

God Bless the Pill: Contraception and Sexuality in Tri-Faith America

By Samira K. Mehta

University of Colorado Boulder



© 2020 by Samira K. Mehta



God Bless the Pill: Contraception and Sexuality in Tri-Faith America

“God Bless the Pill: Contraception and Sexuality in Tri-Faith America” charts the illuminating and unexpectedly complex history of the contemporary debate over abortion, contraception, and religious freedom. For the contemporary period, we think of battles over contraception as occurring between conservative Christians (Protestant and Catholic) and secular Americans. However, these debates have a much more diverse religious history in which liberal Protestants and Jews played a prominent role. For instance, in 1958, the chairman of the New York City municipal hospital system prevented a Jewish doctor from providing a diabetic Protestant woman with the contraception she needed to prevent a life-threatening pregnancy. In response, the New York metropolitan area’s Jewish and Protestant clergy launched a campaign that changed hospital policy. This two-month-long public relations battle used both arguments about religious freedom and theological and halakhic defenses of contraception. Theirs were not the first religious voices to speak publicly for contraceptive access, but they set the tone for a public alliance between Jews and Protestants against more conservative Catholic teaching on the pill and shifted much of the debate from the morality of contraception to contraceptive decisions as an arena for religious freedom.

From those opening debates around contraception in the 1950s and early 1960s, my project moves forward to contemporary debates about contraception. In doing so, it analyzes shifts (and longstanding attitudes) towards sexuality, marriage, family, and motherhood, as well as towards religious freedom. I approach all these topics through the filter of who and what defines public morality. While conservative religious actors (including many evangelical Protestants, some Jews, and many Catholics) framed their opposition to family planning and premarital sex in strong moral terms, liberal secular voices provided another moral vision designed to underscore the hypocrisy of “religion,” which cared more about condemning contraception than about helping the poor. These competing visions, prominent in the press, eclipsed a third moral vision, one that was, at once, liberal

and religious. This third approach drew from both Protestant and Jewish ethical frameworks and from their particular concerns in the American landscape. It defined reproduction as an arena for moral agency and emphasized the individual or couple as the primary moral agents in shaping their family, while also stressing their responsibility to take social issues such as economics, environmentalism, and the continuity and growth of Jewish families and communities into account. Continuity was a particular concern for American Jewish leadership, and many among the laity also worried about a decline in the overall number of Jews and a decline of those people who self-identified and practiced as Jews, both because of the genocide of the Holocaust and because of their unprecedented acceptance into US society. This would, they worried, result in assimilation. When easy availability of birth control began to allow Jewish women to attend graduate and professional schools, and Jewish couples to delay starting families, Jewish communal leaders worried that there would be a resulting decline in the Jewish birth rate.

My work moves beyond a history of the contraception movement and links it to religious and cultural understandings of “the natural,” “morality,” and law, particularly as those understandings relate to issues of privacy and religious freedom. This project builds on existing secular and Catholic histories of birth control to more fully articulate the range of religious reactions to contraception. It particularly focuses on the birth control pill as the first effective mode of contraception to separate birth control from sexual intercourse and to place reproductive agency squarely in the hands of women. I address the religious backgrounds of scientists developing oral contraception, the role of religious leaders and laity in public discourse linking the pill to both the sexual revolution and anti-communism, and the hope that the pill would limit the global population explosion. Most of the scholarship on contraception gives little attention to the role of religion in these debates. When they do consider the role of religion, historians tend to think about conservative religion, such that they see religion in opposition to expanded access to contraception. My work builds off these more secular histories, and also Deborah Tentler’s classic monograph *Catholics and Contraception*, to explore the role of liberal Protestant and Jewish thought, clergy, and laity debates about access to and appropriate use of contraception.

Most of my research at the Rockefeller Archive Center focused on the records of the Population Council, the papers of John D. Rockefeller 3rd, and the Joan Dunlop papers. Since one of my primary tasks is to interrogate the relationship between secular organizations and religious leaders and/or thought, these archival materials were invaluable to my larger project. The records of the Population Council and perhaps more strikingly, the correspondence files in the John D. Rockefeller 3rd papers, and the Joan Dunlop papers, for instance, demonstrate the involvement of religious leaders with this officially secular organization. We see correspondence (noted later, in the section on Catholic viewpoints), between John D. Rockefeller 3rd and both Pope Paul VI and his staff and Theodore Hesburgh, CSC, president of the University of Notre Dame. This correspondence discussed medical research, and in the latter case, about the strategies and work of the Population Council. We also see letters to leaders in the United Methodist Church, documents signed by Protestant and Jewish leaders in support of Population Council work, and early records of the Population Council suggesting both prominent Protestant and Catholic clergy as potential members.

Importantly, the records of the Population Council will prove very important in another aspect of my research, which is considering the role of religious thought in shaping the rhetoric of ostensibly secular organizations. The Population Council has numerous documents that address the ethics of population control and moral issues around population control, including the questions around who exactly should be limiting their birth rate. Was birth control incumbent on people of all financial classes? How should people be encouraged to limit their family size? Was it ever, under any circumstances, acceptable to compel them to do so? Although I have not completed the other archival work that will be necessary in order to explore these documents comparatively, they will be very useful in considering several analytic questions: first, how much of the language in these documents either feeds into or reflects Protestant theologies of responsible parenthood? Second, do they have similar relationships (or not) to Jewish thought on contraception, population, and eugenics over the same period? Beyond these theological questions, I also want to ask how the Population Council dealt with issues related to eugenics. In the documents about morality and ethics, there are clear attempts to distance the work of the Population Council from early

modes of eugenics.

The next phase of my research will track those attempts against critiques of the Population Council by civil right leaders, asking whether the critiques were fair, whether and how the Population Council responded to those critiques, and the relationship of the languages of religion, ethics, and morality to those dynamics. Leaders in the Population Council, including Frederick Osborn, had relationships with the eugenics movement that predated the founding of the Population Council. How did he, and others, attempt to move the work of the Population Council away from the racial and class problems of eugenics of the earlier part of the century? And how successful were they? What did that look like in the 1950s, when the Council was founded and in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust? How did the Council present its work in the 1970s, after critiques of civil rights leaders?

The Rockefeller Archive Center also contains papers that are helpful in another aspect of my project, specifically nuancing Catholic stances on birth control beyond the formal stance of the institutional church. In fact, considerable diversity is represented in Catholic views about how to talk about contraception. For instance, an educational organization called Catholic Alternatives understood itself to be dedicated to “offering as many alternatives as possible regarding responsible human sexuality to Catholics and those of other faiths” produced a pamphlet that advanced a clearly feminist agenda.¹ Catholic Alternatives was dedicated to three principles: the right of individuals to the “personal privacy to make informed choices regarding fertility according to their conscience”; that a woman who is denied the right to decide “if and under what circumstances she is able to bear children” is “denied her inalienable powers as a sexual being” and is being exploited by society; and that decisions about family planning rest with individual women.² Their principles translated into action, including establishing “real alternatives regarding population concerns”; increasing the stature of women in society, such that they are seen as appropriate agents of their own reproductive futures; developing and providing education around religion and reproduction; supporting “individuals in their use and choice of contraceptive methods”; supporting women who choose abortion for medical, psychological, or

economic reasons; and lastly, supporting “women in their choice to have children within the context of quality of life for all humanity.”³ What we see here is an organization that is clearly identifying as Catholic and very explicitly identifying pro-contraception work with both population concerns and with explicitly feminist rhetoric, specifically around women’s right to bodily control. Because John D. Rockefeller 3rd was interested in potentially funding Catholic Alternatives (and Joan Dunlop was one of his key associates working on issues of population and reproductive health), her papers contain a reasonable collection of background information on the group, allowing me to establish a basis for both further exploration and adding Catholic voices to the collection of Protestant groups working to increase the availability of birth control. Such documents are particularly useful in nuancing Catholic lay debates about birth control.

The John D. Rockefeller 3rd papers further help us to see diversity among prominent Catholic voices on birth control, as they contain his correspondence with the Vatican and with Theodore Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame. In 1965, Rockefeller wrote to Pope Paul VI in his role as the founder of the Population Council, expressing his concerns about the population explosion, in light of the Pontifical Commission on Birth Control and the impending Vatican decision on the topic.⁴ Rockefeller’s letter outlines the Population Council’s concerns, as would another of his letters later that year, in which Rockefeller took the occasion of a speech that he gave at the Economic Club in New York to reconnect with His Holiness. Both Hesburgh and the Office of the Secretary of State at the Vatican assured Rockefeller that the pope found his concerns about overpopulation and the supporting material he provided to be of use.⁵ That said, the contrast between their responses was striking. Whereas the Vatican wrote to Rockefeller that “there are many elements of this project that require study and prayer,” Hesburgh was more clearly advising Rockefeller on the strategy of his communication with the pope, trusting that, in that conversation, a solution could be reached.⁶ These documents demonstrate the internal division within the institutional Catholic Church, as well as the relationship between the scion of a prominent Baptist family and founder of the secular Population Council and the president of one of the nation’s most prestigious Catholic universities.

Lastly, archival information has also helped to support and nuance the information that I had collected elsewhere about the role of Protestant and Jewish voices in encouraging government agencies to act in accordance with research of population growth. For instance, a collection of Protestant and Jewish religious leaders, including the presidents of the National Council of Churches, the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, the World Council of Churches, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the American Baptists, the Unitarian Universalists, and the executive secretaries and moderators of any number of other denominations and denominational committees, sent a letter in support of the President's Commission on Population Control. "Perhaps none of us may agree with all the recommendations in the report, for they deal with complex issues of ethical, cultural and religious attitudes, and public policy which cannot be lightly resolved. Controversy over these points should not be allowed to obscure the need for discussion of the Commission to call for a national population goal and policy."⁷ Here, we see clergy and religious lay leaders arguing in support of both the research and a national policy conversation about how to respond to that research, even if they had hesitations about how best to address some of the problems articulated by the report. This is particularly significant in terms of tracing out what this highly interfaith group of Protestant and Jewish leaders seemed to present as the appropriate negotiation between their own individual ethical concerns and a public policy that both took those concerns into account and preserved the separation of church and state. It is also notable, with their objections to the "immediate condemnation of the report by some on doctrinal grounds, because of specific recommendations such as those on abortion law reform or wider access to contraception," that these clergy are drawing clear lines around how religious authorities may speak to the state. They may offer concerns for consideration, but they may not, these clergy members imply, condemn the research outright.⁸

Such information is particularly helpful to me as I try to parse out how and when particular Protestant denominations stepped back from their support of contraception (and/or state involvement in making contraception available). Additionally, I am trying to identify the moment, not only when more conservative members of this alliance backed away from support for any practice

of birth control at all, but also when the more liberal members (perhaps because population control felt less pressing and birth control less controversial) ceased actively advocating for population control and birth control. As it is very difficult to prove a negative, finding documents that demonstrate which groups were still involved in these movements and when is particularly useful.

Much of my archival work from the Rockefeller Archive Center still requires further analysis and needs to be put into conversation with archival material from other collections. I am excited to look at the Population Council material juxtaposed against more explicitly feminist and/or more explicitly religious organizations.

-
1. "Catholic Alternatives Pamphlet" (n.d.), Box 11, Folders 113-124, Joan Dunlop Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.
 2. "Catholic Alternatives Pamphlet."
 3. "Catholic Alternatives Pamphlet."
 4. John D. Rockefeller 3rd, "Letter from John D. Rockefeller 3rd to His Holiness Pope Paul VI," October 8, 1965, John D. Rockefeller 3rd Papers, Series 3, Subseries 4,, Box 74, Folder 511, Rockefeller Archive Center.
 5. John D. Rockefeller 3rd, "Letter from John D. Rockefeller 3rd to His Holiness Pope Paul VI, November 8, 1965," November 8, 1965, John D. Rockefeller 3rd Papers, Series 3, Subseries 4, Box 74, Folder 511, Rockefeller Archive Center; Theodore Hesburgh, "Letter from Theodore Hesburgh, CSC, President of the University of Notre Dame to John D. Rockefeller 3rd," October 2, 1965, John D. Rockefeller 3rd Papers, Series 3, Subseries 4, Box 74, Folder 511, Rockefeller Archive Center; "Letter from the Office of the Secretary of State at the Vatican to John D. Rockefeller 3rd," November 15, 1965, John D. Rockefeller 3rd Papers, Series 3, Subseries 4, Box 74, Folder 511, Rockefeller Archive Center.
 6. "Letter from the Office of the Secretary of State at the Vatican to John D. Rockefeller 3rd," November 15, 1965; Hesburgh, "Letter from Theodore Hesburgh CSC to John D. Rockefeller 3rd, October 14, 1965," October 14, 1965. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Papers, Series 3, Subseries 4, Box 74, Folder 511, Rockefeller Archive Center.
 7. "Religious Leader's Statement Welcoming the Report of the President's Commission on Population Growth and the American Future," March 1972; John D. Rockefeller 3rd Papers, Series 3, Subseries 4, Box 71A, Folder 472.
 8. "Religious Leader's Statement," John D. Rockefeller 3rd Papers, Series 3, Subseries 4, Box 71A, Folder 472.