

The Family in America

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The Fifties Illusion: The Cultural Dry Rot that Doomed the Postwar Era

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“THE FIFTIES”—broadly defined to cover the years 1946 to 1964—were on the surface “the best of times,” a golden age of religious renewal, strong families, and a vital and growing middle class. Beneath this façade, however, lurked the theological, moral, and social dry rot that would usher in “The Sixties.”

Among the “mainline” Protestant churches, the post-World War II Baby Boom created a heady confidence over the success of the Christian family. After the dark days of economic depression and war, church membership lists climbed sharply while the nurseries and Sunday schools teemed with children. Despite the mainline’s embrace of birth control within marriage during the 1930s and early 1940s, completed fertility levels rose. Even the Federal Council of Churches shifted its emphasis from limiting family size to expanding it, arguing in a 1946 policy statement that “for the individual family, there is nothing more satisfying, even though it may involve real sacrifice, than to have at least

three or four children.”¹

Evangelicals, meanwhile, seemed to enjoy a surge in organization, enthusiasm, and membership over these same years. New radio ministries founded in the decades before the war (e.g., *Shepherd Hour* and *Old Fashioned Revival Hour*) drew millions of listeners into an informal network of believers. In 1942, the National Association of Evangelicals took form as a vehicle for organizing conservative Protestants disillusioned with the mainline, and quickly created influential satellite arms such as the National Religious Broadcasters, while boosting the nascent Youth for Christ. The latter group launched the career of the Rev. Billy Graham, who galvanized national attention through his 1949 crusade in Los Angeles. Graham became the symbol of what some called America’s “Third Great Awakening.”² Through most of the 1950s, evangelical leaders remained opposed to birth control. As a probable result, fertility among “conservative” or “fundamentalist” American women remained significantly higher during the 1950s than that found among “liberal” or “mainline” Protestant women.³

Most impressively, American Roman Catholics registered a still more robust level of family growth. Theological affirmations from the very top of the church hierarchy appeared to have played a role, with Pope Pius XII declaring at the apex of the Baby Boom in 1958:

Large families are most blessed by God and specially loved and prized by the church as its most precious treasures. . . . Where you find families of great numbers, they point to the physical and moral health of a Christian people; a living faith in God and trust in his Providence; the fruitful and joyous holiness of Christian marriage.⁴

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1. In Gregg Singer, *The Unholy Alliance* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1975), p. 179.
 2. See D. G. Hart, *That Old Time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2002), pp. 55–79; Douglas A Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), pp. 172–75.
 3. Pascal K. Welpton, Arthur A. Campell, and John Patterson, *Fertility and Family Planning in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960); Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley, and Melissa Wilde, “The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States,” *American Journal of Sociology* 107 (September 2001): 468–500.
 4. Pope Pius XII, “The Large Family Address to the Association of Large Families in Rome and Italy, January 19, 1958,” *The Pope Speaks* 4 (Spring 1958): 363–64.

Average completed family size among American Catholics increased from 3.54 children in 1953 to 4.25 children in 1963; the proportion of young Catholic families with four or more children climbed from 10 to 22 percent during the same period.

Protestant and Catholic Weaknesses

Yet these signs of religious faithfulness to the building of families rested on unstable or shifting ground. Among mainline Protestants, for example, popular religious sentiments were tending toward the “smiley face” theology of Norman Vincent Peale and his *The Power of Positive Thinking*. More broadly, Peter Berger has carefully documented how economic changes, social class, and historical factors—rather than true piety—lay behind Protestantism’s new family-centeredness. As he explains, “It is not a particular family that produces certain political or economic development, but the other way around.” Looking at motivations for joining churches, Berger found relatively few conversion experiences and life crises, and little theological reflection. Instead, “for most of these people, the decision to join was prompted by the prospects or presence of children in the family.” Parents hoped that their offspring might pick up some moral values in the mainline Sunday schools, making church membership merely one more step in building the “O.K. world” of the American middle class.⁵

Indeed, by 1961, “sexual ethics” among the member denominations of the National Council of Churches (NCC) had already been turned over to figures such as Lester Kirkendall (America, he said, had “entered a sexual economy of abundance”); Wardell Pomeroy of the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research (“the concept of normality and abnormality . . . gets in the way of our thinking”); Evelyn Hooker (who wrote on the supposed healthy, well-adjusted lives of most homosexuals); and Planned Parenthood’s Mary Calderone. They were the featured speakers at the NCC conference that year on the “Foundations for Christian Family

5. Peter Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 93ff; and Dennison Nash and Peter Berger, “The Child, the Family, and the ‘Religious Revival’ of Suburbia,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 2 (Fall 1962): 85–93.

Policy.”⁶

Evangelicals, too, tended to drift away from a tough, consistent theology, in favor of alignment or engagement with the mainline. Historian Alan Petigny, for example, has carefully documented how—by the mid-1950s—Billy Graham had already drifted away from rigorous fundamentalism, moderating his message and declaring his admiration for the therapeutic theology of Peale and the neo-orthodox ambiguities of Reinhold Niebuhr.⁷ Indeed, by 1959, this voice of the “New Evangelicalism” had also joined mainline leaders in endorsing the use of birth control by married couples. “The Rev. Dr. Billy Graham believes there is nothing morally wrong in the practice of birth control,” reported the *New York Times*. He labeled this an effective response to the “terrifying and tragic” problem of overpopulation.⁸

In addition, Roman Catholic “exceptionalism” in family formation during the 1950s appears to have had little to do with a genuine surge in personal piety and a great deal to do with one-time material changes in the living patterns of a single generation. Young adults, who had been born into the prewar Catholic ghettos of urban America and reared within these *gemeinschaft* ethnic parishes, found themselves lifted up by the war and its aftermath into the middle class. They also poured into the new suburbs, where conditions allowed fertility to increase by about one child per household in a quarter of affected families, hardly a demographic counter-revolution. The imposing Catholic educational edifice, from parish schools to great universities like Notre Dame, and the religious orders that filled them with teachers, actually began to succumb to disorienting intellectual currents, as well. The popular new psychology of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow found converts among Catholic as well as Protestant clerics. While Maslow held that “the healthiest persons in our culture . . . are most (not least) pagan, most (not least) ‘instinctive,’

6. Elizabeth Stell Genne and William Henry Genne, eds., *Foundations for Christian Family Policy: The Proceedings of the North American Conference on Church and Family, April 30–May 5, 1961* (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1961).

7. Allan Petigny, *The Permissive Society: America, 1941–1965* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

8. George Dugan, “Graham Sees Hope in Birth Control,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 1959.

[and] most (not least) accepting of their animal nature,” such gauzy forms of post-Freudian psychology reshaped pastoral counseling and so opened the door to the emotional train wreck of the 1960s.⁹

Deconstructing Home Economics

One of the more striking developments marking the 1950s was the return of the full-time homemaker as the normative aspiration for American women. Behind this lay the apparent success of the home-economics movement in training girls and young women for careers as “household engineers,” focused on rational, scientific forms of consumption. This involved, in practice, a fairly complete merger of the home sphere with the industrial sphere, with the homemaker recast as a purchasing agent. Christine Frederick, in her popular books *Household Engineering: Scientific Management in the Home* (1920) and *Selling Mrs. Consumer* (1929), was particularly adept at translating Taylorism—the principle of time-motion studies and “one best use”—into the home. Careful meal planning, the efficient arrangement of kitchen appliances, detailed household records, and a thorough family budget represented specific tasks.

Favored and directly funded by the federal government, home-economics teachers had spread across the landscape. In 1946, the Department of Agriculture launched Future Homemakers of America, which quickly counted membership in the hundreds of thousands. Throughout the 1950s, home economics was the most popular major for young women in colleges and universities. All the same, leaders of the movement actually turned against the role of “homemaker” in the early 1950s, joining the clergymen in an embrace of popular psychology as an alternative basis of identity. In 1953, the American Home Economics Association (AHEA) redefined its purpose as “the attainment of the well-being of individuals and of families, the improvement of homes, and the preservation of values significant in home life.”¹⁰ In 1955, Helen LeBaron of Iowa State University argued that home economics must refocus “on

9. Petigny, *The Permissive Society*, p. 93.

10. Olive Hall, *Home Economics Careers and Homemaking* (New York: Wiley, 1958), 38, 77–84, and Selma F. Lippeatt and Helen I. Brown, *Focus and Promise of Home Economics: A Family-Oriented Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 89ff.

a study of *problems of the family*, irrespective of the subject matter thus affected.” And in 1959, the AHEA adopted “New Directions: A Statement of Philosophy and Objectives,” in which the group assumed “a unique responsibility for helping girls and boys, women and men, to achieve wholesome, happy lives.”¹¹

Not only did this new focus reinforce an earlier turn away from teaching effective methods of “home production” as a defining part the discipline; it also marked a near abandonment of attention to any aspect of “the material culture” of the homemaker and her family. Trendy psychology filled the vacuum, which opened the way as well for a powerful feminist challenge to the very existence of the discipline in the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹²

An Obsession with Things Sexual

The American “Sex Revolution” is popularly associated with the Sixties. The real revolution in sexual behavior actually began two decades earlier. To a considerable degree, the immediate cause was World War II itself. This conflict occasioned a great mixing of young Americans—15 million men and 10 million women—who were pulled out of their homes and neighborhoods and dispatched to military bases, overseas’ battlefronts, and war factories. As John Costello reports in his book *Virtue Under Fire*, “in the unsettled conditions of wartime many social inhibitions . . . lost their restraining force.” He adds: “Moral and sexual taboos, once broken, were not . . . easily restored, especially when the traditional pattern of life had been disrupted for so many for so long.” The real cost of the “Good War” actually included increases “in the barometer of illegitimacy, venereal disease, and divorce rates.”¹³

A more forceful explanation of sexual adventures among the wartime

11. Helen R. LeBaron, “Home Economics: Its Potential for Greater Service,” *Journal of Home Economics* 47 (September 1955): 468–69, and Committee on Philosophy and Objectives of Home Economics, American Home Economics Association, *Home Economics’ New Directions: A Statement of Philosophy and Objectives* (Washington: American Home Economics Association, 1959), p. 5, emphasis added.

12. See: “What Robin Morgan Said in Denver,” *Journal of Home Economics* 65 (January 1973): 13.

13. John Costello, *Virtue Under Fire: How World War II Changed Our Social and Sexual Attitudes* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1985), pp. 258–60.

masses is found in a peculiar, but illuminating book from the early 1970s, entitled *The Rape of the A*P*E** (APE meaning the “American Puritan Ethic”). Published by Playboy Press, subtitled *The Official History of the Sex Revolution* and written by humorist Allan Sherman, the book opens with a chapter on “World War II as Sex Education.” The author describes the deployment of American soldiers throughout the world as “a fly-opening experience.” In Italy, he says, the soldiers found pornography enshrined in stone; in Africa and the South Seas, they viewed bare breasts galore; in Paris, the GIs found “books we hadn’t dreamed existed, postcards too marvelous to mail and girls anxious to share their gratitude for being liberated.” In the China-Burma theatre, the American boys discovered hashish, and a little Oriental guidebook called *The Perfumed Garden*; over in India, they found *The Kama Sutra*. Sherman continues, “We went to Scandinavia and the Low Countries and Germany and Japan. Everywhere there were girls who did things our well-scrubbed sweethearts hadn’t yet imagined, and did them for nothing, without a labored seduction routine, without the promise of marriage or eternal love.”¹⁴

When the boys came home, Sherman reports, they pondered their experiences. Some of them began to plot the sexual revolution in a peculiarly militarized way:

Wherever there was a strawberry church social, they would search and destroy. They would storm every bastion of decency, besmirch and defile the enemy on the beaches, in the homes and in the streets. They would recruit allies among the corrupt, and despoil the innocent. They would experiment with new sex positions, new sex locations, new sex kicks. They would open new sex fronts—science, for example; they would give smut respectability by dressing it in the dignified cloak of science. They would shock, and shock again.¹⁵

At least in a symbolic way, Sherman correctly dates the beginning of the postwar American “sex revolution” as November 13, 1945, when Bob

14. Allan Sherman, *The Rape of the A*P*E*—The Official History of the Sex Revolution, 1945–1973: The Obscening of America* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1973), pp. 72–73.

15. *Ibid.*

Hope—that paragon of “World War II Americanism”—introduced a new joke to wild laughter on his Tuesday night Pepsodent radio program. This veteran of the USO extravaganza had already discovered the crowd-stimulating value of beefcake. His next innovation, on that fateful evening, was a joke about Sonny Wisecarver, a 14-year old Lothario, who had just been hauled into California juvenile court for sleeping with a variety of Los Angeles housewives. Encouraged by the wild response, Hope made “Sonny Wisecarver” jokes a weekly staple on his program.¹⁶

Other developments during the Fifties threw gasoline on the flames of revolution. In 1948, zoologist Alfred C. Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. The deep flaws in his data collection and analysis long remained hidden. Instead, the book won broad attention for claims that 22 percent of American college men had used prostitutes; that 37 percent of men had had a homosexual experience by age 21; or that half of all husbands counted at least one extramarital affair. The companion volume, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, appeared in 1953, with claims that the average American wife had experienced 233 orgasms before marriage, commonly followed by frigidity after marriage. This indirect invitation to infidelity was matched by his claims to having observing masturbation among infant girls as young as four months.¹⁷

The same year witnessed publication of the first issue of *Playboy*. A full decade before Betty Friedan raised the new feminist challenge to the suburban American family, editor Hugh Hefner boldly attacked the breadwinner role of the husband and father. He lifted pornography out of the back alley, printed it on slick paper, and moved the result onto the magazine racks of drugstores and supermarket chains. His “Playboy Philosophy” celebrated sexual hedonism as the highest human aspiration. “Anything is permissible between consenting adults,” he preached, which became the key text in the gospel of the sexual revolution.¹⁸

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 196–97.

17. See: Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948) and Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, and Paul H. Gebhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948.)

18. Sherman, *The Rape of the A*P*E**, pp. 215–18.

By 1956, the Russian-American sociologist Pitirim Sorokin concluded that America was already in the grip of a sexual revolution. At the very height of the Marriage and Baby Booms of the Fifties, he saw instead a dangerous moral anarchy. Its signs included

a rapid increase of divorce, desertion, and separation, and of premarital and extramarital relations, with the boundary between lawful marriage and illicit liaisons tending to become more and more tenuous. Still greater has been the deterioration of the family as a union of parents and children, with 'fluid marriages' producing a super-abundance of the physically, morally, and mentally defective children, or no children at all.¹⁹

Other consequences of "the sexualization of American culture" through "sexual poisons" included mounting psychological disorders and a loss of creativity in science, theology, music, and art. Americans who tried to explain these developments through the "fantastic yarns" of Sigmund Freud were left with "an utterly debased conception of the human being as a . . . libido-bag filled with all kinds of sex perversions."²⁰ Sorokin went on to condemn the whole of the American culture of the Fifties:

Thus, whatever aspect of our culture is considered, each is packed with sex obsession. Its vast totality bombards us continuously, from cradle to grave, from all points of our living space, at almost every step of our activity, feeling, and thinking. If we escape from being stirred by obscene literature, we may be aroused by the crooners, or by the new psychology and sociology, or by the teachings of the Freudian pseudo-religions, or by radio-television entertainment. We are completely surrounded by the rising tide of sex which is flooding every compartment of our culture.²¹

19. Pitirim A. Sorokin, *The American Sex Revolution* (Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1956), p. 132.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Economic Bliss That Wouldn't Last

The economic prosperity and remarkable growth of the American middle class during this era were, in one sense, real developments. In a deeper sense, though, these phenomena were illusions as well, with negative long-term effects. The overwhelming economic realities in 1945 were the complete or relative ruin of all of America's pre-World War II industrial rivals—Germany, Japan, Belgium, and Great Britain—and the overwhelming predominance of America's war-swollen factories and transportation network. As global reconstruction began, only the United States could provide the materials needed. In addition, America's immigration laws remained quite restrictive. The consequences were high demand for labor from a restricted pool, and steadily climbing real wages. Fulfilling an old dream, industrial workers by the millions moved into the middle class. Meanwhile, continued high marginal income taxes on the wealthy—reaching more than 75 percent at the highest levels—limited to a degree the growth of the super-rich. The result was a decrease in inequality, given further credence to the sense of a strong and growing middle class.

This development also coincided with the great surge of positive attention to the role of the full-time homemaker, noted before. With most young women comfortable being at home as wives and mothers, a culturally enforced system of job segregation by gender reinforced the American "family wage" system. The most prestigious and well paying jobs—physician, attorney, engineer, etc.—were largely reserved for men as real or potential breadwinners. "Women's jobs"—secretary, grade-school teacher, nurse—paid much less and were usually assumed to be temporary, until marriage and the first baby came. On the factory floors, Rosie the Riveter had gone home, usually most willingly, and industrial workers could finally claim a "family wage" as well.

However, this would not last. Near the end of the Fifties, old competitors came roaring back, with better products made in newer, more efficient factories. By the late 1960s, American industries—which had grown somewhat fat and lazy in the interim—were losing market share in just about every product field. A long recession began in 1973, as these changes worked themselves out. Not by coincidence, the American family-wage system began to break down at the same time. Feminist

attacks on the family wage were not so much the cause of its collapse, but more accurately a symptom of the larger transition. By the early 1980s, a considerably smaller American industrial sector would re-emerge on a competitive basis, but only after sharply reducing the real wages of men and drawing women out of their homes for work in the factories and offices. The economic side of American family life had failed as well, due in part to failures found beneath the surface of the Fifties.

In short, the postwar era was not the family-centered utopia often celebrated later by pro-family advocates. Nor were the Fifties a pleasant, one-generation wonder tucked nicely between two eras of long-term family decay. Rather, the very nature of the notable decade rested on ideas, values, and behaviors, all of which conspired to damage family life and which would find their more complete expression in the Sixties.

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This revised and updated edition includes the latest information on race, the culture wars, and current cultural and political controversies of the post-Cold War era. ...more. Get A Copy. Amazon.Â While she well documents the paucity of opportunities available to women during the postwar era, other than marriage and family, her wistful "what ifs" appear unscholarly. She bemoans the "widespread challenges to traditional gender roles" brought about by the Great Depression and the Second World War that "could have led to a restructured home."(5) "If opportunities had expanded," she laments, "the number of women holding jobs would have risen dramatically. The Doomed Fleet. Go to Menethil Harbor in the Wetlands, and speak with Glorin Steelbrow. Description. Years ago, the Third Fleet of Kul'Tiras sunk along the coasts of The Wetlands, an expanse of marsh north of the Dwarven kingdom of Ironforge. Aboard one ship was a load of Lightforge Iron. This metal is precious to us, for items crafted from it strike with holy truth. If you are to face Morbent Fel, then you will need such a weapon. Go to Menethil Harbor and speak with my dwarven colleague Glorin Steelbrow. If that lost metal can be found, he'll know where to look. Completion.Â Contribute. Please keep the following in mind when posting a comment: Your comment must be in English or it will be removed. Unsure how to post?