

Grigory Pomerants and self-destructive zealotry

In times of geopolitical crisis there is a temptation to fall into the trap of zealotry which, I argue, is inherently self-destructive.

Zeal is commonly defined as great energy or enthusiasm in pursuit of a cause. In an increasingly polarized moral landscape, where once-faceless corporations now compulsively utter ethical statements on contemporaneous issues, and once obscured individuals now interface with and thereby disclose their innermost thoughts to the entire planet, zeal is easily mistaken for virtue. “Silence is violence” the cry goes up across the land to take a side in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. From speakers’ corner to the workplace water cooler everyone is challenged to pick a side – to make a moral judgement. One side is the merciless aggressor, the diabolic actor; the other side is the righteous victim rising up on the side of truth. Language games and discourse analysis ensure that even the way the conflict is framed betrays an allegiance – whether it’s called suppression of a terrorist state or state-sponsored terrorism.

The Russian philosopher, dissident, and human rights activist Grigori Pomerants (1918 – 2013) once noted how “The Devil begins with froth on the lips of an angel rushing into battle for a just and holy cause.¹

Every good intention (thought righteous at the outset) is undermined by the individual’s inescapable proclivity to moral evil. Such a ‘spirit of hatred’, according to Pomerant’s, not only resides within but to some extent extends beyond the ‘righteous struggle’ it sustains. The noble cause therefore inevitably descends into terror, and thereby is necessarily conflated to (so as to be identified with and indistinguishable from), the flawed means whereby such a position is both sustained and advanced.

Over-simplification for the satiation of an irrational desire to understand (and thereby make a moral judgement) as opposed to the polarizing worldviews or the irreconcilable premises assumed therein, constitutes, according to Pomerants, the basis of the promise of a false peace. He writes: “The terrible over-simplifiers meet the expectations of the masses that the world should be made simple and understandable. People feel lost in the accelerating torrent of the new. They do not know how to defend themselves against the new evil. They no longer understand what to pray to, what to read. They want to be protected by a few simple phrases about the ethnic struggle.”²

Such desire for assimilation, in order to be accepted within one side, reflects the growing evisceration of the individual conscience at the expense of the emergence of a tribal group-think. People are no longer allowed to state their perspective, it must conflate to one of the two oscillations. They are no longer afforded a unique paradigm through which to view the

world, and within which to assimilate their irreplaceable experience. They must pick a side and join the fight.

In closing let us return to Pomerants: “The Devil begins with froth on the lips of an angel rushing into battle for a just and holy cause. Everything turns to dust: people, ideologies, — but eternal is the spirit of hatred in a righteous struggle, and that’s why evil on earth has no end.”

[1] Pomerant’s 1970 Dissertation on Dostoevsky, quoted
http://www.pomeranz.ru/p/pub_dogmats.htm

[2] Pomerants, Grigory. The spiritual movement from the West. An Essay and Two Talks, translated by Peter TInwaites, Caux: Caux Books, 2004, 36.