

Sexual Revolution

Prophets of peace and promoters of love arise in every generation, but the decade best remembered for its call of love and cry for peace is that snippet of time known as “the sixties.” During the 1960s, the generation born in the wake of World War II came of age in an era of rapidly changing social and sexual values. In many ways, the full flowering of “the sixties” was more a state of mind than a period with its burst of idealism, rebellion, naïveté, and hope. Or, as summarized in the gospel according to John, Paul, George, and Ringo, “All you need .. is love.”

Sixties’ spirituality remained a vital cultural force well into the “Me Decade” of the 1970s and beyond. It was a period of cultural experimentation, sexual liberation and spiritual innovation. Throughout much of the world, but especially in the United States and Europe, trust in existing social, political, and religious institutions eroded. Massive demonstrations for civil rights and against American military involvement in Southeast Asia polarized society. The assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Senator Robert Kennedy, and the Reverend Martin Luther King, followed by the Watergate scandal and resignation of President Richard Nixon, only worsened the alienation of a generation.

Religious institutions were among those facing the most severe challenge. *Time* magazine asked “Is God Dead?” God was not, but as the poet laureate of the era pointed out, the times were most certainly changing. Mainline Protestant denominations underwent steep membership declines. For many Roman Catholics, the liberal church reforms of the Second Vatican Council redefined the church as “the people of God,” and despite a later retrenchment in the ranks of the hierarchy, there was no going back. Millions of baby boomers abandoned organized religion but remained active seekers, calling themselves spiritual but not religious. There was a turn inward and toward the mystical traditions of the East.

Two little pills, LSD and the birth-control tablet, helped shatter popular notions about morality—not to mention reality itself. Psychedelic drugs fueled the spiritual renaissance of the sixties. Many users burned out, but at least as many got a soul-shattering glimpse of the expanded awareness and sense of interconnectedness that mystics had spoken of for

centuries. Meanwhile, the birth-control pill separated sexuality from procreation. The Pill was born in 1960, and by 1966, six million American women were taking it. That same year William Masters and Virginia Johnson published their landmark work *Human Sexual Response*: Sex was out of the closet.

Church and state did not approve. LSD was outlawed in 1966, the first battle in a renewed war on drugs by the federal government: Two years later, in the summer of 1968, Pope Paul VI ignored the findings of a church commission set up to study the ethics of pharmacological contraception and issued *Humanae Vitae*—a papal encyclical that reaffirmed traditional church teachings condemning all forms of contraception except the rhythm method. Most American Catholics ignored the pope’s teaching, and the controversial document did little to stem rising dissent on other moral issues, such as the church’s condemnation of masturbation, oral sex, premarital sex, extramarital sex, homosexuality, divorce, and abortion.

Moral theologians searched for a new sexual ethic—one that transcended the “thou shall nots” of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, but remained informed by the wisdom of religious insight. Theologians with a more positive view of human sexuality—including those writing from gay, lesbian, and feminist perspectives would often start from a very different place when talking about sexuality. Rather than asking what God says about sex, many of these theologians asked, “What does our sexual experience reveal to us about God?”

This experiential perspective informed much of the spirituality of the sixties. Seekers placed a premium on personal spiritual experience, downplaying doctrine and religious tradition. Their religion was more therapeutic than theological. It was more about feeling good than being good.

Charting an ethical course that celebrates the joys of sex and affirms sexual liberation, yet still sets limits on this powerful human instinct was no easy task. Many discovered that sex is like fire—it can warm, but it can also bum. The Pill and the sexual revolution did not just separate sex from procreation; they often separated sex from love. Many people in the sixties generation—especially women—began to question whether sexual

freedom led to sexual liberation or sexual exploitation. For some, the sexual promiscuity of the 1960s and 1970s did little to engender a nurturing spirituality of love and compassion.

Alternative sexual values and family structures were fashioned by many of the new religious movements, spiritual disciplines, psychological techniques, and self-help therapies of the 1960s and 1970s. Esalen Institute, a retreat center on the central California coast, held its first seminar in January of 1962 and soon gave birth to the human potential movement—which asserts that human consciousness and capabilities are evolving and can be expanded by way of meditation, massage, and other means to transform consciousness, improve interpersonal relationships, and deepen compassion. Esalen helped popularize the humanistic psychology of Abraham Maslow and the no-holds-barred encounter groups of Fritz Perls, the cofounder of Gestalt therapy. Maslow was an explorer of “peak experiences,” those intense moments of ecstasy, empathy, and awe. Esalen offered an eclectic array of programs, but the public and the news media were fascinated by its casual attitude toward social nudity and natural hot springs baths overlooking the spectacular Big Sur coast.

Charismatic leaders of new religious movements and spiritual sects also explored the boundaries of sexual behavior. Members of the Children of God—a “Jesus people” movement founded in the late 1960s by the Reverend David Brandt Berg, a self-styled apocalyptic prophet—followed a “law of love” that encouraged sexual sharing among members. Female devotees even engaged in religious prostitution to bring converts to Christ and into their fold. Berg’s belief that “to the pure all things are pure” echoed the ancient rallying cry of antinomian certainty—the belief that Christians can rise above moral law and sexual sin because they are already saved by Jesus Christ and the grace of God. Berg and others in his movement, later known as the Family International, were later accused of molesting and exploiting many children and teens raised in its ranks.

Charges of child abuse and sexual exploitation of adult members were also made against the leaders of several popular Hindu and Buddhist movements that took root in the West. One of the most infamous Eastern gurus to wash onto America’s shores was Bhagwan

Shree Rajneesh, an Indian philosophy professor who in the late 1960s began attracting Western followers with a blend of Eastern mysticism, Western hedonism, and avant-garde group therapy techniques. Rajneesh, remembered for his fleet of Rolls Royce sedans and the City of Rajneeshpuram in central Oregon, never claimed to be a monk, and seemed to revel in the media’s description of him as the “free-sex guru.” Instead of calling on his Western followers to repress their sexual desire, Rajneesh urged his followers to act on those impulses and forge what he called “a sensual religion.”

Communal living, often combined with alternative ideas about family structure and sexual fidelity within marriage, was a hallmark of the sixties counterculture. These communes ranged from thousands of people, to small households in cities and rural communities across the United States, to larger collective experiments like the Farm, a once-thriving commune in the backwoods of Tennessee.

It was easy to parody and belittle the spiritual innocence and sexual freedom of the hippie movement as little more than “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll.” But there was power in the purity of the call to “make love, not war.” Perhaps the Beatles said it best when they sang, “In the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.”

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See also Hedonism; Hindu Mysticism; NeoPaganism; New Religions; Sexual Symbolism

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