Surfing the Tide of Sex Anarchy: How Sexual Co-Revolutionaries Remade Evangelical Marriage, 1960-1980

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Abstract
This project examines the conservative evangelical response to 1960s era sexual revolution in order to explain how and why evangelicals both resisted and adapted tenets of sexual modernity in a process that transformed the theological foundations underlying the conception of Christian marriage and sexuality. Though evangelicals and conservatives are typically portrayed as resisters to cultural and sexual change, my research reveals the ways in which conservative evangelicals agreed with key critiques of the sexual status quo in the 1960s, and deliberately worked to change Christian teachings and attitudes to keep them vibrant and attractive to postwar generations. Previous examinations of evangelical thought on sexuality has focused on rhetorical analysis and social history to the exclusion of examinations of the close ties between evangelical marital theology, sexual practice, and political activism. This project seeks to integrate all three into a cohesive historical framework that reveals evangelical response to sexual revolution as more complex and adaptive than it is typically described.

Close readings of conservative evangelical texts from 1960 to 1980 combine the long term editorial trajectory of Christianity Today magazine with ideological and theological texts from the 1960s with popular, practical texts from the 1970s to demonstrate that the evangelical marriage project was deliberate, deeply rooted in a modern hermeneutic of Biblical interpretation, and nimble in its ability and willingness to adapt changing sexual attitudes to accommodate Christian theology and practice. The resulting portrait of evangelical response to sexual revolution is more complex, contextualized, and nuanced than previous narratives.

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For the Sexual Revolutionaries the revolution is not over, and after dismantling marriage, with the help of the Supreme Court that most likely will determine same-sex “marriage” to be a constitutional right this summer, religious liberty is next. As President Obama, continues to reassure us that “same-sex marriage poses no threat to religious liberty,” photographers, bakers and florists are being sued for declining to provide services to same-sex ceremonies in violation of their religious beliefs. And losing. To echo the words of Ryan T. Anderson, co-author of What is Marriage: Man and Woman: A Defense, marriage has always existed to unite a man and a woman as husband and wife to be mother and father to any children that their union might produce. Today, the sexual revolutionaries of the 1960s are typically portrayed as brave and daring, and their predecessors in the 1920s forgotten. But the overarching story of an oppressive past and a debauched, out-of-control present has remained consistent. For people born after 1980, the most important sexual ethic is not about how or with whom you have sex, but open-mindedness. As one young man amongst the hundreds I interviewed for my forthcoming book on contemporary sexual politics, a 32-year-old call-center worker from London, put it, “Nothing should be seen as alien, or looked down upon as wrong.” The “second sexual revolution” was more than just a change in sexual behavior. How do you turn the world upside down? In the span of just five decades, the moral and cultural world has been transformed by the sexual revolution. In terms of both public and private impact, no moral revolution can come close to the importance of the sexual revolution, and none has occurred so quickly. The moral world taken for granted in 1960 has virtually disappeared. Helen Gurley Brown, who died last week at age 90, was one of the most important, if often underestimated, agents of that revolution. Moral revolutions do not happen by accident, nor are they orchestrated by a cabal of culture.