

“CHURCHES IN THE VANGUARD:” MARGARET SANGER AND THE
MORALITY OF BIRTH CONTROL IN THE 1920s

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Overview and Argument

If sexual intercourse had no consequence of pregnancy, what would become of the world? Many religious leaders in the early 1900s were afraid of the immoral associations and repercussions of birth control. The Catholic Church and some Protestants never accepted contraception, or accepted it much later, but many mainline Protestants leaders did change their tune dramatically between the years of 1920 and 1931. This investigation seeks to understand how Margaret Sanger was able to use her rhetoric to move her reform from the leftist outskirts and decadent, sexual connotations into the mainstream of family-friendly, morally virtuous, and even conservative religious approval. Securing the approval of religious leaders subsequently provided the impetus for legal and medical acceptance by the late-1930s.

Margaret Sanger used conferences, speeches, articles, her magazine (*Birth Control Review*), and several books to reinforce her message as she pragmatically shifted from the radical left closer to the center and conservatives. She knew the power of the churches to influence their members, and since the United States population had undeniably a Judeo-Christian base, this power could be harnessed in order to achieve success for the birth control movement, among the conservative medical and political communities and the public at large. Despite the clear consensus against birth control by all mainline Christian churches in 1920, including Roman Catholics and Protestants alike, the decade that followed would bring about a great divide that would continue to widen in successive decades.

Sanger put forward many arguments in her works, but the ones which ultimately brought along the relatively conservative religious leaders were those that presented birth control not as a gender equity issue, but rather as a morally constructive reform that had the power to save and strengthen marriages; lessen prostitution and promiscuity; protect the health of women; reduce

abortions, infanticide, and infant mortality; and improve the quality of life for children and families. Initially, many conservatives and religious leaders associated the birth control movement with radicals, feminists, prostitutes, and promiscuous youth, and feared contraception would lead to immorality and the deterioration of the family. Without the threat of pregnancy, conservatives feared that youth and even married adults would seize the opportunity to have sex outside of marriage. Others worried the decreasing size of families was a sign of growing selfishness and materialism. In response, Sanger promoted the movement as a way for conservatives to stop the rising divorce rates by strengthening and increasing marriages, and to improve the lives of families by humanely increasing the health and standard of living, for women and children especially. In short, she argued that birth control would not lead to deleterious consequences, but would actually improve family moral values and become an effective humanitarian reform. She recognized that both liberals and conservatives were united in hoping to strengthen the family, and so she emphasized those virtues and actively courted those same conservative religious leaders that had previously shunned birth control and the movement. Throughout the 1920s, she emphasized the ways in which birth control could strengthen marriages and improve the quality of life of women and children, and she effectively won over the relatively conservative religious leaders that she needed to bring about the movement's public, medical, and political progress.

Scope and Research Methodology

In order to identify the major arguments Sanger made to convince religious leaders that birth control was a morally compelling reform, I have examined the rhetoric and most works of Margaret Sanger produced between 1920 and 1931. The scope of this project concentrates on the 1920s for several key reasons. The first major mainline church to accept birth control was the British Anglican Church at its Lambeth Conference of Bishops in August 1930, which led to the subsequent acceptance in March 1931 by the American Federal Council of Churches in Christ

(FCC), an umbrella organization of mainline American Protestant churches. From that point on, other major denominations followed and began to accept it as well. At the previous Lambeth Conference in 1920, however, even the Anglican bishops had been firmly opposed to artificial contraception, as were all other mainline Protestants and Catholics. Unlike the shift of support among mainline Protestants, the 1920s also mark the period in which the Roman Catholic Church argued even more strongly against birth control, starting with a Town Hall Raid of Sanger's conference in New York City in 1921 and continuing through Pope Pius XI's encyclical against artificial birth control in 1931. During this decade, then, a clear divide emerged between, on one hand, Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants, who continued to oppose birth control, and, on the other hand, mainline Protestants, who began supporting it. Finally, Sanger's efforts became exclusively and aggressively focused on birth control after World War I, and her efforts greatly expanded throughout the decade with speaking tours, conferences, and major publications during the 1920s. For all of these reasons, the decade of the 1920s stands out as the critical one in which the major shift of opinions occurred, both in the public and especially among religious leadership.

My primary source research focuses on the works of Margaret Sanger and the arguments and rhetoric that she projected, along with speakers at her conferences and fellow writers at her *Birth Control Review (BCR)*. I have purposely excluded most documents and works of those who received her message, such as religious leaders, in order to more closely analyze the messages and themes that she emphasized. The prolific works that I examined include her letters, speech transcripts, diary entries, conference schedules and transcripts, and some articles. In addition, I have analyzed the monthly publications of the *Birth Control Review*, from the time Sanger began it under the American Birth Control League (ABCL) with the first issue appearing in 1917 until she resigned as editor in 1929 (publication continued until 1940). As she was highly involved in the editorial process of the magazine, her rhetoric was visible throughout the *BCR* issues. Finally, my research includes her major publications and books during the 1920s and shortly thereafter, including: *Woman and the New Race* (1920), and *Happiness in Marriage* (1926).

Literature Review

In researching the role of Margaret Sanger in the birth control movement of the 1920s and the changing views of religious groups, there are several bodies of historical scholarship to explore and synthesize, including the life of Sanger, the history of the birth control movement, religion in the Progressive era, and eugenics. The many biographies of Margaret Sanger tend to portray her either as a hero for women and the working class, or as a villain against Christians and the Catholic Church, especially in regards to her later work with Planned Parenthood and its association with the Pill and abortion rights. This project, however, seeks to find a balanced perspective on Sanger in evaluating the earliest sources of conflict and cooperation she encountered with major religious groups when the focus was merely to legalize access to information about artificial contraception and gain mainstream acceptance of the practice. The purpose is neither to demonize nor glorify her campaign, but rather to understand and evaluate how her work contributed to Protestants' growing agreement about the moral benefits of birth control, even as she furthered an antagonistic relationship with the Catholic Church that has yet to be resolved.

The literature on Sanger and birth control is thoughtful and informative, but none seeks to specifically analyze the subtleties of her message in regard to the morality of contraception. The present work is significant because it exposes the ways in which Sanger adjusted her message to win over those critical, relatively conservative, religious leaders that her movement needed for further success with powerful medical and political conservatives.¹ She managed to change her negative associations enough to shake off a stigma that was powerful and widespread; upon examination, her works display the major arguments that brought about this dramatic

¹ The term "conservative" is a complicated one in this context. In this project, I argue that the religious leaders of mainline denominations that did accept birth control were not as conservative as fundamentalist Protestants or Roman Catholic clergy, though they were certainly right of center and more conservative than Sanger and her radical counterparts from the post-World War I era.

accomplishment. The success of her family-values rhetoric also serves to reveal the priorities of the mainline Protestants who gradually accepted artificial contraception.

Several key works regarding Sanger and the movement will be explored in depth and discussed here, but a survey is helpful to first understand the scope of these interpretations. In the 1930s, Sanger wrote accounts of her own life in two autobiographies, *My Fight for Birth Control* (1931) and *Margaret Sanger: An Autobiography* (1938). These are certainly politicized and could be said to glorify her role and work, since she was in the midst of her reform and persuasion, but still provide valuable insight into her perspective. Two of the most highly-regarded biographies of Sanger are David Kennedy's *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (1970) and Ellen Chesler's *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (1992). Each of these is thoroughly researched and thoughtfully written, but provides very different characterizations of Margaret Sanger.

For a look into the birth control movement as a whole, the best-regarded works include James Reed's *From Private Vice to Public Virtue: The Birth Control Movement and American Society Since 1830* (1978), which contains a favorable portrayal of Sanger, and Kennedy's aforementioned more disapproving biography and history of Sanger in the movement. Additionally, Linda Gordon's classic, original and extensive work on the history of birth control was first entitled *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (1976) and was later revised and renamed in a third edition, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (2002). Gordon's critical analysis addresses the role of Sanger in the movement. Finally, the topic of religious views on birth control in the early twentieth century is widely varied and often unbalanced in its analysis of Sanger and the early movement. One well-researched and thoughtful work that was integral at the outset of this project was Kathleen Tobin's *The American Religious Debate Over Birth Control: 1907-1937* (2001). Tobin examined the arguments among religious leaders themselves over contraception by exploring the social changes and doctrinal decisions that occurred in this dynamic era.

Throughout the women's movement of the 1960s, which included revolutionary changes like the pill, the sexual revolution, and women's liberation, Margaret Sanger had been touted as a hero for womankind by many. Yet shortly after celebrating her life and mourning her death in 1966, historians of the 1970s began to poke holes in the belief that she was the feminist hero of the birth control movement. She was attacked from both the right and the left in this regard, notably by Kennedy from a relatively conservative perspective and Gordon from a leftist perspective. Major debates regarding Sanger revolve around whether she is best seen as a feminist or as someone who promoted antiquated Victorian views of women. In addition, there is debate about whether she was a left-wing, egalitarian socialist or rather a right-wing, conservative eugenicist. In regards to the religious debates over birth control, historians debate the motivations leaders had for accepting or opposing birth control. This project seeks to consider these perspectives while showing that her work pragmatically shifted from her radical and left-wing origins towards the center, and even towards the right-wing. She effectively and increasingly projected birth control as a morally constructive and family-friendly reform to solve some of the most pressing family moral concerns for those relatively conservative religious leaders of the 1920s.

In the first major work to challenge Sanger's reputation as a feminist hero, *Birth Control in America* (1970), David M. Kennedy critically analyzed the role of Sanger in the early birth control movement.² In the end, he determined that while she was very important to the movement, she was not quite as instrumental as she and others had believed. He argued that the movement gained momentum regardless of her, as social conservatives embraced eugenics, middle-class women accepted birth control, doctors overcame their reservations, and religious liberals adopted more individualistic interpretations of morality. He claimed that Sanger's role was significant early on because she agitated and educated to generate needed attention and

² David M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).

interest, and this role suited her personality well. Still, he argued that her role was limited since she also irritated and scared away potential supporters with her radical notoriety and combativeness towards the Catholic Church. As several other historians would later agree, Kennedy argued that Sanger shifted from early radical tactics in the immediate post-war era to a more conservative approach during the 1920s and 1930s by embracing eugenic ideas and lobbying the established medical community and lawmakers. He did distinguish Sanger from conservative eugenicists and neo-Malthusians who were afraid of overpopulation, arguing that she focused more on improving the standard of living and not primarily on the fear of overpopulation and subsequent wars as they did. In Sanger's shift toward the right, Kennedy noted that both feminists and conservatives did find common ground on the need for reforms to improve family life and values.³ Therefore, as this project seeks to show, Sanger was able to successfully shift her reform from under the shrinking coalition of radicals to the more conservative umbrella of reforms by arguing those points on which both sides agreed—namely, the ways that birth control would improve marriage, the family, and quality of life.

In the debate over the morality of birth control, Kennedy continued his position that Sanger's ideas were not as influential as she believed, arguing that her points did not cause religious leaders to shift in favor of accepting birth control. While she tried to convince them with varied arguments about the morality of contraception, he emphasized the liberalism of the clergy who came to accept it and wrote that they did so mostly due to concerns over family stability and marital connectedness, as divorce was on the rise. While I agree with this assessment of their concerns, I would argue that her works were intentionally designed to put birth control forward as the answer to these exact concerns. Her arguments about the rights of women and the need to alleviate the suffering of the poor, according to Kennedy, were not as important as the internal debates that had already begun to fracture those Protestant groups who changed their position. In particular, Kennedy effectively argued that religious leaders fell into

³ Kennedy, 49-50.

two camps of moral traditionalists, such as the Catholic Church and fundamentalist Protestants, and the theological liberals, such as more liberal and some mainline Protestants, who were influenced by the popular notions of both scientific empiricism and romantic views of sex. According to the religious liberals, human technology had evolved as a way of God's revealing himself, and so utilizing scientific developments did not conflict with moral virtue. Sigmund Freud's psychological research and new, romantic ideals also influenced liberals by claiming that sex was meant to connect and fulfill humans in a spiritual way, and frustrating that natural tendency with continence was unhealthy. Kennedy asserts that the main reason Protestants accepted birth control was because of the divorce crisis and benefits to marriages, rather than Sanger's points about the suffering of the poor.⁴ According to Kennedy, then, Sanger's arguments were not what inspired Protestants to see birth control as morally viable, or even virtuous. Although these social changes were certainly part of the reason these leaders came around, I believe her works and public speaking were actually critical in generating discussions about the morality of birth control and were much more influential among a broader group of leaders than Kennedy considered.

Refuting Kennedy's harsh critique of Sanger was James Reed's classic work on the history of birth control in America, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue: The Birth Control Movement and American Society since 1830* (1978).⁵ Reed showed how the movement shifted from Victorian condemnation of contraceptives to a mostly modern acceptance of birth control through diverse and widely varied reform efforts. He pointed out that changes in social values, not new or innovative technology, allowed and elicited this shift. His study focused on the work of three individuals, their distinct motives for supporting birth control, and their role in providing impetus for the movement in the 1920s and 1930s. The combination of their work effectively appealed to the widening spectrum of supporters, and together they elicited needed developments.

⁴ Kennedy, 159-160.

⁵ James Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue: The Birth Control Movement and American Society since 1830* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978).

Reed argued that Sanger was a feminist seeking autonomy for women, while Robert Dickinson was a medical professional who believed better marital “sexual adjustment” would stabilize families, and Clarence Gamble was a eugenicist concerned that lower class people were having more children than their middle- and upper-class counterparts. In contrast to some more critical assessments of Sanger, Reed recognized Sanger’s flaws, but still regarded her as a heroic pragmatist. Reed posited that Sanger believed birth control would improve the quality of life for women, and that the way to win acceptance “depended on manipulation of public opinion, victories in court, and skillful lobbying among professional elites.”⁶ She did what was necessary for the movement to succeed. I would agree this assessment, but add that her success was also focused clearly on winning over religious leaders, as well as other conservatives.

At almost the exact same time as Reed was researching and writing *From Private Vice to Public Virtue*, Linda Gordon was working on her book, though she approached the topic from a different perspective and, unsurprisingly, came to very different conclusions. Gordon’s book is considered a classic in women’s history. Both the original, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right* (1976) and the third revised and renamed edition, *The Moral Property of Women* (2002), are highly regarded in the history of the birth control movement.⁷ She approached the topic as a feminist and socialist to show that “reproductive rights” conflicts, like birth control, are always politically driven by the established gender system, and to a lesser extent the class and racial structure. In other words, the groups that have limited women’s access to reproductive rights (such as birth control in the 1920s) were those with political power—namely men and white, upper-class capitalists. These groups were reluctant to empower and embolden women politically by granting those rights because it would undercut their own power and control simultaneously.

⁶ Reed, 69.

⁷ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002). The book was originally published as *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York: Grossman, 1976).

In Gordon's newest version, she has toned down the socialist-feminist perspective, but continued the central argument that birth control rights evolved due to the politics of each respective era.

Both Gordon's original book and the revised version give substantial attention to the role of Margaret Sanger in the birth control movement. Gordon criticized Margaret Sanger and her contemporaries for bringing the movement away from the radical, grassroots, social revolution to become a more professional, middle- and upper-class, conservative movement. *Moral Property* includes a new chapter on Margaret Sanger and the early radical leadership of socialists, feminists, and sex radicals in the pre-war era. Gordon softened her criticism of Sanger by conceding that the change was necessary since the radical Left had abandoned the movement.⁸

When Sanger entered the movement, Gordon argued that she initially was a leftist, but she became less radical and grew distant from the socialist and feminist communities. Some suffragists feared that women would actually be further exploited if contraceptives allowed men to have sex without consequence of pregnancy. Many socialists resisted the birth control movement because of Marxian ideals of a pre-industrial family and restoration of the traditional home, an idea that Gordon argued was put forward by anti-feminist socialists. Both feminists and socialists wanted to distance themselves from the free love movement in order to find more mainstream support, and the postwar Red Scare further shut down activity.⁹ Since the groups were in decline and even attacking birth controllers, Sanger necessarily pushed the movement away from the Left altogether.¹⁰

Sanger then shifted gears during the 1920s in order to gain favor and funding from a broader base including conservatives, such as professionals and leaders in the medical

⁸ Gordon, 128-39.

⁹ The free love movement began among utopian communities in early- to mid-nineteenth century America. The main principles involved the belief that marriage was a form of loveless, sexual slavery for women, and free-lovers advocated sex only when passion and love were present, not reckless promiscuity. The movement was strongest among anarchists, and called for free choice of sexual partners and a woman's right to choose when to have children through birth control. For an overview of the movement, see John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman's *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 111-116.

¹⁰ Gordon, 142-167.

community, social workers, clergy, and even academic eugenicists. Gordon argued that conservatives joined the cause out of an elitist desire to help, though she said they were more accurately seen as trying to further their own politics and needs. Gordon's feminist interpretation posited that the transition to professional, male leadership sidelined female amateurs to organizational work while men directed and dictated policy. Gordon primarily blamed Sanger for this transition, and said that she was responsible for making birth control a medical issue and setting up the organizational structure that made birth control a "mainstream cause." By her third edition, however, Gordon eased her criticism and qualified that the shift was perhaps inevitable, since socialist and feminist groups were declining in both their size and effectiveness.¹¹

Though Reed and Gordon researched and wrote at the same time and within ten years of Kennedy, each came to very different conclusions about Sanger's role in the movement and in their overall assessment of her strategies. Reed agreed with Kennedy and Gordon that the task of birth controllers was not to advance technology, since much of that had existed for centuries, but rather it was to overcome the "social context" of Victorian values, population concerns, and sex norms.¹² Although Gordon was initially very critical of Sanger as a political traitor to the socialist and feminist causes, Reed praised her shift in tactics as a necessity that she was wise to understand. He argued that her bid for support from conservative professional elites was not meant to "preserve the domestic status quo," as Kennedy had argued, but instead it was meant to give women control of their own bodies so that they could subsequently make revolutionary changes. Reed criticized Gordon for underestimating Sanger's contributions as well as those of those liberals and conservatives whose views did not align with Gordon's politics.

Later on, but similarly to Reed, Ellen Chesler sought to respond to the criticism of Sanger by Kennedy and Gordon. In 1992, she published *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the*

¹¹ Gordon, 175-178.

¹² In this project, I refer to "Victorian values" as those espoused during the era of Britain's Queen Victoria, who ruled from 1837 to 1901. These values are generally agreed to include strict moral standards, prudishness and repression of sexuality. They encouraged strong families, hard work, respectability and religious conformity.

Birth Control Movement in America.¹³ As the title indicates, she regarded Sanger in a more positive light than previous historians, though she was thorough and thoughtful enough to also acknowledge Sanger's flaws. Kennedy and Gordon had both asserted that Sanger was not truly an idealistic and committed feminist. Kennedy even asserted that Sanger's romantic ideas about women's unique destiny and sexuality were just new versions of Victorian womanhood. Conversely, Chesler showed that Sanger believed giving women control of their reproduction would liberate them and make women's lives better at every level of the socioeconomic spectrum. Chesler claimed that Sanger worked in earnest to better the lives of all women throughout her life. Her break with the left and her subsequent single-minded focus on the cause of birth control showed dedication to her sincere, though perhaps naïve, belief that birth control alone had the power to transform the conditions and freedom of women. Chesler defended Sanger's alliances with conservatives, elites, eugenicists, and professionals as pragmatic and necessary for the cause of birth control to succeed. While in some cases, Sanger might have gone too far in her enthusiasm for eugenics and to win over conservatives, she was more a product of the racist and classist times in which she lived than the bigot that some critics still assert. Sanger wanted the approval of eugenic professionals in order to gain respect from a scientific field of the times, as well as intellectual support for the significance of fertility studies.

Chesler's account placed Sanger and the movement within the context of her times, highlighting the incredible difficulties she had to overcome. She emphasized the organized opposition of the Catholic Church, and the significant political power that it levied against her cause. Chesler emphasized that Sanger was always pragmatic, driven by a belief in the power of birth control more than the broader ideologies of socialism, eugenics, or classical feminism. Her single-mindedness necessitated cooperation with many divergent groups, including both liberals and conservatives. My research findings are fundamentally in agreement with Chesler's overall

¹³ Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

assessment of Sanger's pragmatism and significant role in the movement, but *Woman of Valor* did not seek to specifically analyze Sanger's rhetoric and arguments in regards to the religious leaders of the 1920s.

More recently, Kathleen A. Tobin came back to the more critical interpretation of the birth control movement as one that succeeded due to the support of social conservatives, not liberals. Tobin's book specifically addressed the religious arguments about contraception in *The American Religious Debate Over Birth Control, 1907-1937* (2001).¹⁴ She focused on the internal and institutional debates within Judeo-Christian religious groups, and thoroughly analyzed the various conventions, committees and official publications of these groups and leaders. She took a more critical stance on the movement, claiming that those early churches that accepted birth control as a moral option did so because of conservative notions of improving society rather than liberal notions of advancing women's rights or alleviating the suffering of the poor. While I would concede that these social fears were certainly part of the context for their decision, it seems that their growing concerns over the state of the family were at least equal, if not more, important, and therefore Sanger's arguments to that end were largely influential in bringing the religious leaders on board.

Tobin argued that religious leaders may have been somewhat liberal theologically, but ultimately it was their conservative fears over the growing Catholic voting bloc, rising costs of relief programs, and the rise in divorce that led religious leaders to approve of artificial contraception. She pointed to Sanger as a leader in escalating the fear of the Catholic Church. Catholics were a convenient target for upper-class Protestants and provided fodder for her accusations early on in the movement when the Roman Catholic Church overtly—and sometimes violently—tried to keep her from speaking. While many Protestants and Jews also refused to compromise on the issue of birth control, Sanger specifically and purposely made a public enemy

¹⁴ Kathleen A. Tobin, *The American Religious Debate Over Birth Control, 1907-1937* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2001).

of the Catholic Church and continued courting the Protestant denominations. Doing so united the relatively conservative, mainline religious contingent that she needed to further the movement. Tobin claimed the primary motivator for these groups was not individual notions of morality, as liberal theologians would assert, but rather the conservative and pseudo-scientific views of social improvement, such as strengthening the “stock” of Americans and strengthening marriages within the churches. Tobin argued that Sanger exploited anti-Catholic sentiments and fears and promoted the eugenic agenda of continued white, upper-class dominance in America.

Tobin’s work was extremely useful as a resource for the perspective of religious denominations as they debated the issue of birth control, and I agree with many of her arguments. Still, her work did not focus on analyzing the themes in Sanger’s work itself and instead was largely supported by documentation from those on the receiving end of Sanger’s rhetoric, namely the church records and mass media publications. My research builds upon hers and narrows the scope somewhat to the critical decade of the 1920s in seeking to understand what Sanger actually said to move mainline Protestant clergy further toward her cause.

Another work that examined the mindset of religious leaders, focusing on their response to scientific modernization, is Christine Rosen’s *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (2004).¹⁵ Her work concentrated on understanding how and why many self-proclaimed modern, liberal ministers embraced the eugenics movement. Since the birth control movement was then considered a branch of eugenics by some, and since the conflict between modernity and traditional doctrine arose similarly with respect to both movements, this book was helpful in understanding why mainline Protestant ministers may have been more receptive to Sanger’s messages in the 1920s than were more traditional moralists, such as fundamentalist Protestants and Roman Catholics. Rosen argued that many religious leaders, including mostly Protestants, but also some Catholics and Jews, embraced eugenics because of a

¹⁵ Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

belief that modern science could help solve some of the problems of modern society. She claimed that they were more open to the now-taboo ideas of eugenics because they were moving away from traditional religious tenets and instead trying to defend their faith against challenges from the growing and influential scientific ideas. Rosen asserted that these leaders came out of the Social Gospel tradition, which embraced the idea that religion should combat social problems. By ascribing to the belief that society could be perfected, many ministers then accepted the idea that humans could also be perfected. Rosen's arguments about religious embrace of eugenics are similar to my own arguments about the moral appeals that Sanger made to win over religious support of birth control, and helped provide a better understanding of the priorities of the mainline ministers and their shifting theology. According to Rosen, ministers who embraced eugenics were anxious about losing status in the midst of a changing culture and were oriented toward finding solutions to modern societal problems; they saw birth control as a scientific solution to some of the growing problems faced by families in the 1920s. The ministers who embraced birth control, then, were also part of the Progressive legacy of social reform and heirs of the Social Gospel concept of improving society.

The reform impulse of Progressives was also addressed in Robert M. Crunden's book, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1920* (1982).¹⁶ Crunden sought to show the common influences on early progressive leaders. He argued that, while Progressives had no clear, shared platform, the first leaders all grew up with strict, Calvinist, Protestant, small-town values. They emerged into a new world outside of the ministry, however, and found ways to "preach without pulpits" through various social reforms as a way to educate the public and thereby build a more moral democracy. Crunden's book was particularly helpful in placing the spirit of progressive reformers in the context of their religious views as he claimed these progressives tried to reconcile their religion with the changing new

¹⁶ Robert M. Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

world. This assessment fits with my argument that many ministers came to support birth control as a moral improvement in society that would alleviate suffering and improve family life. Since the ministers, even those who were relatively conservative compared to Sanger, came out of the Progressive Era, they may have seen themselves as reformers and subsequently seen contraception as a way to reconcile religion with the modern world.

In conclusion, much of the literature surrounding Margaret Sanger, birth control, and the religious debates over the topic in the 1920s revolves around the wider questions of whether society should have embraced new ideas and changes, such as those Progressives had espoused, or rejected the tide of liberal and radical movements in order to keep the old order of society. As Sanger moved out of her radical associations, she tried to bring along conservatives by framing her ideals in such a way that would appeal to their conservative sense of returning to a society of strong, happy families. She was always a radical personally, but publically and in her works, she embraced some ideas of the conservatives in order to find common ground and progress her ideas. She was still a Progressive at heart, hoping to improve society through new ideals and changes, but she was able to tone down her radical rhetoric enough to make the movement acceptable for moderately conservative religious leaders. She did not turn her back on her socialist-feminist values, but she pragmatically aligned herself with the ruling middle- and upper-classes in order to bring the birth control movement into mainstream, conservative acceptance. This study seeks to fill in some of the gaps in understanding the ways Sanger navigated among both left and right ideals in order to win over relatively conservative religious leaders and therefore begin bringing along other conservative leaders, such as the medical and legislative leaders. Sanger focused on the churches as the vanguard of her efforts to make birth control acceptable in middle- and upper-class society, and this study examines the themes she emphasized publicly in order to accomplish this unprecedented feat.

Historical Background

Sanger in the Political Context of the 1920s

Many important changes occurred in the post-war era that dramatically shaped the world in which Sanger brought about her movement and which led to the growing approval of birth control. On the heels of the turn of the century, the United States had experienced great changes which had ushered in a new modernity as well as new societal ills. After decades of a massive influx of immigrants, particularly “new” immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, America was truly a melting pot. Most of the new immigrants were not Protestant, but largely Catholic, Orthodox, or Jewish. They came from Italy, Greece, Poland, Russia and other countries and brought with them new cultures, foods, languages, traditions, and politics. Many immigrants moved into the cities, which saw an explosion of population and often growing squalor in the over-crowded tenements and areas where factory work and jobs existed for the immigrant population. For the first time, the 1920 census reported that more Americans lived in urban areas than rural ones. As the number and size of cities grew, the importance of rural life shifted; it increasingly made up a smaller segment of jobs and way of life for Americans by the 1920s.

The 1920s concerns arose out of these dramatic changes at the turn of the century and as a result of the subsequent upheaval and destruction caused by World War I and led to a period of extremes in both liberal and conservative trends.¹⁷ The incredible destruction of the war led to a modern challenge to traditional ideals, and Margaret Sanger’s reforms fit into this vision well. Many began to question those ideas and the traditions that had brought about such destruction, and the 1920s became an era that prided itself on its “newness” and modernity.¹⁸ The United States was rebuilding, generating new ideas, promoting scientific understanding as a solution to problems, and attempting to apply rational and modern solutions to the rapidly changing world.

¹⁷ For an excellent analysis of the post-war social climate, in particular in Europe, but also shaping the United States, see Richard J. Overy’s book, *The Inter-War Crisis, 1919-1939*, 2nd ed. (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Ltd, 2007).

¹⁸ Overy, *Inter-War Crisis*, “Ch. 3: A Crisis of Modernization,” 25-37.

Traditional ideas and old values seemed to have failed and, therefore, were regarded by many as outdated and irrelevant. While many liberals in America embraced these changes, there was also a backlash of conservatives' calling for "a return to normalcy" which brought about counter trends. There was a wave of distrust of and disgust for the new immigrants that ushered in the establishment of quotas which served to dramatically reduce the influx of immigrants other than those from northern or western Europe. After the Russian Revolution established the first Communist government, a Red Scare ensued in the United States that made socialists, radicals, anarchists, and revolutionaries into unwelcome enemies of the state and society. These ideas were largely associated with the influx of south-eastern European immigrants as well. In the midst of the conservative calls for a return to the traditional and rural values of the late 1800s America, the eugenics movement emerged as a scientific and progressive reform advocated by some as a modern way in which to solve some of these problems.¹⁹ Sanger arose from the 1910s into this new world and found herself straddling both the liberal and conservative trends with her push for birth control reform. In the 1920s, she decreased her involvement with and focus on the widely unpopular socialism and radicalism and instead promoted birth control as a scientific and moral solution to the problems that existed in the changing world.

Fertility, Divorce and Abortion Trends (up to 1920s)

During the nineteenth century and throughout the early twentieth century, the notions of marriage, sex, family, and femininity had also undergone important changes that prepared the way for Sanger's birth control efforts. During the 1800s, marriage rates had declined and fertility made a marked drop over the century. Though the data is difficult to confirm, most historians agree that use of contraception must have discreetly and privately increased as well as rates of

¹⁹ Margaret Sanger was closely aligned with the eugenic movement throughout the 1920s, though the birth control movement was separate and new by comparison. She benefitted from the association by linking birth control to scientific developments that were revered at the time. Her comments from the era and association with eugenics are certainly taboo by today's standards, but they are representative of the time in which she lived and the ideas that were widely accepted. She differed from typical eugenicists who believed that the "desirables" should have more children while the "undesirables" had few or no children; Sanger argued that all women should have the choice for smaller families at every economic level.

abortion by the mid-1800s. The size of families decreased most sharply among the better educated, urban dwellers, and northern families, including many Protestant ministers.²⁰

According to John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, authors of *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, contraception “paved the way” for sexual relations to take on new meaning beyond just reproduction by the 1920s.²¹ They claim that, by the turn of the century, sex had become more about choice than reproduction, and desire was increasingly seen as romantic and spiritually connecting. They argue that the transformation of sex was “more problematic for women” because of the double-standard inherent in maintaining feminine purity and separate spheres for women, along with the personal impact of reproduction.²²

Decreasing marriage, and especially increasing divorce, were becoming a cause for concern by the turn of the century as well. Couples often fought over sex issues, which led to marital problems and corresponded to increasing rates of separation and divorce. In filings for divorce, men often cited frustration with wives for too little sexual intercourse, while women lived with a fear of pregnancy and complained of sexual abuse from husbands.²³ According to Chesler, at the turn of the century there had been only about 2 divorces per 1,000 people annually, but the rate was increasing by an alarming 3% every year.²⁴ Tobin cited findings of the Northern Baptist Convention, whose Social Service Committee found in 1930 that the number of divorces per 1,000 people had increased from .47 in 1887 to 1.52 in 1925 and 1.62 in 1928.²⁵ According to a current source, the divorce rates from the Civil War to the turn of century increased steadily, but remained well under 1 person per 1,000 each year.²⁶ Following World War One and throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the rate continued to increase to twice that amount to nearly 2

²⁰ D’Emilio and Freedman, 66.

²¹ D’Emilio and Freedman, 66.

²² D’Emilio and Freedman, 84.

²³ D’Emilio and Freedman, 80-81.

²⁴ Chesler, 96.

²⁵ Tobin, 167.

²⁶ “Marriage and Divorce Rates, 1867-2011.” Chart. Paul Waldman, “Marriage is What Brings Us Together Today,” *The American Prospect* (April 4, 2013). <http://prospect.org/article/marriage-what-brings-us-together-today>. Accessed January 16, 2014.

people per 1,000 per year before doubling again around World War Two to more than 4 people per 1,000. Despite discrepancies in the data, all sources concur that, while the rates were low relative to modern standards, they were increasing significantly and consistently enough to alarm many observers, including religious leaders in the 1920s.

Similarly, concrete and reliable data about abortion is difficult to acquire, but sources all suggest that those rates were also increasing significantly during the time frame from the post-Civil War era and through the early twentieth century. Sources agree that abortions were abundant in cities from the mid-nineteenth century and beyond, when it was still legal to abort before the general stage of “quickening,” or the period in the pregnancy when women typically begin feeling fetal movement.²⁷ Chesler cites an estimate that by the 1850s, one of every five to six pregnancies was willfully aborted in the United States.²⁸ According to D’Emilio and Freedman, the increased rate emerged mostly out of working- and middle-class women, usually single, but broadened to include more middle-class, married women who used abortion to limit the size of their family.²⁹ Despite an aggressive and sustained campaign against abortion by the American Medical Association (AMA) from roughly 1860 to 1890, abortion remained prevalent at the turn of the century and especially among new waves of immigrants in large cities, such as New York City.³⁰ Kathleen Tobin cited Dr. Hugo Ehrenfert, chairman of a White House committee that studied “Abortion in Relation to Fetal and Maternal Welfare,” which estimated that there were 700,000 abortions performed every year by 1932.³¹ In sum, overall fertility rates in 1900 were half that of 1800, despite medical and political attacks on birth control and abortion, which had both been driven underground. D’Emilio and Freedman credit this dramatic decline to

²⁷ See Chesler, Gordon, and D’Emilio and Freedman.

²⁸ Chesler, 63.

²⁹ D’Emilio and Freedman, 64-65.

³⁰ Chesler, 64.

³¹ Tobin, 196-197.

the changing ideals of the middle class for sex to accomplish more spiritual intimacy and not just reproduction.³²

Overview of Birth Control Techniques (up to 1920s)

The early birth control movement of the 1920s did not invent the methods of contraception, but rather it sought to bring about greater information and access to those that already existed since the 1800s. According to James Reed, birth rates in the United States were declining from 1800 to 1940, even before rapid industrialization and declining infant mortality rates, which suggests that some people were using methods to control their reproduction. In 1800, the average American woman bore 7.04 children, but by 1900 only 3.56.³³ Many methods were available in the nineteenth century, including *coitus interruptus* (withdrawal before ejaculation), spermicidal douches, vaginal diaphragms (or pessaries), rubber condoms, and periodic abstinence during fertile periods (later known as the “rhythm method”).³⁴ While these and other methods existed, however, access to information and devices became more limited by the end of the nineteenth century as moral reformers sought to strengthen family life and values.

As many Americans moved into cities for work, and out of home-based economies, the nature of the American family also changed. Reed notes that there emerged a more private, romantic, nuclear family, or a “companionate family,” with the growth of industrial cities.³⁵ Women’s roles became less a part of the economy and more isolated into a “separate sphere” in the home, so larger families were not necessary for help at home. Parents instead wanted fewer children to whom they could afford to give a better life—economically, educationally, and morally.³⁶ With this new type of family and economy came questions of how to limit the growth of the family.

³² D’Emilio and Freedman, 174.

³³ Reed, 3-4.

³⁴ Reed, 6-19.

³⁵ Reed, 19-20.

³⁶ Reed, 22.

Although contraceptive methods were likely known and used during the 1800s, specific laws were passed to actively suppress birth control information. Post-Civil War reformers attacked vices that negatively affected the family, such as gambling, prostitution, alcohol abuse, and pornography.³⁷ One of the most ardent moral reformers was Anthony Comstock, who campaigned against the destructive vices he saw among immigrants in New York City by working to pass congressional legislation.³⁸ In March 1873 his work led to passage of the so-called “Comstock Laws” that prohibited mailing “obscene matter,” including “information on ‘the prevention of conception.’” Additionally, Comstock worked with the post office to make arrests and convictions and seize “obscene rubber articles,” such as condoms or pessaries. He was known to entrap doctors, so it became dangerous to print any information about birth control or contraception. This trend led to a repressive environment that made it difficult to achieve a “companionate family.” Birth control and condoms were often associated with use by prostitutes, so it was hard to promote the idea that contraceptives might benefit upstanding families.³⁹ By the 1920s, part of Sanger’s difficult task would be to show that birth control did benefit respectable, moral families.

Overwhelmingly, doctors and medical professionals took a conservative position on the issue of contraception. Many were concerned with the declining birth rate, and even morality, of the middle class and the emerging modern woman. In addition to seeking to win over religious opponents, one of Sanger’s early challenges was to recruit the medical community and empower them as the gatekeepers of contraceptive information.

The situation leading up to the twentieth century, then, was one of both Victorian and religious resistance to birth control. All of the major religious groups, not just Catholics, were opposed to the concept. Many people, especially those in the middle- and upper-class, however, did find ways to obtain contraceptive information, despite very stringent laws restricting

³⁷ Reed, 34-36.

³⁸ Reed, 37.

³⁹ Reed, 37-39.

information on the topic. With the influx of immigrants and a growing urban society, there were many new problems emerging that would put growing pressure on working-class families to find some relief and control their reproductive processes. As Margaret Sanger began her movement in the early 1910s, notions about eugenics, marriage values, and sexual fulfillment were beginning to emerge and open more ears to her message.

Sanger's Legal and Medical Efforts

Sanger's efforts to legalize birth control targeted three main groups of conservative professionals whose support she needed, including the legal and political leaders, medical leaders, and religious leaders. By the 1930s, not only did she win acceptance among the key leadership in these groups, but she had clearly won over the majority of public opinion as well. Chesler cites several polls from the 1930s that showed "70% of Americans, comprising at least a clear majority in every state, now supported the legalization of birth control."⁴⁰ In 1938, a *Ladies Home Journal* poll showed that 79% of American women approved of contraception.⁴¹ In addition to winning public support, Sanger finally secured approval from the three major conservative factions she most needed to make contraception a truly successful reform. While the groups fed off of one another and certainly looked to the others for affirmation as each shifted its stance, the religious leadership was the first major success for Sanger, beginning with the Lambeth decision in 1930 and subsequently American mainline denominations following suit throughout the 1930s.⁴² The changing stance among religious leaders provided the impetus for Sanger's subsequent successes in the legal and medical fields.

Her clear victory in legal standing of birth control came with the *United States v. One Package* decision. Sanger had begun the quest for legal change with her creation of the American Birth Control League. In 1929, she formed the National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control, which participated in five Congressional hearings in the early 1930s by arguing

⁴⁰ Chesler, 371-372.

⁴¹ Chesler, 372 and D'Emilio and Freedman, 248.

⁴² The changes among mainline Protestants will be discussed in depth below.

that birth control would help relieve the burdens of the poor in the midst of the Great Depression. Finally, the landmark decision came in 1936 with *United States v. One Package Containing 120, more or less, Rubber Pessaries to Prevent Conception*, more commonly known as the *One Package* case.⁴³ In 1932, Sanger deliberately mailed a shipment of Japanese condoms to Dr. Hannah Stone, the primary doctor of Sanger's clinics. When it was confiscated by customs, as expected, Stone and Sanger filed a legal claim in order to challenge the outdated, and largely ignored, Comstock laws that still outlawed mailing "obscene" materials. The laws were effectively overturned and the case was hailed by Sanger as the "greatest legal victory in the Birth Control Movement."⁴⁴

In the ruling on *One Package*, Judge Augustus Hand had cited newfound medical knowledge and understanding of the safety and reliability of birth control as the reasoning, an accomplishment largely owing to the work of Sanger's Clinical Research Bureau.⁴⁵ Sanger had established the Bureau in 1923 in order to persuade medical professionals that birth control was safe and effective.⁴⁶ As late as 1936, though, the majority of medical schools still did not include contraception training.⁴⁷ Official medical approval finally came with acceptance by the American Medical Association in 1937. The AMA insisted that the use of contraception must be supervised by medical doctors, but expanded acceptable use to include "a responsible element of normal sexual hygiene in married life," not just medical problems.⁴⁸

Protestant Views of Contraception through the 1930s

Of the three major groups whose support Sanger won through her efforts in the 1920s and early 1930s, the mainline Protestant leaders were the first success and mark a watershed moment

⁴³ Chesler, 371-375.

⁴⁴ Chesler, 373. Decades later, birth control finally achieved full legal success in the 1960s and 1970s. *Griswold v. Connecticut* established contraception as a constitutional right for married couples in 1965, and *Eisenstadt v. Baird* extended the right to the unmarried in 1972. Congress finally rewrote the Comstock laws and removed the label of obscenity from contraception in 1970. See Chesler, 376.

⁴⁵ D'Emilio and Freedman, 245-246.

⁴⁶ D'Emilio and Freedman, 242-244.

⁴⁷ D'Emilio and Freedman, 244.

⁴⁸ Chesler, 374.

of winning over conservative allies. Historically, both Protestants and Catholics had viewed artificial contraception as immoral according to traditional moralists. As late as 1920, these Christian denominations were still united in their opposition to birth control. Yet throughout the 1920s, Sanger's arguments and ambitious campaign reversed the tide of religious opinion in many mainline Protestant groups. This project will use the landmark decision of the Anglican Church in England, the Lambeth Conference of 1930, to mark the beginning of religious approval which quickly expanded to include major religious bodies in the United States as well.

The concept that contraception was a sin was hardly questioned until the twentieth century. Most of the teachings originated with the Biblical concepts of "be fruitful and multiply" and "Onanism," which were interpreted to mean that any type of intercourse preventing offspring should be viewed as sinful. Key theologians, such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, furthered this treatment, and it would have been heretical to question these authorities.⁴⁹

One central difficulty for churches, and part of the reason for such varied responses, was that the Bible made only a couple of vague references to the topic of reproduction. In Genesis 1:28, the Bible instructed followers to "be fruitful and multiply," although scholars disagreed as to whether the verse indicated a blessing upon mankind or a command to reproduce.⁵⁰ Additionally, the story of Onan formed the basis for some religious beliefs on the topic of sex and reproduction. In the Jewish tradition, Onan was required to marry the widow of his deceased brother, Er, in order for her to bear a son that would be considered Er's heir. Onan purposely avoided impregnating his new wife by "spilling his seed" on the ground.⁵¹ God took his life for this rebellion, but it is not clear whether his sin was shirking his duty to his brother, disobeying God, or wasting his potentially life-bearing semen.⁵² This passage has had various interpretations within different Judeo-Christian groups through the years, and has led to doctrines concerning

⁴⁹ Flann Campbell, "Birth Control and the Christian Churches," *Population Studies* 14, no. 2 (November 1960): 131-147.

⁵⁰ Genesis 1:28 (King James Version).

⁵¹ Genesis 38: 8-10 (King James Version).

⁵² Tobin, 4.

contraception, masturbation, homosexuality, and other sexual questions within theological studies.

Since the early days of Christianity, contraception has been largely ignored, but clearly theologians saw procreation as the main purpose for intercourse. One recent religious academic (and minister), Tom Davis, claims that there is “religious sexism” throughout the Bible which made progress difficult for birth control advocates.⁵³ Many Christian scholars reacted against the perceived liberal sexuality of the Romans and other enemies by arguing for conservative views of sex. In the fourth and fifth centuries, St. Augustine claimed that sex was for procreation only, even within marriage. He cited Onan’s story as his basis, and later theologians supported this interpretation.⁵⁴ Even during the Reformation, there was no real dissent.⁵⁵ Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other Protestants still held that the purpose of marriage was procreation, and even though they rejected celibacy and had a greater respect for marriage, they still did not support contraception.⁵⁶

By the nineteenth century, Victorian society was still firmly against contraception. As biologists discovered how ovulation worked, however, the Roman Catholic Church in 1853 allowed what was essentially the modern-day “rhythm method” of abstaining from sex during fertile periods. Around the turn of the twentieth century, many Europeans were against contraception since nationalism and militarism required a strong and growing nation, but clergy stayed relatively quiet on the issue until the eugenics movement brought troubling issues to the table.⁵⁷ From the 1900s onward, there was a dramatic shift within theological doctrine and

⁵³ Tom Davis, *Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and its Clergy Alliances* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 10.

⁵⁴ Tobin, 41.

⁵⁵ Campbell, 131.

⁵⁶ Davis, 10-13.

⁵⁷ Tobin, 42.

various literature concerning marriage and sex.⁵⁸ This relatively quick turn makes Sanger's early success even more surprising and pronounced from a religious standpoint.

In the early 1900s, birth control became an issue for Christian churches. Many followers and ministers were using contraceptives, even though they were still illegal, and both Catholic and Protestant leaders rebuked people's use of contraceptives.⁵⁹ In the era of the Social Gospel, some Protestants saw it as a religious duty for the privileged class to help the poor and working-class through various reforms. With a different approach to the problems of poverty, Social Darwinists and eugenicists sought to better the race by reproducing only the "best stock" and limiting lesser stock.⁶⁰ Subsequently, birth control came into these discussions with both benevolent and malicious undertones. Many Christian churches in this period were just beginning to articulate a position on the growing topic, but clearly all major groups—both Protestants and Catholics—were firmly against use of birth control through 1920.

At the 1908 Lambeth Conference, Anglicans had first addressed the issue, and denounced any use of contraceptives.⁶¹ The ministers did allow "periodic abstinence in severe cases," though some questioned whether abstinence within marriage should be considered "natural" either. Anglicans and most denominations had drawn the line at what they called "artificial" or "mechanical or chemical means of prevention."⁶² By accepting the idea that abstinence was a moral way to prevent births, however, many churches opened the door to methods which might accomplish the same goal.

Before 1920, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews had all defined the purposes of marriage and cited bearing children as the first objective.⁶³ Nevertheless, around this time some social scientists debated the idea that marriage could also exist for "conjugal love," rather than just for

⁵⁸ Campbell, 132.

⁵⁹ Tobin, 44-48.

⁶⁰ Tobin, 46-48.

⁶¹ Campbell, 134.

⁶² Tobin, 52.

⁶³ Tobin, 54.

reproduction.⁶⁴ After the 1908 Lambeth, some wondered if there was a difference in intent between restraining from sex during fertile times and using actual contraception during these times. If the motives were the same, then was there really a theological difference? Finally, the Lambeth report called procreation “one of” the ends of marriage, which led many people to question whether there were also other equal ends of marriage that should be acknowledged and considered.⁶⁵

Despite the difficulties imposed on marriages and rising divorce rates, and even the new attitudes regarding dangers of overpopulation that emerged after World War I, Anglicans continued to speak out against contraception at the next Lambeth Conference in 1920.⁶⁶ The 1920 report called sexual temptations the “most universal in the world.” Resolution 68 was adopted without opposition, noting “grave concern” over new “theories and practices hostile to the family,” and even warned that there were “grave dangers” in unnaturally avoiding conception that “threaten[ed] the race.”⁶⁷ Finally, the report affirmed that the purpose of marriage was to bear children and that self-control was critical for married life.⁶⁸ This stance seemed resolute, and yet through the decade that followed, church leaders would shift their ideas about the purpose of marriage and the moral benefits of birth control began to outweigh perceived dangers, albeit only in some conditional circumstances.

Early in the century, other Protestant denominations had struggled to articulate a position on the birth control debate, much as the Anglicans had. Due to the rapidly rising divorce rates, Christian churches were trying to affirm the sanctity of marriage, and their declarations about marriage reveal the value they placed on procreation before the era of Margaret Sanger.⁶⁹ Part of the challenge for Sanger was to counter the widespread affirmation that reproduction was truly

⁶⁴ Tobin, 50.

⁶⁵ Tobin, 54.

⁶⁶ Campbell, 135.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Campbell, 135.

⁶⁸ Campbell, 135.

⁶⁹ Tobin, 56-57.

the main purpose and value in a marriage. As the push for more companionate love in marriage came about, Sanger would capitalize on the changing sentiments.

The shift from disapproval of birth control at Lambeth in 1920 to cautious approval at Lambeth in 1930 serves as a distinct marker and a testament to the prolific rhetoric and aggressive campaigning by Sanger in the 1920s. While the Anglicans were British, this moment is widely agreed upon as the impetus for change in the United States mainline denominations as well. According to David Kennedy, the reasoning asserted at Lambeth in 1930 was similar to that promoted by U.S. denominations and Lambeth was, therefore, a “watershed” moment.⁷⁰ Immediately following Lambeth, the most liberal religious groups in the United States, including Universalists, Unitarians, and Reform Jews, endorsed birth control that year as well.⁷¹ According to Chesler, although the Lambeth ruling was restrained, and not liberal in its reasoning, it “still [broke] the dam of official clerical opposition to the widespread practice of birth control.”⁷² Sanger revealed the importance she placed upon the ruling when she celebrated it, claiming that “With the Churches in the vanguard, the cause of birth control is assured.”⁷³ She was right—Lambeth proved to be the beginning of approval from many religious leaders, and was shortly followed by medical and legislative support as well.

The most important break in America came soon after Lambeth, in 1931, with the approval of birth control by the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America (FCC). The FCC represented “some 22 million Protestants ranging from Presbyterian elites to Baptist fundamentalists,” and though some churches protested and severed their connection after the decision, most continued to cooperate and support the Council after approval.⁷⁴ The FCC was made up of 27 total denominations, including various Baptist, Congregational, Disciples of

⁷⁰ Kennedy, 163.

⁷¹ Chesler, 318.

⁷² Chesler, 318.

⁷³ “The Churches and Birth Control: A Symposium,” *Birth Control Review* (May 1930): 129.

⁷⁴ Chesler, 319-320.

Christ, Evangelical, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Reformed denominations.⁷⁵ Two denominations had more limited affiliation, since the Protestant Episcopal Church had a “cooperating” membership and the United Lutheran Church in America had a “consultative” membership.⁷⁶ Despite approval by the FCC and its British counterparts at Lambeth, the Episcopal Church in America remained deeply divided until it finally approved birth control in 1934.⁷⁷ The largest group of Lutherans, the Missouri Synod, did not accept contraception until the 1950s. For its part, the Catholic Church has persisted in its adamant opposition and continues to do so to the present.⁷⁸

Though the FCC accepted birth control in 1931, only two years earlier in 1929, the members had still shied away from any overt approval when they published the “Ideals of Love and Marriage.” This earlier report had implied that a family of five should be affordable for all. Although that small of a family was likely achieved only with the help of contraception, the group would still not commit to approval of birth control and intended only for the study to prepare the way for further studies and an official recommendation on birth control.⁷⁹ Kathleen Tobin has claimed that the huge, Protestant umbrella group of the FCC was wary of committing to change until the Lambeth clergy made their decision in 1930. Then later, in 1931, the FCC finally published a limited approval of birth control in its new report, “Moral Aspects of Birth

⁷⁵ “Council of Churches Holds Birth Control Morally Justified,” *New York Times*, 21 March 1931, 1 and 13.

⁷⁶ “Council of Churches,” 13. While approval by the FCC began the process of acceptance at the denominational and congregational levels, it did not force any doctrinal changes. This study does not examine the impact of the decision at the local level, nor seek to find how behavior of church-goers did or did not change as a result, but instead focuses on the official acceptance as a benchmark for the beginning of widespread public acceptance of birth control in America. Based on the declining birthrates of the nineteenth century and into this era, however, one can assume that contraceptives were already widely and discreetly used by both parishioners and ministers even before official acceptance.

⁷⁷ Chesler, 320.

⁷⁸ For more about opposition by the Catholic Church in the 1920s, as well as the role of leading activist Father John A. Ryan, see Tobin, 65-72 and Davis, 31-35.

⁷⁹ Tobin, 140-142. For more about the immediate influence of Lambeth in various and specific American Protestant denominations, see Tobin, 156-161.

Control.”⁸⁰ This step marked the widespread public acceptance of birth control by many Protestants in the United States and was directly driven by the Lambeth approval.

Historians Chesler and Kennedy disagree about the role of Margaret Sanger in bringing the FCC along to approval after Lambeth. On the one hand, Kennedy underestimated her influence, asserting that Protestants as a whole treated her very poorly and emphasizing the controversy over the document.⁸¹ On the other hand, Chesler more convincingly pointed to the extensive funds she raised for the FCC’s Committee on Marriage and the Home as members studied the subject, in addition to various arguments she brought forward and consultants that she brought in for the committee.⁸² Sanger’s efforts in the 1920s and at the time of their decision, then, were a direct and effective influence on the FCC’s decision to approve birth control.

Sanger’s messages seem to have resonated with mainline ministers especially because of the Protestant ethos of modernization in the 1920s. These largely middle- and upper-class denominations tended to view themselves overall as rational, scientific-minded, self-disciplined, logical planners. In particular, this self-image contrasted to the negative associations of the Roman Catholics as superstitious, antiquated, anti-modern, traditional, and dogmatic to a fault. Considering the wave of nativism that often targeted Catholic immigrants, the ministers may have been especially eager to highlight this stark contrast. Their acceptance of birth control showcased mainline Protestants as the modern church that could adapt to the dramatic social changes and scientific developments of the times.

⁸⁰ Tobin, 161. See the Full Report of the Federal Council’s Committee on Marriage and the Home in “The Churches and Birth Control,” *Federal Council Bulletin* (April 1931): 19-20, 25 (hereafter, FCC Report). The report was widely followed and reprinted in many publications, along with varied commentary, including *Federal Council Bulletin*, *The New York Times*, and *Current History*.

⁸¹ See Kennedy, 154-171 as well as footnotes in Chesler, 572.

⁸² Chesler, 319-320.

Chapter Conclusion

This project seeks to understand the messages that Margaret Sanger projected through her works as she tried to bring relatively conservative religious leaders on board with her movement. Chapter Two will address the ways in which she argued birth control would help women and children to alleviate some of their most troublesome concerns of health, wellness, and quality of life, and particularly those in the lower and lower-middle class. Sanger emphasized women's risks during and after continual pregnancies, maternal death in childbirth, and diseases whose symptoms were exacerbated by pregnancy. Sanger also focused on the high rates of abortion and infanticide that both posed health risks to women and affected children, arguing that birth control would reduce both of these trends. She maintained that all living children would be healthier if their mothers and fathers had access to birth control, since they could be born healthier, spaced out, and provided for more adequately. In addition, children in working-class families would not be as likely to be driven to crime and prostitution as a result of large families that could not adequately provide for them, both financially and emotionally. Throughout the entire 1920s, Sanger emphasized the humanitarian aspects of birth control as they related to quality of life for working-class women and children.

Midway through the decade, however, Sanger began to focus even more attention on the growing problem of divorce among the middle class and the ways in which she believed that birth control would help to improve the number and quality of marriages (concerns of religious leaders). Chapter Three focuses on some of the changes in sexuality and marriage that birth control claimed to bring about to help families stay together and improve the marriage relationship. Sanger maintained that birth control would strengthen companionate marriages by allowing romantic sex for love and intimacy instead of simply for procreation. She also stressed that sexual expression was natural and God-given, and methods of birth control such as abstinence were both unnecessary and harmful. Sanger encouraged greater knowledge and understanding of sex and reproduction as a way to loosen the impact of Victorian prudery for

women, contending that greater information would allow women to enjoy sex and, therefore, prevent their husbands from routinely turning to prostitutes as a sexual outlet. Finally, Sanger called attention to the ways that birth control would allow for increased marriages among young adults who would benefit from greater time to mature and prepare for parenthood. These couples would be able to build a stronger foundation for their marriages, while the young men would express their sexuality in marriage instead of turning to prostitutes as young, single men.

Given the climate going into the 1920s, there were many social and economic changes that made Sanger's birth control reforms relevant and appealing to many in the American population. Her task, though, was to convince the largely conservative leaders that access to contraception would not lead the country to moral depravity or further decline of the family in the turbulent post-war world and the extremes of the 1920s. Though she went about her reform by a three-pronged campaign targeting legal, medical, and religious change, it was the religious leaders who first made the move to accept birth control and which gave impetus to the shift among fellow conservatives. She had to convince these religious leaders that birth control would not lead to moral deterioration, but instead would prove to be a humanitarian and morally constructive reform. Throughout the 1920s, she did this by showing the ways that birth control could improve the health and quality of life of women and innocent children. And, increasingly in the 1920s, she emphasized the benefits that birth control would bring to the institution of marriage about which religious leaders were so concerned. She pulled her movement from the unpopular, radical left towards the more powerful and influential conservatives on the right in order to successfully bring birth control into the mainstream. When the Anglican bishops at Lambeth cautiously accepted birth control in 1930, they opened the floodgates to similar acceptance by denominations in the United States and even provided the impetus for legal and medical acceptance by the late 1930s.

CHAPTER 2

“THE AGONY OF THE LIVING”:

IMPROVING HEALTH AND QUALITY OF LIFE FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Introduction

Margaret Sanger never underestimated the importance of bringing the mainline churches on board with the birth control movement. She knew that despite her own belief in the rightness of contraceptives, she had to convince the relatively conservative religious leaders that widespread use of birth control would not have deleterious consequences for the moral fiber of the country. She had to counteract the negative associations of her movement with the radicals and leftists, but especially the assumed connection to promiscuity and prostitution. She argued many benefits to birth control, including furthering women’s rights, promoting racial quality, reducing overpopulation, and supporting world peace, but the most compelling element of her argument for these religious leaders was that birth control would actually improve the morality of the country and the quality of family life. In the immediate post-war years, Sanger was still arguing the more radical points concerning feminism and socialism, but throughout the 1920s she dramatically shifted her rhetoric to the right in order to bring along conservatives in the religious, legal, and medical spheres.

Sanger focused her efforts on convincing religious leaders that birth control was not only morally acceptable, but even morally compelling. In particular, she claimed it would improve key family values, which were of great concern to religious leaders as divorce rates increased. She achieved this goal and ultimately won approval by many American mainline religious groups, beginning with the British Anglicans at Lambeth in 1930 and subsequently expanding to American shores. Throughout the 1920s, Sanger consistently emphasized the health and wellness aspects of birth control to argue that contraception would have both physical and moral benefits

by improving the quality of life and health of the family, and especially of lower-class women and children. Over the course of the decade, she also increasingly emphasized ways in which contraception would have emotional and relational moral benefits, particularly in regards to marriage. Taken together, the moral benefits of improving quality of life and marriages for families were at the heart of her efforts to convince Protestant ministers to approve of birth control.

From the outset of her movement, Margaret Sanger needed to win over the Protestant leadership, not just doctors or politicians, in order to bring along the conservative support that would be essential to her progress. At the First American Birth Control League (ABCL) Conference on November 18, 1921, she jumped right into the task of presenting birth control as moral.¹ She introduced her speech by noting that the issue of the “moral side” of birth control was the one with the “most uncertainty and disagreement.”² Sanger discussed the form letters which she had sent that year to “the most eminent men and women in the world,” asking them about several key moral issues related to birth control. She asked four questions—the first related to overpopulation and world peace, and the second related to distribution of information through medical clinics. The final two questions, however, both targeted the moral improvements to family life: would knowledge of birth control change attitudes towards marriage or lower the morals of youth? And, would knowledge for parents make people happier and raise the “moral, social, and intellectual standards of the population?”³ Her line of questions challenged prominent religious leaders to dispel the notion that birth control would increase promiscuity, and instead to

¹ The session scheduled for the last day of the conference, entitled “Birth Control: Is it Moral?,” had to be rescheduled a week after the rest of the conference, since the New York City police had interrupted the original meeting at the prompting of local Catholic leadership. The incident was famously known as the Town Hall Raid and generated volumes of publicity that brought further attention and sympathy to Sanger’s cause.

² Margaret Sanger, “Birth Control: Is It Moral?” Speech. “1921 First American Birth Control League Conference,” 11/18/1921, 20. Smith College Collection, Series II, Subseries 2, Microfilm reel S67.

³ Sanger, “Birth Control: Is It Moral?” 20. Copy of the actual form letter is also available on Reel S67.

see how contraception could improve marriages and the quality of family life by allowing parents to control family size. Many of Sanger's writings in the 1920s echoed the broad theme of birth control's role in creating happier homes and marriages as she tried to sway religious leaders. In her form letter to American bishops and clergy in 1923,⁴ she asked them to consider their "humanitarian sympathies" and look over the aims, principles, and accomplishments of the ABCL, which was trying to secure "happier homes, healthier children, and better economic and social conditions" in which families could live.⁵ The idea of creating less stressful and more pleasant home life appealed to many conservatives, but in particular to the religious leaders who were keenly aware of the growing problem of unraveling marriages. According to David Kennedy, while liberals and conservatives disagreed widely about issues of femininity and women's roles, they all agreed on the importance of family life and children. He claimed this common ground became the key motive for various reforms. Sanger's identification of this shared priority drove her most effective rhetoric in the 1920s.

In particular, Sanger's *Birth Control Review* addressed specific and numerous physical family concerns throughout the 1920s, reinforcing the notion that contraception was a humanitarian reform that would improve the quality of physical life for women and children and especially in regards to health and wellness. Though her emphasis on marriage and sex concerns seemed to escalate during the decade, her points about quality of life remained consistently important as she tried to persuade conservatives. Many of these concerns likely originated with her post-war radicalism of socialism and feminism, including concerns for the working class and women, but she modified the emphasis of these issues in an effort to bring her reforms into the mainstream and closer to the views of religious conservatives.

⁴ Margaret Sanger, "ABCL, Margaret Sanger, Form Letter to Clergy," 07/12/1923. Smith College Collection, Series II, Subseries 2, Microfilm reel S61.

⁵ Kennedy, 49-50. For more insight into the nineteenth century's changing views, see Kennedy, "Ch. 2: The Nineteenth-Century Heritage: The Family, Feminism, and Sex."

The first issue of *Birth Control Review (BCR)* in 1917 included an article claiming that “The most palpable justification for the rational control of pregnancy is found in the protection it would afford to the health and life of both mother and offspring.”⁶ Later on, a 1924 article on “Birth Control in India” summed up the moral charge of the movement, claiming it as “a movement which is intended for the destruction of a mighty evil” and whose motives “are sacred.” N. S. Phadke, an Indian writer, made the argument that despite charges of “gross indecency, immorality, [and] sin,” the birth control movement had “the highest and purest motives of humanitarianism.” Addressing concerns faced by many families, he claimed, “It is for extinguishing misery, limiting human disease, raising the general level of humanity, [and] driving away the monster of poverty.”⁷ Sanger worked hard to put birth control forward as a humanitarian effort from the outset of the movement.

Sanger used the *BCR* to address major family concerns were throughout the 1920s. Most issues of *BCR* included a section of selected “Letters from Mothers,” calling attention to the major themes of despair and need that supporters hoped would compel readers. In the March 1926 issue, the section was entitled “Family Problems: Letters From Mothers Showing How Various are the Family Reasons for Birth Control.”⁸ In the introduction, the editor stated that families hoped “to make family life not a burden but a source of happiness to both the parents and children.” The letters were titled by editors and highlighted the following “reasons”: preventing divorce, stopping “defective” children, saving mothers with tuberculosis, avoiding abortion, giving children “a chance,” saving the family, and making a happy home. This list is an effective overview of the major causes for concern in the quality of life for families and especially the

⁶ Frederick A. Blossom, “Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review* (Feb. 1917): 12.

⁷ N. S. Phadke, “Birth Control in India,” *Birth Control Review* (April 1924): 105-107.

⁸ “Family Problems: Letters From Mothers Showing How Various are the Family Reasons for Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review* (March 1926): 88-89.

health and welfare of women and children in poor families. In short, smaller families would lead to happier, healthier mothers and children and result in better quality of life for families.

It is obvious throughout Sanger's works that the women who wrote and appealed to her for information about birth control were suffering, and their families were as well. Sanger wrote that the thousands of letters told "the story of slow murder of the helpless by a society that shields itself behind ancient, inhuman moral creeds—which dares to weigh those dead creeds against the agony of the living who pray for the 'mercy of death.'"⁹ One of the most useful rhetorical devices employed by Sanger was the compelling and emotional stories of individual women who were in poor health, bad relationships, and miserable poverty. These letters dramatically revealed to resistant leaders the human impact of uncontrolled fertility and the toll it was taking in the lives of everyday people. Throughout *Woman and the New Race*, she often referenced women she had met and letters she had received whose authors desperately cried out for her to dispense information about contraception.¹⁰

Several matters emerged from the testimonies of the women. In one of her early works, *Woman and the New Race* (1920), Margaret Sanger dedicated an entire chapter to highlighting typical letters from mothers and commenting on the themes that emerged, because they were so compelling and effective at revealing the dire circumstances with which families were routinely faced.¹¹ She claimed, "These letters have come to me by the thousands. There are enough of them to fill many volumes—each with its own individual tragedy, each with its own warning to

⁹ Margaret Sanger, *Woman and the New Race* (New York: Truth Publishing, 1920; Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2007), 49.

¹⁰ Early in her campaign, these letters were occasionally deceptive ploys meant to entrap her by soliciting information that would violate the Comstock Laws. She wrote in her *Autobiography* that she would occasionally be called down to the Post Office, where the postmaster had a drawer full of letters from people who complained that she had mailed copies of *Family Limitation* to them.

¹¹ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, "Ch. 6: Cries of Despair and Society's Problems."

society. Every ill that we are trying to cure today is reflected in them.”¹² Several related to marriage and sexual relations concerning the difficulties of continence for a marriage and husband, and the side effect of sending husbands toward prostitution. Most of the letters, however, showed how birth control would be able to alleviate suffering of families and especially the women and children. The letters highlighted the mental strain for women of continual pregnancies and caring for larger numbers of children, as well as the physical deterioration after having numerous children and the illnesses that were exacerbated by pregnancy or which made pregnancy life-threatening, such as tuberculosis and syphilis. Sanger also emphasized the large volume of letters that showed how children’s lives were damaged by being in undesirably large and strained families. The letters highlighted themes of husbands driven to drunkenness, women compelled to neglect children as they worked from home or even out of the home, poor health of children, children sent into labor, and little ones neglected due to the declining strength and means of the parents.

Sanger believed that birth control would solve some of the most heart-breaking conditions faced by families, stating that “oppressed motherhood knows that the cure for these evils lies in birth control.”¹³ In Sanger’s *Birth Control Review*, editors posed the question in 1927, “Why is Birth Control Necessary?” saying that among many reasons, the one “most vitally important to the individual is the health of mother and child,” and in 1928 they featured “Ten Good Reasons for Birth Control,” naming “The Health of Mother and Child” among others.¹⁴ Clearly, by the late 1920s the morality of preventing unnecessary suffering was seen as a compelling point and one that seemed to resonate with the potential supporters that Sanger needed. As she put it, “society has not yet learned to permit motherhood to stand guard for itself,

¹² Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 54-55.

¹³ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 55.

¹⁴ “Why Is Birth Control Necessary?,” *Birth Control Review* (Jan. 1927): 3; and “Ten Good Reasons for Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review* (March 1928): 3.

its children, the common good and the coming race.”¹⁵ She made the case that there was a clear moral mandate to allow contraception and give women a way to alleviate such unnecessary suffering.

Taken together, the works of Margaret Sanger propelled the notion that contraception would solve some of the most pressing concerns regarding the physical quality of life for families. She believed the relief of these physical pains would be a compelling argument to convince religious leaders that birth control was a moral solution to the growing problems of health and wellness faced by women and children. By 1930, the relatively conservative religious leaders were taking her message to heart, or at least responding to the will of the people and finding moral virtue in the practice of contraception within marriage. At Lambeth, the Bishops passed a key resolution that made birth control acceptable in Resolution 15. The language used here stipulated that, for married couples, “where there is a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, the method must be decided on Christian principles,” and her works emphasized the reasons for such “moral obligation.”¹⁶ In the FCC’s 1931 report, issued by the Committee on Marriage and the Home, American ministers agreed that “careful and restrained use of contraceptives by married people is valid and moral.”¹⁷ These ministers listed the primary reasons as spacing of children, size of the family, protection of mothers and children, and affection in marriage. Contraception would alleviate many physical ailments for women, and subsequently children, and reduce the common stressors that threatened the quality of family life across the country. It would improve women’s health, both in the difficulties of pregnancy, child birth, and weakness after having children. It would reduce the need for abortion, or even infanticide, which would protect the health of both mothers and the unborn children. It would

¹⁵ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 55.

¹⁶ “Lambeth Conference Archives—1930—Resolution 15,” www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1930/. Accessed April 12, 2013.

¹⁷ FCC Report.

allow parents to limit the size of their families in order provide healthier conditions for those children who were desired, and could, therefore, decrease the high rate of infant mortality as well. In these smaller families, children would be provided for adequately, and so birth control would reduce the poverty which drove children and teens into child labor, crime and prostitution.¹⁸ Throughout the 1920s, Sanger presented her cause as a compelling, moral solution to all of these growing problems faced by women and children since they threatened the quality of family life overall.

Women's Health

For Margaret Sanger, the rights and health of women were two of her most pressing personal reasons to promote birth control rights. In her rhetoric to convince relatively conservative religious leaders, however, her feminist concerns took on a more practical twist as she emphasized the immorality of allowing women to suffer from preventable illnesses, poor health, mental stress, and risk of death in childbirth. She also pointed to the risks transferred to the children of these sick or weakened women, in some cases through literal transmission of disease and in other cases a second-hand effect of poor home life that would make children vulnerable to disease. In a 1927 issue of *Birth Control Review*, editors summarized women's health concerns by arguing that birth control would prevent death and injury to mothers related to heart and kidney disease, tuberculosis, diabetes, venereal diseases, pelvic irregularities, and injuries to reproductive organs.¹⁹ They claimed that thousands of women either died in childbirth every year or resorted to abortion to avoid such a fate.²⁰ Finally, the editors argued that even if a

¹⁸ FCC Report.

¹⁹ "Why Is Birth Control Necessary?" *Birth Control Review* (Jan. 1927): 3.

²⁰ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, throughout the 1920s there were annually almost 700 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. This rate decreased dramatically throughout the 1930s and 1940s to a rate of 83 deaths per 100,000 by 1950. See the CDC's report "Maternal Mortality and

mother were healthy, birth control would allow her to space out her children in order to enjoy her wellness and vitality and thereby be a more caring and attentive mother to her children.²¹

Underneath all the arguments about women's health and wellness was the fundamental assumption by Sanger that women should have control over their own fate and risks when it came to choosing to mother a child or enlarge a family. Religious conservatives might have been turned off by a message seen as too liberal, or even radical, concerning women's rights. The wellness of the mother, who was seen as the center of the home for husbands and children, however, could evoke sympathy and conviction on the part of religious leaders. In an early issue of Sanger's *Birth Control Review*, editors condensed a pamphlet entitled "Birth Control and Biological Ethics," by Professor Warner Fite. Fite had argued that "To stand for birth control does not mean that childlessness is a virtue. A child enriches personal life, broadens thought, deepens responsibility—but the best things always cost the most. And the mother carries the double burden of the suffering and sacrifice incurred."²² If the suffering of the women and their families could be prevented by contraception, it should be seen as a humanitarian and morally compelling solution instead of an immoral caving to modernity.

In her prolific arguments about improving the health of women and children, Sanger often cited medical doctors who supported her cause as a way to show religious leaders that she had support from fellow professionals. The prestige of these supportive conservative medical authors and speakers was significant as she tried to persuade conservatives in the religious community. Kennedy noted that after the American Episcopal convention that finally accepted birth control in 1934, one bishop acknowledged this influence, admitting "that 'the fact that physicians specializing in obstetrics wanted the legislation' was an important factor in the

Related Concepts," *Vital and Health Statistics: Series 3, No. 33* (February 2007): 14, http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_03/sr03_033.pdf. Accessed January 12, 2014.

²¹ "Why Is Birth Control Necessary?," *Birth Control Review* (Jan. 1927): 3.

²² Warner Fite, "Birth Control and Biological Ethics," *Birth Control Review* (May 1923): 123-124.

resolution's passage."²³ Like the bishops at Lambeth, the FCC ministers also cited the health of women and children one of the primary reasons for their limited acceptance of birth control. The report stated, "Physicians have long known that under certain physical conditions of the mother, pregnancy is hazardous to mother and child," and it noted the agreement among physicians that too numerous pregnancies were a health risk even for otherwise healthy women.²⁴ Conversely, Sanger's clinical research throughout the 1920s and the approval of Protestant leaders in the early 1930s provided greater impetus for the AMA's official endorsement of birth control in 1937.²⁵ Overall, her emphasis on the health improvements for women helped persuade medical professionals to take on the issue themselves, but it also brought attention to the religious leaders of the great humanitarian needs and the physical consequences of religious opposition to contraception.

The Physical Toll of Frequent Pregnancies

In her 1923 "Need for Birth Control" speech, Sanger explained the many health concerns that some women experienced along with pregnancy, and especially after repeated and frequent pregnancies.²⁶ She claimed that as many as 22,000 women died from "causes incidental to pregnancy," although she did not elaborate on that statistic. In her 1920 book on *Woman and the New Race*, Sanger wrote a chapter directly arguing that there are times when women or couples should avoid having children, and a large focus of this chapter related to the damage caused to a mother's health and especially diseases exacerbated by pregnancy. She advised women to space their children with at least two to three years between births, arguing that they needed time to

²³ Kennedy, 169.

²⁴ FCC Report, 19-20.

²⁵ For more about the medical profession and its steps towards accepting birth control, see Kennedy "Ch. 7: Birth Control and American Medicine."

²⁶ Margaret Sanger, "The Need for Birth Control in America," Speech given at Parsons Theatre in Hartford, CT on 02/11/1923, 7-8. Smith College Collection, University Library, Indianapolis. Series II, Subseries 4, Microfilm reel S70.

replenish their strength and avoid wrecking their reproductive organs or causing pelvic ailments.²⁷ Certainly many of the more conservative religious leaders knew that children were physically and mentally demanding for parents, and especially for women. In the first issue of *BCR*, Managing Editor Frederick A. Blossom wrote that too-frequent childbearing by women was “neither humane nor intelligent,” resulting in “a progressive decline in the mother’s health.”²⁸ In addition to harming women, it also “condemn[ed] children to be born into the world poorly equipped for the physical struggle of life.” Sanger drove home the point that this fate could easily be avoided if only access to contraception was allowed.

In a chapter of *Woman and the New Race*, Sanger directly addressed women’s health in a chapter boldly entitled, “The Wickedness of Creating Large Families.”²⁹ As she put it, “The indictment against the large, unwanted family is written in human woe.”³⁰ She argued that medical professionals would validate her claim that “excessive childbearing” was “one of the most prolific causes of ill health in women.”³¹ She cited the contention of Dr. William J. Robinson that between the combination of the challenges of pregnancy, difficulties of birth, physical demands of nursing infants, and the sleepless nights, having too many children would “exhaust the vitality” of women, making them “prematurely old” and “chronic invalids.”³² Sanger noted that large families were also demanding on the fathers, and therefore were inevitably hard on men’s health and spirit as well.

Sanger focused much of her arguments about women’s health and wellness in the poorer segments of society. She often pointed out that the middle- and upper-class women had access to

²⁷ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 57.

²⁸ Frederick A. Blossom, “Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review* (February 1917): 12.

²⁹ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, “Ch. 5: The Wickedness of Creating Large Families.”

³⁰ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 46.

³¹ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 41. For more about Sanger’s persuasion of the medical community, see Kennedy, “Ch. 7: Birth Control and American Medicine.”

³² Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 41-42.

and utilized methods of birth control to which the lower-class women were not privy. She specifically addressed this claim in *New Race*, distinguishing herself from eugenicists on one critical point—while they would argue that the “undesirables” should have fewer or no children and the “desirables” should have greater numbers of children, Sanger argued that even those with the means to support a large family should limit the size of their family.³³ She pointed out that childbearing still took a toll on the woman’s body, arguing that it took time to recover and replace “certain elements,” whether a woman was rich or poor.³⁴ She speculated that the stresses and tensions of life had made modern women of every class less fit to bear more than six children, and further speculated that tuberculosis and other diseases might even have been due to the poor physical condition of those born into large families, regardless of good nutrition or welfare of the family.³⁵ By pointing out the cumulative effect of continual pregnancies, Sanger could assuage fears that birth control was meant to stop or further slow birthrates, as some conservatives feared. Rather, she tried to assure them that by spacing and limiting reproduction, women’s health could be preserved and the population could maintain its strength as well.

Maternal Death Rate and the Risks of Childbirth

One of the most direct health concerns faced by women related to pregnancy was the risk of childbirth itself, and Sanger pointed out these risks by comparing the maternal death rate to that from other diseases. She argued that while doctors and health professionals were improving the health and death rates in most every field, women were still dying in childbirth at about the same rate. This risk seemed unnecessary and preventable, and she tried to convince religious leaders that it was immoral to continue to ignore the suffering any longer. In a 1919 *BCR* article,

³³ Historians, such as Linda Gordon, have criticized Sanger for her affiliation with eugenicists. See Gordon’s critical evaluation of Sanger’s ties to eugenicists, which accuses her of abandoning feminist and socialist concerns for women and the poor, in *Moral Property*, 190-203.

³⁴ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 45.

³⁵ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 46.

editors cited a 1917 U.S. Department of Labor pamphlet from the Children's Bureau entitled "Maternal Mortality," which stated that the death rate from causes related to childbirth in the U.S. was very high and was not decreasing despite the rapid decrease in death rates from other preventable diseases.³⁶ The pamphlet also stated that in 1913, childbirth caused more deaths among women ages 15 to 44 than any other disease except tuberculosis (TB). By the end of the decade, the same problem still existed and childbirth was still second only to TB. Providing support from the medical experts, Dr. Helen Miller discussed the matter in a 1929 *BCR* article, arguing that birth control would help lower the maternal death rate.³⁷ Dr. Miller argued that the rate was not decreasing proportionately to other causes of death, positing the main reason for the persistence of the problem as "the unfitness of the mother to bear a child." She claimed that their known health problems led women to try to bring about a miscarriage or to outright abort babies, often using "crude and injurious methods" and leading to "dangerous and fatal complications" and "perpetual sepsis...with death of mother and child as the end." Another doctor wrote in favor of birth control as a means of improving women's health, claiming that half of maternal deaths were due to infections at the time of birth, which the healthy could fight off successfully, but to which the "weak and debilitated [would] become easy victims."³⁸ It seems likely that the opinions of these medical doctors were included by Sanger's editorial staff in order to strengthen the perception of legitimacy and professionalization that would have helped to draw in sympathetic religious leaders.

Advocates for birth control often argued that contraception had already been successful in lowering the maternal mortality rates where it had been instituted. They often referenced the record of Holland's large cities of The Hague and Amsterdam once the movement took hold,

³⁶ Ellen A. Kennan, "Maternity—A Hazardous Occupation," *Birth Control Review* (July 1919): 10.

³⁷ Helen Miller, "Contraception as a Means of Conserving Maternal Health," *Birth Control Review* (October 1929): 281-282.

³⁸ James F. Cooper, "The Doctor and Birth Control," *Birth Control Review* (March 1925): 69-70.

stating that Amsterdam had “the lowest [maternal] death rate of any in the world” as a result.³⁹ They even gave birth control credit for improving some statistics in New York City at the outset of the movement. The NYC Department of Health found that between 1918 and 1919 marriages had increased, births had decreased, infant death rates went down, and overall death rates went down. The *BCR* editors concluded that it must mean birth control was taking effect, as it would lead to both lower infant and maternal mortality rates.⁴⁰ This assertion shows the conviction held by advocates such as Sanger that the movement was not one of mere convenience or immoral promiscuity, but a noble and moral cause that would improve the quality of life for those women and children seen as so vulnerable.

Tuberculosis

One of the most deadly diseases for pregnant women was tuberculosis (TB). While many maternal deaths were caused by events and infections in childbirth, Dr. James F. Cooper claimed that the other half of maternal deaths were due to known diseases going into childbirth, such as tuberculosis, heart and kidney disease, and diabetes.⁴¹ Dr. Cooper wrote in a 1925 *BCR* that “If the woman were warned of the peril of undertaking maternity and the proper information [was] given, these lives could be saved, the homes kept together and the children given a fair chance in life.” Cooper further drove home the point that birth control was a morally-compelling solution to a common and preventable suffering, and he undermined the notion that birth control was immoral because it was unnatural. He pointed to the unnatural preventative measures that were commonly practiced and sanctioned, such as brushing teeth, taking baths, getting vaccinations, and having surgical operations: all “might be called unnatural, but they preserve health, save life and give happiness and we therefore feel that they are justified. When birth control is practiced to

³⁹ “Birth Control Lowers Death Rates,” *Birth Control Review* (Feb. 1920): 5.

⁴⁰ While this conclusion might seem an illogical leap, it shows that Sanger sought to emphasize the ways in which birth control would alleviate suffering to convince religious leaders.

⁴¹ James F. Cooper, “The Doctor and Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review* (March 1925): 69-70.

preserve health, save life and promote human welfare, it is justified.” Dr. Cooper’s argument emphasized that Americans employed many “unnatural” devices to improve the quality of their lives because they were prudent and civilized ways to protect people from unnecessary harm.

Sanger herself often argued that it was a common and preventable medical problem for women who had tuberculosis to become pregnant. She was likely driven to strong conviction about the preventable weakness associated with TB and pregnancy because her own mother had died at an early age after years of childbearing and suffering from TB.⁴² Sanger recollected her mother’s severe cough and slow decline over time. Chesler reported that Anne Higgins “seems to have wasted slowly from the disease and from the constant pregnancies that weakened her resistance to it.” Though her devout, Catholic mother had religious convictions about not using contraceptives, Sanger still blamed her mother’s early death on her parents’ ignorance of birth control information.⁴³

According to an early speech by Sanger, four of every seven women with the disease died from pregnancy and not tuberculosis itself.⁴⁴ She pointed out that doctors were allowed to end the pregnancy in order to save the life of the woman, but then they would send her back out again without help to prevent another pregnancy, so she would end up in the same dilemma again. In *New Race*, she had argued that it was simply cruel to permit or force women to resort to abortions when they had diseases that were well-known to be exacerbated by pregnancy and childbirth—especially tuberculosis.⁴⁵ If either parent at home had tuberculosis, the child would be weaker and more likely to acquire the disease as well. Additionally, for women with tuberculosis, childbearing was a known danger that should certainly be avoided, since it was widely believed

⁴² Chesler, 32-35.

⁴³ Chesler, 32-35.

⁴⁴ Sanger, “The Need for Birth Control in America,” 7-8.

⁴⁵ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 112-113.

that pregnant women with latent TB were more likely to progress to active TB in that state.⁴⁶ A 1924 *BCR* featured letters from mothers concerned about tuberculosis.⁴⁷ The introduction to the letters complained that no TB organizations had come out openly for birth control and called on the societies to stand up for those women, writing that the latter were refused information, often died, and perpetuated the disease by bearing weak babies and spreading the disease to their children. Dr. S. Adolphus Knopf advocated for birth control largely for the purpose of limiting diseases such as TB.⁴⁸ In 1917, *BCR* described Dr. Knopf as “a veteran in the long war against tuberculosis,” and featured his article concerning the relationship between the disease and the large family.⁴⁹ He claimed that women who were later-born in their own family were more likely to get TB, and a huge percentage of women with TB would die as a result of pregnancy when the full onset of the disease could otherwise be avoided or limited.

Other Diseases

Other diseases than TB were also considered to be exacerbated by pregnancy. Sanger pointed out in her “Need for Birth Control” speech that women who had either kidney disease or heart disease would die if they were pregnant, and again doctors would end the pregnancy, but not prevent the woman from becoming pregnant again.⁵⁰ In *New Race*, Sanger also advised women to avoid pregnancy if they had known pelvic deformities or syphilis, conditions which she claimed caused many miscarriages and made pregnancy a danger to the mother’s health and life. If a mother had gonorrhoea initially, or became infected from the father, there was a danger of

⁴⁶ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 57-58.

⁴⁷ “Tuberculosis and Birth Control: Letters from Mothers Who are Entitled to Relief,” *Birth Control Review* (June 1924): 176.

⁴⁸ Dr. Knopf had worked in a hospital for tuberculosis patients in Paris, and was a leading expert in the disease in the U.S., writing numerous essays and books, forming committees for study, and even founding the National Tuberculosis Foundation (which became the American Lung Association). He was also a leading eugenicist. According to Kennedy, Dr. Knopf “enjoyed substantial prestige among fellow physicians” (173).

⁴⁹ S. Adolphus Knopf, “An Arsenal of Argument: Birth Control, Its Medical, Social, Economic and Moral Aspects,” *Birth Control Review* (April/May 1917): 8.

⁵⁰ Sanger, “The Need for Birth Control in America,” 8.

causing blindness in children.⁵¹ Though primarily concerned with TB, Dr. Knopf also valued contraception as a way to prevent the birth of children with venereal diseases, since parents with syphilis or gonorrhea could be taught how to prevent conception during infectious stages of their disease. He argued, “There would certainly be less inherited syphilis, less blindness from gonorrheal infection. In other words, fewer unfortunate children in this world handicapped for life and a burden to the community.”⁵² There was a lingering presence of eugenics influence to Sanger’s points as she transitioned towards moral arguments to promote birth control, especially regarding couples that would pass on undesirable mental “traits,” such as “feeble-mindedness” and alcoholism. She began to place stronger emphasis on the desire to keep women healthier, and subsequently their offspring as well, and therefore prevent some of the suffering many were unable to avoid without contraception. This shifting argument brought more focus on the morally-compelling virtues of contraception. Sanger successfully showed religious leaders how the health of all women could be preserved and protected with the simple humanitarian reform of allowing access to birth control. More importantly, it would be immoral to ignore the responsibility of the leadership to do so.

Preventing Abortion and Infanticide

Another health concern that birth control could alleviate for many women was the dangerous and illegal practice of abortion or attempted abortion. Women resorted to the practice over concerns with the risks of pregnancy, childbirth, and the wellness of their family if they continued to bear more children. Many religious leaders in the 1920s were concerned that birth control might allow for moral decline, but practically all of them were even more appalled by the

⁵¹ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 57-58.

⁵² Knopf, “An Arsenal of Argument,” 8.

growing rates of abortion.⁵³ Margaret Sanger pointed out that poor conditions, health risks, finances, and stress were leading women to resort to dangerous abortions as a means of family limitation, when they could prevent the pregnancy altogether with contraception. Sanger appealed to conservatives' hearts and minds both by arguing that contraception provided a preventative measure to ensure women would not be in such a dangerous or stressful position to resort to such an immoral atrocity. If they were not convinced that birth control was moral, then she tried to convince them that it would at least prevent the greater of two perceived evils.

Growing Trend in Developing Civilizations

The rise of and opposition to abortion were certainly noted by the bishops at Lambeth in 1930 and were influential upon American Protestants as well. While Lambeth's groundbreaking Resolution 15 allowed for contraception, Resolution 16 directly followed that concession by overtly stating their abhorrence of abortion as a sinful practice.⁵⁴ Clearly the religious leaders wanted to distinguish that it might be understandable and moral to limit the growth of one's family, but it was inarguably immoral to end a life once it had already begun. Whether or not she privately disagreed with abortion, Sanger's public work revealed her keen awareness of conservative public feelings against abortion and presented birth control as a preferable and moral solution to the dilemma in which many women and families found themselves.

In Sanger's publications, there are many references to the practice of abortion as detestable and immoral. In one article in the *Birth Control Review*, Dr. John C. Vaughan addressed the American Birth Control Conference, defining abortion as termination of any ovum, embryo, or fetus while in the womb.⁵⁵ He argued that it should be outlawed by asking, "Why should it be any less a crime, why should it be more moral or legal to destroy a life in its

⁵³ See the "Ch. 1: Introduction" above for sources regarding the increased practice of abortion.

⁵⁴ "Lambeth Conference Archives – 1930 – Resolution 16," www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1930/. Accessed April 12, 2013.

⁵⁵ John C. Vaughan, "Birth Control Not Abortion," *Birth Control Review* (September 1922): 183-4.

intrauterine stages than it is after these stages are over and the baby has been born?” In the same breath that Sanger and other advocates condemned abortion, they offered contraception as the perfect preventative measure and utilized medical doctors as a way to lend professional status to the movement and persuade other conservatives of its legitimacy.

In her 1923 “Need for Birth Control” speech, Sanger pointed out that while there were destructive, natural ways to limit the population growth, such as disease, famine, pest, floods, and wars, there were even more “savage” ways that were morally detestable, including abortion, infanticide, and abandonment of children.⁵⁶ She claimed that throughout history, infanticide had been a common problem that persisted despite punishment, and had begun to decline only recently with the growth of abortions. She pointed out this dark historical tradition to convince conservatives that while it may never go away completely, birth control was an obvious way to prevent the need for, and, therefore, help eradicate abortion.

Sanger’s books, speeches, and publications often referred to the increasing frequency of abortions throughout the 1920s, a reality which certainly would have alarmed religious leaders. An article in the *Birth Control Review* in 1921 stated that rates of abortions were growing worldwide, but called U.S. cities one of the biggest and growing offenders.⁵⁷ The author, sociology professor Edward G. Punke, claimed that the practice had replaced infanticide in modern times as a means of family limitation. While it was more common in the city, it was increasing in rural areas as well. Punke speculated that the increase was due to increasing educational standards, higher status of women, more information and facilities, and especially increasing ideals for better quality of life. If his speculations were correct, the increase would only grow as standards of living did. One of Sanger’s earliest clerical supporters, Anglican Dean William R. Inge, wrote in 1921 that attempting to suppress contraception only served to increase

⁵⁶ Sanger, “The Need for Birth Control in America,” 1-6.

⁵⁷ Edward G. Punke, “Birth Control in Relation to Poverty,” *Birth Control Review* (November 1921): 9.

abortions. Inge cited a German birth control researcher “who described the United States as ‘the classic land of abortion,’ claiming two million abortions took place in the nation each year.”⁵⁸ Margaret Sanger successfully emphasized the ways in which birth control could improve the standard of living for families, so that the need and reliance upon abortion would decrease significantly. To persuade Protestants, she especially argued that it would be immoral to deny such improvements to the masses.

In her 1920 book, *Woman and the New Race*, Sanger addressed the alternatives to birth control at great length, arguing throughout that contraceptives were the preferable means to prevent the ancient practice of abortion or infanticide for family limitation. In the second chapter of the book, she gave an overview of the prevalence of the practice of abortion in both “savage,” uncivilized cultures throughout history, but also in enlightened and more educated civilizations as well.⁵⁹ Sanger wrote of women, “Where laws, customs, and religious restrictions do not prevent, she has recourse to contraceptives. Otherwise, she resorts to child abandonment, abortion and infanticide, or resigns herself hopelessly to enforced maternity.”⁶⁰ Sanger argued throughout the chapter that the drive to limit the size of one’s family, and therefore better care for one’s self and existing family, must then be an instinctive impulse of the “feminine spirit” that could not be stopped. If it is “irresistible,” despite the risks of punishment and personal health complications, then society should allow women to choose motherhood by legalizing the use of contraception as a safe and preferable alternative to abortion.

She pointed out many historical examples of cultures in which the practice of abortion and infanticide was common, and in some cases even encouraged, including Native Americans, Asian and Indian cultures, Western Europeans, and ancient Greeks and Romans. She wrote that

⁵⁸ Quoted in Tobin, 89.

⁵⁹ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, “Ch. 2: Women’s Struggle for Freedom.”

⁶⁰ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 18.

infanticide was an established custom in ancient Greece and Rome despite laws against it. Citing findings from Finnish sociologist Edward Westermarck, in his 1906 book *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, Sanger described how the custom of infanticide was condoned by philosophers like Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece and Rome. They condemned the practice of allowing to live “deformed or sickly infants,” those that were “imperfect” or weak, or those that came after a sizable quantity of children were already achieved in a family.⁶¹ Contrary to what one might expect, Sanger argued that these tendencies actually increased with progress and great civilization of a culture, primarily because women had higher expectations for the resources, health and quality of life of themselves and their family.

Sanger’s emphasis on abortion in civilized cultures attempted to persuade religious leaders that the impulse to control family size and aspire to higher living standards would not desist with moral persuasion or punishments, but instead the urge could be undercut by allowing scientific knowledge to help. Sanger claimed that infanticide was the “most common crime in Western Europe from the Middle Ages down to the end of the 18th century,” stating it was practiced mostly by married parents to limit conditions of poverty, and finally arguing that “nothing short of contraception can put an end to the horrors of abortion and infanticide.”⁶² She also pointed out that the practices persisted despite condemnation and even torturous penalties by dominant religions in China and India and by the Roman Catholic Church. Dr. John C. Vaughan echoed this sentiment in his 1922 article in the *Birth Control Review* as well, writing that since “abortions have steadily increased regardless of the fear of death and of threats of punishment, both legal and religious, I maintain that there is only one safe and scientific way in which to handle the situation, and that is to prevent abortion from being necessary.”⁶³ Finally, Sanger

⁶¹ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 20-22.

⁶² Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 23.

⁶³ Vaughan, “Birth Control Not Abortion,” 183-184.

addressed the rise of abortions in the United States and called for readers to support birth control as a solution, claiming that every year “more women will undergo the humiliation, the danger and the horror of them, and the terrible record begun with the infanticide of the primitive peoples, will go on piling up its volume of human misery and racial damage, until society awakens to the fact that a fundamental remedy must be applied.”⁶⁴ By pointing out the long, historical tradition and suffering of women faced with the dilemma of too many children, Sanger hoped to show potential supporters, and especially those religious conservatives most appalled by abortion, that contraception was not the morally destructive vice as it was reputed to be. Rather, it was a comparatively moral and constructive solution to a growing and offensive method of limiting one’s family.

“Thoughtful Mothers Choose Abortion”

For many women struggling with the desire to limit their families, one of the primary concerns was to preserve the standard of living and wellness of their existing families, in terms of finances, health, and stress. From the outset, Sanger’s American Birth Control League emphasized concern for women and children, and in the organization’s stated “Principles,” founders cited the goal of improving the health of the entire population.⁶⁵ They stated that “unwanted pregnancies often provoke the crime of abortion, or alternatively multiply the number of child workers and lower the standard of living.” The organization called for children who were “conceived in love,” “born of the mother’s conscious desire,” and healthy. While this early document still showed her earlier sympathies with the eugenics movement, there was also an increasing message of compassion for the health and conditions in which so many women and children lived. This line of thought certainly would have been compelling to religious leaders

⁶⁴ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 25.

⁶⁵ “ABCL Constitution/By-Laws,” 1921. Smith College Collection, Series II, Subseries 2, Microfilm reel S61.

who had sympathy for the difficult lives of the poor who struggled to make ends meet and could not provide a basic standard of living.

Several articles in the *Birth Control Review* described the difficult choices faced by women. Dr. Vaughan cited several reasons a mother might choose abortion, noting that “As long as children, brought into the world, are throttled by poverty, racked by inherited insanity, snuffed out by inherited diseases, wasted by wars and by our social system, thoughtful mothers choose abortion, when they feel it necessary, unless they are given some better alternative.”⁶⁶ In 1923, a year after Vaughan’s article, the introduction to the “Letters from Mothers” section of the July issue of the *BCR* referred to his points once again, and continued:

Without birth control, the mother is given the choice of two crimes—to injure herself and to destroy her unborn child by abortion, or to bring into the world children for whom she cannot care, and who are doomed from birth to misery, ill health, deficiency or physical defect. The mother conscience often prevails over the individual conscience, and even when she feels that she is running the risk of eternal damnation, the mother resorts to abortion rather than bring children into the world to suffer, and to cause suffering to the whole family. But ought there to be any such hard choice for a woman, when science has discovered harmless means of prevention? What right has any government to inflict such tyranny on women as to keep this knowledge from them by law?⁶⁷

The dominant argument may have resonated with those relative conservatives in the religious leadership. Many of these denominations were conservative theologically, yet also adhered to the Social Gospel doctrine and clearly saw the needs of the “other half” that could be addressed with some help and some systemic changes.⁶⁸ Many of the mothers who Sanger served and referred to were in a difficult position; health and economic concerns were driving them to resort to abortion

⁶⁶ Vaughan, “Birth Control Not Abortion,” 183-4.

⁶⁷ “Prevention or Abortion—Which?: Letters Showing the Dilemma Faced by Many Mothers,” *Birth Control Review* (July 1923): 181-182.

⁶⁸ The Social Gospel movement was common from about 1870 to 1920 among many mainline, Protestant denominations. The movement emphasized labor reforms, such as minimum wages, anti-child labor, working conditions, and housing conditions. It was driven by what leaders saw as the exploitation of the masses by industrialism. For a brief overview, see “Social Gospel (American Religious Movement),” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/551238/Social-Gospel>. Accessed May 15, 2014.

when, instead, the situation and moral compromise could be avoided altogether if only information was made legal and accessible to the entire public, not just the privileged strata.

The reason society had turned a blind eye to the struggles was, according to Sanger, largely due to the reality that those with power and influence—the middle- and especially upper-class—already had the resources to understand and acquire birth control as needed.⁶⁹ In contrast, the working class had limited access to the necessary education, doctors, and information, let alone to contraceptives. She cited Dr. Max Hirsch's claim that most of the abortions in the United States were performed on married women, despite the association with sexual promiscuity, and furthermore that women of the upper-class acquired contraception in order to limit their family size, while the less-privileged classes resorted to abortion as a matter of self- and family-preservation.⁷⁰ Much as Sanger repeatedly argued, Hirsch claimed that contraceptives were the most "important weapons in the fight against abortion." Sanger argued that women always had been practicing, and would continue to practice, family limitation in whatever way was available, but that they would never choose to have abortions if they were able to avoid the pregnancy with access to birth control. She implored leaders, "Shall family limitation be achieved through birth control or abortion? Shall normal, safe, effective contraceptives be employed, or shall we continue to force women to the abnormal, often dangerous surgical operation?"⁷¹ If religious leaders wanted to limit abortion, then, it stood to reason that contraceptives would go a long way towards doing just that. At the same time, they could serve the humanitarian purpose of improving the overall wellness of an entire class of people who badly needed and desired a greater standard of living.

⁶⁹ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 73-74.

⁷⁰ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 74.

⁷¹ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 75.

Health and Medical Concerns

In addition to the major argument that women resorted to abortion out of desperation to maintain their quality of life and that of their family, much of Sanger's works on the topic of abortion asked conservative leaders not only to consider the moral benefit of keeping women from the sin of abortion, but also to keep in mind the humanitarian virtue of avoiding preventable health and medical risks with the relatively simple measure of making contraceptives accessible. Sanger argued that abortion was dangerous and led to further health problems for many women. Birth control was already safer and functioned as an ideal preventative medicine instead of necessitating a reactive medical treatment. She and others pointed out, however, that doctors could make the practice even safer if they were given more training and allowed to research for even better methods of birth control.

Sanger called great attention to the dangers of abortion as a way to reinforce the need for a more moral, viable alternative for family limitation. She continued to cite and engage with medical doctors as a way to emphasize the alliance among conservative professionals that might give further confidence to Protestant clergy. An early *Birth Control Review* pointed out the general challenges, stating that abortion was dangerous and risky, as well as expensive. The article argued that women should not be forced into the position when there were viable means of preventing conception, and cited several desperate examples of mothers that had written letters telling of their attempted abortions since they already felt they had too many sickly children at home.⁷² She quoted Dr. J. Clifton Edgar's book, *The Practice of Obstetrics*, to list the "immediate dangers of abortion" as "hemorrhage, retention of an adherent placenta, sepsis, tetanus, perforation of the uterus. [Abortions] also cause sterility, anemia, malignant diseases,

⁷² "Prevention or Abortion?," *Birth Control Review* (February 1920): 20-21.

displacements, neurosis, and endometritis.”⁷³ She also brought attention to the long-term health dangers for a woman who had undergone an abortion, citing damage to the womb and the ability of women to conceive again quickly, in which case frequent abortions could eventually cause “barrenness and serious, painful pelvic ailments” that would ruin a woman’s overall health in turn. Dr. Rachele Yarros, a gynecologist, Hull-House resident, and birth control advocate, noted some women’s dangerous reliance upon abortion: “Some women seek this means not only once but a dozen or twenty times. Some women do not live to seek it for the second time.”⁷⁴ Her warnings—both of reliance upon abortion and the life-threatening risks—were a powerful motivation to reduce the need for abortions through contraception.

Sanger further pointed out that many women without means might even resort to a home remedy to abort the child, utilizing crude methods or harmful drugs. Not only did these methods often harm the woman, but if they did not work, they could also have long-term damage to the child.⁷⁵ In her 1926 book, *Happiness in Marriage*, Sanger advised new couples that birth control would be much healthier for women than abortion, and emphasized her warning not to take drugs as an attempted abortifacient, but rather to find a reliable doctor who would give the couple reliable contraceptive information.⁷⁶ Dr. Adolphus Knopf was quoted in the *BCR* stating that contraceptive knowledge would save “the lives of thousands of poor mothers who in their desperate efforts to get rid of an unborn and unwanted child resort to violent and dangerous means.”⁷⁷ Dr. Rachele Yarros was cited in a 1929 *BCR*, claiming that abortion was much more common than many in the public assumed, and stating that it was most common among married,

⁷³ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 76.

⁷⁴ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 113.

⁷⁵ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 77.

⁷⁶ Margaret Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage* (New York City: Coward McCann, Inc., 1926; Garden City, NY: Blue Ribbon Books, 1940), 214-215 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

⁷⁷ “The Curse of Abortion,” *Birth Control Review* (November 1929): 307.

poor, working-class women who could not afford more children.⁷⁸ Sanger captured the dilemma women faced (especially lower-class women) by claiming that by ignoring birth control, society was “compelling women to choose between injury,” to themselves, their children, and society, and an “abhorrent operation which kills the tenderness and delicacy of womanhood, even as it may injure or kill the body.”⁷⁹ Given the dangerous health risks, Sanger hoped to show conservatives that they had a moral obligation to approve contraception as a safer and more humanitarian alternative.

In contrast, Sanger pointed out the advantages experienced by the upper classes. She noted that if women of wealth did resort to abortion instead of contraception, the benefits afforded by the best medical care and skill often meant that these wealthier women often avoided these common and serious consequences. Regardless, she called on society to “adopt the easier, safer, less repulsive course and prevent conception altogether.”⁸⁰ As time went on, she emphasized the class distinctions with less fervor than in her socialist radical days in the immediate post-war era, but it might have still been effective to point out to a largely middle- and upper-class clergy that access, information, and quality of care were not evenly distributed.

Not only did abortion often have health consequences due to the procedure (or incorrect procedures, as she pointed out), but often the women were driven to abortion in the first place due to existing health problems that made pregnancy especially dangerous. Sanger argued that doctors were allowed to perform abortions in cases of medical need, such as for women with tuberculosis, but that they then sent the women home to get pregnant once again without any preventative methods. The sick women were essentially “thrown back to the wolves” if they were given warnings not to get pregnant again but no methods to heed the warning. If they went

⁷⁸ “Ten Good Reasons for Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review* (January 1929): 3.

⁷⁹ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 50.

⁸⁰ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 113.

home empty-handed to a husband “with passion,” they were completely dependent on the discipline and continence of the husband. In many cases, the patient would be back to the doctor soon after to start the cycle over again.⁸¹ Sanger presented this dilemma to leaders as an example of how birth control would not have deleterious moral consequences among the populace, but rather would serve a moral and humanitarian function of preserving the health and wellness of suffering women.

The larger problem seemed to be that, in addition to the unwillingness of some doctors to relinquish control, many doctors were uneducated concerning contraceptive methods, or were uncomfortable with them due to the lack of research. There was too little study of the various methods to give interested doctors much confidence in their safety and reliability. Sanger argued that doctors needed greater education about contraception as a preventative medicine, instead of using abortion as a treatment after the fact. They also needed approval to research safe methods of birth control. In *Woman and the New Race*, Sanger called on readers to question doctors and the institutions that trained them. She claimed that birth control was “kept in the dark” in medical schools and hospitals, since the institutions chose to acknowledge and teach abortive methods, but not contraceptives. Finally, many birth control methods were not formally researched and therefore did not have official approval or give doctors any certainty in advising patients to use them.⁸² In several of his speeches, as reported by the *Birth Control Review*, Dr. John C. Vaughan argued that medical professionals needed to be freed from restrictive laws in order to research methods to find those that were most safe and reliable.⁸³ In an address to the American Birth Control Conference, he demanded that doctors “be given the right to instruct those who find it necessary for any reason to refrain temporarily or permanently from having children and that we

⁸¹ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 113.

⁸² Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 113.

⁸³ John C. Vaughan, “Instead of Abortion,” *Birth Control Review* (July 1923): 174.

be given freedom and help in order that we may find the best methods of prevention of conception.”⁸⁴ If religious leaders would first acknowledge the moral benefits of approving contraception, doctors could follow the lead and make the practices even safer and more beneficial for public health and humanitarian purposes. Indeed, the relatively conservative medical and Protestant leaders seemed to feed off of each other as they cautiously progressed to approval of birth control. Finally, after Anglican approval at Lambeth in 1930 and subsequent FCC approval in 1931, the AMA did come around with official recognition by 1937.

Several writers in the *Birth Control Review* argued that doctors should be more focused on birth control as a preventative medicine and, therefore, religious leaders could see it as a humanitarian reform. Dr. James F. Cooper claimed that 85% of abortions would be prevented by birth control, and that medical professionals should utilize greater information on birth control in order “to save life, health and happiness by ‘preventive obstetrics.’”⁸⁵ Later he wrote in the *BCR* that abortion was a “most abominable affair and everything possible should be done to suppress it” since it could relieve women of the need to abort, “which is at once immoral and dangerous to life and health.”⁸⁶ Cooper argued for contraceptives as preventative medicine again then, stating, “The great objective in the practice of medicine is prevention of sickness and promotion of health rather than curing disease. I doubt if there is any field more promising for the promotion of health and happiness than preventive obstetrics.” Another medical doctor wrote in the *BCR* to convince readers and put forward the idea that the focus in medicine should always be on prevention. Dr. Benjamin T. Tilton wrote that it was more moral for doctors to take preventative action in support of birth control rather than to put women in the position of choosing abortion and then addressing the health concerns that resulted:

⁸⁴ Vaughan, “Birth Control Not Abortion,” *Birth Control Review* (September 1922): 183-184.

⁸⁵ “Birth Control for Health and Morals,” *Birth Control Review* (January 1925): 10 and 29. The article summarized speeches by two medical doctors on the moral aspects of birth control.

⁸⁶ James F. Cooper, “The Doctor and Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review* (March 1925): 69-70.

Prevention of the evils of too frequent and too many pregnancies in the women of our poorer classes is perhaps the most important and productive field that preventive medicine can devote itself to. Scientific birth control will then emerge as the only solution of the problem. Education of womankind will follow and the overburdened and sickly mothers will realize that they are offered something infinitely better than their old stand-by, abortion. Abortion with all its evils will become less and less common and will ultimately be discarded by the enlightened mothers.... If birth control does nothing more than prevent abortion it should receive the support of every thinking individual.⁸⁷

Dr. Max Hirsch compared those who would fight abortion, but attack birth control to “the person who would fight contagious diseases and forbid disinfection.”⁸⁸ For religious leaders, then, the concept of seeing contraception as preventative medicine meant that human suffering could be alleviated, and they had the power to influence the success of the movement by their approval.

Birth Control as the Lesser of Two “Evils”

In later decades, Sanger’s movement led to Planned Parenthood and, in recent years, the latter has been criticized by modern religious fundamentalists for providing abortions. Yet in the early decades of the movement, Sanger effectively deflected any association of contraception with abortion and strongly railed against abortion as a way to present birth control as a morally viable movement. As Sanger reflected in her *Autobiography*, she discussed the opening of her first Brownsville clinic and pointed out that calling it a “clinic” had brought about some confusion.⁸⁹ The term was meant to help win over conservatives in the medical community, but some women apparently thought the workers would perform abortions for current pregnancies. Still, Sanger reported that she tried to comfort and encourage those mothers by promising that if they had that baby, she could help them prevent the conception of any more afterwards. The language used throughout the 1920s, in her speeches, works and the *BCR*, harshly criticized the

⁸⁷ Benjamin T. Tilton, “Birth Control as a Prevention of Abortion,” *Birth Control Review* (March 1925): 71 and 94.

⁸⁸ “The Curse of Abortion,” *Birth Control Review* (November 1929): 307.

⁸⁹ Margaret Sanger, *Margaret Sanger: An Autobiography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1938; Reprinted under the title *The Autobiography of Margaret Sanger*, Mineola, NY: Dover, 1971), 214-218.

practice of abortion as disgusting, immoral and dangerous. This rhetoric helped her shake off some negative associations of birth control with promiscuity and immorality.

By contrast, she argued that contraception was the best, moral solution to the immoral growing trend towards abortion as a means of family limitation. Certainly Sanger promoted the concept that birth control was, if not moral to some religious conservatives, at least more moral than abortion, or the lesser of two evils. Three weeks after the 1921 Town Hall incident, when the Catholic Church used the New York police to break up a birth control conference, *The Nation* published an article by William R. Inge, Dean of London's St. Paul's Cathedral. Inge, a fervent supporter throughout the decade, claimed that contraception would reduce abortions and showed at least some religious support early on. Inge did not directly address theological arguments, but he did claim that it was morally wrong to ignore factual information, such as that which doctors and obstetricians had provided, stating that "Willful ignorance is a moral fault."⁹⁰ He argued that a lack of contraception had only led to increasing abortions, citing a German researcher's finding that there were two million every year in the United States. Inge also argued that there was a serious need for eugenics and legal sterilization, an association that may have turned off some religious conservatives, but for most mainline Protestants his support helped Sanger give leaders a moral reason to justify their pro-birth control stance. Inge was actively involved in the campaign with Sanger, and his support provided a notable Protestant leader's defense that contraception would prevent the perceived greater evil of increasing abortions.

Another religious leader presented birth control as a moral reform in a speech about the moral aspects of birth control. According to the summary of his paper in the *BCR*, Unitarian minister Rev. Charles Francis Potter called birth control "the greatest moral reform challenging

⁹⁰ Tobin, 89.

the present generation.”⁹¹ He stated that it was “the great means of fighting abortion” and “would also prevent the moral, physical and economic wrecking of families by over-reproduction.” Finally, he called the movement morally compelling by virtue of the fact that it had the power to do away with “an enormous amount of suffering.” Taken together, Sanger and her fellow advocates successfully pitched birth control as an important tool in improving the lives of those women who were suffering and resorted to abortion. It was a health concern, as women tried to preserve and protect not only their own lives, but those of their family and children. Therefore, eradicating abortion through providing contraception could be seen as a moral and humanitarian solution to a growing and persistent problem.

Children’s Health and Wellness: “Condemned from the Cradle”

As Sanger focused on winning over the relatively conservative religious leaders, she knew she had to emphasize the ways in which contraception could improve the quality of life for all families, and especially improve the health and wellness problems that plagued lower- and middle-class women and children. By emphasizing the humanitarian mission of the movement, Sanger hoped to convince leaders to see birth control as a morally constructive reform that would relieve various stressors and therefore strengthen families. So, in addition to calling to attention the health of women and risks of abortion, her rhetoric included many arguments about improving the lives of babies and children. Sanger discussed ways in which family limitation would improve the condition of homes for those who were desired and already living. In addition, she emphasized that family limitation would reduce the necessity and occurrence of child labor as well as the need for older children to resort to crime or prostitution as a way to support the family financially. The points went along well with the Social Gospel doctrine that

⁹¹ “Birth Control for Health and Morals,” *Birth Control Review* (January 1925): 10 and 29. Date of paper not cited.

encouraged many church leaders to see it as their duty to help the poor through charity and progressive reforms. Her arguments showed leaders that birth control was a humanitarian and moral reform that would allow families to improve their quality of life, wellness, health, and happiness to such an extent that the bonds of the family would be improved as well.

Biblical Virtues of Quality over Quantity

Sanger rarely delved into theology, but did try to show religious leaders that it was moral to help alleviate suffering and that God never commanded Christians to have more children than they could adequately care for. For centuries, two of the foremost arguments against birth control were the Biblical passages concerning the sins of Onanism and the command to Noah to “Be fruitful and multiply.” In the First ABCL Conference of 1921, the former member of British Parliament and prominent neo-Malthusian Harold Cox argued that God’s message to Noah had been taken out of context, since this command was given after the Great Flood had taken out the earth’s population and it needed to be replenished.⁹² Others argued that it was not a command at all, but rather a blessing bestowed upon Noah and his family for their faithfulness through the crisis. Cox also cited another Biblical passage in Ecclesiastes that warned, “don’t delight in ungodly sons,” and said that one just son was better than a thousand ungodly ones.⁹³ In other words, proponents of birth control would argue that these passages supported the concept of quality over quantity when it came to bearing children. Another advocate at the First ABCL Conference, Mrs. Black, cited Proverbs 31:9 which stated, “Open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy” to support birth control.⁹⁴ Sanger attempted to show

⁹² Harold Cox, “1921 First American Birth Control Conference,” 11/18/1921, 9-11. Smith College Collection, Series II, Subseries 2, Microfilm reel S67.

⁹³ Cox, “1921 First American Birth Control Conference.”

⁹⁴ Mrs. Black, “1921 First American Birth Control Conference,” 36. Her full name is not noted in conference documentation.

that caring for children's wellness by limiting the number of children, and especially poor children, was a moral mission and compatible with Biblical principles.

Infant Mortality and Wellness of Children

In addition to preventing abortion and infanticide, Sanger argued that contraception would improve the lives of those babies and children who were born and already living. She emphasized the ways in which birth control could slow infant mortality rates by allowing women to wait longer to start having kids, have fewer children, and space them apart further. All of these measures would help improve the health of the mother, and therefore the baby, as well as reduce the economic strain on the family and allow for children to be raised with a healthier diet and environment.

In her book, *Woman and the New Race*, Sanger laid out some statistics regarding infant mortality which she often repeated through the 1920s in her works and speeches. She claimed that about 300,000 infants under the age of one died every year, and of those 90% died of malnutrition and poor living conditions due to poverty and excessive childbearing.⁹⁵ She also cited a study by Arthur Geissler in his book, *Problems in Eugenics* (1913), concerning the high rates of infant deaths in miner families who were some of the poorest in the American population at the time. According to Geissler's findings among 26,000 births in families with more than two children, the first-born through the fourth-born infants had about a 22% mortality rate, and this rate increased until the twelfth-born infant had about a 60% mortality rate.⁹⁶ In an early issue of *BCR*, one article cited a study by G. E. Earnshaw and compared infant mortality rates to the casualty rates of soldiers.⁹⁷ Blaming the infant death rates on "improper foods and clothing," the author claimed that "To our shame be it said that our soldiers on the field of battle are safer than

⁹⁵ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 52.

⁹⁶ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 42.

⁹⁷ Louis Westzenkorn, "The Toll of Child Life," *Birth Control Review* (June 1918): 11.

our infants in their cradles” and estimated that 50% of infant deaths were preventable. He concluded that birth control would “save the baby before conception in order to give those already born a more equal chance for life.” Whether the increasing infant death rates were due to poor maternal health or the inability of the family to adequately care for subsequent children, birth control would provide a way to limit the size of the family according to the choice and resources of each individual family.

As indicated by Geissler’s study of mining families, Sanger often argued that infant mortality rates were higher for later-born children of large families. In one *BCR* article, Harold Cox wrote about the problem of infant mortality, calling the high rate “the most horrible side effect of the customary thoughtless reproduction.”⁹⁸ Cox blamed the rates on economic factors and the inability of the poor to prevent and adequately care for babies. According to Cox, the first few children were cared for well enough, but “the stream flows on, another follows before the last can walk, the welcome grows cooler, the work of caring for the baby without neglecting the others becomes too strenuous, and one dies, and then another.” As the health of the mother deteriorated from the physical exhaustion of pregnancy, childcare, home care, and other responsibilities and stress, each successive baby was at greater risk, and one which birth control could help prevent.

Poverty was widely considered one of the fundamental problems that led to subsequent problems as parents tried to keep families healthy, since their living conditions led to higher infant mortality rates and they had less access to reliable birth control information. The *BCR* cited a pamphlet written by the Chief of the Children’s Bureau in Washington, Julia Lathrop,

⁹⁸ Harold Cox, “Socialism and the Population Question,” *Birth Control Review* (November 1923): 298-300.

which had been originally printed in the *American Journal of Public Health*.⁹⁹ The data showed that the highest infant death rates were found in the lowest income groups, and were primarily due to poor prenatal conditions and “the exhausting toil and poor living of the mother.” Rates were even worse among wage-earning mothers, either due to the work itself or perhaps because only the poorest of the poor were driven to have mothers work outside the home in the first place. If these women were better able to slow or prevent the births of their children, they would be able to lower the death rate of infants in turn. In addition, those poverty-stricken families would be able to better improve their quality of life with fewer mouths to feed, as one pastor pointed out in 1930. Episcopal minister, Rev. Harry V. B. Darlington, called it undemocratic that the rich and privileged had access to information that the poor were legally prevented from finding, though that very information “would free them from the economic burden which keeps them poor.”¹⁰⁰ If the poor had more information available to them, then they would be better able to resolve their poverty.

Perhaps like other religious leaders by the end of the decade, Darlington gave his wholehearted support of the movement because he believed birth control would improve the lives of other children in the family, and his concerns over increasing promiscuity were allayed by the statistics showing improved family values in Holland since allowing contraception. He compared birth control to using other forms of technology such as electricity to improve the quality of life of those affected, and told a story about a family who believed they could not afford any more children.¹⁰¹ He asked, “What of the rights of the older two? Surely it deprives them of the advantages of proper housing, good food, and education.” Finally, though he had some fear that

⁹⁹ M. K., “Income and Infant Mortality,” *Birth Control Review* (November 1919): 9. This article cited Julia C. Lathrop, “Income and Infant Mortality,” *American Journal of Public Health* (April 1919): 270-274. Lathrop’s role as Chief of the Children’s Bureau lasted from 1913-1921.

¹⁰⁰ “The Conference Mass Meeting,” *Birth Control Review* (January 1930): 7-9. The article included excerpts from the speeches at the Mass Meeting of the National Birth Control Conference.

¹⁰¹ “The Conference Mass Meeting,” 7-9.

birth control might lead to an increase in sexual promiscuity, he used Holland as an example to alleviate his and others' fears. He cited data that the number of marriages there had increased while the age of marriage had lowered, divorces had lessened to rarity, and venereal diseases were infrequent. Darlington quoted Dr. Jacobs to show that rates of illegitimate children had lessened in recent years to only about 19 in 1,000 babies (compared with over 40 in England and 70-90 in Scotland, France, and Belgium). Darlington concluded that Holland was "a healthy, happy country with a high moral standard." These examples of improvements in both health and marriages were certainly meant to appeal to Protestant leaders.

Sanger often cited the success of the birth control movement and available clinics in Holland as a way to show the good that could come of the reforms, and improving the rate of infant mortality was one of the most compelling and tangible benefits which she espoused. She argued that allowing clinics would lower infant mortality and child labor significantly here, as it had there.¹⁰² In Holland, which had been providing birth control information since 1881, the death rate and infant mortality rate had fallen to the lowest in Europe. She cited data stating that in Amsterdam, the rate of infant deaths per 1,000 births had fallen from 203 in 1881 to 90 by 1906 and only 64 by 1912, resulting in about a two-thirds reduction over thirty years. She also claimed that Australia and New Zealand had lowered their infant mortality rates since legalizing contraceptive information, compared with rates in the U.S. and Germany that were 50% higher due to lack of information in the general population.

One of Sanger's common arguments for birth control in her speeches and writings was that the resulting greater space in between children would improve the health and life expectancy of all involved. The mothers would have enough time to replenish their strength and nutritional reserves, the new babies would have a healthier start due to mother's improved health, and even

¹⁰² Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 114-116.

the older child would be given greater attention and resources. She argued that infant mortality could be largely prevented if women were permitted to use contraception in order to space children two- to three years apart.¹⁰³ In her *Autobiography*, she described the meeting when she gained the support of a well-known pediatrician in New York, Dr. Emmett Holt, who agreed with this argument. Holt was known for his book *The Care and Feeding of Children* (1894), which Sanger claimed “was the bible of thousands of mothers.”¹⁰⁴ Before endorsing the movement, he wanted to meet with her to discuss her methods. After their discussion, Sanger wrote that Holt countered the complaint of other child specialists, who thought that reducing pregnancies would lessen their business, by arguing that greater space between children would improve the long-term prospects of all of the children. He said:

A thoroughly reliable contraceptive would be a godsend to us. If the family cannot afford a nurse we must rely on the health and strength of the mother to keep her baby alive. If pregnancy can be postponed for a few years, not only the baby who has been born, but the baby who comes after is much more likely to survive.

Sanger presented Holt’s support as a huge boost to her recruitment of the medical community at the time.¹⁰⁵ His input also supported her message that birth control would reduce infant mortality and improve the health and wellness of babies and children, arguments that certainly would find sympathy and compassion among the religious and moral leaders of the time.

Dr. Hannah M. Stone, who had taken over as the primary physician at Sanger’s clinic in New York City in 1925, agreed with the benefits and necessity of spacing children out by at least two- to three- years.¹⁰⁶ She wrote that the problem of too-closely-spaced children was widespread among “a large class of women,” and led to detrimental consequences for those

¹⁰³ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 57.

¹⁰⁴ Sanger, *Autobiography*, 297-298.

¹⁰⁵ Sanger, *Autobiography*, 297-298.

¹⁰⁶ For an excellent summary of the work of Dr. Stone, see the short article “Hannah Stone: The Madonna of the Clinic,” reposted on the website of the Margaret Sanger Papers Project.

http://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/articles/hannah_stone.php. Accessed January 25, 2015.

women and their children.¹⁰⁷ She advocated a period of rest for the women to recuperate as a solution, observing that “children born at intervals of less than two years show a notable deficiency in height, weight and intelligence.” She also cited the published data of Dr. Woodbury, of the U.S. Children’s Bureau, which showed that closer spacing correlated with a “striking increase” in infant death rates. He had reported that in children spaced three years apart, the infant death-rate was 86.5 per 1,000 births; with two years spacing it was 98.6; with only one year it was 146.7.¹⁰⁸

In addition to greater spacing between births, Sanger also maintained that women would have healthier babies, and therefore endure fewer infant deaths, if they were given access to contraception and waited till they were older and more physically mature before bearing children. She called on women to wait until they were at least 22 years old, and preferably at least 25 years old, claiming that they would be more fully developed mentally and physically.¹⁰⁹ Thus, they would be able to sustain a healthy pregnancy, care better for their infant, and reduce the risk of infant mortality. She claimed that there were higher rates of infant mortality for those born to mothers under age 22 and the best chance for baby’s health was with a mother over age 25.¹¹⁰ This point also went hand-in-hand with her assertion that access to birth control would allow young men and women could marry younger without fear of having children and subsequent responsibilities at too young an age.

“The Sins of the Father:” Preventing Diseases in Children

In addition to the lowered risks of infant mortality if women had babies later in life and more spaced apart, Sanger also asserted that family limitation would allow families with specific health concerns to save children from such diseases as syphilis, gonorrhea, and tuberculosis by

¹⁰⁷ Hannah M. Stone, “Family Limitation and Family Health,” *Birth Control Review* (June 1928): 182-183.

¹⁰⁸ Hannah M. Stone, “Family Limitation and Family Health,” 182-183.

¹⁰⁹ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 58.

¹¹⁰ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 58.

preventing their exposure during pregnancy, birth and infancy. In 1927, *BCR* published a “Birth Control Primer” that asserted that while there were plethora reasons that contraception was necessary, the “reason most vitally important to the individual is the Health of Mother and Child,” and especially the diseases and deaths that killed infants and were caused by “bad inheritance.”¹¹¹ Some of the discussions of transmittable diseases reflect Sanger’s affiliation with eugenics, but the problem of venereal diseases affected much of the population. According to *Intimate Matters*, prostitution was common among all classes and in large and small cities alike. In the early twentieth century, a committee of New York doctors estimated that 80% of the men in New York City had gonorrhea, and 5-18% syphilis; one Boston doctor estimated that a third of the male hospital patients had gonorrhea.¹¹² The widespread occurrence led to concerns about the spread of diseases to children, and frequent deaths that had to be endured, that could have been prevented if mothers were able to acquire the contraceptive information that they desired. While some eugenicists did propose forced sterilization in some populations considered to lend such a “bad inheritance” of mental illness, diseases, criminal behavior, and alcoholism, among other problems, Sanger’s public works always focused on the mother and her desire to voluntarily limit offspring. Often, Sanger selected the letters and stories in which the woman was the victim of her husband’s infidelity and sexual pursuits. This method took the focus off of those who might “deserve” such a fate to those innocent family members who could be saved from “the sins of the father” or husband, and therefore made the discussion of various diseases a more compelling point for religious leaders.

In one *Birth Control Review*, editors introduced the monthly selection of desperate letters from mothers with the heading, “The Sins of the Fathers: Mothers Beg to be Saved from Bearing

¹¹¹ “Birth Control Primer,” *Birth Control Review* (January 1927): 3. This article was the first of a series of monthly installments in the front of the *BCR*.

¹¹² D’Emilio and Freedman, 181-183.

Diseased Babies.”¹¹³ In the introduction, editors wrote that “no reasonable man or woman believes that any child should be born with a heritage of syphilis. If there is one thing on which all doctors are agreed, it is that syphilitic parents should not produce children.” Dr. Walter M. Brunet asserted that syphilis killed 75% of children conceived to syphilitic parents, either during pregnancy or in the first year of life.¹¹⁴ Syphilitic babies who survived to birth could show symptoms of sores, rashes, fever, seizures, and death among other possibilities.¹¹⁵ In addition to the doctors’ concerns, editors wrote that “no mother wishes to bear a syphilitic child, and the sin of bringing such children into existence lies at the door of society that forbids the prevention of their conception.” Dr. James F. Cooper emphasized that, among many reasons birth control should be better practiced, most infant deaths were preventable and were due to defects such as syphilis and other diseases of the parents.¹¹⁶ Cooper called the losses an “appalling amount of human wastage which is continuously going on, most of which is avoidable.” In addition to concerns about syphilis, Dr. Brunet pointed out that gonorrhea, while not transmitted during pregnancy, could be transmitted during birth.¹¹⁷ Gonorrhea could subsequently cause blindness, joint infection, or even a life-threatening blood infection.¹¹⁸ While these diseases might have been viewed as just punishment for sexually-promiscuous men and women, Sanger always focused her rhetoric on the innocent children whose life of suffering could humanely and easily be prevented with use of birth control.

¹¹³ “The Sins of the Fathers: Mothers Beg to be Saved from Bearing Diseased Babies,” Introduction to the “Letters from Mothers,” *Birth Control Review* (October 1924): 286-287.

¹¹⁴ Walter M. Brunet, “Venereal Diseases and Posterity,” *Birth Control Review* (March 1925): 74 and 93.

¹¹⁵ “Syphilis Fact Sheet,” Office on Women’s Health (July 8, 2011), <http://www.womenshealth.gov/publications/our-publications/index.html#sti>. Accessed January 16, 2014.

¹¹⁶ James F. Cooper, “The Doctor and Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review* (March 1925): 69-70.

¹¹⁷ Walter M. Brunet, “Venereal Diseases and Posterity,” *Birth Control Review* (March 1925): 74 and 93.

¹¹⁸ “Gonorrhea Fact Sheet,” Office on Women’s Health (July 8, 2011), <http://www.womenshealth.gov/publications/our-publications/index.html#sti>. Accessed January 16, 2014.

Finally, tuberculosis was also repeatedly discussed by Sanger and in her publications as a preventable health concern—especially for mothers, but also for their offspring. While infants would not contract or inherit TB directly, they often did contract the disease eventually from the breathing, coughing, and saliva of the parents.¹¹⁹ Dr. Knopf also proposed that children born to mothers with tuberculosis were “predisposed with a weakened constitution” and therefore were more likely to contract the disease and more susceptible to other infectious diseases than children born to healthy mothers. Taken together, the risks of spreading these diseases and the inevitable suffering of innocents led many medical authorities and mothers to the belief that it was immoral to allow children to come into life doomed to disease. Sanger agreed and tried to convince religious leaders that the most moral course would be to give women the tools to limit their family if there was such a risk.

Maternal Morality: The Duty to Protect the Welfare of Children

In addition to safeguarding children’s health and wellness, Sanger and her supporters also felt compelled to improve their welfare with a higher standard of basic living conditions. Advocates pushed the idea that contraceptive access would allow women to prevent the birth of children they did not desire or could not provide for appropriately. Family limitation would not only help prevent the misery of the unborn, but it would benefit the welfare of those (fewer) children who were already living and desired. Many of Sanger’s works promoted this concept as a new way of thinking about what morality meant, calling it a maternal morality and inferring that the mothers would feel guilty bringing children into the world if they knew they did not have the resources to give their existing and potential offspring those conditions that were the basic rights of all children. Therefore, while traditional moralists called contraceptives immoral and feared the growth of immoral promiscuity, Sanger’s works countered by calling upon leaders to see that

¹¹⁹ S. Adolphus Knopf, “Birth Control in its Relation to Tuberculosis,” *Birth Control Review* (March 1925): 82-83 and 93.

birth control was the most humanitarian, and therefore moral, choice for mothers to help improve the lives of those children who were already born and those who were desired by limiting the size of families and therefore maintaining their rights to at least a basic standard of living.

As early as 1921, advocates outlined what they called the basic rights of all children: “To be a wanted baby, born of healthy parents; To have a home where he is loved, adequately fed, clothed, and housed; To be educated and trained for life, and for earning a livelihood according to his abilities.”¹²⁰ If children were due these basic rights, then the logic followed that mothers were moral in their desire to ensure that their children would either have these basic rights fulfilled or not be conceived in the first place. In an introduction to mother’s letters in a 1923 *BCR*, editors questioned if it is really right to bring children into the world when their “prospects are semi-starvation, unwholesome living and early toil? The mothers say ‘no,’ and no clerical exhortation can persuade them to stifle the voice of their own conscience. True morality demands care for the welfare and happiness of the baby.”¹²¹ This particular article continued by asserting that religious leaders were opposed to birth control only because they were “occupied with the sin and punishment of sinners,” and saw pregnancy as “a penalty for sexual indulgence” that would keep people in line. If leaders could be convinced, however, that maternal morality, or “Mother-Love,” was just as important as sexual morality, then perhaps they could see the virtue in family limitation. Another article in 1924 speculated that English clergy must already feel that sense of moral responsibility to limit their family if they could not afford more, since they typically had smaller families.¹²² The author further stated that “No moral wrong seems comparable with that of bringing into the world children who never can have a chance, and who are condemned to

¹²⁰ Edith How-Martyn, “Birth Control and Child Welfare,” *Birth Control Review* (November 1921): 5 and 13. This article was originally published in *The Women’s Leader*, a British publication.

¹²¹ “The Guiding Power of Mother Love: Letters Showing That Mother-Love Points the Way to True Morality,” *Birth Control Review* (August 1923): 202.

¹²² “The Example of the Clergy,” *Birth Control Review* (March 1924): 75.

disease and squalor from the cradle to the grave.” Morality of the mother, then, meant ensuring a home in which a child could be adequately cared for.

In a 1928 *BCR*, editors wrote about “Ten Good Reasons for Birth Control,” citing one reason as “The Welfare of Children.” The article described the problems of overcrowding, malnutrition, and overwork, “either as Little Mothers in the home or as Child Laborers in industry. From these causes they are often broken in health and easily fall prey to disease. They are deprived of the healthful recreations of youth and their education is cut short at the earliest moment the law permits.”¹²³ Later, editors wrote that society should uphold “The Right of the Child to be Wanted.” According to the article, unwanted children might receive less attention from their mother, resentment from siblings, and an unprepared home.¹²⁴ Sanger even asserted that a mother’s negative emotions while pregnant had a physically detrimental effect upon the baby’s health. Many of the arguments further maintained that children born into destitution would inevitably fall into child labor, crime, mental illness, and slums, but at least part of the argument was expressed as a concern for the poor welfare of the children. One religious leader and supporter summed up the view of children’s rights by explaining: “What we are trying to do is establish...a principle of freedom...in family life. That children, in other words, should be free.”¹²⁵ Sanger hoped to make limitation into the most moral course of action for religious leaders, rather than allowing them continued fear of the moral consequences of birth control.

In the early 1920s, Sanger’s message about the health and wellness of babies and children was clearly interwoven with her messages related to eugenics, in that she argued that many children were born unwanted and unhealthy, and then eventually became a burden to society and the race. She was still tied to the eugenics movement and Neo-Malthusian concerns about

¹²³ “Ten Good Reasons for Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review* (April 1928): 3.

¹²⁴ “Still Another Reason for Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review* (March 1929): 67.

¹²⁵ “The Conference Mass Meeting,” 7-9. The article quoted a statement by Dr. H. Adye Prichard, Honorary Canon of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

overpopulation and the progress of the race, especially since she needed the support of scientists and conservative thinkers in order to win over relatively conservative ministers. According to Christine Rosen in *Preaching Eugenics*, “most ministers responded to the growing influence of science not with denunciation, but with well-intentioned efforts to incorporate the scientific method into their own belief systems.”¹²⁶ Rosen further argued that both religious and scientific leaders shared a common purpose and respect for the quality of human life, as well as the belief in its perfectibility, though their methods differed.¹²⁷ She concluded that those ministers who subscribed to eugenics saw the possibilities of science to alleviate human suffering and cure social ills.¹²⁸ She called these leaders “modernistic liberals,” claiming that they “wanted to reconcile...the enduring principles of Christianity with the vagaries of modern experience and culture.”¹²⁹ Rosen’s analysis helps explain why Sanger chose to frame her message in scientific terms. The same sympathies that led many liberal ministers to support the eugenics movement might also resonate with leaders when it came to the acceptance of birth control. Therefore, Sanger emphasized the role of scientific progress and innovations, such as artificial contraception, in alleviating suffering and perfecting the quality of human life.

In order to emphasize the scientific aspects of her cause, Sanger embraced the eugenics movement early on, and has subsequently drawn much criticism for doing so. In her 1923 “Need for Birth Control” speech, she blamed many problems on the growth and persistence of large families, including “poverty, misery, ignorance, infant mortality, slums, overcrowding,...child labor, [and] unemployment.”¹³⁰ These concerns were meant to elicit feelings of moral sympathy

¹²⁶ Rosen, 8.

¹²⁷ Rosen, 9.

¹²⁸ Rosen, 13. According to Rosen, the “branches” of the eugenics movement tree “grew to include purity reform, health reform, sex hygiene, radical sex reform, marriage counseling, anti-vice campaigns, ‘fitter family’ contests, the child-rearing advice industry, and eventually, the birth control movement” (11).

¹²⁹ Rosen, 15.

¹³⁰ Sanger, “The Need for Birth Control in America,” 1-6.

and a conviction to alleviate such problems for the sake of the poor and suffering people. There was also much about these issues, however, that was also meant to evoke some fear, and even disgust, with the type of people who were bearing so many children. She continued by claiming that this same group of people who were having such large and problematic families were “perpetuating for generations” those “evil conditions of society.”¹³¹ This statement could stir up the fear that such large and destitute families would multiply as these children went on to create their own large families plagued with the same difficulties. In the speech’s conclusion, she stated that advocates were “fighting for the women and children of this generation...and...of the next generation.”¹³² Her statements reflected concern for the terrible conditions in which the people lived, and particularly after her years working as a nurse on the Lower East Side of Manhattan among many poor immigrants. She described the fate of the many poor babies brought into such an environment, claiming that hundreds of thousands of infants died every year, and most of those deaths were due to poverty and neglect. Sanger hoped to appeal to the sympathies of Protestant leaders, and to give them a morally sound reason to justify approval of birth control as a scientific and humanitarian reform.

That same year, the *Birth Control Review* argued that birth control would not lead to a rise in immorality by drawing upon sympathy for those children that were essentially the innocent victims of unwanted pregnancies. Managing Editor of the *BCR*, Annie G. Porritt, wrote that society injured itself as well as innocent children by using births as a deterrent to promiscuous behavior, and she argued that society had both the right and duty to prevent bringing about children who were “foredoomed” to be “dependent or delinquent” if they did survive their difficult youth.¹³³ She asked readers to consider: “By what reasoning can any intelligent and

¹³¹ Sanger, “The Need for Birth Control in America,” 1-6.

¹³² Sanger, “The Need for Birth Control in America,” 30.

¹³³ Annie G. Porritt, *Birth Control Review* (January 1923): 4.

merciful man or woman justify the bringing into the world of a baby, to endure a life of scorn, of social persecution and torment, of neglect, mistreatment and ill-usage?" She asserted that it was immoral to allow these consequences by denying birth control, and said that the immorality should end with those children. In other words, their genetic problems should not be passed on and multiplied with further proliferation of that class of people. Her points were clearly influenced by eugenics principles as well, but still elicited concern for the children who were born unwanted and could have avoided such a life of difficulty.

Despite gaining many new supporters among religious leaders, Sanger still faced much religious opposition. One *Birth Control Review* printed a thoughtful counterpoint to her arguments that it was a mother's moral action to ensure her children's basic rights by limiting the size of her family. A Catholic priest, Father Vincent McNabb, made a statement for the *Catholic Times of London* that was reprinted in the *BCR*.¹³⁴ He argued that while many people had good intentions, seeing family limitation as "an act of charity and even of justice towards their children," it was still "misguided" to change one's morals because of poor conditions. "Acquaintance with town problems of housing, food, clothing, and health has led them to the seemingly inevitable conclusion that if there are more children than can be provided for, the state must see that there are fewer children that shall be provided for." Rather, McNabb, much like fellow Catholic priest and reformer, John Ryan, argued that the conditions themselves were the problems that needed to be changed and addressed in society. He sympathized with parents in that position, stating that they were not to be seen as sexually perverted or dealt with strictly by religious communities. He posited that he and other Catholics were "not fulfilling our duty either to God or our neighbor merely by denouncing the sin. We must work to change the conditions."

¹³⁴ Vincent McNabb, "A Roman Catholic Opinion: Father McNabb on Birth Control," *Birth Control Review* (January 1924): 18-19. Originally printed in *Catholic Times of London* (England).

While Sanger may have agreed that conditions were problematic, birth control offered a concrete solution that put the choice of bearing children in the hands of parents.

Adolescent Crime and Prostitution

Not only did Sanger contend that larger families led to poor health and increased chances of child labor, but frequently she and other advocates asserted that children from large, lower-class homes were driven by their poverty and parental neglect to crime and prostitution. If the parents were busy with household tasks, work, and care for a large family of children, they would not have the time to devote to carefully monitoring and instructing each of the children. The logic followed that if the children were instead left to learn from the streets and driven by hunger to seek food and money, they could end up with the combination of desperation and moral depravity that led adolescents to immoral and harmful criminality.

Sanger often argued that the lack of care in a large family would lead children down the paths of crime and prostitution, but with smaller families, parents would be able to attend to, care for, and monitor their children better. Early on, she wrote that large families were injurious to society because they led to some of “the greatest evil[s] of the day.”¹³⁵ Among other evils, she included prostitution, and added that larger families increased the likelihood of the children ending up in prison, poor houses, and insane asylums as well. Specifically, she pointed out that the problems of large families, including poverty, lack of care and attention during adolescence, and overcrowding, all caused girls to turn to prostitution. She argued that they needed more guidance and time with their mothers for moral instruction, and in addition the family’s poverty, large families meant that the young women longed for necessities and lived in an environment that was overcrowded, indecent, and immodest—all conditions which made prostitution a more

¹³⁵ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 40-43.

likely course for young women.¹³⁶ Miriam Van Waters, a well-known social worker and prison reformer, wrote that “delinquent children are very often unwanted children,” and asserted that this was particularly the case in large families where the mother could not provide as much guidance and care as she might wish. Van Waters argued that “haphazard methods of family limitation” led to a “large proportion of the stream of delinquent boys and girls that pass through our courts and correctional institutions.” Finally, she admitted that while birth control was not “a panacea” for delinquency, if “linked with an adequate sense of its deeper emotional and social values[, it] is a significant step in the right direction.”¹³⁷ As with many of Sanger’s points about the potential humanitarian benefits of birth control to the lower-class, there was a strong undercurrent of eugenics to these arguments. Nevertheless, Van Waters pointed to the legitimate concerns and environmental forces that could lead adolescents into criminal behavior, and sought to persuade religious leaders that birth control would contribute to moral improvement for those adolescents and, subsequently, society as a whole.

Chapter Conclusion

In order for Sanger to win over the relatively conservative religious leaders in the 1920s, she strategically addressed the negative associations and stereotypes of the movement as a radical, socialist, feminist movement that would allow sexual promiscuity and immorality to increase dramatically. Instead, she positioned birth control as a moral and humanitarian solution to many of the health and wellness concerns that plagued women and children in families, and especially those of the crowded and destitute lower class. Capitalizing on the tradition of some mainline denominations to support the Social Gospel view of the church as having a duty to

¹³⁶ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 44.

¹³⁷ Miriam Van Waters, “The Unwanted Child Comes Before the Court,” *Birth Control Review* (November 1925): 313 and 332.

improve conditions for the poor, she effectively highlighted the ways in which birth control would bring moral improvement and shook off many fears of deleterious moral consequences. She emphasized the ways in which contraception and family limitation would improve the health and morality of sick or over-worked mothers, stop the rise of abortion as society progressed, and improve the health of existing and potential children.

Some religious leaders began to support the movement openly and widely by the late 1920s, and the reasoning they professed matched up with the rhetoric Sanger had put forward throughout the decade. According to Kennedy, the Anglicans at Lambeth and the leadership of the FCC accepted birth control for similar reasons, and all included the health of women and children to some extent. He summarized the concerns at the 1930 Lambeth, which mentioned the general cause of helping family stability.¹³⁸ American Protestants of the FCC in 1931, however, specifically cited maternal health and infant mortality among their main reasons for acceptance.¹³⁹ For all of the churches that approved contraception early on, then, the health of mothers and children, along with the state of marriage and the family, were some of the greatest concerns. Sanger had strategically emphasized these points, along with the professional support of some doctors, throughout the decade and effectively convinced Protestant clergy to embrace birth control as a moral reform. By addressing religious concerns about the nature and strength of American families, Sanger succeeded in presenting birth control as a morally viable reform. As the decade of the 1920s went on, Sanger continued to emphasize the health and wellness benefits for lower-class women and children, but she also began focusing greater attention on the ways in which birth control could improve marriages, especially for the middle class.

¹³⁸ Kennedy, 164.

¹³⁹ Kennedy, 154.

CHAPTER 3

“HAPPINESS IN MARRIAGE”:

PROMOTING SEXUAL INTIMACY AND STRENGTHENING THE FAMILY

Introduction

One of the most convincing moral benefits of birth control, for many resistant religious opponents, was apparently Margaret Sanger’s argument that access to birth control would strengthen marriages and slow the rising trend of divorce that concerned mainline Protestants. Over the course of the 1920s, as Sanger moved closer to the right and continued to campaign with Protestants, her messages about marriage became more and more central to her arguments. Sanger effectively argued that contraceptives would allow couples to marry sooner and form more intimate, deeper, companionate bonds without fear of unintended pregnancies and the subsequent stressors. Her books, articles, and speeches claimed that by waiting longer to have children, limiting the size of a family, and increasing sexual intimacy, couples would have stronger relationships and greater connectedness. Finally, the fact that couples could easily marry younger and enjoy more satisfaction during their marriage would also lead to a decrease in reliance upon prostitution for young men and married men. Sanger emphasized all of these virtues in an effort to win over the relatively conservative religious leaders who were concerned with the state of marriages and sex during the 1920s.

It was important for Sanger to take this more conservative approach. The birth control movement had risen out of the radical environment of New York’s Greenwich Village in the 1910s especially, and was tied to the causes of socialism, feminism, agitation, and the free love movement, all causes to which Sanger subscribed in the early years of the movement.¹ However,

¹ For more on the early radical years of the movement, see Gordon’s *Moral Property*, “Ch. 8: Birth Control and Social Revolution.”

Gordon argued that as the movement lost support from the leftist groups by 1920, Sanger shifted towards the powerful leadership whose support she needed to make the cause a mainstream reform—particularly in religion, politics, and medicine. For these conservatives, the leader and the cause were always associated with liberalism at best, and feminist radicalism at worst. Her early approach brought her negative fame in the mainstream and turned off many of the very groups whose support she needed. Religious groups did not want to be associated with Sanger until she managed to modify her message to include a more pronounced conservative bent. She was never reaching for support from the far right of religious leaders, such as fundamentalist Protestants, or Catholic clergy. Nevertheless, she did successfully seek approval from those mainline leaders who were considered liberal by the religious right.

Due to this shift to the right in the 1920s, many historians have accused Sanger of being a fallen feminist, a secret conservative, a nativist, a racist, and/or a eugenicist. Yet, despite criticisms, most still agree that she did what she had to do to win over people with whom she personally disagreed in most ways, but whom she unquestionably needed to pursue her greatest priority—the legalization of contraception.² She distanced herself from other related causes because an affiliation with them was a liability to the cause that was always, for her, the real key to victory in any of her other causes. She believed that birth control would liberate and satisfy women, especially those in the working classes, though some feminists and socialists called her focus a betrayal of their broader goals. She believed that traditional families, married conservatives, and religious believers would benefit from birth control, even if she did not conform to their conventions in her own private life.

² While Gordon attacks her from the left and Kennedy from the right, both concede that her approach was necessarily pragmatic in order to win over the public and make her cause a mainstream success. Chesler and Reed similarly argue that, though her methods were imperfect, she was wise to recognize the need for a message that was more compelling to conservatives.

Her arguments were not theological because she was not a theologian. Yet as the first mainline churches changed their stance on contraceptives, beginning in 1930 at Lambeth, her rhetoric and values were written all over the resolutions. Church leaders were a complex and dynamic body of men who came out of conservative traditions, but were on the cusp of embracing a more liberal theology. Without seeking to lose their mainline, affluent, and traditional base, it seems the religious leaders of these Protestant groups were attempting to update their doctrine to the quickly-modernizing society in which they functioned. By 1930, Sanger's arguments successfully bridged the gap between left-wing radicals and right-wing religious leaders by moving towards the center and espousing the moral benefits of birth control. Ministers found consensus in the belief that birth control would strengthen the fundamental base of religious bodies by improving people's marriages and quality of family life. She increasingly focused her arguments about marriage on the benefits birth control would bring about: more intimacy and romance due to regular and relaxed sex, fulfillment of a natural and God-given desire for sex expression, less frigidity among prudish and wary wives, stronger foundations in marriages as young couples took more time to mature individually and bond as a couple, and less reliance upon prostitution by young men and husbands.

Religious Concerns over Divorce

As divorce rates increased, even among religious couples, many Protestant denominations were alarmed at what they saw as weakening family values, and ministers sympathized with the challenges of family life, especially since they were often married themselves. In 1920, Anglicans clearly condemned birth control at their Lambeth Conference of bishops, as did all mainline Protestant denominations and Catholics. However, many churches were already expressing strong concerns over the rise in divorce, and soon Sanger's arguments

were tailored to sway these Christians and convince them that contraception would improve marriage quality in a revolutionary—and perfectly moral—way.

In the 1920s, Methodists and Baptists seemed to focus on the overall declining morals of the decade, but they too were beginning to open up to the birth control movement. They were particularly interested in those sins that affected the family, such as rising rates of divorce, growing interest in sex, immoral literature, and increasing materialism that led people to limit their family for greater financial success. By 1926, Baptists and Methodists focused their attention towards the evils of divorce and the breakdown of the family. Conservative Southern Baptists still attacked “immoral literature,” including shared information about contraceptives, which they called a “vicious product of the printing press.”³ But taken together, these trends show that though these churches were not budging in their stances against birth control, the primary concern was the preservation of strong marriages and families.

Throughout the 1920s, Episcopalians still indirectly disapproved of the movement because they were concerned with growing immorality among their populations. They noted the moral decay of divorce and “amusements,” reflecting the “widespread fears during the decade of the 1920s.” New ideas were spreading that there was an innate desire for sex, and frustrating that would lead to psychological damage, and many also shared the concern that selfish materialism of the 1920s had led many couples to limit their family size.⁴ According to D’Emilio and Freedman, the American society of the decade “embraced the sexual” in discussions, displays, films, magazines, and other pop culture.⁵ They described the movement as “sexual liberalism,” arguing that society increasingly embraced ideas about sex without procreation, pleasure as a value in itself, sex as necessary for happiness and good marriages, and even sex outside of

³ Tobin, 100-102.

⁴ Tobin, 101.

⁵ D’Emilio and Freedman, 234.

marriage for youth or others.⁶ Likewise, Anglicans showed great concern over rising divorce. The 1930 Lambeth resolutions, adopted by the Anglicans, accepted birth control even as they reiterated a stance against divorce. Resolution 11 stated that divorce went against Biblical principles, though it also emphasized the possibility of a reconciliation with God if divorce did occur.⁷ Still, the resolutions contained key ideas that Sanger had effectively argued throughout the 1920s: that sex was a natural and God-given desire, and therefore birth control would lead to a morally positive result of more satisfying and happy marriages—and, therefore, fewer divorces.

This growing idea sparked many denominations to examine their theology and assess the core purpose of marriage. Historically, churches had maintained that the primary purpose of marriage was procreation. Yet the 1920s brought on greater sexual openness, and a new wave of people began believing that sex was intended to be pleasurable and not simply functional. Marriages, then, should also be companionate and intimate, rather than simply a moral means of procreation.⁸ As these notions shifted, Sanger made the case that birth control was a vital key to finding greater sexual and relational satisfaction for married couples. She reiterated this point all throughout the decade in her publications and speeches, but her emphasis on marriage seemed to increase as the 1920s went on, culminating in her 1926 book, entitled *Happiness in Marriage*. The argument that birth control would limit the number of divorces became one of the most important factors as many Protestant churches changed their stance against contraception.⁹ According to Ellen Chesler, *Happiness in Marriage* successfully undermined the perception of

⁶ D’Emilio and Freedman, 241.

⁷ “Lambeth Conference Archives – 1930 – Resolution 11,” www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1930. Accessed April 12, 2013.

⁸ For more discussion of the growth of “companionate marriages,” see James Reed’s *From Private Vice to Public Virtue*, Ch. 2: “The Rise of the Companionate Family.” In addition, see D’Emilio and Freedman’s *Intimate Matters* for an excellent overview of “Reshaping Marriage,” 265-273, which addresses the changes in married sex with the onset of companionate marriage and sexual liberalism.

⁹ Tobin, 98 and Kennedy, 159-160.

birth control as immoral.¹⁰ Though Sanger was a radical, she spun her public arguments to sway churches in which conservatives were still very influential. They were beginning to open up to more liberal theology, but the importance of preserving conservative family stability was still of the utmost importance to church leaders.

From the First American Birth Control League (ABCL) Conference in 1921, Sanger and her colleagues emphasized the ways that birth control would strengthen marriages by increasing intimacy and happiness. The Chairman of the conference, Edith Houghton Hooker, began the proceedings by asserting that while the “most important problem” was population, the “most important institution” was “monogamous marriage.”¹¹ She claimed that society must safeguard the home in order to build a good world based on reason, and the backbone of a monogamous marriage was birth control. Hooker argued that homes were “broken up, wrecked, and ruined” due to “unthoughtful reproduction.” This argument literally started off Sanger’s first meeting of her most significant organization early on, and showed the importance placed upon arguing that birth control would not lead to deleterious moral consequences, but in fact would do just the opposite. As the once-radical movement shifted towards conservatism in the 1920s, happiness in marriage was one of the most important benefits posited by birth control advocates.

Strengthening Marriages by Allowing Romantic Sex

One of the main arguments Sanger made in her pitch for legal contraception was that birth control would strengthen marriages because it would allow couples to bond and strengthen their romantic intimacy through regular and relaxed sex. She wrote:

The real and happy consummation of marriage between men and women cannot work any injury to morality. Nor can it destroy the institution of marriage. On the contrary, happiness in marriage—the complete union of body and mind—can

¹⁰ Chesler, 263.

¹¹ Edith Houghton Hooker, “1921 First American Birth Control Conference,” 11/11/1921-11/13/1921, 1. Smith College Collection, Series II, Subseries 2, Microfilm reel S67.

only reinforce and strengthen the ties between man and woman. This is the only enduring solution to marriage problems.¹²

She continually claimed that sex had the unique and almost mystical power to build unity and love, which would bond the couple and result in fewer fights and greater satisfaction in marriage. The idea of companionate marriage was growing, and while her points emphasized a fairly traditional view of male and female roles, she placed a mystical value on sex as a path for both men and women to find self-expression, increased spirituality, and communion with each other.¹³

The bishops at Lambeth reflected some of Sanger's arguments about the value of marriage and sex for love and intimacy, rather than just for procreation. In addition to Resolution 10, which "exalted" marriage as a partnership, Resolution 13 noted that intercourse within marriage had value on its own. The bishops stated that sex could enhance and strengthen the character of married love.¹⁴ They went on to qualify that view by stating that procreation was still the primary purpose of marriage, and therefore self-control was critical for married people, but by acknowledging the value of the sex life they were already interpreting marriage in a more liberal way than before. Soon after the conference, two bishops published *Marriage and Birth Control*, which presented conflicting views on the topic. Supporting the resolution, the Bishop of Liverpool said his opposing colleagues were too focused on the "dangers and evils of sex." He claimed that the sexual impulse was given by God for continuing the race, and, significantly, also

¹² Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 6.

¹³ The 1930 Lambeth resolutions reflected this view of marriage. Resolution 10 said that the Lord taught "an exalted view of marriage," and recognized the new and modern emphasis on personality, equal partnership, and the importance of monogamy. In her public works and arguments, Sanger promoted the conservative values of monogamous, traditional, and romantic commitment in marriage. The fact that Lambeth bishops acknowledged the aspects of marriage as a friendship and satisfying partnership indicated that Sanger's rhetoric and the larger trends had likely penetrated religious groups.

¹⁴"Lambeth Conference Archives – 1930 – Resolution 14," www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1930. Accessed April 12, 2013.

for “fostering the mutual love of husband and wife.”¹⁵ His response showed the shift from Victorian prudery and shame to more openness and embracing the virtues of sex.

Similarly, the FCC’s Full Report in 1931 emphasized the importance of sexual relations in strengthening and maintaining intimacy in marriage. The report called for “the passing of shame” and explained the meaning of sex as “the union of the two mates [in] a supreme expression of their affection and comradeship.”¹⁶ The ministers claimed that God intended sex to create human life, but it was also “a manifestation of divine concern for the happiness of those who have so wholly merged their lives.” A majority of committee members agreed that sexual union, “as an expression of mutual affection[,]...is right.” Given the changing interpretation of sex by religious leaders, it seems that Sanger was effective in her choice to emphasize the morality of sex in improving marital relationships.

Sanger put forward each of these notions about the mystical intimacy of sex throughout the 1920s in speeches and writings. She discussed the benefits to marriage in her closing remarks from the First ABCL Conference in 1921. She questioned the very purpose of marriage, stating that if sex was intended only to be occasional and for reproduction, then humans were no different from animals that have sex only for procreation.¹⁷ Sanger argued that it was just as beautiful for humans to express their love without intending to have a child, and even compared the marriage relationship to “the same beauty and same holiness with which [couples] go into music or to prayer.” She furthered this argument, stating that sex led to “creative energy” and “spiritual illumination,” and the greater purpose of sex was “soul development and soul growth.”¹⁸ Her position not only asserted that birth control would help strengthen marriages, but,

¹⁵ Rt. Rev. A. A. David and Rt. Rev. M. B. Furse, *Marriage and Birth Control*, 27 (James Nisbet, c. 1930). Quoted in Campbell, 136.

¹⁶ FCC Report, 19.

¹⁷ Margaret Sanger, “1921 First American Birth Control Conference,” 11/18/1921, 35. Smith College Collection, Series II, Subseries 2, Microfilm reel S67.

¹⁸ Sanger, “1921 First American Birth Control Conference,” 35.

even more significantly, suggested that sex was not the primary purpose of marriage. More important, in her view, was the spiritual growth and connectivity of the intimate relationship itself. By arguing that sex within marriage would bring people to a higher level of spirituality, and even comparing sex to the church practices of music and prayer, she was claiming that the sexual act itself was religiously sacred, and not just the marriage and procreation of children.

Many of Sanger's works conveyed her point that sex should elevate marital intimacy and romance, but she elaborated upon this notion most fully in her 1926 book *Happiness in Marriage*. She wrote that sex expression was the consummation of love, "an art," and a "sacred gift," and that "husbands as well as wives today realized the importance of complete fulfillment of love through the expression of sex."¹⁹ In this delicate and primly-written book, she began by emphasizing the importance of this intimacy in courtship and said that "psychic and spiritual unity and communion" was essential in marriage and should be a prelude to physical intimacy.

Sanger's presentation of courtship in the book, along with the relatively traditional gender roles and values that she endorsed, effectively challenged the perception of her as a promiscuous radical. She espoused the traditional, romantic, and old-fashioned ideas of dating and waiting until marriage for sexual intimacy. She even wrote that every girl was "a Cinderella" and needed "a Prince" to awaken her confidence and belief in her own beauty. Feminists then and now might scoff at the notion that women need a man to instill this self-esteem, but Sanger argued repeatedly that women should be a challenge not "easily won."²⁰ Her relatively prudish approach in this book was certainly purposeful as she tried to win over the conservatives that she needed for birth control to become legal—not only in the religious community, but in the equally conservative medical and political ones as well. The book was not a huge seller, but it captured the shift she made to win over conservatives by increasing her focus on birth control as a

¹⁹ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 6 and 19-20.

²⁰ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 40-48.

marriage virtue. The message and language in *Happiness in Marriage* reveal the concerted effort that she made to reach them and give them a reason to see legalized contraception as a morally tenable position.

Her ideas about the equal partnership of marriage contained remnants of her feminist affiliations, but by the mid-1920s her ideas about marriage were squarely targeted towards a much more conservative audience, and even seemed to convey traditional views of women which feminists did not condone.²¹ This effort effectively catered to the conservative religious leaders whose support she so needed. Even so, in *Happiness in Marriage* she advised a fairly liberal view of the husband's role by stating that men should praise and thank their wives, showing their love and articulating it verbally as well.²² She even dared to propose they share household tasks equally. However, she pitched this perspective in a conservative way by directing her points to the men and arguing that by having this equal partnership, their happy wife would stay and look both younger and happier. Rather than appealing to the virtues of equality for women, she instead focused on the benefits for men. Sanger appealed to men by presenting the wife as a point of pride for the husband. She advised him to buy her new clothes and go on dates in order to make her feel desirable—not just for her benefit, but for his own. In a similar vein, she wrote that if men would exercise control in their sexual relations with women by going slowly and focusing on the woman, the man would be “a veritable god” to her.²³

Still, she did not entirely direct her arguments to men in *Happiness in Marriage*. As she promoted sex for marital communion and fulfillment, Sanger argued that it was critical for men to please the women sexually in order to experience that mystical connection, strengthen their love, and keep the women happy. She asserted that sexual fulfillment would lead to a greater bond and

²¹ Both Gordon and Kennedy criticize her for not being a feminist, but actually espousing a new version of (old) Victorian values.

²² Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 221-231.

²³ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 122-126.

therefore greater satisfaction with a couple's marriage overall. Sanger claimed that sexual satisfaction was imperative for happiness, peace, and success in marriage; conversely sexual frustration usurped joy, destroyed marriages, and led to divorce.²⁴ She argued that people should apply intelligence to solve the problems in marriage as they would in any other important problem, and noted that while marriages were individual and did need work, there was "no other source of true contentment" than that which came from the "realization of love in marriage," referring to sexual satisfaction.²⁵ Sanger advised that while fights could wear on a marriage, maximum happiness was attainable from only the communion of sex because couples needed to express the emotion of love, and it was good for their health, body, and mind.²⁶ She repeated the theme that marital discord and fighting were often due to a lack of sexual ecstasy, and in this way bridged the gap between her radical ideas of about free love and sexual liberation and her new and growing audience of moderately liberal religious leaders who might be willing to shift their position on birth control.

She also believed that women's satisfaction would lead to a new kind of spirituality and increased love for her husband and children. In her 1920 book, *Woman and the New Race*, Sanger had written that sexual knowledge and freedom through birth control would allow women's love not only for her mate to "flower," but additionally, her love for those children which she desired would "blossom" in the "high spirituality" of her new morality.²⁷ While Sanger's definition of morality was different from that of religious leaders, she still promoted the notion that birth control would allow women to attain a different kind of spirituality and self-expression.

²⁴ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 119-120.

²⁵ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 121-122.

²⁶ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 181-183.

²⁷ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 104.

While she used delicate language to promote sexual satisfaction as a means of marital communion, she wrote explicitly that female climax, or orgasm, was the key component of that satisfaction, claiming that it was the “ties of ecstasy that bind.”²⁸ Sanger began Chapter 9 of *Happiness in Marriage* with a Bible verse about the Judeo-Christian notion of sexual fulfillment that two would become “one flesh,” thereby rooting her argument about mutual orgasm on moral grounds.²⁹ Though she used flowery and slightly-guarded language, Sanger boldly advised husband to discipline himself by holding off on his climax until the woman climaxed as well, even stating that he should pause midway if needed.³⁰ She posits that women must be equal and active in the sex life, and that mutual orgasm would be “magical” and a “true union of souls” that would both satisfy and “elevate both participants” spiritually.³¹ Afterwards, she advised a man to take his time and slowly unwind, assuring the woman of his deep love for her.³² As early as 1914 in her notorious “Family Limitation” pamphlet, Sanger had promoted female orgasm as a solution to the problem of women’s disgust with and frigidity concerning sex, stating that men’s use of a condom might help women achieve this ideal by allowing them to prolong the act.³³ These ideas were reflected in her modified version of feminism and sexuality by 1926. They were feminist and free love principles, but since they were woven into *Happiness in Marriage*, Sanger promoted them not as radical and leftist notions, but instead dressed them up as conservative. She claimed these goals would strengthen the monogamous marital bond and preserve that institution by infusing it with companionship and satisfaction.

Sanger continued to promote more liberal ideals like sexual desire and equality in *Happiness*, advising couples to notice the rhythm of woman’s sexual desire, and basically to

²⁸ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 126.

²⁹ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 137, quoting Matthew 19:6.

³⁰ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 138-142.

³¹ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 142-143.

³² Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 143-146.

³³ Sanger, *Family Limitation*. *Family Limitation* was originally published in 1914 as a 16-page pamphlet, but there were several different editions published in the following years.

respect those desires or lack thereof in order to undo women's "frigidity" concerning sex. She claimed this attention to women's desire would make married life more "interesting," "stimulating," "mysterious," and "poetic."³⁴ By respecting the wishes of women, men would find a more positive attitude from wives that would yield a more satisfying physical relationship overall and therefore strengthen the marriage bond through greater physical intimacy. Sanger argued that couples should enjoy the communal element of sex as much as desired during those peak times of desire on the part of the woman, a goal that would only be practicable for most couples with the use of birth control. This concern for the rights and desires of women showed Sanger's feminist inclinations and was certainly left of mainstream notions at the time, but still the language and approach in the book were targeted towards men and even stroked their egos and promoted conservatism in the process. She wrote that while promiscuous men were known to be selfish lovers, the "intelligent, monogamous husband" was a "master of love and a real leader."³⁵ In this way she simultaneously criticized promiscuity and promoted male leadership, two ideas that were certainly meant to appeal to her increasingly traditional audience.

Sex for Self-Expression, Self-Development, and Spirituality of Individuals

Part of what Sanger argued about the birth control benefits for marriage came from the intrinsic happiness, development, and new freedom for the individual, in particular for the woman. She saw sexual fulfillment as a deep and mystical path to self-expression, self-development, art, and spirituality, and in her various writings and speeches she connected this growth to a woman's ability to love and connect to both her husband and children on a deeper level. While the self-development was likely more important to Sanger privately, it was the

³⁴ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 151-158.

³⁵ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 154.

impact on the marriage and family that she increasingly pitched to her relatively conservative, religious audience.

Earlier in the decade, Margaret Sanger had written *Woman and the New Race* (1920); in it she argued that there should be a “New Morality” which would be created by women and based on “knowledge and freedom,” not “ignorance and submission.”³⁶ The book had strong remnants of her recent days as a radical feminist, socialist, and free-lover. Though her emphasis throughout the decade kept shifting towards the center, this early and more radical work revealed her own particular view of morality which she consistently argued thereafter. As with her views on the spirituality of sex, Sanger’s notion of the morality concerning birth control was not theological in nature. She assumed that contraceptive freedom was moral because it was freeing for women, and therefore it was good. Her efforts to convince religious leaders, even ones who were somewhat liberal relative to mainstream Protestants, were certainly more ideological than theological. David Kennedy wrote that Sanger believed in the new morality of choice and the idea that the net good for society made contraception moral. He criticized this stance, however, for missing the point of theological objectors to birth control. Kennedy argued that Sanger did not comprehend or address the objections of traditional moralists who believed the ends did not justify the means.³⁷ For her part, Sanger assumed the morality of birth control. She hoped to persuade others so that they would interpret birth control as theologically moral by their own standards as well.

Her “new morality” would liberate women, and this theory connected to marriage and family because the woman’s happiness would allow her to love more deeply and truly. Contrary to fears about growing promiscuity and prostitution, birth control would instead help develop women’s moral development more profoundly because it would break the bonds of the old

³⁶ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 97-105.

³⁷ Kennedy, 142-143.

repressive morality.³⁸ Sanger argued, “In spite of the age-long teaching that sex life in itself is unclean, the world has been moving to a realization that a great love between a man and woman is a holy thing, freighted with great possibilities for spiritual growth.”³⁹ By unleashing her sexuality, she would satisfy her soul’s needs and cravings, and thus would be able to develop her love nature in turn. Women would develop morally by loving more deeply, according to Sanger, in three ways: love of self, love of children, and love of husband. She believed women’s freedom would lead to great self-fulfillment in their lives as they abandoned the shackles of repression, fear, force, and shame surrounding sex. Her freedom would “lift women by the very soaring quality of her innermost self to spiritual heights that few have attained.”⁴⁰ Since women would be happier and enjoy greater spirituality internally, they would be better mothers and wives as well. She repeatedly argued that women would be better mothers if they had children whom they desired and chose to conceive—without resentment or bitterness, but rather with a passionate yearning and love for their children. Years later, in her 1953 radio broadcast statement, “This I Believe,” she reflected: “I believed it was my duty to place motherhood on a higher level than enslavement and accident. I was convinced we must care about people; we must reach out to help them in their despair.”⁴¹ Finally, women would better preserve their love life with their mate because of their liberated capacity for love and happiness. Without the fear of inevitable pregnancy and subsequent children, couples would have more time to develop their relationship through sexual intimacy and more time to themselves before growing a family.

³⁸ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 103.

³⁹ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 103.

⁴⁰ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 103-104.

⁴¹ Margaret Sanger, “This I Believe,” November 1953. *This I Believe* with Edward R. Murrow.

http://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/news/this_i_believe.html, Accessed July 6, 2008.

Opposition: Birth Control Goes Against Heroic Discipline

Sanger wrote that there were three purposes for sex, including physical relief, procreation, and communion, but that the first two had “little to do with the art of love.”⁴² Physical and emotional intimacy, then, was the primary purpose for marriage in her view. Certainly this idea was not universally accepted, and particularly opposing the concept of marital sex for pleasure were fundamentalist Protestants and Catholics. John M. Cooper, a professor of sociology at Catholic University, published a pamphlet in 1923, *Birth Control*, that articulated the Catholic stance on the role of intercourse and procreation in marriage. Tobin argues that while Protestants would later change their view, many would have agreed with Cooper on his arguments in the early 1920s.⁴³ Cooper argued that the physical relationship in marriage was merely a means to an end, not an end in itself as many contemporaries were claiming. As many religions were beginning to reexamine the purpose of marriage and the role of sex, he said there was too much emphasis on pleasure. According to Cooper, “Nature,” or our “Maker,” purposely attached the gratification of sex to procreation so that we would continue the race.⁴⁴ Cooper also claimed that there were three elements in marriage, including passion, love and parenthood; while the initial passion was self-centered, the two stages that naturally followed were others-centered. Birth control, then, selfishly isolated the first phase of sex and passion from the natural course that followed. Cooper further argued that passion should bring about “sacrifices and responsibilities of sex” and the character that would develop with a resulting parenthood.⁴⁵ Likewise, Catholic priest and activist John A. Ryan argued that people were getting too soft. Ryan maintained that people needed to uphold the values of duty, sacrifice, and discipline within

⁴² Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 153.

⁴³ Tobin, 113-114.

⁴⁴ Tobin, 113.

⁴⁵ Tobin, 114.

marriage instead of placing enjoyment as the first priority of marriage.⁴⁶ Ryan's and Cooper's arguments pointed to the opposition Sanger faced when she claimed that sexual intimacy should be a greater priority than procreation in marriage, and revealed the revolutionary nature of her argument for the times.

Though the bishops of Lambeth were the first mainline Christians to accept birth control, even they did not quite accept Sanger's idea that intimacy and companionship were the main goals in marriage. Even as they resolved to allow contraception in 1930, they noted this point of disagreement. Resolution 13 stated that while the sex instinct was holy, natural, and God-given, and intercourse within marriage did have value, the primary purpose of marriage was still procreation, and self-control was critical for couples. Resolution 14 further affirmed the "duty of parenthood as the glory of married life," stating that families brought about such benefits as joy, national welfare, and character-building for parents and children. Similar to Cooper and Ryan, Anglicans still declared that marital "discipline and sacrifice" were a "privilege."⁴⁷ The Americans of the FCC committee agreed that reproduction was still the most important purpose of sex. The report stated, "To be a mother is seen to be the supreme fulfillment of womanhood, as to be a father is of manhood," and it affirmed that God intended sex "first for the creation of human life."⁴⁸ Despite the continued belief by religious leaders that reproduction was the primary purpose, Sanger continued to argue that marital affection was just as important, if not more.

⁴⁶ Kennedy, 146-153. Ryan believed that the answer to poverty and problems which Sanger brought up was not birth control, but rather to have larger social and economic structural change, such as more even distribution of wealth, increased labor rights and wages, and better living conditions for the poor. In particular, Ryan agreed with Marxists that unless there was some discomfort, there would not be enough demand for change from society, and that birth control seemed to blame the poor instead of helping them. Ryan argued, "We simply cannot—those who believe as I do—subscribe to the idea that the poor are to be made responsible for their plight, and instead of getting justice from the Government and more rational social order, they are to be required to reduce their numbers." See Tobin, 67-77 for more about Ryan's views.

⁴⁷ "Lambeth Conference Archives – 1930 – Resolution 14,"

www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1930/. Accessed April 12, 2013.

⁴⁸ FCC Report, 19.

Sex is Natural and God-Given

Some religious leaders may have disagreed with the romantic premise that marriage was primarily meant for companionship and intimacy, but Sanger effectively undermined many religious opponents by arguing that sexual expression was necessary, natural, and even God-given. If God gave us the desire for and enjoyment of sex, then God would want people to enjoy this gift and bond with their spouse in this way. She was able to pitch the notion in a way that seemed to resonate with and impact the Protestant mainstream to a growing extent throughout the 1920s.

The idea was certainly not her idea or hers alone; Sigmund Freud and others in the new field of psychology were making big waves at the turn of the century. Freud had claimed that humans have internal struggles and drives, such as aggression and sexual urges, that must be expressed—if not directly then indirectly—or else there would be natural and consequential side effects. His research was still considered a fledgling “science” in the 1920s, but those ideas opened up doors that had been closed for decades, particularly during the heightened prudishness of the Victorian era. By stating that sexual impulses were natural, and must be expressed for psychological health, he tried to show that repressive religious beliefs and social norms were containing something that had to come out. He thought these drives were part of a person’s subconscious, and therefore out of a person’s control, and tried to show that, among other things, the need for sexual expression was not wrong. Rather, attempting to restrain that impulse, through the only acceptable manners of birth control, abstinence or continence, was harmful and wrong. D’Emilio and Freedman explained the American interpretation of Freudianism as “present[ing] the sexual impulse as an insistent force demanding expression.”⁴⁹ In addition, they noted that while Freud has left a more lasting and infamous legacy, the English sexologist Havelock Ellis was also highly influential at the time. Like Freud, Ellis advocated sexual

⁴⁹ D’Emilio and Freedman, 223-224.

gratification and expression of passion rather than married practices of self-control and restraint. Ellis was an intimate friend of Sanger and his work was presented throughout the entire decade of the 1920s; it was clear that his rhetoric penetrated her work as well. The theories of Freud and Ellis likely would not have appealed to ministers at the time, even liberal ones. However, the notions of openness and the view of sex as natural and necessary became more mainstream in the 1920s and did influence Sanger's thinking and works. Furthermore, these ideas would also be evident in the Lambeth resolutions and FCC report, both of which pointed out that sex was God-given and that it was very difficult to expect abstinence from couples.

Sanger's language reflected the mainstreaming of Freudian beliefs. D'Emilio and Freedman argued that her work in this era successfully changed norms of sex and the meaning of sex in marriage.⁵⁰ In *Happiness in Marriage*, she explained the uncontrollable power of men's natural sex urges:

Women should not fail to recognize that the sex urge is strong in the male. Sometimes it is as strong, from the biological point of view, as the hunger for food. In some men it cannot be controlled by the usual code of morals or the religious and ethical teaching instilled by early training and tradition. Consciously or unconsciously everything is brushed aside by such men in their overwhelming expression of passion. Such men are the slaves of desire instead of its master. Yet such men exist and they are too numerous to count. When their sex urge is not thwarted this savagery in their natures does not reveal itself. The same man may be considered the best of citizens and of parents, as indeed he many in truth be in most respects; but let anything stand in the way of his sexual demands and an entirely unexpected set of characteristics will suddenly be revealed and take possession of him.... Such men reveal a characteristic common to all of us, but under greater control and direction.⁵¹

If the impulse was so powerful and unruly, then birth control would allow a healthy outlet that might safely channel the "savagery." Margaret Sanger built her arguments for birth control upon this premise. She particularly tried to show that what was natural was not wrong, but God-given, and that the oft-advocated policy of abstinence in marriage (as a means of birth control) was

⁵⁰ D'Emilio and Freedman, 231-233.

⁵¹ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 217-218.

actually harmful compared to the free expression of love that birth control could offer happily married couples. Though it may not have been popular with religious leaders to explicitly invoke the theories of Freud, Sanger did emphasize the changing scientific understanding of sexual drive and the difficulty of abstinence in order to convince ministers to support birth control.

Many churches held that while they understood some arguments for limiting the number of children within a marriage, the only acceptable means of doing so was by abstaining from sex—either completely or at the critical times when a woman was believed to be fertile, though this science was still unreliable at best. This belief was one of the primary arguments against birth control. Artificial contraception was, by definition, unnatural; continence did not introduce anything artificial or unnatural to the sex act. However, Sanger countered that abstinence was actually unnatural because it went against God-given human impulses and led to deleterious consequences if applied.

Sanger argued against abstinence with a variety of points. She often stated that abstinence was not only more unnatural than artificial birth control, but also that it was physiologically and psychologically harmful. She also pointed out that the motives behind family limitation were the same whether couples were using continence or contraception, and if those motives were acceptable from a religious standpoint, then the methods should also allow for artificial contraception. While she did not tackle the issue in a theological way, she did attempt to present birth control as a scientifically-backed practice.

As early as 1920, Sanger devoted an entire chapter of *Woman and the New Race* to the perils of continence. She argued that while the practice might work for those who chose it out of religious zeal or for artistic enrichment, it was simply impracticable and undesirable for the needs of the masses.⁵² She claimed there were “disastrous effects of repressing the sex force,” and added further scientific legitimacy by citing claims of doctors and sex psychologists who said that

⁵² Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 64-72.

absolute continence was neither healthy nor possible for the “mass of humanity.” She stated that “enforced continence is injurious—often highly so.” Her use of these scientific references was clearly a way to gain academic legitimacy and undermine the argument that contraception went against God’s natural laws. Sanger quoted various doctors, including Dr. J. Rutgers, who said that extended suppression of desire would lead to “pathological disturbances,” “[crippled] function,” and would especially harm women by bringing “deep disturbances.”⁵³ As with her arguments about improving the health and quality of life for women and children, Sanger frequently published the quotations and articles of medical doctors and psychologists as a way to assert legitimacy and bring religious conservatives on board as well. The association of her movement with fellow conservative professionals was important to give religious leaders the boldness to embrace her reforms and seems to have been effective.

Another scientific study lent validity to her points that sexual activity was natural, necessary and healthy. She extensively cited the work of a French doctor, Dr. Jacques Bertillon, who was known for his statistical analyses as a social scientist, and special interest in alcoholism and depopulation in France. Sanger cited Bertillon’s conclusion that married men (who were presumably sexually active) lived longer and were less likely to be insane, criminal, or vicious. Bertillon’s studies also claimed that crime and insanity were half as likely with married men and women and death rates were twice as high among bachelors, widowers, and celibate religious. There are many assumptions of causality in her portrayal of these correlational relationships, which concluded that marriage and sexual activity would prevent men from asocial and immoral behaviors. However, by citing them she was attempting to give her ideas more scientific weight among the relatively conservative religious leaders whom she needed to persuade.

⁵³ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 65.

Sexual Expression is Necessary and Abstinence is Wrong

Sanger argued fervently that continence was not a practical method of limiting children for most couples. At the First ABCL conference in 1921, when the focus of the meeting was morality, several speakers pointed to the problems with continence in marriage. Harold Cox, former member of Parliament and keynote speaker, claimed that there were two ways to address the urgent need for reducing the birth rate: either by reducing the number of or delaying marriages, which he argued would lead to increased prostitution, or by reducing the number of births in marriages, which he said would lead to fewer children and “more happy homes.”⁵⁴ Cox undermined the abstinence option by stating that it would be impossible to expect young couples to abstain from sex altogether after having two to three desired children, and this method would “break the happiness” of millions of couples. Cox even called this standard of abstinence a “world without sunshine,” and stated that birth control, then, was moral since it would allow the “sunshine” in marriages and a higher standard of living to continue, and even bring peace to stop the recurrence of great wars.

Sanger pointed out that while abstinence might seem to be the most reasonable and natural method of birth control for religious conservatives, it was not the best birth control since it meant couples might only be able to experience “this relationship, which is allied to the divine,” two or three times in their lives.⁵⁵ While her numbers were hyperbolic, she asserted that any periods of abstinence for the purpose of birth control were “harsh and unnecessary” and unreasonable for “the average, normal person” to accomplish. She even dramatically pointed out that a “controlled” couple could abstain all but one time each year, and still end up having “18-24 children” in their lifetime.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Cox, “1921 First American Birth Control Conference.”

⁵⁵ Sanger, “The Need for Birth Control in America,” 22-27.

⁵⁶ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 67.

By 1926, in *Happiness in Marriage*, Sanger explicitly argued that birth control would strengthen the intimacy and bonding in marriages, and in doing so her language incorporated Freudian points throughout. In her discussion of courtship, she told readers not to be ashamed of their passion or strong sex drive, because it is a natural force that cannot be denied.⁵⁷ In Freudian terms, she advised men during the dating period not to selfishly allow sexual attraction to become a primary and consuming force lest it enslave them.⁵⁸ Throughout the book, she pointed out the ways that sexual expression would naturally bond married lovers and gave vague advice about how to find doctors who would provide information about birth control so that couples could embrace their God-given impulses and avoid a policy of abstinence.

Many opponents of birth control argued that while the idea may have moral intent, the methods were innately immoral because they interfered with nature. In the 1920s, most Protestant ministers emphasized the need and innate design for humans to reproduce. Tobin claims that there was a growing "battle line," or distinction, between natural abstinence as birth control versus artificial methods.⁵⁹ Still, Sanger and other advocates tried to convince the religious leaders that what was natural was not necessarily what was most moral, and that much of our progress throughout time has been to improve upon what is naturally imperfect. At the First ABCL Conference, Harold Cox pointed out that all of human progress had come about through unnatural interference with nature, from medicine to eyeglasses.⁶⁰ He countered that the morality of birth control should be based on intent, pointing to some of the key moral and intentional benefits of birth control, including the health of mothers and children, increased standard of living, and happier marriages.

⁵⁷ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 21.

⁵⁸ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 38-39.

⁵⁹ Tobin, 119.

⁶⁰ Harold Cox, "1921 First American Birth Control Conference," 9-10.

It seemed the changing attitudes of the public and the messages of Margaret Sanger did begin to influence mainline Protestants to reinterpret the decency and value of sex in marriage. By 1930, the first of the Anglican resolutions on Marriage and Sex, Resolution 9, claimed that the changes of modern life warranted their “fresh statement” on sex, and affirmed that sex was both “God-given” and “essentially noble and creative.”⁶¹ In addition, Resolution 13 stated overtly that “sexual instinct is a holy thing implanted by God in human nature.” The FCC Report would agree, calling sex “a supreme expression of [married] affection and comradeship.”⁶² These points seem to show that Freud and Sanger’s beliefs were infiltrating both the mainstream vernacular and religious thinking by 1930. Despite these concessions, not everyone would agree that sexual expression was natural and godly, even in that circle of ground-breaking Anglicans.⁶³

The essential resolution of Lambeth that accepted birth control was Resolution 15, and even in this there was strong evidence of the opposition. Unlike the other conference resolutions, this particular one passed without consensus, as 193 voted for it and 67 voted against the controversial decision.⁶⁴ Even as they allowed contraception, the bishops listed a host of qualifications that revealed the deep wariness of unintended consequences and a preference for the practice of abstinence. They still cited abstinence as the primary method for avoiding parenthood and affirmed the value of discipline and a life of self-control. Only if there was a “clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood” and a “morally sound reason for

⁶¹ “Lambeth Conference Archives – 1930 – Resolution 9,” www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1930/. Accessed April 12, 2013.

⁶² FCC Report, 19.

⁶³ After Lambeth, the Bishop of Liverpool supported the resolutions when he claimed that abstinence in marriage “would be a severe strain” and possibly even cause “harmful results.” Opposing the resolutions, however, the Bishop of St. Albans spoke for many Christian dissenters when he called birth control intrinsically sinful because it went against God’s natural laws. He claimed that although abstinence within a marriage would be difficult, and might “even cause neurosis,” it was still the “heroic way.” This view of the character-building, heroic discipline of abstinence was one deeply entrenched among opponents. Although Sanger disagreed vehemently with the view, she was not entirely successful in convincing even the more liberal Anglicans to abandon this vision of restraint. See Campbell, 136.

⁶⁴ “Lambeth Conference Archives – 1930 – Resolution 15,” www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1930/. Accessed April 12, 2013.

avoiding complete abstinence” could other methods be utilized, and only if decided upon and enacted with “Christian principles.” Finally, the bishops directly confirmed their “strong condemnation” of any birth control methods utilized due to “motives of selfishness, luxury, or mere convenience.” The stipulations exposed many of the major concerns that Christian moralists had about the results of birth control: an undisciplined populace, over-avoidance of parenthood, immoral behavior, and materialistic selfishness. This revolutionary resolution opened the door to mainline Protestant endorsement of birth control, but its language showed the deep disagreement surrounding the topic, even as the majority agreed that some form of birth control could align with Christian values. Ministers of the FCC seemed to agree with the reservations of Anglicans. In the FCC Report, the committee stated that it was “the plain duty of the Christian Church...to uphold the standard of abstinence as the ideal.” They further stated that all the committee agreed:

If marriage centers upon sex indulgence, it is sure to result in unhappiness and usually in disaster. A high degree of self-control, especially during the early years of married life when marital habits are forming, is necessary to the happiness of the mates and the spiritual life of the home.⁶⁵

Despite the lingering concerns of religious leaders, it seemed that the main arguments Sanger had made were right on target with the priorities of the religious leaders.

Lessening Frigidity in Wives and Husbands’ Reliance upon Prostitution

Not only would birth control allow couples to avoid the unnatural practice of abstinence, but by embracing their married sex life, couples could avoid “frigidity” in women towards sex, and therefore men would not resort to prostitution to solve their sexual frustration. Sanger repeatedly argued: women should be lifted out of the Victorian appreciation of prudery and ignorance about sex, couples would have less fear of pregnancy and therefore fewer negative

⁶⁵ FCC Report, 25.

emotions towards sex, and finally women's warming towards sex would lead husbands to find greater satisfaction in their marriages instead of turning to prostitutes. Sanger appeared to have believed that these reasons would be persuasive to church leaders for two main reasons. First, the increased warmth and happiness within marriage would, in turn, help to undermine the growing divorce rate. Second, her points helped to diffuse the opposition who feared that contraception would increase prostitution. However, according to David Kennedy, Sanger's emphasis on the importance of satisfying sex for women's happiness actually distinguished her from many feminists.⁶⁶ Kennedy claimed she embraced a mystical view of "free womanhood," leading him to argue that Sanger's ideas were not radically feminist, but actually just a new spin on Victorian beliefs about the uniqueness and sacredness of women.⁶⁷

Regardless of Kennedy's assessment, one of the major themes in Sanger's speeches and writings about the moral virtues of birth control, especially as it related to improving the quality of marriages, was that women needed to be freed from the glorified naivety of Victorian prudery. According to D'Emilio and Freedman, early in the century, two pioneering sex studies had shown that ignorance about sex and distorted teachings led women to experience fear of sex before marriage and anger and unhappiness within marriage.⁶⁸ They claim that few women were eager for sex, since the majority saw it as important to marriages, but of a limited role. Sanger argued that as long as women were taught to think that sex was unspeakable, dirty, and something only to be endured, they would never find joy for themselves or for the benefit of their husbands and marriages. In addition, their lack of knowledge and education meant that they did not understand how to prevent pregnancy through contraception, so there was a constant element of fear of

⁶⁶ Kennedy, 132-135. Kennedy also pointed out that some feminists, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Elsie Clews Parsons, actually wanted to free women from sex, believing that birth control would allow men to further exploit women sexually (p. 132).

⁶⁷ Kennedy, 132-135. Kennedy described "free womanhood," for Sanger, as meaning that birth control would liberate women. Then, having fulfilled their own self-expression, they would choose to additionally satisfy their maternal urges (p. 134).

⁶⁸ D'Emilio and Freedman, 175-178.

pregnancy that brought about a further coldness. By eliminating women's frigidity from naivety and fear of pregnancy, Sanger maintained that the husbands would find greater satisfaction in their married sex lives and would not turn to prostitutes to fulfill their sexual needs and desires. Both partners would find greater satisfaction and increased connectedness, and therefore greater "happiness in marriage."

Early in the 1920s, Sanger had advocated a "New Morality" that would embrace knowledge and freedom, and break the restrictive shackles of the traditional church teachings on sex. Over the course of the decade, her tone became less accusing towards the churches and instead more conciliatory as she sought to emphasize their common ground and goals. However, early on she had blamed the church's code of morality for instilling shame and ignorance in women in regards to their sexuality and calling the code a virtue instead of acknowledging its inherent oppressiveness.⁶⁹ There was a "doctrine that the sex life is in itself unclean," and "all knowledge of the sex physiology or sex functions is also unclean and taboo." Sanger accused the church of selfishly keeping women naïve and ignorant under the guise of keeping them "pure."

Due to these standards, women who did seek knowledge or enjoyment were necessarily considered deviant and shameful, a status that Sanger deeply wished to change. She said the sex life was "clouded in darkness, repressive, and morbid," even arguing that the church had kept women enslaved by attacking any means of women's freedom.⁷⁰ Her language in one particular chapter in *Woman and the New Race* showed remnants of her early radical days, and while she toned down some elements of her attacks later in the 1920s, as she tried to win over more conservatives, she still maintained vigilance against the most traditional of churches, the Roman Catholic Church.

⁶⁹ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 97-103.

⁷⁰ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 97-103.

Sanger attacked the church and traditional “moralists” whom she saw as responsible for the lack of sex education regarding sexual anatomy, intercourse, and especially birth control. She advocated for more scientific talks and common sense to rid women of their repugnance towards sex, claiming that “only the truth, plainly spoken, can save these people,” and only then would they find the “upliftment” and idealism that was their “birthright.”⁷¹ In *Happiness in Marriage*, she devoted one chapter to the basics of sex education, entitled “The Organs of Sex and Their Functions.”⁷² Here, in a straight-forward manner, she explained the details of the male and female sex organs, stating that people should not allow “prudishness or a false sense of delicacy to stand in the way of acquiring this invaluable knowledge.” She argued that these organs were vital to all aspects of physical health and hormones, as well as “the instruments” through which “the emotion of love between husband and wife finds complete and culminating expression.”⁷³ Sanger believed that education would allow women in particular to understand that sex was natural, virtuous, and a means of strengthening the bond with their husband, and therefore would find that there could be joy and fulfillment instead of shame and disgust. She pointed out that if education about contraception did not come from upstanding and legitimate sources, it would instead be left to the “gutter and houses of prostitution” and would leave millions of “miserable marriage failures.” Finally, her argument was intended to resonate with mainline Protestants because of her point that better sex education would help marriages:

The present chapters are written in a spirit of profound reverence, in the hope that they may help those young men and women who stand at the entrance of life’s labyrinth to avoid the pitfalls and disasters that have been occasioned in the past by those unfortunate humans who did not dare tear asunder the thin cobweb veil of prudishness and misunderstanding and whose precious lives have been wrecked because, while standing so near to marital happiness, they failed to attain that mutual adjustment which should have been the most priceless treasure of their lives.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 68-69.

⁷² Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 104-115.

⁷³ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 104-107.

⁷⁴ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 120-121.

Her claim was certainly not original, as the decade of the 1920s was known for increased sexual awareness and openness, but she tried to persuade conservatives that knowledge was not a sign of coming moral decay, as many feared. Rather, openness could be a gateway to increased morality in marriages at least.

Increased sex education included greater knowledge of birth control for Sanger, and both education about the body and contraception were necessary for women to be able to enjoy and embrace their sexuality. Although that was always a key goal for Margaret Sanger, she was also trying to persuade the churches on the matter by showing the connection between women's pleasure (or lack thereof) and the problem of rising divorce rates and dissatisfaction within marriages. If women could come out of the darkness and shame of ignorance, they would find greater enjoyment in their marital relationships, and knowledge of birth control would allow women to fully embrace this idealized sex without fear of unwanted pregnancy. She also believed that better sex education and increased knowledge of birth control would give women the freedom to refuse or embrace sex based on their own desires, instead of simply submitting to the wishes of their husbands.⁷⁵ She coached men to please their wives, both with romantic gestures and with sexual satisfaction, claiming that much of the problem of the "frigid" wife could be solved with proper, unselfish attention from husbands, along with greater relaxation and stress relief for women, directing men to "win and woo each time anew."⁷⁶ She emphasized ways to keep the love alive in other ways as well, acknowledging that marriages were tough and problems were individual ones, but essentially advising couples to avoid the ruts of boring habits and monotony, express their love openly, and have fun together in order to maintain the initial passion and happiness.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 104-105.

⁷⁶ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 172-173.

⁷⁷ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 176-186.

In *Happiness in Marriage*, Sanger claimed that the first step to a happy marriage was in fact to remove the fear and ignorance which were so common.⁷⁸ She claimed that women's prudery and modesty led to their ignorance, and that men's ignorance led to their acquisition of venereal disease. Along with promiscuity and prostitution, then, ignorance and diseases destroyed the positive attitude of women towards sex. Young men were encouraged to "sow their wild oats" before marriage, but they subsequently acquired venereal diseases. According to D'Emilio and Freedman, men often entered marriage with sexual experience, but women did not.⁷⁹ Prostitution was common in cities large and small and for all classes of men. Young men's experiences with prostitutes, though, provided poor training for married sex.⁸⁰ Though women were virtuously inexperienced, their married love life was shaped negatively by the husband's ignorance of ways to protect himself—and therefore her—from those diseases. Sanger claimed, "Marriage based on a young man's experience without knowledge and a girl's ignorance without experience is foredoomed to inevitable failure." Finally, she criticized the sheltered Victorian approach, saying that the growing rates of "divorces, separations, ruined lives, cynical husbands, hysterical wives, infidelities and all manner of family tragedies attest to the failure of the traditional approach to marriage."⁸¹ The combination of family unhappiness and immoral consequences seemed to have resonated with the Protestant leadership.

Since women were kept so naïve and ignorant of sex, and taught that enjoyment was paramount to sin, Sanger maintained that they were often repulsed by sex and completely missing the joy of sexual expression. By educating women about their bodies, men's bodies, intercourse, the God-given and moral virtues of sexual intimacy, and birth control, women could learn to enjoy and embrace their sexuality.

⁷⁸ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 14-17.

⁷⁹ D'Emilio and Freedman, 181.

⁸⁰ D'Emilio and Freedman, 181-183.

⁸¹ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 17.

She often cited fear of pregnancy as one of the key limitations to sexual intimacy early in marriages.⁸² Sanger said women's repugnance stemmed from an intrinsic fear of pregnancy that could result from intercourse, and therefore they were never able to relax or find joy in the practice and further magnified their distaste for sex. Sanger described the prototypical fearful wife in *Happiness in Marriage* when she advised couples to seek information about birth control which she could not publish, and said that these women tried to keep their husbands away due to fear of pregnancy. Not only did this fear affect their sex life, but it also limited their connectedness through loving touch as well:

The poor distracted, worried and hounded wife dares not permit her husband even the ordinary affectionate expression his heart longs for and which his whole body and soul desires and needs. The wife, harried and panic-stricken, dares not even give him a welcoming smile: she shudders at his touch. She struggles against her deepest impulses, and meets his tender embrace with a frigid resistance. She dreads the homecoming of her husband, for his presence means not peace but eternal conflict in her heart.⁸³

Birth control would further make it reasonable and practical to value their love life and would strengthen the potential for marital intimacy and pleasure, especially for women.

Sanger argued that years of prudish Victorian values had taught women that it was virtuous to dislike sex and immoral to enjoy it. In *Woman and the New Race*, Sanger argued against continence, claiming that it was mostly the women in marriages who advocated the practice because these "frigid" women found no joy in their sexual intimacy and were repulsed by the idea.⁸⁴ Some of the frigidity came because women had been taught that their ignorance and displeasure made them more virtuous and moral, especially in the eyes of God and men. "Loathing, disgust or indifference to the sex relationship nearly always lies behind the advocacy to continence," which then "brings nothing but...discontent, unhappiness and misery."⁸⁵ If the

⁸² Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 95-98 and 179.

⁸³ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 215.

⁸⁴ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 67.

⁸⁵ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 67.

women could become educated and understand their bodies and the inherent morality of the sexual embrace, they would not loath it and might even enjoy it. Sanger pointed to years of teaching that sex was unclean as the reason for women's disgust, saying that the universal cause of the view was a lack of education about the "beauties" of sex. Women did not understand the power of sexual unions or the physiological processes. They would never "reach higher planes through ignorance and compulsion," but only with fuller knowledge, with a more positive attitude towards sex, and without fear, would they see the purity and "power of upliftment."⁸⁶ For Protestants interested in birth control, greater understanding was compelling because a more sexually satisfied and interested wife would hopefully keep husbands away from prostitutes and keep marital intimacy stronger overall.

While most of Sanger's earlier writings and speeches pointed to the need for women to embrace their sexuality, she also seemed to take on a much more conservative tone by 1926 in *Happiness in Marriage* which seems contrary to her earlier radical advocacy for free love and feminism. Though at one point she told women that they were the leader and commander in sex and marriage, and that their attitude was vital to married happiness, she had earlier in the book recommended a conservative approach in the courtship period.⁸⁷ In her advice to dating women, Sanger advised them to essentially "play hard to get" in their pursuit of a husband and countered the 1920s trend for women to become bolder. Her advice clearly argued against the flappers and those women whom they influenced. She told them not to be too passive with men or too hasty, because his desire would increase if she was not "taken for granted." Her approach was surprisingly traditional, even stating that men should be "the pursuer and huntsman," since there was "psychological reason for the rightness of this view."⁸⁸ She criticized the boldness of the modern women, stating that though prudery was wrong, the opposite movement had also gone too

⁸⁶ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 71-72.

⁸⁷ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 99-101.

⁸⁸ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 58-64.

far, and that women still needed to be “elusive” and avoid appearing “cheap” and “gaudy.”⁸⁹ Her more conservative approach did not seem to fit with the feminist, free-love, radical Margaret Sanger of the 1910s. However, it did fit with her turn towards the center in the 1920s, as she sought to undermine concerns on the part of religious conservatives that birth control would open up society to a dramatic turn towards immoral sexuality and a perversion of the traditional roles that many were committed to maintaining. Many of her arguments about the morality of birth control stated both how contraception would achieve moral ends and also how it would limit immoral trends that people feared, and in this case maintaining the somewhat traditional role of women was clearly presented to allay the fears of mainline Christians.

By the time Anglicans approved of birth control at Lambeth in 1930, Sanger’s arguments had effectively taken hold that Victorian ignorance and prudery were harmful. Resolution 12 resolved that more sexual and marriage education was necessary, and that it was the responsibility of parents to educate children before puberty.⁹⁰ In addition, the church sought to teach its own leaders, so that clergy were better informed of moral theology on the topic and would pursue more research to study problems relating to sex. By resolving to better educate the people and the clergy, the Anglicans showed a reversal of the values held in the previous decades of glorifying women’s ignorance as well as shame and displeasure concerning sex and instead recognizing that couple’s should embrace that which is natural and God-given as a way to solve and avoid marital problems. The ministers of the FCC similarly argued in their report that “if the influence of religion and education is properly developed the progress of knowledge will not outrun the capacity of mankind for self-control.” They argued that the Church, society and parents “must give greater attention to the education and character-building of youth, and to the

⁸⁹ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 60-64.

⁹⁰ “Lambeth Conference Archives – 1930 – Resolution 12,” www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1930/. Accessed April 12, 2013.

continued education of adult opinion.” Clearly these religious leaders believed that education and knowledge were needed to go along with artificial contraception.

In sum, Sanger argued that if women were less frigid towards their husbands, the married relationship would thrive and men would be less likely to turn to prostitutes to satisfy their frustrated sexual needs, as Freud had suggested. If women were happy to sexually engage with their husbands more often, their marriage would be stronger and the men’s sex drive would be satisfied. Sanger asserted early on that 77% of the men who “frequent houses of prostitution are married men” because American culture had “the wrong concept of the marriage relations.”⁹¹ Women were taught to wear “a cloak of frigidity” towards sex because of their fear of pregnancy, so they drove husbands away and into immorality, even as they were taught that their coldness was “ideal,” “natural,” “right” and “spiritual.” If the woman lost her fear, she would open up and the couple could “develop together fully” since they would strengthen their companionship. In *Happiness in Marriage*, Sanger advised couples to seek advice about birth control from their doctor, noting that if they used protection that was reliable every time, not only would women have less worry about pregnancy, but more sexually-willing wives would, in turn, prevent men from turning to prostitutes. Sanger warned of a less-understanding husband without birth control:

He may meet her resistance by unkind comment, even by brutal retorts and insinuations. He may threaten her by infidelity, and even look elsewhere for a woman to satisfy his passion. It often happens that such men unintentionally fall victims to professional or occasional prostitutes.⁹²

While conservatives feared that birth control would allow prostitution to thrive, since there would be no threat of pregnancy, Sanger’s arguments aimed to diffuse the concern by showing that birth control would conversely undermine rates of prostitution engaged in by married men (as well as by young men, a point which will be discussed later). In a 1929 *BCR*, editors began the list for

⁹¹ Sanger, “Need for Birth Control in America,” 22-27.

⁹² Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 216-217.

“More Reasons for Birth Control” with the number one reason of “The Promotion of Morality.”⁹³ Authors argued that birth control would “attack the institution of prostitution and increase the stability of the family.” Dr. William Allen Pusey further elaborated by arguing that nothing contributed more to sexual immorality than “the seeking by married men of that sexual gratification from illicit intercourse that they have found lacking in married life” due to marital continence. He posited that “There could be no greater contribution to the morality of the world, as well as to its happiness, than would be the removal of this unhappy state that interferes so greatly with marital happiness.” This argument attempted to underscore one of the major fears held by religious leaders that birth control would encourage prostitution by removing the potential consequence of pregnancy. Sanger may not have erased those fears entirely, but she did successfully show some ways that morality would be improved and marriages would benefit and at least some need for prostitution would actually decrease among married men.

Unfortunately for married men, women were trained to be prudish by outdated values, and as a result they were ignorant of the technicalities and the potential joys of their sexuality. Even if they did enjoy intimacy, they were taught to subdue that immoral impulse and hide it from their husband as a way to maintain their purity. However, even if women could learn to embrace their sexuality without shame, they would still be inhibited unless birth control was understood, available, and morally acceptable. That was why Sanger worked so hard to move towards the center and convince relatively liberal religious leaders to see contraception as an advance that would benefit the family and especially strengthen marriages in the modern age.

Birth Control Would Prevent Premature Parenthood

Not only would birth control lessen frigid wives and prostitution in existing marriages, but Margaret Sanger also argued that it would help new marriages by preventing premature

⁹³ “More Reasons for Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review* (February 1929): 35.

parenthood and allowing young couples time to start their marriage off with a strong foundation. Women would have the time to mature fully before becoming mothers, even if they chose to marry young, and the couples would have the time to develop their relationship, grow together, and prepare financially for the responsibilities of parenthood. Since some conservatives were afraid that birth control would lead to immorality among the young, as they could engage in premarital sex without fear of pregnancy, Sanger's point alleviated these fears by instead pointing out that young people would be less afraid to marry young (and therefore satisfy their sexual desires in a married, monogamous relationship). They would feel confident marrying young with the time to build a strong foundation. By utilizing birth control early on, they would avoid the marital stress of an early pregnancy and strengthen their romantic connection and intimacy to help their marriage endure challenges over time. This idea was compelling to some conservative religious leaders who hoped to slow divorce rates and make the family a renewed haven in the face of alarming, modern cultural change.

One of Sanger's key concerns was always with the status of women, and in the case of early marriage, she makes the case that young women needed time to mature fully, both physically and emotionally, before being thrust into premature motherhood. Traditionally, women married younger than men, and so it was often the case that the new husband might have been better prepared for the challenges of mature marriage than was the young bride. Not only was motherhood a stressor for a young woman, but it also meant that by starting young, she would likely end up having a greater number of children over the course of her child-bearing years, an effect that would further add physical, emotional, financial, and marital stress on the woman. Instead of diving into having children right away, young women should, according to Sanger, seek self-development and self-expression in marriage and not just motherhood. She wrote that a woman should take the time "to develop herself mentally, emotionally and physically" in the teenage years and early twenties. Interestingly, she continued in *Happiness in*

Marriage to advise the courting girl in all manner of beauty, giving recommendations about health, hygiene and “odors,” preventing constipation, maintaining her mouth, hair and clothes, achieving flattering and stylish clothing that was not cheap or loud, and even advising women to clean “all orifices” in order to smell sweet.⁹⁴ These pages revealed some attempt on Sanger’s part to appeal to the traditional values of conservatives as women attempted to please men with their physical beauty, though she added that doing so would also help women to develop themselves for their personal satisfaction as well. Feminists would likely scoff at her approach here, but she was trying to lose her radical image as she convinced a wider, more conservative audience that birth control and traditional values were capable of happy coexistence.

She claimed that both young men and women would benefit from waiting longer to marry and developing themselves more fully, recommending they prolong their childhood and years of “play” before maturing. This marriage delay reflected a larger trend towards savoring and protecting the innocence and joys of childhood.⁹⁵ Sanger advised young adults to set aside the ages from 20 to 23 for maturing, both physically and mentally, and called upon some loose scientific points that the ages of 12 to 23 were the time for “body-building” that should be protected.⁹⁶ After referencing the Biblical passage stating that “to everything there is a season,” she called upon young adults to “build up their life forces” longer instead of wasting their “inner energies” by having children at too young an age.⁹⁷ While she discouraged teenagers from marrying too young, she mostly focused on the ways that birth control would allow young adult couples to marry while still delaying parenthood in particular. She promoted the benefit of birth control as a way to strengthen young adult marriages and therefore decrease the tendency towards prostitution for young, unmarried men.

⁹⁴ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 51-55.

⁹⁵ See Kennedy, 36-50 for more about the nineteenth century changes in view of family life and growing emotional view of childhood and child-rearing.

⁹⁶ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 29-31.

⁹⁷ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 27-28. The passage cited was Ecclesiastes 3:1.

While she encouraged young adults to wait for children, she also encouraged them to marry young in order to counter the fears of conservatives that birth control would lead to an increase in promiscuity among the young. She advised couples to have an engagement period of a year, but not to wait any longer due to financial concerns, pointing out that if they could delay parenthood through contraception, then there was no need to delay marriage.⁹⁸ Her implication was clearly that birth control would encourage early marriages since these men and women would not be scared off by the prospects of parenthood, and by marrying earlier they would in turn avoid the moral pitfalls of sexual promiscuity that conservatives feared.

In her 1938 *Autobiography*, Sanger recalled the benefits to marriage as a moral argument that came up throughout the earliest years of her campaign. She recounted in a speech that when the first Brownsville clinic opened in 1916, she was overwhelmed by its popularity and the positive response, and listed one of her most common clients as newly married couples who wanted to “make a go of it” and agreed that contraception would help them strengthen their relationship before engaging in the growth of their family.⁹⁹ After the Great War, Sanger cited this group of young couples as one of the primary consumers of the *Birth Control Review* as well.¹⁰⁰ In a 1918 *BCR*, Ida Wright Mudgett called late marriages “one of the chief causes of prostitution,” arguing that men’s passions were the “strongest and most uncontrollable” during the years he would try to prepare financially for marriage.¹⁰¹ Mudgett claimed that men would prefer to set up a home with a supportive wife rather than consorting with prostitutes, and birth control would allow men to marry without fear of a too-large or too-quick family to feed. She wrote, “if a young man was reasonably sure that a too numerous brood would not follow at once upon the heels of the marriage ceremony, he would marry” and thus “save himself from

⁹⁸ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 78-79.

⁹⁹ Sanger, *Autobiography*, 214-7.

¹⁰⁰ Sanger, *Autobiography*, 256-7.

¹⁰¹ Ida Wright Mudgett, “The Crying Need for Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review* (August 1918): 2.

demoralization and perhaps physical ruin.”¹⁰² Later, in 1924, Syracuse University sociology professor Rev. Albert P. Van Dusen agreed in the *BCR* that birth control would not increase promiscuity, but would instead be supervised and given to married men and women.¹⁰³ He also pointed out that “nearly all who would misuse such knowledge are actually doing so now,” and instead argued that contraception would give people a way to marry younger instead of supplying “the army of prostitutes to satisfy the imperious sex instinct in men who cannot afford to marry and provide for children.” Sanger emphasized the benefit of birth control to both increase marriages among young adults and simultaneously decrease the common use of prostitutes by young men.

By the mid-1920s, Sanger’s *Birth Control Review* seems to have noticeably more articles relating to the use of contraception as a way to increase marriages and quality of marriages, which reveals a growing interest in winning over the religious leaders who seemed to be coming around to the idea. This increase in marriage-related articles also corresponded with Sanger’s publication of *Happiness in Marriage* in 1926. In the December 1926 *BCR*, Dr. William F. Ogburn wrote an article showing a correlation between cities with more early marriages (ages 20 to 25) and the subsequent lower birth rates, contrary to expectations.¹⁰⁴ He concluded that the growth of birth control use, then, had led to earlier marriages, and more of them. Ogburn summarized the opposing views of moralists on the subject, stating that those who opposed birth control feared it would make it possible to have sex without consequence of children. Further, they viewed children as a key element in marriage and that limiting children would then “diminish marriage and increase immorality outside the home.” On the other side, he summarized the view of moralists who favored birth control who believed marriages among

¹⁰² Mudgett, 2.

¹⁰³ Albert P. Van Dusen, “Birth Control as Viewed by a Sociologist,” *Birth Control Review* (May 1924): 133-138.

¹⁰⁴ William F. Ogburn, “Birth Control and Early Marriage,” *Birth Control Review* (December 1926): 363-364.

young people would increase if financial barriers were lessened without the fear of immediate children. He concluded, “The data which I have presented, it seems to me, furnishes very strong evidence for the latter opinion.” Taken together, these arguments by Sanger and her colleagues effectively persuaded religious leaders that instead of increasing immoral sexuality, birth control would instead promote more marriages and family values during a decade in which divorce was on the rise and family life was seen as endangered.

Margaret Sanger directly argued that alleviating marriage difficulties was one of the primary benefits of birth control in her 1923 “Need for Birth Control” speech.¹⁰⁵ Birth control would encourage younger marriages, as it would allow couples to build up and nurture their relationship before adding the stresses of children. Sanger emphasized the increased intimacy that a couple would enjoy. If they had more time to know each other, play, read, and love together, their strengthened bond would be more resilient to difficulties over time. Reflecting the growing movement towards sexual enjoyment, she claimed that women had been brought up to resent sex until marriage, and therefore it was necessary to allow time for nurturing the “love relationship” before having children. She pointed out that couples could build up their home as a “nest” for children they wanted, and that the waiting would actually “intensify desire for maternity” since children would be welcomed and provided for in the established home. Since some feared birth control would hurt women’s maternal instinct, she countered that the wait would instead make motherhood “a joy to her and not a dread and a fear.”

In *Happiness in Marriage*, building on her previously-mentioned guidelines for starting marriage at the appropriate age and waiting to have children, she asserted that solving marriage problems in society would require “all the combined intelligence and foresight both man and woman can command.” In her turn towards the conservative male leaders whom she hoped to sway, her arguments became less focused on the women’s maturity in this particular book and

¹⁰⁵ Sanger, “The Need for Birth Control in America,” 17-20.

took on a tone of male-centered arguments. She pointed out how wives often become sick and unpleasant when pregnant, stating that “the young husband is deprived” of the sweet, mature woman that he married as “the ominous days of early pregnancy” took over and she became “frightened, timorous, and physically and nervously upset by the great ordeal that she must go through.”¹⁰⁶ Additionally, she argued that early parenthood would deaden the love-life and the wife would become bitter, secretly feeling “enslaved.” Notably, she did not appeal to the women in this subject but instead pitched it to the power base she needed to support her cause. In a nod to the women, though, she did stress that while women had not had a say in the past, they were more equal and should be seen as companions, not slaves, to men. Not only did the women need to mature fully, but the couple needed a strong spiritual foundation and financial preparation as well. She claimed that the couple would only see each other as parents to the child, referring to each other as “Mumsy and Daddy” instead of seeing each other for themselves. Finally she claimed the “sweet tyranny of the child” would inflict an “irreparable blow to their love” early on, and fear of pregnancy would continue to poison their marriage over time.¹⁰⁷

In addition to her assertion that birth control would not encourage young to become promiscuous, Sanger contended that it would limit prostitution among married men and unmarried young men as well. Her “Need for Birth Control in America” speech attempted to prove that encouraging younger marriages would undermine prostitution, since young men would enter monogamous relationships sooner and therefore have less desire for immoral sexual satisfaction.¹⁰⁸ She referred to her visit to the Netherlands in 1914 as anecdotal evidence of this point, claiming that the introduction of birth control in Holland had increased the marriage rate and decreased prostitution. Young couples “were not afraid of a big family they could not support,” and Dutch society impressed upon the young people the responsibility of parenthood.

¹⁰⁶ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 192-193.

¹⁰⁷ Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 193-203.

¹⁰⁸ Sanger, “The Need for Birth Control in America,” 22-27.

Sanger claimed that prostitution there had decreased, even arguing that there were few native prostitutes since young Dutch were encouraged to marry if they were interested in each other sexually; those prostitutes who did work there were typically French or Germans instead. She argued that birth control “has not increased immorality, it has increased morality. Marriages are popular; there has been an increase of total marriages. Immorality and prostitution have decreased.”¹⁰⁹ Church leaders, then, might hope for a similar boost to early marriages in the United States.

In the January 1925 *Birth Control Review*, Sanger’s Managing Editor, Annie G. Porritt, reviewed Bernarr MacFadden’s book *Manhood and Marriage*.¹¹⁰ She maintained that the warnings of sex and instructions for marriage were appropriate and unsurprising, but overall criticized the work. In her review, Porritt reiterated that birth control would promote better morality and more monogamous marriages: “Many a young man would marry and be a better citizen and a happier individual, if he had the right understanding of birth control and could know that he was not assuming a burden.” She argued that the book would better serve young men if it taught that “marriage does not necessarily mean an uncontrolled family.” Advocates for contraception tried to bring in conservatives by emphasizing the ways in which birth control could actually promote greater morality and encourage the growth of healthy marriages.

Addressing Fears of Increased Promiscuity in Youth

Many religious leaders were afraid that if people could have sex without the consequence of pregnancy, there would be an increase in sex outside of marriage, particularly among the young and unmarried. Sanger’s 1921 ABCL speech addressed this fear by arguing that the birth

¹⁰⁹ Sanger, “The Need for Birth Control in America,” 22-27.

¹¹⁰ Annie G. Porritt, review of *Manhood and Marriage*, by Bernarr MacFadden, *Birth Control Review* (January 1925): 21.

control movement “is the morality of knowledge,” meaning that giving women information would allow them to make choices based on genuine piety and accurate information, as opposed to fear. She maintained that the church should have more confidence in women’s morals instead of relying on fear as a motivator. She reasoned that there was a “direct connection between morality and brain development” since morals were about human conduct, and so a person’s actions depended on the mind and intent.¹¹¹ Since intent was the key to morality, then, she posited “irresponsibility and recklessness in our action is immoral, while responsibility and forethought put into action for the benefit of the individual and the race becomes in the highest sense the finest kind of morality.”¹¹² In other words, it was more moral to behave thoughtfully and with good intention than to act with carelessness.

Sanger further acknowledged the historic trend among opponents of women’s battles to limit women’s freedoms on the grounds that privileges, such as that of education and the vote, would compromise the morality of women.¹¹³ Rather than trying “to keep women moral by keeping them in fear and in ignorance,” she called on religious leaders to “inculcate into them a higher and truer morality based upon knowledge.”¹¹⁴ This reasoning put more responsibility upon the church leaders to instill an authentic moral framework. She challenged, “If we cannot trust woman with the knowledge of her own body, then I claim that 2,000 years of Christian teaching has proved to be a failure.”¹¹⁵ Over the course of the decade, she lessened her harsh criticism of the church, but continued to insist that authentic sexual purity should not depend on fear.

Women’s moral decline was not the only concern, as many opponents feared a general increase in promiscuity among the young adult population. Sanger addressed this broader issue

¹¹¹ Sanger, “Birth Control: Is It Moral?” 21.

¹¹² Sanger, “Birth Control: Is It Moral?” 21.

¹¹³ Sanger, “Birth Control: Is It Moral?” 21-22.

¹¹⁴ Sanger, “Birth Control: Is It Moral?” 22.

¹¹⁵ Sanger, “Birth Control: Is It Moral?” 22.

along the same lines as she addressed that of women's corruption, by claiming that morality should not be motivated by fear or driven by reckless and thoughtless action. She claimed that as civilization progressed, greater control over human actions and reproduction was the inevitable development, and further that careless impulse and selfish gratification at the expense of people's suffering was not true morality.¹¹⁶

A couple years later, Sanger further articulated her thoughts countering the proposition that birth control was immoral. In her speech, "The Need for Birth Control," which she gave at a variety of events and locations throughout the 1920s, Sanger claimed among other points that society had an evolving understanding of what was moral, and again stated that it was insulting to argue that women could not be trusted with information if they were to live a moral life. She mentioned things she witnessed on a trip to Japan that were considered moral there, and yet immoral in the U.S. Not only did morality change from culture to culture, but from history to the present as well: "Morality today has been immorality a hundred years ago and immorality today is likely to be morality a hundred years from now."¹¹⁷ She then referred back to her earlier suggestion that fear was an unsatisfying and disingenuous motivator for purity. "It is an insult to suggest that our women will become promiscuous if they have knowledge of [or] if they have not the fear of the result to keep them moral. In other words... a woman must be kept ignorant to live a clean life."¹¹⁸ Sanger did acknowledge that some women might abuse the new technology, but said society should not stop all progress for fear of some misuse. This speech was geared towards presenting the arguments for the necessity of birth control, as the title indicates. However, even in showing this, Sanger tried not only to promote the moral benefits of birth control, but also to undermine the most feared moral consequences of birth control. This two-pronged approach to

¹¹⁶ Sanger, "Birth Control: Is It Moral?" 23.

¹¹⁷ Sanger, "The Need for Birth Control in America," 21-22.

¹¹⁸ Sanger, "The Need for Birth Control in America," 22.

the morality question was the rhetoric that seems to have helped her win over the critical approval of many mainline Protestants.

A colleague of Sanger's reiterated the theme that knowledge would not lead to increased promiscuity, and fear of consequences should not be a motivating factor for sincere morality. In the January 1923 issue of the *Birth Control Review*, Annie G. Porritt wrote a column addressing several opposing points on the moral question. She claimed that contraceptives would not lead to a rise in immoral sexual behavior:

Fear of consequences...has never proved an efficient deterrent. Hellfire is no longer the main reliance of the preacher in urging his flock to godliness. No longer are the venereal diseases left to rage unchecked, because they are regarded as the rightful and necessary punishment of the men who resort to prostitutes. There is no more reason to expect an increase in immorality when birth control is fully and generally understood than to assert that there have been increases in prostitution and the white-slave trade since medical science has been able to do something towards lessening the frightful ravages of venereal disease.¹¹⁹

This message clearly defied the moral persuasion of fear and compared birth control to medicine for diseases associated with sexual immorality, since that was how many upstanding citizens perceived contraception. Like Sanger, she claimed that if people abstained from immoral sex only to avoid disease or pregnancy, then morality was "worthless" from a spiritual point of view. Her point about medicine also went along with the point made by Sanger that progress in other aspects of civilization had not been hindered though the methods were unnatural.

Several articles also echoed various themes of Sanger that undermined fears of increasing immoral behavior. Porritt also wrote that young people would actually decrease their immoral behavior since they would become more educated about the connection between their sexual conduct and reproduction.¹²⁰ A 1924 *BCR* highlighted the court opinion of Judge Harry M. Fisher, from Cook County, Illinois, which argued that real piety could not be attained through

¹¹⁹ Annie G. Porritt, *Birth Control Review* (January 1923): 4.

¹²⁰ Annie G. Porritt, *Birth Control Review* (January 1923): 4.

fear.¹²¹ He argued that fear was a poor deterrent for immoral sexual behavior, stating that birth control would not increase immorality among young women. If that were true, he said, it would be a sad testament to the “the influence of home environment, and of our moral and spiritual teachers, the clergy included.” He argued that those only refraining due to fear of pregnancy could already find information, but those deeply moral girls would not resort to finding information about contraception. “Morality... must depend upon the acceptance of it as a principle of life, and not upon fear and ignorance.” In 1925, another colleague and Unitarian minister, Charles Potter, reiterated these arguments. He stated that simply providing information about birth control would not increase immorality, such as extramarital intercourse, but rather that ignorance about the issue would: “Knowledge does not cause vice; it is ignorance that does it.”¹²² Better education would lead people to make more moral choices.

Contrary to the fears of religious opponents, Sanger argued that, according to a “new morality,” women would actually observe the highest standards of purity and make their own “tenets of morality.”¹²³ If they were given greater information and freedom, they would choose to maintain purity and exalt their conception of sex. Similar to Sanger’s point, Porritt said that “foresight” and “responsibility” were qualities of higher standards of morality, as opposed to reliance upon the reckless injury to society if the birth of innocent children is used as a deterrent to immoral acts.¹²⁴

All of these arguments served to send a message to leading Protestants who were still concerned that there would be immoral ramifications with the onset of contraceptive information, and they certainly seem to have influenced the logic of the bishops at Lambeth by the end of the

¹²¹ Harry M. Fisher, “Birth Control and Public Policy: Judicial Opinion of Judge Harry M. Fisher,” *Birth Control Review* (June 1924): 165-168.

¹²² Tobin, 97.

¹²³ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 104-105.

¹²⁴ Annie G. Porritt, *Birth Control Review* (January 1923): 4.

decade. Sanger and her allies successfully made the claim that authentic morality should be motivated by holiness and virtue and not by fear or punishment.

By 1930, the bishops of the Lambeth conference issued several key resolutions on “Marriage and Sex” that addressed the widespread fear of an inevitable rise in sexual promiscuity, and seemed to reflect the logic of Sanger’s arguments. Resolution 19 stated that “fear of consequences can never, for the Christian, be the ultimately effective motive for the maintenance of chastity before marriage.”¹²⁵ This line of thought reflected the language used by Sanger throughout many of her speeches and writings, in which she argued that morality was not authentic if it was motivated by fear instead of piety. Essentially, she had repeatedly pointed out that if the ministers’ messages were truly reaching their members, then contraceptives would not affect the choices of the faithful. Resolution 18 reiterated that sex outside of marriage was a “grievous sin,” and “use of contraceptives does not remove the sin.”¹²⁶ It also called for actions to limit the sale of and advertisements for contraceptives, reflecting the persistent fear of deleterious consequences in sexual morality. The Protestant ministers of the FCC, likewise, acknowledged that “serious evils, such as extramarital sex relations, may be increased by a general knowledge of contraceptives....Such knowledge, however, is already widely disseminated, often in unfortunate ways, and will soon be universally known.”¹²⁷ They argued that, in order to address this concern, there should be greater education and more emphasis on character development by the churches in order to encourage more appropriate motives for sexual purity other than fear.

¹²⁵ “Lambeth Conference Archives – 1930 – Resolution 19,” www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1930. Accessed April 12, 2013.

¹²⁶ “Lambeth Conference Archives – 1930 – Resolution 18,” www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1930. Accessed April 12, 2013.

¹²⁷ FCC Report, 25.

Chapter Conclusion

Margaret Sanger faced a challenging task throughout the 1920s of bringing a cause of radicals and liberals into the mainstream and gaining approval from largely conservative groups in politics, medicine, and religion. To position birth control as a morally tenable practice, Sanger shifted her attention more towards the center and pitched contraception as a moral solution to the growing family values problems, especially the rise in divorce. Throughout her books and speeches in the 1920s, she consistently argued that birth control would help marriages by allowing couples to bond and find greater satisfaction; allowing them to express a natural, beneficial, and God-given impulse; helping lessen the frigidity and prudery of many women; decreasing the likelihood of husbands seeking prostitutes; helping young couples to marry sooner and establish a strong base upon which to grow their family; and finally limiting prostitution and promiscuity among the young. The decision at Lambeth was the first mainstream religious community to accept birth control. Those resolutions show that her rhetoric had indeed influenced religious leaders, and they were a turning point in Protestant acceptance of birth control in the early 1930s United States. She successfully took an idea that led many conservatives to fear a rise in promiscuity and looser sexual values, and instead turned their fears upside down by promoting the ways in which birth control could actually help the virtuous marriages of religious masses.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the critical decade of the 1920s, Margaret Sanger moved her cause of making birth control accessible from the radical outskirts, with an accompanying stigma of immorality, into mainstream approval by some of the United States' most influential Protestant leaders. She successfully argued that birth control would enable people to improve their lives and marriages in ways that ensured greater moral virtue, and she undercut the association of birth control with the immorality of prostitution and promiscuity. She was able to accomplish these changes by slowly shifting during the decade in order to move her message from the radical, post-war left towards mainstream, public acceptability by the relatively conservative power base of Protestant leaders.

After she secured the approval of Anglicans at Lambeth in 1930, the American denominations quickly fell in line as well with the Federal Council of Churches in Christ in 1931. After the FCC's approval of birth control, Sanger declared that "Today is the most significant one in the history of the birth control movement."¹ A couple weeks later, she gave a speech in which she proudly acknowledged, "With the amendment made by the Federal Council of Churches, woman has achieved justice at length through the recognition of birth control as a means of making happier homes and happier marriages."² Following approval by the churches, she was able to secure the other two critical targets of her movement by gaining legal and medical approval. Driven by the impetus of the churches, the landmark *One Package* decision in 1936 and approval by the American Medical Association in 1937 secured widespread, conservative approval from all the powerful professional groups she had courted during the 1920s and early 1930s. Despite this turning point in the movement in the 1920s and 1930s, some more fundamentalist Protestant denominations, as well as the Roman Catholic Church, did not come around to her cause for birth control. In 1931, Pope Pius XI issued a papal encyclical denouncing

¹ "Federal Council on Birth Control: An Editorial," *Outlook and Independent* (April 1, 1931): 458.

² "Hails Church Move for Birth Control: Mrs. Sanger Tells Audience it Signalizes the 'Biological Emancipation' of Women," *New York Times* (April 15, 1931): 32.

birth control and, to this day, the Church has not wavered in that stance.³ However, considering the history of thousands of years of a consistent, unified stance against birth control in Judeo-Christian religious theology, even as late as 1920, this dramatic break over the course of a single decade was certainly noteworthy.

Throughout the decade, she emphasized the humanitarian, health and quality of life improvements that birth control could bring. Sanger showed that the lives of women and children were perilously affected by uncontrolled reproduction, and by allowing couples to limit the size of their family, religious leaders could alleviate the suffering and unnecessary health and wellness concerns that afflicted millions across the country. Women would live healthier lives and suffer less from continual pregnancies, and diseases would be alleviated if they were known to be aggravated by pregnancy. Fewer women would resort to abortion to control the size of their families. Finally, the health of infants and children would be preserved and protected as women were able to space children further apart, limit contagious diseases, and have only those children for whom they could adequately care.

As the decade progressed and she moved further to the right, Sanger increasingly emphasized to conservatives the ways in which birth control would improve the quality of marriages which were perceived to be in peril by the 1920s. As divorces increased, she argued that birth control would strengthen and increase marriages, and, as a result, would reduce the common practice of prostitution among both unmarried young men and dissatisfied married men. Marriages were increasingly pitched as a place for spiritual connection and intimacy, not just procreation, and on the heels of Freud's revelations, Sanger argued that the expectation of abstinence in marriages for family limitation was simply unnatural and impracticable. As

³ Pope Pius XI, "Quadragesimo Anno," May 15, 1931. The title of the encyclical, Latin for "The Fortieth Year," referred to another encyclical issued forty years earlier by Pope Leo XIII, "Rerum Novarum," which concerned the condition of workers. Libreria Editrice Vaticana. http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html, Accessed January 28, 2015.

conservatives looked for ways to strengthen the institution of marriage, Sanger came in with a solution that seemed to meet many moral concerns in an effective and widespread way.

Many of the issues raised by Sanger in her effort to put forward birth control as a moral reform are still relevant today. The most obvious extension of these dilemmas is the dispute over publicly-funded access to birth control, an issue which has come up recently with the national Affordable Care Act, since many religious agencies refuse to provide their employees with insurance that supports contraception. Another continual dispute is the question of legalized abortion rights, a battle which is still being bitterly debated forty years after legalization with the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973.

Even more broadly, though, other ethical questions have brought about similar tensions of traditional religious dogma versus modern interpretations and reform. Almost one hundred years later, churches still find themselves navigating issues that have arisen with new scientific developments in genetics and fertility, as scientists develop greater technology to analyze human DNA and genetic coding. It is now possible to decipher potential diseases or tendencies in living children and adults, and even in embryos whose fate is yet to be determined. Leaders of religion will face many of the same questions that Sanger posed about utilizing science and technology to improve conditions in modern society and reduce disease and suffering. Finally, Sanger's arguments about the changing purpose of marriage outside of procreation, companionate love, and the resulting happiness of more stable families will certainly resonate with some religious leaders as they tackle the current debate over legalizing gay marriage.

Much as they did one hundred years ago, public opinion, religious approval, legal authority, government legislation, and scientific understanding all intertwine and influence one another. As each group examines traditional teachings and understandings, they also acknowledge the changing values and potential benefits to society that modern ideas may offer. They must then find a way to decipher and interpret the complex meaning of what is most moral and just for society in an ever-changing world.

Margaret Sanger successfully persuaded relatively conservative religious leaders to approve of birth control as a humanitarian and family-friendly reform, and her success drove further victories among legal and medical professionals. Her shift in this critical decade brought her movement the triumph she sought. As Sanger wrote in a May 1930 issue of the *Birth Control Review*, “The attitude of religion is perhaps the focal point of the whole birth control situation....The motivation towards action must spring from a fervent belief in the rightness of the movement....What will finally win this fight...is a positive belief in the idea that sex is fine and holy, that the body and spirit are not enemies, but one.”⁴ Finally, after winning approval at Lambeth and from some more liberal denominations at home, she accurately proclaimed, “With the Churches in the vanguard, the cause of birth control is assured.”⁵ By convincing mainline Protestant leaders of the “rightness” of birth control, she assured the success of her movement.

⁴ “The Churches and Birth Control: A Symposium,” *Birth Control Review* (May 1930): 129.

⁵ “The Churches and Birth Control: A Symposium,” 129.

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