The religious battle over birth control and the unpleasant motivation that fueled it

January 8 2020, by Michele W. Berger

Concerns around sex and gender have divided American religious groups for more than a century, but sociologist Melissa Wilde wanted to understand which hot-button issue caused the first chasm.

"Instead of taking it as a given that progressive religious groups and

secular Americans were progressive on issues like abortion, feminism and contraception, and that conservatives were conservative, I wanted to understand how it happened," says Wilde, an associate professor in Penn's Department of Sociology in the School of Arts and Sciences who studies the sociology of religion.

Following a hunch, she started digging, ultimately examining more than 50 years of periodicals for each of more than 30 of America's most prominent religious groups. Together these groups represented more than 90 percent of religious Americans at that time.

As she suspected, birth control topped the list for most divisive issue, spurred by nine religious groups that liberalized in the late 1920s and early 1930s, rather suddenly calling for the legalization of contraception. After nearly a decade of research that included help from more than 60 Penn undergrads and graduate students, Wilde published her book "Birth Control Battles: How Race and Class Divided American Religion."

Penn Today spoke with her about her book and what turns out to be a dark chapter in a narrative often described as a great success story in the history of women's rights.

After the turn of the 20th century, what does the conversation around contraception look like in the United States?

It was really about whose fertility was perceived to be desirable and whose was not. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants were having about two kids per woman, and newer immigrants who were, by and large, Catholic or Jewish were having about four. Eugenicists were deeply concerned about this difference.

Eugenicists believed that humans could and should breed better humans by encouraging the fertility of desirable parents and discouraging—and sometimes even legally limiting—the fertility of those they deemed undesirable for racial, religious, or class-based reasons. Eugenicists also believed that if contraception became more easily accessible, 'undesirables' would begin using it as much as WASPs already were, closing the gap in the birth rate that they deeply feared was leading to 'race suicide.'

The religious groups that first began promoting contraception did so because they deeply believed in eugenics, feared race suicide, and ultimately began to consider promoting contraception as their religious duty.

People might consider that pretty shocking to hear.

I think we as feminists don't know this part of our story very well. I don't think we've come to terms with it. But it's our history and we need to know it.

Starting in the 1930s and later, how did this progress during the next several decades?

The groups that liberalized early developed an identity as religious sexual progressives. They talked about being first in this arena and wanted to continue to be seen as activists. Indeed, they still are.

Although they stopped using eugenics language very early on—by 1935, openly eugenic language generally faded—the sentiment behind their activism, that the fertility of some groups was desirable and that of others was not, continued through 1965, after the FDA had approved the first oral contraceptive.

What did change was the focus of their activism. What started out as a concern about the fertility of Italian and Irish and Jewish immigrants in the U.S. became centered on different racial populations, namely blacks in inner cities and the poor in the 'third world.'

Now that we have a better sense of this history, what do we do with this knowledge?

Writing 'Birth Control Battles' made me realize that what can be seen as unquestionably right and progressive in one era might be seen as deeply wrong and conservative less than a century later.

It has also taught me that religion intersects with various forms of inequality, especially those associated with race, class, and gender, and that examining those intersections historically can help us to understand why our society is the way it is today.

Practically speaking, it has made me rethink many of my taken-for-granted assumptions as a feminist. For example, it has made me question my acceptance of the idea of 'responsible parenthood.' Growing up in the 80s I got the message about responsible parenthood for sure. As a young woman, I interpreted it as, 'don't be irresponsible' as an individual. Now, I realize that actually, the slogan comes from a concern about whole groups of people who were having 'too many' babies, regardless of whether they were loving, supportive, capable, or 'responsible' parents.

Provided by University of Pennsylvania