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MAKING PEACE WITH THE SIXTIES: REEVALUATING THE LEGACY OF A CULTURAL REVOLUTION

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SYNOPSIS

The 1960s may be long gone, but they certainly are not forgotten, and many of the core ideas and values of this turbulent period remain alive and well in present-day America. Some Christians dismiss the sixties as a period of silliness. Other Christians, however, blame the decade for many of the ills that trouble contemporary America, even though the seeds of many of the sixties upheavals were sown during the seemingly placid fifties. Throughout the sixties, spiritually hungry seekers influenced both alternative and institutional streams of spirituality. Sixties spiritual values such as individualism, the valuing of experience over doctrine, the preference for anything new over anything old, the sacralization of the secular, and the use of drugs as a spiritual tool continue to have a profound influence on modern life and contemporary religion. The Jesus movement was one major Christian response to the revolutionary changes of the sixties. This movement's contemporary music and more relaxed approach toward church are its major contributions to today's ecclesiology. Though it was a turbulent and troubling time, the sixties forced many Americans to confront long-simmering issues such as race, gender, sexuality, war, authority, and patriotism.

Anyone emerging today from a decades-long, Rip Van Winkle-like slumber (or even a Timothy Leary-like trip to the far side of the space-time continuum) might be forgiven for thinking he or she was still living in the 1960s. On the big screen, recent films have given new life to anarchist group The Weather Underground, Latin American revolutionary Ché Guevara, shaman author Carlos Castaneda, and Vietnam War architect William McNamara. On the small screen, a new DVD release of Antonioni's acclaimed 1966 film *Blowup* recently duked it out with CBS's *Helter Skelter*, a drama about Charles Manson, and PBS fundraisers featuring gray-haired troubadours such as Barry McGuire and Peter, Paul, and Mary. In bookstores, *Drop City*, T. C. Boyle's novel about a hippie commune, continues to rack up sales and critical acclaim. In courtrooms, battles over psychedelic drugs continue, with the Utah Supreme Court recently declaring that non-Native Americans can use peyote in religious ceremonies. In legislatures, divisive debates about civil rights for gays and lesbians inspire heated rhetoric about the death of American ideals, much as did earlier arguments about rights for blacks and women. In political conventions, college classrooms, churches, offices, coffee houses, and family rooms all across the country, people young and old debate a war in a distant land that is killing American soldiers and causing troubles for a sitting president.

SILLY OR SUBSTANTIAL?

Looking back, there certainly was much about the sixties that was silly, as a newly elected California governor named Ronald Reagan indicated in 1966 when he described a hippie as someone who "dresses like Tarzan, has hair like Jane, and smells like Cheeta." There was, nevertheless, also much about the sixties that was significant and substantial. "History with a capital H had come down to earth," wrote

Todd Gitlin, a former political activist, in *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. “People were living with a supercharged density.”²

Evangelicals, likewise, have been of two minds about the sixties. Some have flippantly dismissed the decade while others have described it as the beginning of the end of civilization as we know it. Frederica Mathewes-Green employed the dismissive approach when she characterized “early hippies” as people who recommended “that everyone ‘drop out,’ get back to the land, make pottery, and eat acorns.”³

Focus on the Family founder James Dobson, on the other hand, spoke for many worried evangelicals when he described the sixties revolution as a “rapid reversal of social mores [that] is unparalleled in man’s history.” He added, “Never has a society abandoned its concept of morality more suddenly than...in America during the decade of the sixties.”⁴ Dobson condemned the “permissive absurdity” of sixties ideology, which he summarized as follows: “God is dead; immorality is wonderful; nudity is noble; irresponsibility is groovy; disrespect and irreverence are fashionable; unpopular laws are to be disobeyed; violence is an acceptable vehicle for bringing change (as were childhood tantrums).”⁵ Emerging traditionalist voices such as Dobson’s spoke for millions of worried Americans who would engage in “culture war” over the next few decades as members of the “silent majority,” the religious Right, or the pro-family movement.

A British scholar named Os Guinness, who had worked with Christian thinker Francis Schaeffer at L’Abri in Switzerland, visited America in 1968. His outsider perspective helped him make sense of the deeper currents of cultural change, which he wrote about in *The Dust of Death*, published in 1973. In 1994, Guinness wrote a new foreword for a reissued version of the book. “Precisely as the 1960s get further away in terms of calendar years, the decade looms larger in terms of cultural influence,” he observed.⁶ “It was the period that shaped the lives, faith, hopes, experiences, and horizons of countless individuals — and still does,” he wrote. “In one area or another, we are now all children of the sixties, and we need to assess the best and worst of the legacy that is ours.”⁷

During his recent book tour, President Bill Clinton said, “If you look back on the sixties...and think there was more good than harm, you’re probably a Democrat. If you think there was more harm than good, you’re probably a Republican.”⁸

Larry Eskridge, the associate director of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College, wouldn’t go that far, but he has upgraded his earlier negative assessments. “My attitude about the 60s has changed a great deal in recent years,” said Eskridge in a recent interview.⁹ “Formerly I tended to look at much of what the period had wrought as a disaster for American society and for evangelical religion. But I have begun to change my tune over the last ten years, seeing much change for the better.”¹⁰

Debates about the sixties’ cultural legacy will continue, but it is clear that certain sixties ideas and values have proven amazingly resilient, flourishing in America’s collective cultural consciousness to the present day. What’s even more surprising is the degree to which many of the developments people identify with the sixties had their birth in an earlier and seemingly more innocent decade.

SEEDS OF CHANGE: THE FIFTIES

The 1960s were full of sound and fury, whereas the 1950s are fondly remembered as a golden age of domestic and social calm symbolized by TV sitcom couple Ozzie and Harriet. It is surprising, then, when Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David Halberstam points out that the seeds of the swinging sixties were sown during the fifties, an “era of general good will and expanding affluence [when] few Americans doubted the essential goodness of their society” or questioned its “trusted leaders.”¹¹

Back then, folks in search of their piece of the American dream tossed their 2.5 children into the back seat of their big-finned, gas-guzzling sedans and headed for the rapidly expanding suburbs, which would house more people by 1970 than cities would. With affordable housing, however, came a growing sense of isolation from family, community, and tradition.

TV dissipated people’s sense of isolation, if only briefly. “Sometimes they felt closer to the people they watched on television than they did their neighbors and distant families,” writes Halberstam.¹² Life itself

soon seemed small and gray, like the images on grainy picture tubes or the stifling corporate uniform that provided the title for Sloan Wilson's 1955 novel, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.

Beneath the decade's placid surface, a cultural revolution was brewing. The late actor Marlon Brando played a threatening leader of a motorcycle gang in the 1954 film, *The Wild One*. When asked what he was rebelling against, Brando challenged, "Whaddya got?"

Alfred C. Kinsey's laboratories published controversial research results in 1948 (about men) and 1953 (about women) that indicated life was considerably wilder behind closed bedroom doors than most folks suspected. Kinsey (who is the subject of an upcoming picture starring Liam Neeson that opens in November) provided only cold, clinical data, while *Playboy* magazine publisher Hugh Hefner gave readers full-color photos of female breasts, beginning with a centerfold of Marilyn Monroe in its 1953 debut issue. Hefner said *Playboy* was designed to "thumb its nose at all the phony puritan values of the world in which [he] had grown up."¹³

With the Depression a distant memory and an unprecedented wave of prosperity washing over the land, Americans filled their new ranch-style homes with newfangled consumer goods, floating their purchases with credit. A group of fifties radicals, however, called the "Beat Generation" weren't buying any of it. Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg were among "the first to protest what they considered to be the blandness, conformity, and lack of serious social and cultural purpose in middle-class life in America," writes Halberstam. "They saw themselves as poets in a land of philistines, men seeking spiritual destinies rather than material ones."¹⁴

Soon, blacks and women demanded their rights to enjoy the American dream. "If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong," said Martin Luther King, Jr., during the height of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott of the midfifties.¹⁵ Betty Friedan didn't invoke the Almighty in *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, but she did articulate the yearnings of many frustrated fifties women when she asked, "Is this all?"¹⁶

IN SEARCH OF THE "SEEKERS"

Elvis Presley emerged in the mid fifties, not only giving birth to "rock 'n' roll" but also helping create an entirely new subculture that would come to be known as "youth." In the sixties, artists such as Bob Dylan and The Beatles would radically transform pop music, vastly increasing its lyrical depth and musical complexity. "There's something happening here and you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?" sang Dylan in "Ballad of a Thin Man," whose lyrics often combined poetic personal confessions and searing social critique. In groundbreaking albums such as *Revolver* (1966) and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), The Beatles gave voice to the Eastern spirituality and psychedelic mysticism that they and many other young people worldwide had been exploring.

In February, 1967, nearly a year after John Lennon had said, "We're more popular than Jesus Christ right now," The Beatles — along with actress Mia Farrow and musicians Donovan and Beach Boy Mike Love — made a pilgrimage to Rishikesh, India, headquarters for Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the bearded, long-haired guru who gave the West a watered-down form of Hinduism called Transcendental Meditation. "News of the group's retreat was greeted with a fascinated anticipation not seen since Moses' trek up the mountain," wrote Davin Seay and Mary Neely. "The Beatles were ascending to the abode of the gods to bring Truth to a waiting world."¹⁷

The Beatles, however, did not endorse any particular religious truth so much as serve as role models for a new generation of spiritually hungry people whom sociologist Wade Clark Roof would call "seekers." Roof described seekers in two acclaimed books: *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993) and *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton University Press, 1999). Seekers, whether they are "traditionalists" or "counterculturalists," make a firm distinction between spirituality (which to them conveys life) and religion (which to them signifies death).

TRACING TWO STREAMS OF SIXTIES SPIRITUALITY

Two recent books—one by San Francisco journalist Don Lattin and the other by Connecticut scholar Mark Oppenheimer—illustrate the lasting impact seekers have had on the two major streams of the 1960s spiritual revolution: “alternative” spirituality (as represented by a dizzying succession of novel gurus, revelations, and rituals) and institutional religion (as seen in the dogged perseverance of established, mainstream religious institutions). Together, these books show that Americans worship differently and even understand religion differently than they had a few decades ago, whether they pray in a church or an ashram.

Lattin, the *San Francisco Chronicle*’s veteran religion writer, perhaps has done more firsthand reporting on contemporary alternative spirituality than anyone. “Oh, the messiahs I have known!” he writes in the preface to *Following Our Bliss: How the Spiritual Ideals of the Sixties Shape Our Lives Today*.¹⁸ The book’s cover photo shows a rainbow-hued Volkswagen bus festooned with American flags and peace signs. Inside, the book features a dozen equally colorful chapters showing where yesterday’s Moonies, Krishna devotees, and Rajneeshis are today.

Oppenheimer, who has written for the *Christian Century*, *Harper’s Magazine*, and the *New York Times*, thinks too many studies have focused on the “extremes” of alternative religion, so he concentrates on “the vast majority of Americans” who follow the lead of established denominations instead of riding “the paisley bus of religious experimentation.”¹⁹ In *Knocking on Heaven’s Door: American Religion in the Age of Counterculture*, Oppenheimer writes, “American religions must constantly sell themselves, and the ones that last are the ones that discover ways to exert imaginative sway.”²⁰

The two books use different approaches to cover different aspects of recent American religious history. Lattin’s book is deeply personal. Born to a Jewish mother but raised in Presbyterian and Congregational churches, Lattin attended the University of California at Berkeley in the 1960s to “follow his bliss” before going on to cover the religion beat. “We were a restless bunch,” he writes. “We were a generation that was not content to stay in the suburbs and pray to God on Sunday morning. Many of us wanted to see God, to be God, or to at least recapture the ecstasy and revelation of that eye-opening acid trip we couldn’t get out of our system.”²¹

Whether he’s visiting the Esalen Institute, an oceanside human-potential center he labels “the birthplace of religion, California-style,”²² or sitting in on a retreat for Buddhist families at the Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Lattin champions sixties ideals such as hope and spiritualism while he critically examines the impact of those ideals on the children of the sixties’ spiritual pioneers. In some cases, parents’ obsessive quests for nirvana resulted in child neglect or abuse. In other cases, unusual practices actually promoted family ties, albeit imperfectly, as with the mass marriages arranged by Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

Oppenheimer’s tone is more removed and objective. His five lengthy chapters examine Catholics and the folk mass, Southern Baptists and the war, Episcopalians and women priests, Jews and communal worship, and Unitarians and gay rights. Oppenheimer observes that religious activists in all these traditions “took permission from radical countercultural elements” and implemented some of the same techniques used by civil rights activists or anti-war protesters to promote their agendas.²³ In the end, religious activists gained many of the changes they demanded. Or did they? “What changed was the form, not the content, of the religious traditions,” he writes. “The most important fact was how different the worship service ‘looked’ or ‘felt,’ rather than any new ideas being taught.”²⁴

Cardinal Creeds of Sixties Spirituality

Sixties spirituality was largely anticreedal; yet, many seekers shared the following core values:

Do Your Own Thing. Sociologists call it “expressive individualism.” Jimi Hendrix called it letting his “freak flag fly.” Individuals and personal authenticity became more important than institutions or official pronouncements about what’s right or wrong. “If we’re gods, we might as well get good at it,” reasoned the writers of the 1968 edition of the *Whole Earth Catalog*.²⁵

When stretched to its logical conclusion, individualism not only destroys community but also undermines religious tradition, as Robert Bellah and his collaborators pointed out in *Habits of the Heart*. Describing contemporary American religiosity as “private and diverse,” the authors take a quote from one of their interviews with a woman named Sheila Larson who subscribed to a custom-tailored faith she called “Sheilaism”: “I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.”²⁶

Experience Trumps Doctrine. An Eastern guru who spoke with Guinness pointed out the absence of any experiential dimension in much of Western religion: “To the Christian, talk of God is rather like the great bulk of an iceberg, whereas his experience of God is only the tiny tip of the iceberg; but for the Easterner the experience of God is the bulk of the iceberg, whereas his talk about God is only the tip.”²⁷

Experience even trumps reason, as Amy Wallace, a former disciple and lover of Carlos Castaneda, explains in a recent memoir. Wallace, the daughter of best-selling writer Irving Wallace, met Castaneda in 1973, the same year a *Time* magazine cover story questioned Castaneda’s supposed apprenticeship with a shaman named Don Juan. Nearly two decades later, Wallace joined Castaneda’s inner circle, which helped run his business operations and serviced his sexual urges. Although Castaneda routinely played his women followers against one another and subjected them to destructive verbal and psychological abuse, Wallace blithely believes it was all for their “glorious benefit,”²⁸ adding, “he damaged many lives, at the same time exalting many others.”²⁹

New = Improved. Whether or not they expressed it in terms of the astrological dawning of the Age of Aquarius, sixties seekers assumed that the human race was evolving spiritually. They believed, consequently, that their search for the Divine — as messy and confusing as it often could be — was vastly superior to anything that earlier, less highly developed generations had done.

All Are One. Sixties seekers asserted that there are many spiritual paths to God or the goddess, and all are equally valid; likewise, the things that divide people — beliefs, race, gender, or class — are ultimately less important than the things that unite us.

Make the Secular Sacred. Harvey Cox’s 1965 bestseller *The Secular City* prophesied that the rise of urbanism and the collapse of traditional religion would pave the way for a brave new secular age. That, however, was not the way things went.

“For all the talk of secularity, the Sixties still belonged to the Age of Faith,” wrote Robert S. Ellwood in *The 60s Spiritual Awakening*, in which he argued that the decade’s spiritual revolution ranked alongside the Great Awakening, the frontier revivals, and Spiritualist vogue of the 1850s in long-term cultural impact.³⁰ He asserted that the sixties “did not so much secularize the sacred as sacralize the secular, turning its causes into crusades and its activism into liturgies.”³¹ The sixties viewed disembodied religion as dead; spirituality that matters must be therapeutic, transforming people’s bodies, minds, and souls while improving their sexuality, soothing their psychoses, and enhancing their careers and even bank accounts.

Get Instant Karma. “Listen! Wake up!” wrote the late psychedelic drug guru Timothy Leary in his autobiographical book, *High Priest*. “You are God! You have the divine plan engraved in cellular script within you. Listen! Take this sacrament! You’ll see! You’ll get revelations! It will change your life! You will be reborn!”³² The sixties certainly saw a fair amount of recreational drug use, but for many seekers drugs were an essential part of a spiritual quest.

ONE WAY TO JESUS

One of the least studied aspects of the sixties is the Jesus movement. This phenomenon, along with the rise of Christian apologetics and countercult ministries such as the Christian Research Institute, represented evangelicals’ early efforts to respond to the sixties spiritual revolution.

Researchers Ronald Enroth, Edward Ericson, Jr., and C. Breckinridge Peters visited a number of this movement’s outposts in 1971 for their book *The Jesus People: Old-Time Religion in the Age of Aquarius*. “Theologically, the Jesus People are fundamentalists,” they wrote. “Sociologically, they are not.”³³ The authors appreciated the Jesus people’s vibrant Christian experience, their palpable joy, and their

commitment to serving others, but they also expressed concerns about the movement's anti-intellectual and anticultural tendencies.

Today, one of the best ways to understand the Jesus people ethos is to study its anthems. Early Jesus music, beginning with Larry Norman's *Upon This Rock*, which Capitol Records released in 1969, conveyed the movement's key characteristics.

A New Image of Christ

Norman's *Only Visiting This Planet*, released by the mainstream Verve label in 1972 and by Word in 1978, featured "The Outlaw," a folk ballad that presented Jesus as a counter-cultural outsider who "roamed across the land / With a band of unschooled ruffians / And a few old fishermen." The song affirmed that Jesus was "the son of God, a man above all men." As with many early contemporary Christian ballads, Jesus was both hip and holy.

Millennialism

Norman's apocalyptic "I Wish We'd All Been Ready" ("Life was filled with guns and war...") was both a Jesus movement theme song and a barometer of the anxiety of an age. Other songs from the period, including Michael Omartian's elaborate jazz-rock opus "White Horse," could have served as a musical soundtrack for *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Hal Lindsey's 1970 multimillion-selling book about end-time prophecies. The Maranatha! record label took its name from a Greek word Paul used in 1 Corinthians 16:22, which means "Come, O Lord."

Evangelism

Believers knew they had urgent work to do: introduce others to the salvation they had found in Christ. "Why don't you look into Jesus? He's got the answer," sang Norman. The title song to Paul Clark's album *Come into His Presence* (1974) proclaimed: "Jesus died with his arms stretched out on a tree / And they're still stretching out / because they're reaching for you and me."

Experience

The influence of the charismatic movement was evident in songs such as Clark's "Latter Rain" and "Believe and Receive." Annie Herring of Second Chapter of Acts combined charismatic enthusiasm with inward mysticism in the song "Which Way the Wind Blows" from *With Footnotes* (1974) and in these words from "Something Tells Me" from *In the Volume of the Book* (1975): "Let it pour on me... / Let it shine on me / Bear your fruit in me."

Praise and Worship

People didn't know it at the time, but simple Jesus movement praise songs such as "Seek Ye First" and "Father, I Adore You" would come to replace traditional hymns and change the way American Christians worshiped. These new songs, often based on texts from the Gospels or the Psalms, spread like wildfire from one fellowship to the next before invading mainstream churches. Love Song sang about this in their 1971 song "Little Country Church": "Preacher isn't talkin' 'bout religion no more / He just wants to praise the Lord / People aren't as stuffy as they were before / They just want to praise the Lord."

REASSESSING THE SIXTIES

Rock Scully, a former road manager for the Grateful Dead, boldly declared that sixties values now reign supreme. "America joined the hippies," he said.³⁴ That may be overstating the case, but much of the decade's ideology remains surprisingly powerful today. Americans' widespread consumption of prescription drugs represents a faith in chemical-enhanced personal transformation that even the most ardent hippies might have found mind boggling. The current view that sex is, in the words of a 1970s evangelical sex manual, "intended for pleasure,"³⁵ can be seen in today's multibillion-dollar porn industry, the widespread acceptance of divorce and cohabitation, and even adolescents' high-tech

approach to using the Internet for short-term “hooking up.” “If it feels good, do it” has become a national creed, and in many seeker-oriented churches, a sermon on suffering for Christ might seem heretical. In politics, many of the issues once championed by liberals have been adopted by the political mainstream.

“Obviously the sixties were a major cultural, political and social watershed in American history,” says Eskridge.³⁶ “Reaction — pro and con — has largely shaped much of what has gone on in the 30-plus years since, and major events, government policies, and trends are still being screened through filters that were shaped during that time.”³⁷

Eskridge believes the battles that raged in the sixties have also shaped evangelicals. “The decade ushered in a lot of valuable introspection about what evangelicals should be thinking about and doing about various social issues like race and engagement with culture.”³⁸

Eskridge observes the effect the sixties had on evangelical worship and practice, and states, “While I’m concerned about the trend toward therapeutic religion and consumerist church shopping, I think many of the changes toward a more relaxed atmosphere and dress, contemporary music, and the desire for authenticity are a major move toward the positive and make us better able to reach out to those beyond the pale of classic, middle-class American Protestantism.”³⁹

Far from presenting the end of Christianity in America, the sixties helped usher in a renewed and more intentional approach toward faith. “It was during the sixties that evangelicalism as a movement really came of age,” says Eskridge.⁴⁰ “The self-examination the decade brought about was a major move for the good. And the blows to racism, sexism, and people’s unquestioning attitude towards government and other societal institutions and leaders has shaped a much better society.”⁴¹

NOTES

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