

Unravelling the Complex Roots of American Religious Divisions over Sex and Gender

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JANUARY 2025

doi.org/10.33548/SCIENTIA1132



ARTS, HUMANITIES &
SOCIAL SCIENCES

 Scientia





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In her groundbreaking book *Birth Control Battles*, sociologist Dr Melissa Wilde challenges conventional wisdom about the origins of religious divisions over sex and gender in America. Her research reveals that early 20th-century religious support for contraception was driven not by feminism as often assumed but by eugenic concerns and social reform movements. Her work offers a fresh perspective on the complex intersections of religion, race, and class in shaping American social attitudes.

Challenging Assumptions

In today's polarised political climate, it is easy to assume that religious divisions over issues of sex and gender are an inevitable reflection of broader cultural conflicts between progressives and conservatives. This division has become so entrenched that it now defines what it means to be progressive or conservative in America. Dr Melissa Wilde set out to uncover how this situation came to be, beginning with a simple question: Why is it taken for granted that conservative religious groups are conservative about sex and gender issues while progressive religious groups are progressive?

Her investigation led her back to the early 20th century when American religious groups first began to diverge on issues of sex and gender. Surprisingly, she found that the watershed moment occurred between 1929 and 1931 when nine prominent religious groups suddenly declared that birth control, far from being a sin, was actually a duty – at least for certain segments of the population.

The Eugenic Roots of Birth Control Support

This dramatic shift in religious attitudes towards contraception might seem, at first glance, to be a victory for women's rights and bodily autonomy. However, Dr Wilde's meticulous analysis reveals a far more troubling motivation behind this change: eugenics and fears of 'race suicide'. The early promoters of birth control were concerned about curtailing some people's fertility rates because they sincerely believed that 'race suicide' – the idea that white Anglo-Saxon Protestants were being outbred by immigrants and other 'undesirable' groups – was imminent. This finding forces us to confront an uncomfortable truth: the liberalisation of attitudes towards birth control among some religious groups was driven not by concerns for women's rights or health but by racist and classist ideologies aimed at controlling the reproduction of 'undesirable' populations.

A Comprehensive Approach

Dr Wilde's research methodology, comparative-historical sociology, is based on examining history as systematically as possible by thinking through issues of generalisability, bias, and comparison, then identifying and accounting for or disproving alternative explanations. To achieve this, she carefully examined a wide range of religious denominations over an extended period. Her study includes 31 denominations that represented more than 90% of Americans who claimed membership of a religious group in 1926. This broad sample allows for meaningful comparisons across different theological traditions, geographical regions, and socioeconomic backgrounds. To gather data, Dr Wilde and her team examined over 10,000 articles from more than 70 secular and religious periodicals covering the period from 1918 to 1965. This comprehensive approach allowed her to identify patterns and relationships that might not be apparent in a more narrowly focused study.

Key Factors in Birth Control Support

One of the most surprising findings was that whether a religious group supported legalising access to contraception had little to do with their stance on women's rights or feminism. Instead, the key factors were whether the group subscribed to white supremacist eugenic beliefs and was concerned about 'race suicide' and whether the group was part of the social gospel movement, a progressive Christian movement focused on addressing social problems through religious action. Religious groups that embraced both eugenics and the social gospel were the most likely to become early supporters of birth control. These groups saw contraception as a tool for racial and social engineering rather than as a means of empowering women.

Dr Wilde's research also sheds light on the role of influential organisations in shaping religious attitudes towards birth control. While Margaret Sanger's American Birth Control League (ABCL) is



often credited with spearheading the movement for contraceptive access, Dr Wilde found that it had relatively little direct influence on most religious denominations. Instead, the American Eugenics Society (AES), with which Sanger was also connected, played a much more significant role in shaping religious leaders' views on birth control. Through its Committee on Cooperating with Clergymen, the AES actively cultivated relationships with religious leaders, particularly those from denominations in the Northeast. These efforts were instrumental in convincing many religious groups that legalising birth control was crucial to the nation's 'racial health'.

A Spectrum of Religious Responses

Dr Wilde's research reveals four main categories of religious responses to the birth control debate in the early 20th century.

- **Early Liberalisers:** These groups supported both eugenics and the social gospel movement. They were the most vocal advocates for legalising birth control.
- **Unofficial Supporters:** These denominations shared concerns about 'race suicide' but were not part of the social gospel movement. They gave unofficial support to birth control without taking a public stance.
- **Critics:** Groups that rejected both eugenics and the social gospel movement were openly critical of birth control reform.
- **Silent Groups:** Some denominations, particularly those that were racially or ethnically marginalised, believed in the social gospel movement but rejected eugenic ideologies. These groups tended to remain silent on the issue of birth control.

Theology, in the strict sense of doctrinal differences, played a surprisingly small role in determining a denomination's stance on birth control. Instead, factors like geography, class, and racial attitudes were far more influential. For example, Southern denominations, despite often sharing theological similarities with their Northern counterparts, often had very different views on birth

control. This was primarily due to different racial dynamics in the South, where Catholic and Jewish immigrants were more likely to be seen as potential allies in maintaining white supremacy rather than as threats to the racial order.

The Complex Religion Framework

Dr Wilde's work is not just a historical examination; it offers valuable insights into the complex intersections of religion, race, class, and gender that continue to shape American social and political discourse today. By revealing the eugenic roots of early religious support for birth control, she challenges simplistic narratives and assumptions about the relationship between progressive social movements and support for reproductive rights. Many of the religious groups that were early supporters of birth control had also been active in other progressive causes, such as abolition, temperance, and women's suffrage. However, Dr Wilde's research reveals that these connections were not as straightforward as one might assume. 'Complex religion', the theoretical framework Dr Wilde develops in her book, argues that religion is inextricably linked with racial, ethnic, class, and gender inequality. This approach encourages researchers to consider how religious beliefs and practices intersect with and are shaped by other forms of social stratification.

Evolving Attitudes During the Twentieth Century

As Dr Wilde traces the evolution of religious attitudes towards birth control from the 1930s through the 1960s, she identifies several key trends. The early liberalisers and unofficial supporters continued to promote contraception, but their focus shifted from concerns about immigrants to alarm about fertility rates in developing countries and among urban minorities in the United States. By the 1950s and 1960s, Dr Wilde identifies two main groups:



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- **Religious Promoters:** These groups, which included the early liberalisers and unofficial supporters, became deeply concerned with overpopulation and saw contraception as crucial to addressing global issues.
- **Reluctant Endorsers:** These groups, which included many former critics and silent groups, eventually accepted contraception but did so reluctantly and with a focus on its use within Christian marriage rather than as a solution to global problems.

These trends demonstrate the persistent influence of early 20th-century eugenic ideologies on religious attitudes towards contraception, even as the explicit language of eugenics fell out of favour.

Implications and Future Directions

Dr Wilde's work has significant implications for our understanding of contemporary debates over reproductive rights and religious freedom. By revealing the complex and often troubling history behind religious stances on contraception in America, she challenges us to think more critically about the origins and motivations behind current religious activism on issues of sex and gender, and invites us to reconsider our assumptions about the historical trajectory of progressive causes.

MEET THE RESEARCHER

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Dr Melissa Wilde is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, where she currently serves as Chair of the department. She received her PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, in 2002. Dr Wilde's research focuses on the intersection of religion, race, and class in American society. Her work has earned numerous awards, including the 2020 Distinguished Book Award from the American Sociological Association's Section on the Sociology of Religion for *Birth Control Battles*. Dr Wilde has also received the Charles Tilly Best Article Award and multiple Distinguished Article Awards. She served as President of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in 2014. Dr Wilde's innovative 'complex religion' framework encourages researchers to consider how religious beliefs and practices intersect with other forms of social stratification. Her work challenges conventional wisdom about the origins of religious divisions over sex and gender in America.

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FUNDING

National Science Foundation

The Louisville Institute

University Research Foundation, University of Pennsylvania



FURTHER READING

MJ Wilde, *Birth Control Battles: How Race and Class Divided American Religion*, 2019. University of California Press. ISBN: 9780520303218



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