

Pursuit of Transcendence:
Investigation of Impact of 1960s Counterculture Movement on Contemporary Evangelicalism

Leslie Nut-Komlah

Humanities 104

Dr. Henke

May 7, 2018

The Climate of the United States in the 1960s was shrouded in a constant state of unrest. Through mass media, rebellious youth observed the assault of peaceful anti-war and civil rights protesters. The disillusionment of America's youth resulted in the Counterculture Movement, lasting through the mid-1970s, as norms of the pre-war generations were rejected for customs created by hippies. Mystical spirituality, drug-use, rock music, and political dissidence were characteristic of the Counterculture movement. Despite the moral degradation, which appeared to be the only result of the movement, there was also revitalization movement occurring that would change the religious landscape of the United States for decades to come. This paper seeks to address how contemporary evangelicalism was conceived in the middle of a subculture, which abandoned the traditional church and experimented with consciousness-altering drugs, communal sexuality, and eastern spirituality.

On April 8th, 1966, a polarizing cover of Time Magazine depicted giant blood-red letters against a black background spelling out the question, "Is God Dead?" John Elson's, the religion editor at Time Magazine, featured article was the first in Time's history to appear without a photograph or illustration. The title and article alone sufficiently captivated the country. For more than a year, Elson labored over the article, examining radical new approaches to thinking about God in a modern sense that entered intellectual conversation in seminaries and universities, eventually being discussed more frequently in public.¹

The issue gave Time Magazine its biggest newsstand sales in over two decades and received deafening outcry in response. Times received a record-breaking 3,421 letters in reply to

¹ Lily Rothman, "Is God Dead? At 50," Time Magazine, April 6, 2015.

the article while inspiring countless angry sermons.² The query tantalizes believers, who perhaps privately doubted God's existence.

Readers were guided through the theological debate and a shifting religious landscape that produced several answers to the age-old, existential question. People of all educational backgrounds grappled with the effects of "Secularization, science, urbanization",³ which made it increasingly easy for modern societies to ask where God is and hard for the man of faith to give a convincing answer. A survey conducted in 1966 resulted in only seventy-one percent of Protestants and eighty-one percent of Catholics questioned were willing to say, "I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it."⁴

There were profound changes taking place in the relationship of believers to their faith. Some observations were discussed by featured radical theologians, Dr. Thomas Altizer and Dr. William Hamilton. They published a collaborative book of essays that same year titled, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. Dr. Altizer claims that God died on the Cross; all that was God passed to humanity through Jesus. Altizer and Hamilton are clear in their assertion of the "Death of God" to emphasize the totality of God's absence, which elude to an irretrievable loss. God is no longer the God of biblical times; He no longer guides nations, issues commandments, or liberate his people from their oppressors. We no longer can reach God with pleas for help. He no longer appears to seek us.⁵

With the void left by God, radical theologians engaged in the debate on the importance of Jesus. Dr. Hamilton, when asked his stance regarding the death of God, retorted, "I insist that the

² Lily Rothman, "Is God Dead? At 50," *Time Magazine*, April 6, 2015, 1.

³ John Elson, "Is God Dead?," *Time Magazine*, Vol. 87, No.14, (1966), 2.

⁴ Ardis Whitman, "THE "GOD IS DEAD" DEBATE." *Redbook* 127, no. 2 (06, 1966): 123-126.

⁵ Rothman, 3.

death of God is also the time of obedience to Jesus... The Christian is defined as a man bound to Jesus, obedient to Him and obedient as He was obedient.” Hamilton saw religion’s place in the human realm, not in heaven. Therefore, Jesus Christ become a better model than God for work that needed to be done by man.⁶

In 1966, it was not as easy for Americans to believe that a beneficent God was actively steering the lives of man after the many atrocities of the 20th century. After years spent battling foreign opposition in WWII and reports of genocide overseas, American Christians also witnessed communism, often void of religion, rapidly spread across the world. This reality allowed youth to explore alternatives to traditional Christian beliefs and established cultural norms.

Youth in the sixties were more willing than earlier generations to challenge the political and cultural hegemony of American liberalism, which controlled society through an objective legal and rational approach to politics. They reacted strongly to visible contradictions between the seemingly dignified rhetoric of authority figures and certain ugly realities of political practice.⁷ Through mass media, many middle-class white youth came to understand the severity of racial injustice in America as violence toward peaceful African protesters demanding their rights as humans and Americans was televised. In addition, the anti-war movement further exacerbated youth as draft resisters were arrested, and anti-war protesters were tear-gassed, beaten, and sometimes killed.⁸ The violence in response to protest legitimized resistance efforts in the minds of the youth. Consequently, authority figures appeared more heinous in the eyes of the youth, which results in increased youth rebellion.

⁶ Lily Rothman, “Is God Dead? At 50,” *Time Magazine*, April 6, 2015, 3.

⁷ Michael Dewitt Cary, “The Rise and Fall of the MC5: Rock Music and Counterculture Politics in the Sixties,” *Lehigh University*, 1985, 21.

⁸ Cary, 25.

The atmosphere of constant tension and conflict in the 1960s led to the conception of the Counterculture movement, which began in San Francisco. The movement exhibited characteristics including the suspicion of authority and rejection of the dominant social and cultural standards of the era, thereby disregarding the mores established by mainstream authorities. Members of the counterculture movement were usually called hippies.⁹

One might ask what distinguishes a counterculture movement from regular youth rebellion? Both appear to break cultural norms and appear driven by dissatisfaction. Sociologist John R Howard acknowledges this question in “The flowering of the hippie movement” by distinguishing between “vertical” and “lateral” social deviance. A youth rebellion is “vertical” whereas the counterculture movement is “lateral.” Vertical deviance occurs when persons in a subordinate rank attempt to enjoy the privileges of those in a superior rank. Whereas, Lateral Deviance occurs when someone in a subordinate rank develops their own standards and norms distinctly opposed to people in a superior rank.¹⁰ The values of the non-deviant are rejected, just as they were in the youth Counterculture.

Many hippies abandoned Judeo-Christian traditions completely in favor for eastern, mystical practices like meditation, yoga, and Zen. The 1960s witnessed the increased prevalence and use of LSD (Lysergic acid diethylamide) and other hallucinogens. Mystical champions Aldous Huxley and others including Timothy Leary and Stephen Gaskin believed the use of psychedelics allowed one to enter the realm of Perennialism—a belief in a unitive Oneness.¹¹ Many Americans reacted to this counter-culture movement by persecuting hippies, submitting

⁹ Jill Katherine Silos, “Everybody Get Together: The Sixties Counterculture and Public Space,” University of New Hampshire, Order No. 3083741, 2003, 43.

¹⁰ Silos, 47.

¹¹ Morgan Shipley, “One Never Loves enough: Psychedelics and Spirituality in Post-War America,” Michigan State University, Order No. 3587219, 2013, 16.

them to violence, harassment, and police raids. Mass media labeled them as “unwashed” and “drug crazed.” creating a herd mentality where hippies could be subjected to harsh treatment.¹²

The hippie counterculture resulted in what Morgan Shipley, Doctor of American Studies, coined as “Psychedelic mysticism”, the belief that Psychedelics cleansed perception, allowing access to a reality that is not influenced by systematic knowledge and discursive reasoning.

Huxley advocated for the sacramental use of psychedelic substances such as LSD to help initiate religious experiences.¹³

“Humanity at large will never be able to dispense with Artificial Paradises... Most men and women lead lives at the worst so painful, at the best so monotonous, poor, and limited that the urge to escape, the longing to transcend themselves if only for a few moments, is and always has been one of the principal appetites of the soul.”¹⁴

-Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*

Huxley’s and Timothy Leary’s books on psychedelics published in the 1960s were tremendously popular within the counterculture. Many accounts of psychedelic experimentation during this era emphasized the extent to which drug experiences were religious and not purely recreational. Users experienced internal journeys, which were facilitated by psychedelics. Mystic communes were established, allowing hippies to live in a space of total spiritually and sexually liberation while still being deeply interconnected with others.¹⁵

Despite the appeal of Psychedelic mysticism, the spiritual practice still received extensive negative coverage from the major media outlets as well as from law enforcement and religious

¹² Silos, “Everybody Get Together: The Sixties Counterculture and Public Space,” 46.

¹³ Morgan Shipley, “One Never Loves enough: Psychedelics and Spirituality in Post-War America,” 60.

¹⁴ Shipley, 62.

¹⁵ Shipley, 63-5

communities. While psychedelics led some to an immanent position of unity, these substances also produced acid casualties, violence, and nihilism; rather than a position of unity, this dark side of psychedelics led to unethical behavior.¹⁶ Social critic Joan Didion, in response to the sensationalist accounts of Psychedelic Mysticism as “the desperate attempt of a handful of pathetically unequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum.” By turning mystically inward and therefore away from direct social or political engagement, psychedelics essentially stripped away the political awareness and dedication to activism that defined the early countercultural movement; it reinstituting revolution as an aesthetic, rather than a concerted practice.¹⁷

This reality, Didion observes, simply re-institutes modern power dynamics; however, instead of technocrats and experts which members of the Counterculture movement were not fond of, psychedelic gurus and elders emerged to direct and save the masses that came to San Francisco with flowers in their hair.¹⁸ The underground news center of the San Francisco underground in 1967, The Communication Company, produced a series of short articles aimed directly at this amalgamation of drugs, enlightenment and love, mentioning, “rape is as common as bullshit on Haight Street, only no one is willing to believe it, since it’s part of their religious creed that acid makes everybody automatically BEAUTIFUL...they would never believe that they were guilty of monstrous crimes against humanity.”¹⁹

Indeed, rather than flourishing, the utopian ideal of the Haight had, by January 1968, become a “herd”-like scene dominated by diseases, addicts, teenage runaways, and unremitting

¹⁶ Shipley, 3

¹⁷ Shipley, 9-12

¹⁸ Shipley, 7

¹⁹ Shipley, 8

violence.²⁰ At this point, the 1960s had faced the possibilities of a death of god. It had also experienced a counterculture movement that was gaining traction until hippies lost their sense of morality. As the sixties came to a close, many hippies become disenchanted with the counterculture.

It can be argued that the Hippie counterculture created a void in the hearts of its youth from the beginning in the late 1960's that was quickly filled by Evangelicalism, a cross-denominational movement that holds the belief that the essence of the Gospel consists of the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ's atonement. Hippies exchanged drugs and sex for Jesus, however; they still carried their other tastes and worldviews. As a result, the churches changed to suit norms of the counterculture youth. The infiltration of evangelicals into popular culture quickly became sensationalized.

Time magazine ran a major story on titled "The alternative Jesus: Psychedelic Jesus" on June 21, 1971, about the Jesus Revolution. The cover depicted a caricature of psychedelic Jesus with a pink face and a purple beard and hair in front of a vibrant heavenly background. The article acknowledges the drastic change from amorality back to Judeo-Christian values; "It is a startling development for a generation that has been constantly accused of tripping out or copping out with sex, drugs, and violence. Now, embracing the most persistent symbol of purity, selflessness and brotherly love in the history of Western man, they are afire with a Pentecostal passion for sharing their new vision with others."²¹

What became to be known as the Jesus Movement was a Christian revival within the counterculture movement originating in California and extending throughout the United States

²⁰ Shipley, 15

²¹ "The Alternative Jesus: Psychedelic Christ," Time Magazine. Vol. 97, No. 25 (1971), 2.

between the late 1960s and the late 1980s. Members of the movement were called "Jesus people" or "Jesus freaks," because they were anything but traditional, even though they were followers of biblically grounded Christianity. They mixed the hippie aesthetic with evangelical belief. Consequently, young hippie converts often received critiques from the traditional church.²²

Albert Schweitzer's, a renowned French-German theologian stated, "it has been characteristic of each age of history to depict Jesus in accordance with its own character."²³ The Jesus Movement accordingly depicts Jesus to be a "radical alternative" not within the counterculture Movement. During the revitalization movement, Jesus offered followers of his countercultural movement a purity in commitment and lifestyle that could not be found in other sectors of the counterculture.²⁴ Jesus provided them with viable answers to many personal dilemmas, which easily surpassed answers provided through drug-use, radical politics, or sexual communes.

The Time Article served as a reflection of the status of Jesus movement in 1971. The son of God served as the "Notorious Leader of an underground liberation movement" and was considered a detriment to young people because of "his insidiously inflammatory message." He both challenged and undermined the established order. The Jesus of the Holy Bible is also counted on as a dependable deliverer, the one with the resources and authority to rescue people from bondage, drug addiction, meaningless sexual quests, and personal crises. He promises and delivers new life, purpose, joy, and ultimately eternal life in heaven.²⁵

²² Shawn David Young, "From Hippies to Jesus Freaks: Christian Radicalism in Chicago's Inner-City," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 22, no. 2 (Summer, 2010), 5-6.

²³ James Alan Patterson, "Revolution and the Eschaton: Images of Jesus in the Jesus Movement," *Trinity Journal* 26, No. 2 (Fall, 2005), 271-273.

²⁴ "The Alternative Jesus: Psychedelic Christ," *Time Magazine*. Vol. 97, No. 25 (1971), 2.

²⁵ Shawn David Young, "From Hippies to Jesus Freaks: Christian Radicalism in Chicago's Inner-City," 8

In the late 1960s, The Jesus Movement, with its psychedelic brand of Christianity erupted out of Southern California. Its early evangelists were ex-drug addicts. Their followers congregated in coffeehouses. Hippies did not stop being hippies simply because they had traded their drug high for Jesus. Similar to there being no requirement for Gentile converting to Christianity to undergo circumcision, the typical late-1960s truth-seeking, marijuana-smoking, hippie was not required, on conversion, to cut their hair, wear traditional church attire, or sing traditional hymns.²⁶

The new Jesus movement churches were focused towards an emotive, experiential, eschatological side of Christianity, which were heavy on baptisms in the Spirit, speaking in tongues, and anticipating the imminent Rapture. The majority of those who did integrate into churches gravitated toward Pentecostal and evangelical churches because their fluidity draws parallels to aspects of Hippie subculture. For example, praise sessions at Calvary Chapel in the early 1970's had a sea of raised hands, and hundreds of shaggy young people clutching bibles in zippered leather cases excited for Wednesday-night Bible study with frisbees.²⁷

The Jesus Movement and assimilation of Hippie subculture lead to the advent of the genre of contemporary Christian music, including groups like Hillsong, MercyMe, and Tenth Avenue North. The hippies of the counterculture movement brought rock music and instrumentation into Evangelical praise and worship. This combination of music was considered secular with a religious message gained extreme popularity amongst the youth of the Jesus movement.²⁸ In addition, Contemporary Evangelicalism and its popularity saw the normalization of revival events where thousands of youth would learn about evangelism and go minister to people they

²⁶ Sally Thomas, "Grooving on Jesus," *First Things*, no. 174 (Jun, 2007), 1.

²⁷ Thomas, 1-2.

²⁸ Thomas, 2.

know in their communities as a form of spiritual warfare.²⁹ As a result, the Jesus Movement that began in California quickly spread all over the nation.

Many religious norms that are practiced today in the United States originated from the Counterculture movement. The introduction of drums and guitar into Christian music sprung from the combination of rock music and Christian. The prevalence on speaking in tongues and casting out demons sprouted out of psychedelic mysticism. It is interesting to observe that we condemn drug-users and their amorality yet exalt the products of the dissidence, such as rap music. We are currently in a time where we are seeing more and more people abandoning Christianity and religion as a whole, similar to how they did after the 1960s. History presents us with patterns which may be observed in different time periods. It will be interesting to observe these changes in the upcoming decades.

²⁹ Larry Eskridge, "One Way: Billy Graham, the Jesus Generation, and the Idea of an Evangelical Youth Culture," *Church History* 67, no. 1 (03, 1998), 11-4.

Bibliography

- "The Alternative Jesus: Psychedelic Christ." *Time Magazine*. Vol. 97, No. 25 (1971).
- Bosch, Jean L. "'Bridging the Musical and Scriptural Generation Gap': The Jesus People Movement and 'Jesus Christ Superstar'." Order No. 1493715, University of Kansas, 2011. <http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/873261808?accountid=10427>.
- CARY, MICHAEL DEWITT. "THE RISE AND FALL OF THE MC5: ROCK MUSIC AND COUNTERCULTURE POLITICS IN THE SIXTIES (REPRESSION, HEGEMONY, "MOBILIZATION OF BIAS", MICHIGAN)." Order No. 8516246, Lehigh University, 1985. <http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/303358252?accountid=10427>.
- Elson, John. "Is God Dead?," *Time Magazine*. Vol. 87, No. (1966).
- Eskridge, Larry. "'One Way': Billy Graham, the Jesus Generation, and the Idea of an Evangelical Youth Culture." *Church History* 67, no. 1 (03, 1998): 83-106. <http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/217501970?accountid=10427>.
- Gambs, John Frederick. "The Mid-Life Experience of Counterculture Males." Order No. 8806788, University of Georgia, 1987. <http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/303467431?accountid=10427>.
- Grimes, William. "JOHN T. ELSON APRIL 29, 1931 - SEPT. 7, 2009 TIME MAGAZINE RELIGION EDITOR WHO ASKED, 'IS GOD DEAD?'" *Pittsburgh Post - Gazette*, Sep 22, 2009. <http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/392016625?accountid=10427>.
- Luhr, Eileen. *Witnessing Suburbia: Conservatives and Christian Youth Culture*. University of California Press, 2009.
- Martha, Sawyer Allen and Staff Writer. "The King of Pop ; Forget Britney, Elvis and Michael. when it Comes to the Ultimate Cultural Icon in America, they and all of the Rest must Bow to Jesus." *Star Tribune*, Aug 21, 2004. <http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/427648362?accountid=10427>.
- McConeghy, David Walker. "Geographies of Prayer: Place and Religion in Modern America." Order No. 3596197, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2013. <http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1448527075?accountid=10427>.
- Patterson, James Alan. "REVOLUTION AND THE ESCHATON: IMAGES OF JESUS IN THE JESUS MOVEMENT." *Trinity Journal* 26, no. 2 (Fall, 2005): 267-277. <http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/212919884?accountid=10427>.

- Rothman, Lily. "Is God Dead? At 50," *Time Magazine*. April 6, 2015.
<http://time.com/isgoddead/>
- Shiple, Morgan. "'One Never Loves enough": Psychedelics and Spirituality in Post-War America." Order No. 3587219, Michigan State University, 2013.
<http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1426825647?accountid=10427>.
- Silos, Jill Katherine. "'Everybody Get Together': The Sixties Counterculture and Public Space, 1964–1967." Order No. 3083741, University of New Hampshire, 2003.
<http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/305315697?accountid=10427>.
- Thomas, Sally. "Grooving on Jesus." *First Things* no. 174 (Jun, 2007): 10-12.
<http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/210000249?accountid=10427>.
- Whitman, Ardis. "THE "GOD IS DEAD" DEBATE." *Redbook* 127, no. 2 (06, 1966): 62-63, 123-126.
<http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1821834424?accountid=10427>.
- Wormald, Benjamin. "*Religious Landscape Study*." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, Pew Research Center. Accessed April 1. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.
- Young, Shawn David. "From Hippies to Jesus Freaks: Christian Radicalism in Chicago's Inner-City." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 22, no. 2 (Summer, 2010): 1-28.
<http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/749204962?accountid=10427>.
- Young, Shawn David. "Jesus People USA, the Christian Woodstock, and Conflicting Worlds: Political, Theological, and Musical Evolution, 1972-2010." Order No. 3449441, Michigan State University, 2011. <http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/862553197?accountid=10427>.