
***The Hilton Bombing: Evan Pederick and the Ananda Marga*, by Imre Salusinszky. Carlton (Vic.): Melbourne University Press, 2019. pp. 277. ISBN 9780522875492 Paperback RRP \$34.99.**

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The Hilton bombing, if not quite the moon landing, is a moment most of us of a certain age remember, though often through a haze of mist and misunderstanding. Imre Salusinszky has done a great service in reconstructing events precisely and objectively – as much as they ever will be. He has also done a great service to those who appreciate a beautifully written, compelling read.

Salusinszky's book succeeds on a number of levels. It is a moving morality tale of sin and redemption. It is the human story of a family who stuck together through some of the most awful events most parents can imagine. It is a commentary on the turbulent 1970s where many of the best and brightest rebelled against their background to seek freedom and enlightenment and came close to self-destruction – and some actually achieved it. It is an insightful account of cults and their ways of capturing and brain-washing adherents. Above all it addresses the question of why in February 1978 'the gentle child of the manse in Peppermint Grove, the shy boy who had trained pigeons and listened to unfashionable music, was ready to commit murder for his guru' (pp. 133-4).

Evan Pederick's father was a Methodist Minister in Western Australia. Evan grew up in a caring, functional environment, although of a strict, unemotional, 'just get on with it' kind. He was bright, finishing fifth in the State in his matriculation year of 1972 and the next year beginning a science degree at the University of Western Australia.

Evan became increasingly alienated from what he saw as his parents' bloodless, conventional lifestyle and found his university studies meaningless. He was looking for

something transcendent to believe in. He dropped out, lived the alternative lifestyle and worked as a gardener in Hobart. A friend took Evan to a lecture by a senior member of Ananda Marga, a Hindu cult founded by railway accountant PR Sarkar. 'Baba', as his devotees called him, was serving a long sentence in India for the murder of disenchanted disciples. The impressionable and immature Pederick was quickly drawn in: 'Everything the Margiis had introduced him to had been fantastic. In particular, he felt that through meditation he was approaching contact with something that was deep inside him as well as being larger than him. Whatever it was, it seemed to be a fount of energy and joy and good health, and he could hardly bear to turn away from it ...' (pp. 50-51).

What Evan experienced next was common to other cults: 'It is important first of all to keep the initiates unaware that they are being controlled or manipulated at all: in other words they have entered a totalistic environment. Relationships and connections outside the cult are progressively shut down. Brain-washing techniques create a sense of powerlessness and instability in the target, undermining their existing beliefs' (pp. 14-15).

By the mid-1970s, Ananda Marga had changed from a fringe spiritual group into a terrorist organisation which considered violence and other extreme measures as legitimate tools in its struggle to free Baba. Pederick was in awe of a senior Margii, Tim Anderson. According to Pederick, Anderson suggested the time had come for a drastic gesture. He proposed the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Morarji Desai when he visited Sydney for the forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting. Pederick was initially taken aback and reluctant but finally agreed that the greater good of allowing Baba to change the world justified the taking of human life.

Salusinszky comments that Pederick joined Ananda Marga to 'transcend the limits of the individual ego; to focus on essentials by sloughing off unnecessary attachments. But in losing unwanted baggage he had lost himself. And the baggage he had thrown aside included the moral compass that had guided him through his life' (p. 106).

So it was that on 12 February 1978 Pederick, in a ridiculous disguise, stood opposite the Hilton Hotel ready to detonate a bomb he had constructed and concealed in a rubbish bin. When Desai appeared, the bomb failed to detonate. However, when garbage workers subsequently emptied the bin a massive explosion occurred that killed two of the workers and a Police Officer.

Pederick disappeared and resurfaced in Brisbane. He was never under any suspicion. He broke with Ananda Marga, got a job in the Commonwealth Public Service and lived a relatively normal life. All this changed in May 1989 when Pederick heard that Anderson had been charged with the Hilton bombing. Evan had for years wrestled with

intense remorse and guilt and this news triggered a decision to give himself up. He was tried, convicted on his own evidence and sentenced to 20 years imprisonment which effectively meant about eight.

In 1979, Anderson had been convicted of conspiracy to murder a neo-Nazi the Margiis considered an enemy. He was pardoned in 1985 on the basis that the Crown case rested on the evidence of a discredited informer and *agent provocateur*, Richard Seary. Anderson's alleged persecution by the authorities became a *cause celebre* among sections of the legal profession, academics and the media.

Anderson was tried over the Hilton bombing in late 1990. The Crown mishandled the prosecution. Because of factual inconsistencies in Pederick's recollection of events, it was alleged that he had attempted mistakenly to murder President Jayewardene of Sri Lanka. When subsequent disclosures made Pederick's testimony more credible, the Prosecution switched back to Desai as the intended victim. An alleged gaol confession by Anderson to notorious criminal Ray Denning was a key part of the Crown case.

Anderson denied all of Pederick's allegations and maintained that he had minimal contact with him. Anderson claimed that he was framed by the Police. His defence team portrayed Pederick as an unreliable fantasist who had falsely confessed to the crime for bizarre psychological reasons.

Anderson was convicted of murder and sentenced to 14 years imprisonment. However, he immediately lodged an appeal that was upheld on the basis of the Prosecution's botched handling of the case. The Court did find that much of Pederick's testimony was credible and that a jury could reasonably have brought in a verdict of guilty. Anderson was not retried and in 1998 became an academic in Political Economy at Sydney University.

A feature of the Hilton bombing is the conspiracy theories it has generated. The main one is that ASIO planted the bomb, intending to discover it in the nick of time, in an attempt to gain a boost in funding. When the bomb went off accidentally, ASIO, ASIS, the Army and the Special Branch orchestrated a massive cover-up involving a large number of people, all of whom have maintained complete silence ever since. According to the proponents of this theory, Pederick was a deranged fantasist and Anderson a scapegoat. Salusinszky argues that, in retrospect, this is *prima facie* absurd. In over 40 years 'not a single shred of evidence has emerged to support any of the conspiracy theories about the Hilton bombing' (p. 292). Pederick, in a letter to his parents from gaol in 1995, pointed out that the ASIO conspiracy theory depended on 'ignoring the fact that I remain in prison solely on the basis of my own confession' (p. 293).

Ironically, Evan Pederick finally found solace in the religion of his youth, Christianity. He was ordained an Anglican Minister in Perth in 2004. Salusinszky concludes his book this way:

For three of his 63 years [Evan] was an unrecognisable person and that person did a terrible thing with consequences beyond description ... And what about the naïve 21-year-old who went along to check out the lecture on meditation in Hobart at the end of 1976? Evan thinks of him, too, occasionally with some sadness and some compassion ... That young man's idealism was betrayed and exploited by people who should have known better ... Evan thinks of that boy as not so different from the rest of us. We all struggle to recognise what is good (p. 320).