A STRANGE CONVERGENCE? POPES AND FEMINISTS ON CONTRACEPTION

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1. Introduction

The publication, in 1968, of Humanae Vitae, confirmed the official teaching of the Roman Catholic church that no contraceptive practices are lawful within marriage. The journal Inside the Vatican defiantly published a special supplement celebrating Humanae Vitae 30 years on, declaring Pope Paul VI, the author of the encyclical, a prophet. While the anti-contraceptive arguments of the encyclical and subsequent official endorsements of them are generally rejected by Christians and non-Christians, a set of converging arguments leading to similar conclusions, emerges from an unexpected quarter—a strand of twentieth-century feminism. Many people may find these arguments equally implausible. In this essay I analyse both streams of argument. Some points of convergence are noted, the arguments re-stated, and the conclusion reached that there remains a remarkable wisdom in each of them.

2. Papal Teaching

Papal arguments against contraception can be usefully classified into three types. These are that contraception is (1) contrary to natural law; (2) contrary to the ‘inseparable connection’ between ‘procreative’ and ‘unitive’ sexual activity; and (3) an expression of a decadent society, culture, or ‘mentality’. In this section each type is described and criticized.


2. For a more detailed account of these types of anti-contraceptive argument, see my Marriage after Modernity: Christian Marriage in Postmodern Times (STAS, 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press; New York: New York University Press, 1999), pp. 182-204.

3. Casti Connubii (1930), part iv. He was responding to the 1930 Lambeth Conference, which, with several qualifications, approved contraceptive practice within marriage.


6. It is important to be precise. A secular British source says, ‘Natural methods’ means the “sympto-thermal method” which “combines the temperature method, cervical mucus method and calendar method with some other signs. These signs include the position, softness or firmness of your cervix and whether its entrance is slightly open or tightly closed, ovulation pain and breast discomfort.’ If it is used
There are obvious arguments against natural law. First, 'the spacing of births' relies on advanced medical knowledge, yet this very knowledge was unknown to earlier generations and brings the very reproductive and contraceptive technologies the Vatican dislikes. Second, as an Anglican report argued in 1958, the spiritual nature of women and men enables them both to stand outside 'nature' while firmly belonging to it. Third, the issue remains whether couples who deliberately abstain from love-making during fertile periods but who make love at other times are practising the 'spacing of births', or NFP, or whether they are practising contraception. This is because not having sex at certain times is not just not doing anything, and so not doing anything wrong. As Gareth Moore points out, 'They do not just not have intercourse; they actively avoid intercourse, as part of their plan to avoid children', and this practice, although allowed by Casti Connubii, is clearly inconsistent with that encyclical's portentous proscription of 'any use whatsoever of maternity exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life'. Fourth, there is a theological problem about the mission of transmitting human life. While God may 'plan' to perpetuate the human race through the uncontracepted love-making of spouses, it does not follow from this rather anthropomorphic depiction of God's intention that every act of love-making must be uncontracepted.

2. The 'Unbreakable Connection' between 'Procreative' and 'Unitive' Sexual Activity

Conjugal love is stated in Humanae Vitae to be 'a very special form of personal friendship whereby the spouses generously share everything with each other'. Granted the totality of 'everything', contraception is then able to be interpreted as a withholding of each partner from the

according to instructions it is '98% effective'. Leaflet 'Contraception: Choosing and Using Natural Methods', Contraceptive Education Service and Family Planning Association, undated (but in circulation in 1997).


9. Humanae Vitae, section 9, emphasis added.

other, a failure to share the God-given power of fecundity. Conjugal love is required to be 'both faithful and exclusive to the end of life'. But the Church's teaching about the operation of this natural law is that 'it is necessary that each conjugal act remain ordained in itself to the procreation of human life'. However, the grounds offered for the view that each act must be open to life are based a priori on the doctrine of marriage revised as recently as the Second Vatican Council, and not on natural law at all. Just as marriage has two ends, 'the procreation and education of children' and the 'mutual love of the partners', so sexual intercourse conveys these meanings simultaneously, and inseparably.

Once again there are compelling counter-arguments. First, there has to be a suspicious ring about the centrality of mutual love in the doctrine of marriage. However, welcome the emphasis, it is a very late development in Catholicism, occurring first in Casti Connubii in 1930. It is an island of innovation in a sea of conservatism. Second, married partners may wish, as an expression of mutual love, to separate union from procreation, something 'nature' in any case may be said to achieve for them most of the time. Third, we might reopen the question why all love-making a married couple ever makes must fall under the joint rubrics of mutual self-donation and potential openness to the creation of new life? Why could not the couple cooperate with God in the mission of procreation by sometimes being open to new life? This position was adopted by the Lambeth Conferences of 1958 and 1968 and was recommended to Pope Paul VI by the commission whose advice he rejected in Humanae Vitae. The dogma of the unbreakable connection when applied to each act of sexual intercourse within marriage has no historical warrant and can impose intolerable strains on marriage.

3. Moral Deficit Arguments

According to this type of argument the evil of contraceptive use is either its contribution to a culture of death, or already a consequence of such a culture. Paul VI held contraception would 'justify behavior leading to marital infidelity or to a gradual weakening in the discipline of morals'. A decade or so after Humanae Vitae, Familiaris Consortio

12. Gaudium et Spes, section 50.
warned against a ‘contraceptive mentality’, a term which would appear more frequently in forthcoming Vatican documents. It was associated with ‘a corruption of the idea and the experience of freedom, conceived not as a capacity for realizing the truth of God’s plan for marriage and the family, but as an autonomous power of self-affirmation, often against others, for one’s own selfish well-being’.14 Contraception, then, is direct evidence of selfishness. The Pontifical Council for the Family document Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage associates the contraceptive mentality with ‘widespread, permissive laws’ and ‘all they imply in terms of contempt for life from the moment of conception to death’.15 The ‘prevailing mentality’ is to be sharply rejected. In Evangelium Vitae contraception and abortion are linked with a ‘culture of death’, a ‘conspiracy against life’,16 and another negative mentality, hedonism.

In very many…instances such practices are rooted in a hedonistic mentality unwilling to accept responsibility in matters of sexuality, and they imply a self-centered concept of freedom, which regards procreation as an obstacle to personal fulfillment. The life which could result from a sexual encounter thus becomes an enemy to be avoided at all costs, and abortion follows on from failed contraception.17

Investment in both contraception and abortion is evidence of a ‘veritable structure of sin’, a ‘war of the powerful against the weak’, and a ‘conspiracy against life’.18 Alternatively contraception is associated with consumer and anti-life mentalities, the ultimate reason for which is the absence in people’s hearts of God…”19

These arguments combine deeply-held convictions held by almost all Christians with highly contentious claims that detract from the extent of agreement which may already exist. One might ask whether the absolutist and increasingly strident position taken over all contraceptive use achieves anything, or is theologically unsustainable. Contraceptives cannot be disinvited; their use, however, is able to be modified, and this appears to be the more urgent problem, confining procreative sex-

ual activity to marriage. Even if it were true that contraceptives make adultery more likely because they make pregnancy less likely, that claim would sanction an argument to confine contraceptives within marriage, not to eliminate them altogether. Fidelity has always needed to be encouraged whether or not condoms are on sale or wives are on the pill. Again, is it the case that husbands lose respect for their wives because of contraception? If so, is it because they forget the natural fertility of their wives’ bodies, and come to see them only as pleasure-giving? Is it obviously true that in marriages where there has been no contraception, husbands’ respect for wives was maintained? The so-called rendering of the marital debt was just such an arrangement, and it contributes little to an adequate theology of marriage.

A principled argument exists that in some poor countries it would be better for fewer children to be born. There are also unexamined problems in the depiction of a culture of death, and in the unqualified support for ‘life’. Between 1950 and 1990 worldwide child mortality declined by two-thirds from around 300 births to 100 births per thousand, an improvement ‘to a greater degree than in the whole of previous world history’.20 This is a remarkable achievement, but is it not arguably a remarkable contribution to a culture of life? The culture of death also seems to be identified narrowly with the practices of contraception, abortion and euthanasia. (It is not extended, for example, to experimentation on animals, or the factory-farming of chickens or calves, or the shooting of migrating birds or wild animals for sport.) Couples who postpone the advent of children in order to establish careers, or to pay off their university tuition fees, or afford the down payment on a house and the enormous interest on a mortgage, may be offended by the suggestion that consumerism drives and ultimately corrupts their intentions.21

18. Evangelium Vitae, p. 22.

21. The document Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage (1996), in its description of 'an accentuated deterioration of the family and a certain corrosion of the values of marriage' includes marriage 'usually contracted at a later age'. See Introduction, section 1. The Council has not taken into account that the rising age of marriage is in fact a return to Elizabethan levels.
These arguments do not establish their desired conclusions or disguise that they rest on contested claims to authority. Despite these obvious difficulties, however, they deserve a rereading. Indeed, if they could be deployed to reach rather more modest, positive, conclusions, they might well increase their inductive credibility and engage the interest of a broader range of people. Before attempting a rereading it is time to consider very different arguments against contraception.

3. Some Feminist Arguments against Contraception

While moral deficit arguments lament the role of contraception in contributing to promiscuity, selfishness, lack of respect, contempt for life, and so on, some feminist arguments against contraception are based on the loss of control by women over their own bodies. Feminists at the turn of the century located men’s desire for heterosexual sexual intercourse as a root cause of their sexual and social subjugation. The removal of the fear of pregnancy which the growing availability of the condom was beginning to offer, was also, they noticed, the removal of the principal reason for refusing unwelcome sexual advances from men. The solution was not contraception but the complete reformation of sexual relations between men and women.

Francis Swiney, feminist and theosophist who wrote exactly a century ago, before the campaigning of Stella Browne and Marie Stopes for ‘birth control’ had begun, is one such feminist. While she hated church and religion for their complicity in the male-domination of women, she couched some of her arguments in terms that are remarkably redolent of papal language and teaching. She even proclaimed a doctrine of Natural Law which became the basis for the theosophical society she founded. Two of the rules were ‘to hold in reverence and sanctity the creative organs and functions, only exercising them for their natural, ordained and legitimate use’, and

to keep, as far as possible by individual effort, the Temple of the Body pure and undefiled; raising sex relations from the physical to the spiritual plane, and dedicating the creative life in the body to the highest uses.

Man regarding Woman as the creatrix of the Race, Woman regarding

Man as the appointed coadjutor in the supreme task of racebuilding, both labouring in Love to produce a perfect work. 23

The congruence between papal pronouncement against, and feminist deprecation of, illicit or excessive sexual intercourse in the early twentieth century, is extraordinary. Despite intense hostility between these types of thought, each has a doctrine of natural law. Each is worried by sexual immorality. Each thinks there is a purpose to sexual intercourse, and that that purpose is the procreation of children. Swiney’s language appears to echo, even if it does not endorse, a divine ordination and legislation of heterosexual sexual relations which excludes pleasure. Continence is the supreme virtue, whether for feminist or catholic. Clear echoes of Pauline teaching resonate within these feminist, anti-religious sentiments, while the assumed relationship between sexuality and spirituality, regarding one as ‘higher’ than the other, identifies more with contemporary conservative Christianity than with liberation movements, religious or secular.

Swiney and others advocated ‘free love’, yet this term meant the opposite of the meaning it came to have in the 1960s. Sexual intercourse was ‘free’ when, and only when, women consented to it, whether in marriage or not. Intercourse they thought, had become an activity too closely associated ‘with man’s view of woman as simply a sexual function and the notion that he could not survive without a sexual outlet’. 24 Such a view was held responsible for the acceptance of prostitution, child abuse and rape. Lucy Re-Bartlett and other feminists, with no idea that they were proclaiming longstanding Christian teaching, held that ‘Sex union in the human being should be limited strictly to the actual needs of creation’. 25 A picture of early twentieth-century sexology builds in which regular sexual intercourse is thought necessary for everyone’s health. The condom, by greatly reducing the risk of pregnancy, removed the main reason for refusing sexual intercourse. ‘Frigidity’ was invented to make avoidance of sexual intercourse a pathology, while spinsters, who lacked the obvious benefits available to married women, were accused of channelling their repressed sexual energy into other, more dubious activities, and spinster teachers (it was darkly


force the well-known dualism between sexuality and spirituality, so that however spirituality is defined, sexuality is not part of it. Such a view is surely disastrous for both sexuality and spirituality, whether one assumes a religious or a secular stance (and much contemporary theological writing seeks to reintegrate them).29

Third, the informal appeal to a version of natural law runs into similar difficulties afflicting more official versions of it. Natural law gives everything a single purpose, one moreover which reason enables the mind to discover unaided. The purpose of sex is ‘racebuilding’: how we know this is not discussed. Presumably, spirituality is not required? Fourth, sexual intercourse appears to be invested with an inevitable negative symbolic charge. The very act of copulation signifies the passive, subjugated, penetrated state of women under patriarchy. Indeed the inevitability of domination by men over women who enter into sexual relations with them, extends to an argument for lesbian separatism. It becomes apparent that the similarities between papal and feminist criticisms of contraception extend also to fairly obvious criticisms of them. Catholic thought has, until the twentieth century, been squeamish about the admission of sexual pleasure; it has treated spirituality and sexuality irreconcilably; it has defined the purpose of sex on the basis of natural law. It still teaches the subordination of women and upholds the view that celibacy is a more exalted state than marriage.

4. A Rereading of the Arguments

Having criticized both streams of argument, it is now appropriate to appreciate them. It is possible to understand the tradition of natural law, as it applies to sex, in a more imaginative way than was managed by Pius XI. Male and female bodies, whether or not joined together in heterosexual intercourse, provide powerful and regular reminders of their reproductive capacities. These reminders are fundamental to being human, that is, they operate at a level logically prior to historical

change, or social construction, or interaction with culture. If appeals to ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ are directed to our deeply-rooted awareness of ourselves as sexual, and therefore reproductive beings, then the practice of contraception by heterosexual couples (whether by barrier or other methods) may perhaps be seen as ‘contrary’ to it. If our natural state propels us towards ovulation, ejaculation, copulation, conception, and so on, sexual practices which are ‘contra-conception’ may be thought to frustrate the outcomes of these activities. Indeed, that is why they are practised at all. In a cultural context where sexual pleasure and sexual reproduction have become widely separated and have assumed the status of a barely challengeable secular dualism, reminders of our natural fecundity are timely.

The expression of heterosexual sexuality cannot be finally separated from reproductive capacity and so from prospective parenthood. This is precisely what contraception does. But NFP, medically expounded, and carefully implemented, is commendable beyond the narrow domain of official Roman Catholic teaching. Despite Protestant contempt for it, extending to the medical profession and its dislike of theology, it is at least as effective as the pill. It works. There is an impressive, theological, pastoral and medical literature about it. The ‘sympto-thermal method’ is much more reliable than the older ‘rhythm’ method. NFP is very plausibly said to make a couple more aware of their fertility. It provides a self-knowledge that comes about through heightened body-awareness, through listening, observing, touching, sensing. Users are quick to point out that none of the modern paraphernalia of chemicals, hormones, implants, bits of copper, plastic or rubber, and so on are needed to make love without making babies. They also avoid the hazards associated with other forms of contraception. Pill users increase the likelihood of breast cancer. There is a statistical link between the pill and cervical cancer. Pill users are more likely to have liver tumors, 3 to 11 times the risk of developing blood clots; twice as likely to have heart attacks, and 12 times as likely if they smoke. Not to mention scores of possible side effects and the strong possibility that it decreases the desire for sex. NFP requires periodic abstinence from intercourse which may itself challenge the set of modern assumptions about phallocentric behaviour, the normativity of penetration as standard sexual activity, and the continuous availability of women’s bodies.

If the unbreakable connection argument is recast in a slightly different form, this too is able to be appropriated by most married couples who are Christians. The different form? That married life as a whole itself suggests an unbreakable connection between procreation and union. By understanding the couple’s union to be the marriage as a whole, and not a state which is repeatedly achieved in every act of intercourse, the link between love-making and baby-making, which contraception breaks, is restored without being required every time a couple makes love. A common strand of moral deficit arguments is that children are to be prevented at all costs. Having a child amounts to a terrible mistake, a liability not a gift of God. Having children with one’s partner is a good test for deciding when to have penetrative sex with him. If either unmarried person would not at some time in the future want a child with their present partner, their sexual repertoire should not include penetrative sex. The test of when to start might well be: whether they would be faithful to any children who might result.

A retrospection on the feminist arguments in the previous section shows them too, to be perspicacious. While contraception provides millions of women with more control over reproduction than any generation before, a new generation is growing up which appears to have less control over decisions about sexual intimacy. That is because penetrative sexual intercourse has become the routinized, standardized, socially accepted, socially demanded form of sexual practice. The more refined contraception becomes (e.g. the ‘morning after pill’), the weaker will be the intention to avoid pregnancy by avoiding intercourse. The intensification of peer-pressure on girls to have penetrative sex at an ever earlier age fatly undermines the resolve to remain chaste. Young males, scarcely pubescent, expect penetrative sex, and young women are under great social pressure to provide it. Contraception normalizes the expectation. Their autonomy is undermined. As Sally Cline has pointed out...


32. For the detail, see my Marriage After Modernity, Chapter 4, ‘Cohabitation, Betrothal and the Entry into Marriage’.
modern sexual mores provide a strong argument for women's celibacy. The regularization of sexual intercourse outside committed relationships represents the extension of 'sexual consumerism' into the most intimate areas of our lives.33

There is undoubtedly a 'coital imperative' which militates against women's health. As well as the massive social effect on sexual behaviour, there may also be harmful side effects for individual women. While the argument that the purpose of sex must be confined to the propagation of the species will be accepted by very few, the attempt to question the morality of established sexual practices by raising questions about their telos is surely appropriate. Some cultural assumptions about sexual intercourse, for example, that it is morally acceptable outside of commitments, or merely for pleasure, are best questioned in this way. The advocacy of continence could hardly be more apt.

Contraception may be seen as a striking product of modernity. It is mass-produced, and over half the world's population now uses it. It has brought with it massive normalization and routinization. Sex education programmes assume intercourse and the need to contracept consequences. By contrast, the strands of argument considered in this paper are pre-modern. They converge in upholding the virtue of chastity. They lead to an understanding of safer sex that is not only learning about how to use a condom, but about learning to value other forms of intimacy that do not inevitably escalate into intercourse.

Contraception has been invaluable for millions of women desiring fewer children and having career aspirations, but it is linked with the expectation that their bodies are always available to their male partners, even if the partner is a passing stranger. Women's health may be better served by the Pope's prescriptions than by the expectations that they should ever be available, sterile, uncomplaining and unaware of the need for radical alternatives such as that offered by the Holy Father. In postmodernity strange alliances are formed. In the case of contraception postmodernity may be said to have arrived.

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EROTIC CELIBACY: CLAIMING EMPOWERED SPACE

Lisa Isherwood

'[Celibacy] an act of heresy in a society where sex is holy because of its role as a sacred ritual in the dominant-submissive relationship set out for men and women'.

Many women find themselves living celibate lives, although not always from choice. I do not mean that they simply do not have sexual partners but rather that what is on offer in terms of heterosexuality under patriarchy is not appealing. If that is it, then many would rather do without it. Conversely many religious sisters find celibacy is a requirement but no one has really explained what it is. It is not uncommon to find that orders have held many conferences on the meaning of obedience in the modern world but none on celibacy. Why is this? Is it a question that body politics have not entered the religious life or that they have been encouraged to image themselves to be disembodied despite recent rhetoric about sexuality being part of a path to God? This is an increasingly perplexing problem for those sisters who know themselves to be lesbian and have only ever had to deal with a heterosexual definition of sex. As a feminist theologian I am interested in how celibacy becomes reimagined under the weight of feminist Christology, body politics and lived experience.

The history of celibacy within the Christian church has been a varied one, moving from meaning simply unmarried to unmarried and not sexually active. For the most part its significance has been underpinned by an understanding of Christology that owes more to Aristotle than to Jesus of Nazareth. This is a Christology that despite speaking of incarnation is distant and hierarchical, one that divides the self between body and soul and places more value on the things of the spirit. Jesus becomes the eternal word and therefore the guardian of orthodoxy.

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* The theory set out in 'Sex and Body Politics' underpins much of this article.