

Introduction

Why do the politics of sex and gender divide American religion? For many, this question might seem almost rhetorical—how could sex and gender *not* divide progressives and conservatives, religious or not? This book is an attempt to problematize such taken-for-granted assumptions. It does so by examining the moment that American religious groups first diverged over an issue of sex and gender—and by tracing the paths those groups took for the next three decades. Many will likely find the argument put forward in this book surprising, if not shocking. This is because American religious groups first became divided over sex and gender when they began to take sides on the issue of contraception around 1930. While that in and of itself might not be surprising, the key takeaway for this book is: the sides they took had almost nothing to do with gender—at least not in the way we typically think about it—at all (and this book will show that this remained the case well into the 1960s). By this I mean that whether a particular religious group supported legalizing access to contraception circa 1930 had nothing to do with whether they were feminist or concerned about women's rights. Instead, whether a religious group supported legalizing access to contraception depended on whether they were believers in the white supremacist eugenics movement and thus

deeply concerned about reducing some (undesirable) people's fertility rates.

This explanation comes from my analysis of one key watershed moment, the factors that led to it, and the consequences of that watershed for American religious groups over the decades that followed. That moment occurred between 1929 and 1931, when nine of America's most prominent religious groups rather suddenly proclaimed that birth control, rather than being a sin, as was commonly understood, was actually a *duty*—for some people. These groups' proclamations were met by consternation by some, support by others, and silence by still others. *Birth Control Battles* explains why these groups took this path of activist liberalization, while most others did not, and traces the implications of that decision until contraceptives gained acceptance among all but the most stalwart of religious groups by the mid-1960s.

The story this book tells is not a pretty one. The early promoters of birth control were concerned about curtailing some people's fertility rates because they deeply believed that *race suicide* was imminent. The *suicide* part of *race suicide* was intentional. The term was promoted by eugenicists—believers in the same pseudoscience that would motivate Hitler during the Holocaust a few years later—who wanted to emphasize that white Anglo-Saxon Protestants were voluntarily allowing themselves to be outbred. In article after article, speech after speech, eugenicists trumpeted calls for desirables to bear more children, printing facts such as these with great alarm:

The Anglo-Saxon Protestant element, which has all along formed the core of American civilization, is now a diminishing quantity . . . the number of children per marriage in Massachusetts in the years 1870, 1880, 1890, was: native stock—2.2, 2.2, and 2.4 respectively; foreign stock—4.4., 5.0, 4.3 respectively.¹

By the mid-1920s, *almost half* of America's most prominent religious denominations professed support for such white supremacist principles and a deep concern about race suicide.

Although concern about race suicide was customary among many (indeed, virtually all elite, northeastern white) religious groups—not all of them officially liberalized. In analytical terms a concern about race suicide

was necessary but not sufficient to explain who supported legalizing birth control. The religious groups that liberalized on birth control all had one other similarity—they were all believers in the social gospel movement.

The social gospel movement was a major progressive social movement within American religion from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. Emerging in the wake of several major labor strikes, a key focus of the movement was on minimizing the negative effects of industrial capitalism. As postmillennialists, social gospelers believed that Christ would not return until society and its institutions had been redeemed.² As a result, social gospelers were active social reformers, believing it was their religious duty to combat poverty, inequality, war, and other social ills. Belief in the social gospel movement often coincided with a concern about race suicide. When it did, religious leaders became convinced that legalizing birth control was not only a wise racial move but also a religious duty.

The groups that liberalized early for eugenicist reasons continued to promote contraception well into the 1960s. As they did so, many particularities about their activism, especially whose fertility they specifically focused on reducing, changed. What began as a concern about being outbred by Catholic and Jewish immigrants in the United States shifted over the next few decades to alarm about the fertility rates in the poorest countries of the world and blacks in the inner cities. However, as this happened one thing remained constant—these groups' promotion of birth control was always concerned with other people's fertility rates and never, not even in the mid-1960s, about their own members' right to use it.

In a nutshell, *Birth Control Battles* demonstrates that it is only possible to understand how and why some groups liberalized before others and continued to promote contraception for the next several decades if we acknowledge that religion intersects with inequality in important, complex ways. I call this argument *complex religion*.

COMPLEX RELIGION: RACE, CLASS, RELIGION, AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Scholars of inequality recognize that inequality is complex and constituted via many social structures.³ The argument and analysis throughout

this book are deeply influenced by these theories—which are often referred to as *intersectionality*. However, while these theories have been crucial to the argument developed in this book, it is also true that religion has not typically been a part of the research and writing that constitutes this conversation.⁴ Thus, while we have many good studies of religion and race, or religion and immigration or ethnicity, most of these studies are not in dialogue with intersectionality. Furthermore, unlike the study of religion and race or religion and immigration, which has remained strong, the study of religion and class, or religious inequality, had largely fallen out of popularity in the subfield until very recently.⁵ This is despite the fact that it also used to be a core part of the sociology of religion, with the class differences between American religious groups considered so germane that many early sociologists took them as a given.⁶

Complex religion argues that religion is part and parcel of racial, ethnic, class, and gender inequality. Its key takeaway is that research that focuses on inequality or religion would be better off taking those intersections into account more explicitly.⁷ In many ways, then, complex religion simply brings the field back to where it started—to a place where we acknowledge and try to operationalize, as best we can, the ways in which religion intersects with inequality.

Of course, in doing so, complex religion theory benefits from advances in the study of inequality since the sociology of religion took such intersections for granted, as well as from a myriad of studies of American religion that do not place race and class in a central analytical position.⁸ The most important of these influences, perhaps even more than intersectionality, comes from theories of race, especially theories of racialization.⁹ My use of the term *race* follows that of racialization theorists who view race “as a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.”¹⁰ When I use the term *racialization*, I mean the process of ascribing racial or ethnic identities to a group that did not necessarily have that identity before the process. Racialization theorists acknowledge the important role of religion in racialization processes historically. However, despite this, and as with studies of intersectionality more generally, few analyses of race or racialization processes treat religion as a central analytical category.¹¹

Throughout the book I emphasize that religion was a core part of the racialization process that Irish and Italian (Catholic) and Eastern European (Jewish) immigrants went through in the first part of the twentieth century. Even more importantly, religion was a key part of why their greater fertility was seen as problematic and undesirable. This book demonstrates that religion was not just correlated with a “desirable” or “undesirable” status. It was an essential piece of that status. Religion was a critical dimension on which race was “culturally figured and represented, the manner in which race [came] to be meaningful as a descriptor of group or individual identity, social issues, and experience.”¹²

At its most basic level, then, complex religion helps us to understand that one cannot explain early birth control reform within the American religious field without understanding how race was seen at the time.¹³ And, one cannot understand the racial categories at the time (particularly in the Northeast) without understanding how they were influenced, and even determined, by religion. This is true not only in terms of whose fertility was to be controlled but also in terms of explaining who was attempting to do the controlling.

Theorists who study race describe a racial project as “an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines.”¹⁴ In no uncertain terms, birth control reform became a “racial project,” the focus of America’s most prominent religious denominations by the late 1920s and one that lasted, as this book will demonstrate, well into the 1960s.

DATA AND METHODS

This book employs research methods that have come to be called *comparative-historical sociology*. In my view these methods entail trying to examine history as systematically as possible—by thinking through issues of generalizability, bias, and comparison—and by identifying and, ideally, falsifying, alternative explanations in the process of making one.¹⁵ It is these methods, and the macrosociological questions they entail, that most clearly differentiate *Birth Control Battles* from other related studies, especially the rich and varied body of research on American religion.¹⁶ This is because these methods, particularly the effort to compare

similar groups that varied on different dimensions, led me to see the enduring importance of inequality, especially when associated with race and class, for American religion.

In order to conduct a comparative-historical study of American religious groups' views of contraception, I had to make a number of important decisions. These decisions have implications for the claims I make in this book and, most importantly, of course, for whether the reader will believe those claims. Below I detail what I see as the most important of these.

Timing—1926 as a Baseline

Because this book covers almost fifty years of American history in great depth (1918–65), the denominations that form the basis of this analysis are in some sense a moving target. Early ruptures often resulted in two new denominations (one in the North and one in the South) because of abolition prior to the American Civil War, just as movements for reconciliation often resulted in those groups reuniting and even merging with other like-minded denominations by the mid-1960s. Thus, the point at which I chose and introduce the reader to my sample needs explication.

Table 1 introduces you to the American religious field as it was circa 1926. As the story in *Birth Control Battles* unfolds, these denominations change significantly. Their modern-day names are presented in table 9, in part III of the book.

The year 1926 proved to be the best baseline for this study for three reasons: First, it represents the year of the last census of religious bodies conducted by the US government. This incredible historical resource allows me to examine and present a significant amount of data that would otherwise be unavailable. Second, 1926 was just a few years before the peak of the first wave of birth control reform. Thus, it represents the American religious field as it was on the eve of that first wave. Finally, 1926 was midway between the schisms that rocked American religious groups around the time of the Civil War and the mergers that sought to reconcile those divisions in the later part of the twentieth century. It thus provides a useful starting point to get to know the American religious field, both in terms of what it had been and what it would become.

The Sample

In many ways the comprehensive sample of American religious groups in *Birth Control Battles* is its greatest asset.¹⁷ To answer my questions, I needed a sample that reflected the diversity of American religious groups. But within that diversity, I also needed enough similarities to make comparisons between denominations possible. From Mormons to Methodists, from Southern Baptists to Seventh-day Adventists to the Society of Friends, from Reform Jews to the Reformed Church in America, and to historically black groups like the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and every major denomination in between, this book tells a story that only a comprehensive sample capturing the diversity of religion in the United States can. Creating this sample, however, involved a great many decisions—more, perhaps, than any other aspect of the research reported here.

SIZE CONSIDERATIONS

The first decision I made regarding the sampling frame had to do with size. Given the likelihood that many smaller denominations would not have had the resources—for example, a periodical or archive—to leave much of a trace of their views and deliberations, using the 1926 census I decided to include any denomination that had more than four hundred thousand members.¹⁸ The majority of the denominations listed in table 1 ($n = 17$) were included simply because they met this basic threshold.

A few denominations smaller than this threshold in 1926 became much more prominent over the next decades. I did not want my sample to overlook these fast-growing denominations, particularly if their growth was partly demographic and thus connected to less use of contraceptives, as research suggests.¹⁹ I thus also included any denomination that was too small to be included in the 1926 sample but had more than one million members by 2017. There were three of these: the Assemblies of God, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Seventh-day Adventists, bringing my initial sample to twenty denominations.

INCLUDING ALL LIBERALIZERS

It turned out that liberalizing early on birth control was actually quite rare, in terms of the overall proportion of denominations in the American religious