

Reflections

Lawrence P. Grayson

The Cultural Tsunami

(Second of a series of four articles)

America entered the 1960s as a well-established Christian society. Then early in that decade, a series of social, military, and religious events occurred which changed the culture of the nation. Anyone of these occurrences would have weakened the religious foundations of the country, but their emergence in rapid succession created a confluence that overwhelmed the existing order.

The nation became involved in the Vietnamese struggle for independence in the 1950s, first providing military advisors and then trainers to the South Vietnamese forces. In 1964, a series of military actions escalated the conflict into a proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union, with large numbers of U.S. troops being sent to Vietnam. The war, which lasted until the U.S. military was withdrawn in 1975, was very unpopular with the American public and led to dissatisfaction with the nation's leaders.

Discontentment took a violent turn in 1963, when President John F. Kennedy, who was young, charismatic and widely admired, was assassinated. Two years later, Malcolm X, a leader in the Black community, was shot while delivering a speech. This was followed in 1968 by the killing of Robert F. Kennedy, who was campaigning for President, and then of Martin Luther King, Jr., a Black civil rights leader. These assassinations added to the disillusionment of the American people in the governing establishment and to its ability to bring about political and social change.

Disenchantment was particularly strong among the children of the World War II veterans, who were then entering adulthood. While the veterans and their parents experienced the effects of the "Great Depression", and so were concerned about improving their economic status, their children rejected a predominantly materialistic



Woodstock. 1969

view of the American dream. A segment of this social group, known as hippies, rebelled against established institutions, criticized middle class values, adopted aspects of non-Judeo-Christian religions, experimented with psychedelic drugs, and promoted peace, love and sexual liberation. The Vietnam War, which they strongly opposed, gave them a rallying point to promote their countercultural views. The movement hits its apogee in August 1969, when over 500,000 hippies attended the three-day

Woodstock Music and Art Festival on a dairy farm in New York. Although only a small part of the nation's population, the hippies were highly visible and vocal and served as an unofficial vanguard for a culture that was much less religious.

The loosening of sexual mores extended to the population as a whole. In 1960, the Food and Drug Administration approved the pharmaceutical company G.D. Searle to market the first oral contraceptive, which was referred to as “the Pill.” Even though its availability was limited in most states by statutes that restricted the advertising and sales of contraceptives, sales took off: by 1965, 6.5 million American women were using it. This situation changed when the Supreme Court ruled that year that prohibiting the use of contraceptives violated a marital right to privacy and, in 1972, that unmarried people had the same right to contraceptives. How accepting the public was of this development, even among Catholics, was evidenced in 1968 when the movie *Prudence and the Pill*, a comedy about adultery and unmarried sex, was shown nationwide without any noticeable backlash.

Attacks on religion extended to education. If God could be eliminated from the classroom, it would be easier in years to come, when these children became adults, to eliminate God from all public venues. In 1962, the U.S. Supreme Court declared unconstitutional a strictly voluntary, non-denominational school prayer composed by the New York Board of Regents. Thus, an activity that had been part of American life since the beginnings of the nation’s history was deemed invalid. The following year, the Supreme Court ruled that reading Bible passages or saying the Lord’s Prayer in school was unconstitutional, even if all students who requested were excused. The *Wall Street Journal* commented that now atheism was “the one belief to which the state’s power will extend its protection.”

While these transformations were occurring in the social arena, the Catholic Church was also being altered in unanticipated ways. In 1962, Pope John XXIII convened Vatican Council II, in order to throw “open the windows of the Church.” When the Council closed in 1965, recommendations had been made for modifications in many aspects of church and liturgical affairs. While the Council’s objective was to maintain the Faith unaltered, but to enunciate it in ways that are relevant to the present time, when the recommendations were implemented many far-reaching changes were introduced in the “spirit of Vatican II.” The result was confusion among the laity and inconsistency in guidance by the clergy.

At a time when the social trends in America required a strong religious response, Catholics as a whole did not have the knowledge or conviction to stand apart from the general flow. When Pope Paul VI issued his encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, in 1968, affirming the Church’s traditional position prohibiting all forms of artificial birth control, it was widely disregarded – in 1970, it was estimated that two-thirds of Catholic women in America were using contraceptives, and 20 percent of them were on the Pill. Clearly, the Catholic Church was not in a position in the 1960s to be the bulwark against the secular and irreligious forces changing America. Rather, it would have to struggle to bring this nation back to its roots at a later time.

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