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Counterculture and Eastern Religion: The Music of George Harrison and The Beatles

The rise of the counterculture movement within the 1960s - 1970s was motivated by progressive rebellion. This hippie revolution was led by young people not only as a protest against the Vietnam War, but also as a gateway to art, music, drugs, free love, and sticking it to the man. At the top of it all were The Beatles, a four-piece pop-rock outfit hailing from Liverpool, England. The group, composed of George Harrison, Ringo Starr, Paul McCartney, and John Lennon had a firm grasp on the minds of the counterculture youth. The Beatles, particularly George Harrison, immersed themselves into the world of Eastern religion and spirituality and the counterculture population followed. Eventually, spirituality became an inspiration for The Beatles, and because of their influence over the counterculture many hippies followed. This essay focuses on the influence of The Beatles' spirituality on the counterculture, more specifically through the work and music of George Harrison.

The Beatles led the British Invasion movement and quickly infiltrated American homes. The Beatles were fresh, and the Baby Boom led to a surge in young people in the 1960s. Young people were at the heart of the counterculture movement, which endorses its longevity. Russell Duncan writes: "For the majority of white teenagers, the simple facts of growing up privileged in this setting spawned a transatlantic youth culture that begat a counterculture," (Duncan, 145). The West was richer than it has ever been, and the popularization of the American Dream bred privileged suburban households. This created the perfect environment for a cultural rebellion. Music, art, writing, psychedelic drugs, and free love quickly defined the counterculture generation. For this reason, The Beatles had a lot of influence, so much influence that they are

frowned upon by the religious far right. In an interview printed in the *Evening Standard* on March 4th, 1966, John Lennon, a founding member of The Beatles said: “Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn’t argue about that; I’m right and I will be proven right. We’re more popular than Jesus now; I don’t know which will go first - rock ‘n’ roll or Christianity. Jesus was alright, but His disciples were thick and ordinary. It’s them twisting it that ruins it for me.” (quoted in Sullivan, 313). The “bigger-than-Jesus” rhetoric quickly forced the religious far right against The Beatles. This groundwork is critical for analyzing the culture war between counterculture and the far right, especially in the lens of religious conviction and The Beatles.

In the mid 1960s, The Beatles embarked on a spiritual journey, while incorporating oriental themes and instruments in their music. In 1967 The Beatles released one of the most acclaimed, influential albums in rock music history. *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* hinges on themes of the occult: instrumentation is erratic, drugs are referenced, and religion is introduced to The Beatles catalog. In particular, the track “Within You, Without You”, written by George Harrison was a direct result of Eastern spirituality.

Harrison sings: “Try to realize it’s all within yourself / no one else can make you change / and to see you’re really only very small / and life flows on within you and without you” (Harrison, 1967). The lyrics are backed by the sitar, a traditional Indian string instrument. This marks the introduction of spirituality in The Beatles music. Harrison started his spiritual journey from his admiration for traditional Indian music. From there, he befriended sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar and quickly assimilated into Hindu practice. John Hausman writes: “...he was being accepted by Western audiences representing these communities, and so encouraging orientalist-style fantasies about Indians: they were all spiritual, they all practiced meditation and yoga, and they possessed the secrets of the universe” (Hausman, 2017). This song broke a

cross-cultural barrier for The Beatles. For Beatles fans, it was also highly likely that they had never heard tonality quite like that of “Within You Without You”.

Harrison’s spiritual journey was shared amongst other members of The Beatles. The group was heavily motivated by the effects of psychedelic drugs on their consciousness, which in turn led them to pursue spirituality. In an interview with *Rolling Stone Magazine*, Harrison explains: “When I was younger, with the aftereffects of the LSD that opened something up in 1966, a flood of other thoughts came into my head, which led me to the yogis. At that time it was very much my desire to *find out*. It still is, though I have found out a lot. I’ve gone through the period of questioning and being answered, and I feel I’ve got to the point where there isn’t anything *really* that I need to know” (Harrison, DeCurtis, 44, 1987). In February of 1968, the group traveled to Rishikesh in northern India to partake in Transcendental Meditation led by Maharishi Manesh Yogi. Harrison led the trip, and the trip is noted to be directly influential on The Beatles discography. The media coverage of The Beatles’s tour to Rishikesh helped the ashram become an icon of international tourism. Following The Beatles, India registered a record of a 30% arrival of foreign tourists in 1969. Murals of The Beatles were erected at the ashram, as they became icons of both music, and Eastern spirituality.

The religious convictions of The Beatles were an indirect form of televangelism, in the sense of media (mostly music) popularized by religious conviction. The Beatles were not motivated by capital gain for spreading religion, however their public commitment to Eastern spirituality set a strong precedent for modern religion rhetoric within the counterculture revolution. Televangelism usually aligns with evangelical and fundamental Protestant religion, and the integration of Eastern spirituality into the counterculture was a threat to evangelicalism. However, the media coverage of the counterculture resulted in a surge of popularity of Eastern

spirituality. Specifically, the religious teachings of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs were adopted by the American counterculture on the basis of values. Eastern religion emphasizes peace, freedom, mindfulness and happiness, which is different to traditional Christianity.

The counterculture generation is a fascinating population to study because they represent a shift in Americanism. Their cultural rebellion offset the American Dream precedent, as individualism was embraced. The collective shift to embrace individualism was different to other religious rhetoric at the time; individualism was rejected by Christianity. Traditional christian religions were strong in their collective belief for salvation, as well as creating moral code and social order. “The collectivity has its own ways of thinking and feeling to which its members bend but which are different from those they would create if they were left to their own devices,” said French sociologist Émile Durkheim. The counterculture is similar in general collectivity, however the embrace of Eastern religion and individuality in Hippie culture was completely opposite to traditional American religion. There was also a level of communalism that was endorsed through Eastern spirituality, that helped raise the social collectivity of the counterculture movement.

George Harrison became an icon of Eastern spirituality. Between the influence The Beatles had, and the integration of spirituality into their work, the counterculture revolution aligned closely with Eastern spirituality. Harrison’s religious conviction defined his character as the reserved Beatle. The breakup of the group in April 1970 marked the end of The Beatles group career, however Harrison’s individual career became even more evident of Eastern spirituality.

Harrison never outwardly labeled his religious affiliation, however he was primarily associated with the Hare Krishna movement. The Hare Krishna Consciousness was brought to

the West by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness in New York City, New York. Within a few years, Harrison released his first solo album *All Things Must Pass*.

All Things Must Pass, released as a triple LP in 1970, represents religious freedom and an opportunity for Harrison to create music that aligns with his beliefs. The album is deeply spiritual, taking inspiration from Harrison's personal religious journey and his relationships with other influential musicians. The album includes songs such as "My Sweet Lord," "Beware of Darkness," and "Hear Me Lord," all of which include teachings from the Hare Krishna Consciousness. "My Sweet Lord," even incorporates phrasing from Vedic Prayer. The song was written with the intention of praising Krishna, a Hindu god.

Harrison's work within The Beatles and solo helped breed Eastern spirituality into the minds of counterculture revolutionaries. This was a form of indirect televangelism. It is important to note that Harrison's spiritual journey was not strategic; he was leading through practice. Harrison believed he could improve lives and protect the planet through his religious conviction (Greene, 2006). This is why spirituality is a consistent motivation for Harrison and his art. The media coverage of Harrison's spirituality contributed to the commodification of Eastern religion in the countercultural mainstream. Harrison led by example, as he was an icon in a musical sense, but also a spiritual sense.

The counterculture movement is forever memorialized as a time of rapid change and social upheaval. The revolution debunked the religious precedent in America, and the effects of religious rejection contribute to modern religious rhetoric. The Beatles and the work of George Harrison was significant in educating the West about Eastern mindfulness, which has contributed to expanding outside of Western thought.

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