
British historian Hugh McLeod has long distinguished himself as an astute analyst of trends in religion. His newest book scrutinizing the decade of the 1960s reinforces his reputation as a careful, trenchant interpreter. For McLeod, the Sixties refers not to an artificial ten-year period, but to what he calls the “long” Sixties. Some trends came into focus as early as 1958 and their immediate effects continued at least until 1972. He turns his lens on Christianity in western Europe, especially France and Britain, as well as in the U.S., with some comment on Australia and New Zealand. The ‘western’ industrialized world is his territory.

No one on either side of the Atlantic (or Pacific) denies that the Sixties denoted a tumultuous epoch, not just in religion, but throughout the social order. McLeod’s intent is to move beyond describing what happened to wrestle with whether this period represented the coming to fruition of many long evolving trends or a revolution that broke sharply with the past. He capably demonstrates that many trends had roots stretching at least to the period between the world wars, but hints that there were also occasional sharp breaks.

Much of the ground he traverses is familiar, though the setting and cast of characters may vary. In Europe more than America, the baby boom years shattered a class structure that was already crumbling, even as almost everywhere they ushered in a time of unprecedented affluence. Everywhere the epoch witnessed challenges to deference and authority—from student unrest in Paris to the civil rights movement in the U.S.—along with increasing pluralism in ethical standards, religious options, and even ideological underpinnings for belief. The net result, McLeod believes, was a weakening of collective identities.

For Catholic Christians, Vatican II created hopes that age-old barriers were breaking down, but new ones appeared. Church leaders remained suspicious of liberation theology, expanding roles for women, any challenge to traditional sexual ethics, and inroads made by the charismatic movement. Increasing affluence gradually turned universities—especially in Britain—from bastions of religious practice into centers of religious doubt, made all the more notorious when some bishops such as John Robinson called for radically recasting the foundations of doctrine.

In all the areas McLeod studied, immigration had a stunning impact, bringing multiculturalism to a once-Christian Britain by the end of the 1960s. Interestingly, immigration law in the U.S. changed only in 1965, with the forces of pluralism gaining ground about ten to fifteen years after they had transformed
European culture. By the end of the twentieth century, few dared claim that the U.S. remained a ‘Christian’ nation.

Everywhere church attendance declined, participation especially in youth groups (once the main route for replenishing the numbers in the pews) dwindled, and fewer sought the services of institutional religion to mark rites of passage from birth to marriage and even death. Pundits in Europe spoke of the triumph of secularism, but in the U.S. church membership and claims to religious identification remained unusually high even as attendance and participation lagged.

Add to this counterculture forces that allowed the Beatles to claim to be more popular than Jesus, efforts to maximize personal freedom, intrigue with Marxism, and the impact of shifting gender roles and family structure, and one has a plot as complex as that of any novel. What was the result? McLeod posits that “Christian culture” gave way to “civilized society.” He turns repeatedly to the way governments and religious groups wrestled with homosexuality to illustrate his point. If no one standard or belief could claim normative status, what held society together? If one speaks of the end of Christendom, as McLeod does, then what was beginning in its place?

McLeod, a historian, does not predict the future. Yet the differing ways individuals, religious groups, and even governments have struggled to find some sort of center of meaning merit attention. Multiculturalism and pluralism have not replaced a shared religious worldview without causing considerable angst and in some cases outright conflict. Societies pay a price as they become increasingly diverse.

In the U.S., even in the ‘long’ Sixties, sociologist Robert Bellah tried to recapture some common ground when he wrote eloquently about an American civil religion that flourished alongside institutional forms of religious expression. Critics even then suggested he was grasping at straws, trying to find a ‘one size fits all’ plausibility structure that would speak to the experience of everyone.

What remains is for students of religion and culture to show how a society can remain cohesive when our multiple systems of belief compete in a free marketplace—even if a nominal state church remains. How can there be a civil society—McLeod’s term would be “civilized society”—when there are not only competing, but often contradictory ethical standards at work? In other words, how can a multicultural, religiously pluralistic society find and celebrate common ground?

Working toward an answer to what is McLeod’s final question will not be easy. One possibility may be to recognize the way that deep belief—whether