

CONTEMPORARY PROTESTANT ATTITUDES ON CONTRACEPTION

Even a relatively superficial analysis of the contemporary American scene reveals how widespread and profound our disagreements concerning the nature and meaning of sex and marriage have become. As the experts tell us, our culture is pluralistic. Briefly, this means that American society includes a variety of subgroups embracing diverse religious beliefs, conceptions of human nature, standards of conduct, and patterns of behavior. To be sure, American Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and the unchurched recognize a more or less common unity of outlook broadly termed the *American Way*, but within the limits of this general framework of national objectives and sentiments, we have all freely developed our own systems of beliefs, norms, and practices.

Modern Americans are becoming increasingly aware of basic value differences on the family front because during the past few generations we have been forced to adapt to the rapid changes introduced by amazing developments in health care, extensive industrialization, and widespread urbanization. But adjustments or adaptations resulting in new standards and patterns of conduct are necessarily devised in terms of the underlying values and beliefs that people cherish. Unfortunately, because we tend to encounter basic differences in value systems primarily at the level of conduct, that is, in the form of specific practices, we seldom reflect that differences in conduct logically imply differences in what people believe.

This failure to grasp the necessary relationship between approved conduct and underlying values is bound to beget confusion and misunderstanding. Some Catholics, for example, tend to regard practices of which they disapprove merely as more or less willful deviations from right moral conduct, forgetting that these practices may be based on different beliefs, and consequently that what is really involved is a clash of two different philosophies of life.

Up to the present, Americans have remained quite unaware of the profound meaning and practical implications of cultural plural-

ism. In this connection it is well to recall that the coexistence of diverse conceptions or "images" of man within a given culture assumes significance primarily to the extent that these images are relevant to the goals, norms, and conduct approved by participants of the culture. Briefly stated, this relevance stems from the fact that conceptions or images of man fulfill an essential role in the genesis of cultural goals, the formulation of institutional norms, and the choice of behavioral patterns. At the base of every institution or cultural system, at least in origin and early development, is found a conception of man. Just as every enduring society embodies a set of broad cultural goals and through its norms and approved conduct defines, regulates, and controls the acceptable modes of attaining them, so behind this unified cultural complex lies a deeper unity stemming from a shared image of man. There exists a vision, an outlook, and a tradition representing the accumulated fruit of centuries of common thought and shared experience.

However, as the practical implications of cultural pluralism are made explicit in a society facing extensive change, the vision becomes blurred, the outlook is fragmented, and the tradition ceases to be vitally unifying. Historically, at least, it was a common set of religious beliefs that furnished the essential elements of the traditional western image of man. If religion were to furnish this basis no longer, our family institution, as well as our entire system of values, would be deprived of its logical basis. This reminder appears necessary because there are those who apparently wish to retain some of our traditional values while selecting, reinterpreting, or rejecting the religious elements upon which they are logically premised. As Renan once remarked, such reformers are trying to live on the perfume of an empty vase.

In the light of these observations, it should be clear that the controversy over birth control represents more than a mere dispute concerning contraceptive means, or the attempt of a religious minority to maintain intact its traditional position relating to sex and the family. At the heart of the controversy are found conflicting conceptions of the human agent, of man's status in the cosmic order, and of the method by which man specifies the contents of the "oughtness" that he universally recognizes as a quality of his conscious

human acts. The population problem touches the very foundations of social structure, for concern with human reproduction not only lies at the core of organization in all human societies but reflects one of the major drives of human nature. Attitudes on contraception, therefore, necessarily imply some consideration of the relationship between the function of sex and personal development, as well as between the purposes of marriage and the exigencies of the human community.

The major difficulties we face in the present discussion stem primarily from the historical fact that the various Protestant bodies have not developed a clearly articulated, consistent doctrine concerning these relationships. As Dr. Fagley has remarked in this connection,

Moving from Roman Catholic to Protestant doctrine seems a bit like moving from an elaborate formal garden to a wildwood with many trails. The systematic paths lined with ancient boxwood, carefully pruned, are no longer in evidence, although in Calvinism and certain phases of Puritanism there are some elements of a new legalism. In general, however, Evangelical trails move freely and rather unsystematically through the wildwood.

The leaders of the Reformation differed from Rome on many issues related to sex and marriage, but in regard to parenthood the viewpoints of Wittenburg, Geneva, and Canterbury tended to remain as strongly pro-fertility as that of Rome. There was a sound non-theological basis for this attitude. Up to roughly the beginning of the nineteenth century, western nations were concerned with under-population rather than overpopulation. Even during the nineteenth century the struggle of the "birth control" movement received little support from Protestant theologians, though Protestant laymen were active in the movement and their concern with the standard of living of the poor, as well as the welfare of mothers and children, was bound to impress their religious leaders. However, the economic disruptions following World War I, and in particular the widespread depression of the thirties, brought the problem of birth control squarely to the fore.

¹ Richard M. Fagley, *The Population Explosion and Christian Responsibility* New York, 1960, 189.

It appears that the Anglican Communion was the first major Protestant body to give the problem systematic attention. A Church of England statement favorable to the principle of contraception was issued as early as 1923, while in 1930 the 260 Anglican bishops of the Lambeth Conference reversed the stand of the 1908 and 1920 Conferences condemning birth control and adopted, by a vote of roughly three to one, a somewhat cautious resolution stating that "where there is a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood" although complete abstinence is the "primary and obvious method," if there are morally sound reasons for avoiding abstinence, "the Conference agrees that other methods may be used, provided that this is done in the light of . . . Christian principles."

The pre-World War II statements of various Protestant bodies tend to stress the need for a full personal relationship between husband and wife, and for healthy and stable families. Thus the Committee on Marriage and Home of the U.S. Federal Council of Churches prepared a statement in 1931 declaring that while conjugal relations "have their source in the thought and purpose of God, first for the creation of human life, but also as a manifestation of divine concern for the happiness of those who have so wholly merged their lives," because abstinence within marriage except for the few is neither satisfactory nor desirable, "the careful and restrained use of contraceptives by married people is valid and moral." The Federal Council did not act on this early statement, but its publication aroused considerable public discussion.

In the same year (1931) the Congregational Christian General Council stated, "We favor the principle of voluntary child bearing, believing that it sacramentalizes physical union and safeguards the well-being of the family and society." In 1936 the General Council of the United Church of Canada supported the establishment of Voluntary Parenthood Clinics on the grounds that the right to use present-day knowledge to determine the occasions for procreation implies the right of access to such knowledge. The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends also stressed the importance of approved contraceptives for freedom and spontaneity in conjugal relations, and for child-spacing. The General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in 1946 favored the adequate conveyance of med-

ical information as an aid to more wholesome family life, and so on. The following year the Evangelical and Reformed General Synod supported "the right of married persons to all appropriate medical aid in the wisest planning of their families."

Meanwhile, concern with declining birth rates led British church bodies to speak with less assurance on the problem. The Methodist Conference of Great Britain in 1939 emphasized the need for a "fresh acceptance of the responsibility and obligation of parenthood." Conception control should aim at producing "the healthiest family in the healthiest sort of way." The Department of Social Responsibility of the British Council of Churches maintained in 1943 that "The use of contraceptive methods can only be justified if the marriage bond and married love are thereby truly honored and not debased, if the obligation to parenthood is the better fulfilled and not evaded, if family life is enriched and not impoverished, and if increase and not diminution of good comes to society." A year later a special Commission of the Church of Scotland insisted that parents are morally bound to consider the demands of the common good in planning the size of their families, though it did not rule out the use of contraceptives entirely.

Official statements of the Protestant bodies after World War II reflect both the internal influence of developing Protestant theological thought related to sex and marriage and the external influence of growing awareness concerning population pressures, the problems of rapid social change, and the widespread "revolution of expectations" among the underdeveloped countries. Among the contributions of the major theologians we might name H. Emil Brunner in *The Divine Imperative*; Reinhold Niebuhr in his first series of Gifford lectures (*The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I*); Karl Barth in Vol. III of *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*; Paul Tillich in *Love, Power, and Justice*; Otto Piper in *The Christian Interpretation of Sex*; Leslie Weatherhead in *The Mastery of Sex Through Psychology and Religion*; H. C. Warner in "Theological Issues of Contraception," *Theology*, LVII, January, 1954; D. Sherwin Bailey in *The Mystery of Love and Marriage and Sexual Relation in Christian Thought*; Jacques Ellul in "Positions des Eglises Protestantes à l'égard de la Famille," *Renouveau des Idées sur la Famille*; Dietrich Bonhoeffer

in *Ethics*; and the major articles in *The Family in Contemporary Society*, the authoritative Anglican publication prepared by the Moral Welfare Council of the Church of England for discussion at the 1958 Lambeth Conference.

Although the viewpoints developed in these contributions tend to stress different aspects of marriage and the family, stem from different theological traditions, and consequently reflect no complete consensus among the various writers, several similar conceptions do emerge. Contrary to the traditional Christian stress on procreation as the primary purpose of marriage, emphasis is now placed on the companionate purpose, or the promotion of the mutual love of the spouses, as a co-equal end. In line with this shift, some writers of the Anglican persuasion place great stress on the Pauline doctrine concerning the significance of *henosis*, the union of man and wife in one flesh that takes place within the marriage relationship; while other Protestant writers, following an emphasis of Calvin, stress the concept of community and procreation. These ends are independent of each other and are of equal importance. Further, since these writers deny that the spiritual effects of *coitus* depend on the act's conformity to certain empirical physiological features, they agree in concluding that there exists no objective criterion by which the morality of physical sexual acts between man and woman can be judged.

Inasmuch as the previously indicated external factors affecting recent Protestant positions are well known, we can pass directly to a consideration of official pronouncements. Perhaps the most significant statement of churches following the Calvinist tradition was issued in 1952 by the General Synod of the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk. This maintains that new conditions may justify family limitation and since medical science has upset the "natural" balance between births and deaths, family planning is not "unnatural" or contrary to faith in divine providence. Because common conjugal life is important, family limitation should not mean cessation of marital relations. Once birth control is justified, the ways and means are up to the couple—it is not means but motives that are determinant.

In 1954 the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

took practically the same position, emphasizing the child's need for love, care, and nurture. Two years later (1956) the General Conference of the Methodist Church in the United States adopted the following proposition, "We believe that planned parenthood, practiced in Christian conscience, may fulfill rather than violate the Will of God." The same year the United Lutheran Church in the United States adopted a statement stressing responsible parenthood, family size determined by the health and welfare of the mother, and choice as to the means of birth control to be made with the help of medical advice. The Church of Finland (a Lutheran body) and the National Council of the Reformed Church of France issued similar statements at this time.

Although it seems that the framers of the preparatory report (The Warren Report) for the 1958 Lambeth Conference desired a forthright statement on the morality of contraception, the Conference resolution on family planning, while apparently giving unanimous approval to family limitation, remains rather vague and avoids any pronouncement on the *objective morality* of contraceptive use. Thus, Resolution 115 of the Conference reads:

The Conference believes that the responsibility for deciding upon the number and frequency of children has been laid by God upon the consciences of parents everywhere; that this planning, in such ways as are mutually acceptable to husband and wife in Christian conscience, is a right and important factor in Christian family life and should be the result of positive choice before God. Such responsible parenthood, build on obedience to all the duties of marriage, requires a wise stewardship of the resources and abilities of the family as well as a thoughtful consideration of the varying population needs and problems of society and the claims of future generations.

It is interesting to note that the National Council of the Protestant Episcopal Church, meeting in Milwaukee in 1959, affirmed its support of the Lambeth Resolutions and urged the study of the Report of Committee Five of the Conference entitled, "The Family in Contemporary Society," but also refrained from pronouncing on the objective morality of contraceptive use.

On the other hand, the International Convention of the Disciples of Christ in 1958 gave considerable emphasis to "population control

based on education concerning the use of efficient birth control techniques" when speaking of world population problems. Also the United Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A. in 1959 reversed previous condemnations of birth control, approved the principle of voluntary family planning and responsible parenthood, and affirmed "that the proper use of medically approved contraceptives may contribute to the spiritual, emotional, and economic welfare of the family."

Although the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church has in the past maintained "that birth control is a violation of God's creation order," Prof. Alfred Rehwinkel in *Planned Parenthood* (Concordia, 1959) notes that 60 per cent of those replying to a church questionnaire "favored a judicious practice of birth control," and suggests that the validity and adequacy of the Synod's traditional position is being questioned. The various pentecostal and faith groups have not issued statements on this subject, though there is some evidence that they do not favor the use of contraceptives. In general, however, the various Protestant bodies that have not officially supported birth control leave it up to the consciences of individual members of their congregations to decide for themselves.

This brief review of recent developments in Protestant thinking and pronouncements suggests that the overwhelming weight of Protestant opinion favors some form of family limitation, as well as the use of contraceptive birth control at least to some degree. As we indicated at the beginning of our presentation, however, no clear-cut, over-all Protestant position has emerged. In this connection, it is well to remind ourselves that any adequate discussion of contemporary Protestant attitudes concerning contraception must be based on some understanding of the distinctive character of Protestant ethics. Briefly stated, there exists no cumulative body of Protestant moral laws related to specific situations by means of a tradition of moral philosophy or casuistry. A few biblicist forms of Protestantism attempt to derive such laws directly from biblical texts, while individual religious leaders have frequently elevated their personal interpretations to the status of law, but there has developed no integrated, cumulative, enduring system or systems. One of the major issues in ethics currently preoccupying Protestant thinkers is the methodological question concerning the relationship

between the universal elements in an ethical judgment and the unique elements in the concrete situation. A strong "existentialist" mood among many influential Protestant thinkers causes them to challenge a Christian ethic based upon principles and consequently to cast discredit on universal ethical judgments. Nevertheless, through a process of continuous conversation with each other, Protestant leaders tend to develop a trend of thinking or a broad type of consensus on many important issues.

As we have tried to show, some approximation to a Protestant consensus on family limitation and contraception is rapidly developing. One characteristic of the emerging consensus is the rejection of an *a priori* hierarchy among the various contraceptive methods. If made effective and safe, there exists no inherent moral distinction between periodic continence, contraceptives, and drugs to inhibit or control ovulation. What is right or wrong depends upon the needs and gifts of the individual couple, including the degree of effectiveness their peculiar situation requires. The methods, *qua* methods, are morally neutral.

It appears that most Protestants maintain that the spacing of children, or at least the limitation of their number, is essential for their welfare and the health of the mother, and that it is neither possible nor right to depend on long continued periods of sexual abstinence to achieve this result. Their approach is based on two assumptions; first, that sexual intercourse has two purposes: the expression of love between the spouses and the procreation of children; and second, that the former purpose should not be subordinated to the latter.

To understand the Protestant position we must keep two points clearly in mind. First, Protestants believe that it is their moral obligation to limit the number of births and that it is morally wrong to advise a married couple to refrain from intercourse for long periods, since this kind of advice puts far too great a strain upon marriage and consequently is itself "unnatural." Hence the practice of birth control is regarded as a duty, not a matter of moral laxity. Second, they believe that birth control should not be practiced as an escape from parenthood. Usually there is a responsibility to have children as well as to limit their number. Either to give birth to

children or to prevent the birth of children may be irresponsible, so the individual couple should approach such decisions conscientiously, prayerfully, and in the spirit of obedience to God.

In general, Protestant thinkers tend to evaluate conjugal sexuality primarily in terms of marital community and companionship, and almost independently of procreation. The particular good of the individual couple as they themselves define it under the inspiration of faith prevails over the universal natural law. Indeed, this is the heart of Catholic-Protestant differences—for the followers of Luther and Calvin the natural law has little significance because the Fall vitiated human nature. The “orders” of creation, the tendencies and norms of which we discover empirically, do not correspond to the transcendent order of God revealed by faith. As William G. Cole in *Sex in Christianity and Psychoanalysis* states it, “The outer, objective, static law, even if it be the divine law, must not be confused with the personal, dynamic will of God. This is always the mistake of legalism, whatever guise it may assume, Pharisaic, Roman Catholic, or Puritan” (p. 185). And in *The Divine Imperative*, Brunner makes this position eminently clear, “Above all ‘orders,’ even above the order of Creation, stands the will of God, which here and now requires nothing of me save that I should meet my neighbor in the spirit of responsible love. But no universal law can anticipate what this means in a world confused and corrupted by sin” (p. 355).

Against the current background of insistent world population problems, emerging Protestant consensus, and clear-cut, doctrinally profound Catholic-Protestant differences, several suggestions relevant to the development of Catholic moral theology appear pertinent. First, the theological and philosophical assumptions underlying present Protestant positions must be clearly understood and carefully distinguished from competing, contemporary secular views implying no transcendental value referents. Second, means must be developed to provide for a more adequate understanding of Catholic doctrine concerning the ends or purposes of marriage. This would involve a balanced consideration of the procreative and educative aspects of the primary purpose, together with more effective emphasis on the responsibilities of parenthood and the consequent need to develop marital companionship. Third, the moral implications of

current population trends must be faced realistically. Under present conditions of early marriage, health care, urbanization, and so on, it seems obvious that a good percentage of fertile couples must give some consideration to the regulation of family size. Finally, there exists serious need for the development of greater consensus among religious leaders and teachers concerning the practical moral issues routinely confronting modern Christians. In this connection it is well to note that the current lack of uniform teaching and consensus on the nature, purposes, and norms pertaining to both premarital and marital chastity greatly endangers the integral survival of the Catholic minority in our pluralistic society, for the resulting confusion tends to generate a readiness to conform to dominant cultural patterns that all too frequently are based on unacceptable premises of values.

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