
BOOK REVIEW

Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics

by R. Marie Griffith

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LUKE M. HERRINGTON

University of Kansas

Conventional wisdom holds that the “culture war” has its roots in the sexual revolution of the 1960s. To varying degrees, the feminist, gay liberation, student, civil rights, and other counterculture movements of the period, represented a threat to traditional norms around sex and gender, so this idea is not without merit. Indeed, the fact that these movements inspired a significant backlash in the form of the Christian Right only substantiates the idea.

For her part, R. Marie Griffith agrees that the politics and theology of sex cleaved Americans into highly polarized political tribes. However, her book, *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics*, dismisses popular notions linking this condition to the sexual revolution. Instead, avers Griffith, women who cut their activist teeth agitating for suffrage at the dawn of the 20th century fired the first real volleys in the culture war while advocating for contraception access in the 1920s. Every debate about shifting sexual mores that has taken place since, from discussions on censorship in film and literature on to conversations about LGBTQ rights, thus represents little more than a mere chapter in an ongoing saga she traces to the years following the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. An engaging work of historical scholarship, *Moral Combat* is Griffith’s attempt to chronicle this saga.

Luke M. Herrington is a political scientist studying the role of religion in domestic and international politics. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Kansas in 2020.

Given the ambitious scope of her project, Griffith, a historian of religion by training, is conscious of the need to achieve “coherence without oversimplification” (xix); her argument, therefore, unfolds across a series of quasi-biographical historical vignettes that allow both for analytical breadth and depth. By limiting each chapter to a period roughly a decade in length and focusing on only one or two important figures, these vignettes make it possible for her to thoroughly examine the individual moral controversies she identifies as most representative of each moment under study.

For instance, the first chapter examines how Margert Sanger’s fight for birth control access in the 1920s challenged the gender norms of the period and gave rise to moral conflicts over sexual freedom in later years. Sanger argued that it was cruel to thrust the condition of constant pregnancy on women and girls. Not only was this condition a significant threat to women’s health, but among other things, Sanger also recognized that constant pregnancy resulted in high infant mortality rates and childhood hunger (5). The Catholic Church was solidifying its resistance to contraception during this period though, and clerics responded by accusing the activist of selfishness for her unwillingness to have children. Sanger, who had herself been raised Catholic, resisted by articulating her vision for “a ‘new sex morality’ [...] crafted by women themselves” (8). Catholic reticence notwithstanding, many physicians, Protestant ministers, Jewish rabbis, and members of the poor Catholic laity saw the appeal of Sanger’s vision. Members of the Protestant clergy, especially leaders from the Episcopal Church, even began to preach that “Christian leaders should champion birth control for the health of mothers and children and for the good of marriage and the family” (11).

Meanwhile, D. H. Lawrence’s views on the spiritual dimensions of human sexuality represent the focus of Griffith’s chapter on censorship in film and literature in the 1930s. Her third chapter tackles interracial sexual intimacy, taking Ruth Benedict’s work as its point of departure. Moral conflict erupts in Chapter 4 with the publication of the Kinsey Reports, while a fifth chapter juxtaposes Mary Steichen Calderone’s fight for sex education against the rise of Billy James Hargis and the Christian Right in the 1960s. In the sixth chapter, Griffith probes the divide between the Christian Right and Left reified by *Roe v. Wade*, looking, for example, at Frances

Kissling and the emergence of Catholics for a Free Choice. The stories of Anita Hill and Paula Jones unfold in Chapter 7, which also explores the instrumentalization of sexual harassment on both sides of the political aisle, but especially among political elites associated with the Christian Right. Given the emergence of the #MeToo Movement, readers will likely find this analysis especially interesting. However, since *Moral Combat* was published at the end of 2017, Griffith does not have the opportunity to address such issues associated with the subject as Brett Kavanaugh's appointment to the Supreme Court. That said, the final chapter addresses the AIDS crisis and same-sex marriage, highlighting Gene Robinson's election as the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church, and the epilogue reflects briefly on the 2016 presidential election.

Of course, it almost goes without saying that it can be difficult to tell a story as sweeping in historical scope as *Moral Combat* without sacrificing some nuance. Indeed, Griffith concedes as much when she describes the stories she tells as little more than snapshots in the lives of her central characters (xx). Nevertheless, although Griffith largely rises to the occasion in this compelling book, much is unavoidably sacrificed by her approach. For example, she ignores pre-Suffrage patterns of women's religiopolitical activism. While this does not directly undercut her thesis that the culture wars began in the 1920s, it may be that the politics of sex and religion as manifest in the abolition or temperance movements played a role in cultivating this moral conflict. She also overlooks 19th century debates about Mormonism and polygamy, and while this may be too specialized an issue to factor into her analysis, one is left wondering if and how these early disputes influenced later moral conflicts. Surprisingly, much is also left unsaid about the shift in gender norms precipitated by World War II, as many women entered the workforce to compensate for the loss of labor resulting from combat in Europe and the South Pacific.

Yet, what is most frustrating is that Griffith's focus on elites allows her to ignore the history of ideas in which her story is embedded. This obfuscates the importance of theological and doctrinal debates about sex and religion—especially about homosexuality—taking place *within* religious communities. Similarly, she overlooks the lived religious experience of everyday people on the ground. Given the way real people interact with or

even ignore official religious teachings on sex and gender, this leaves the reader to wonder about the implications of her ideas. Taken together, these are striking omissions, not only because people often interpret Scripture to suit their own ideological preconceptions (Swidler 1986), but also because people's politics frequently shape their religious practices (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Accordingly, such omissions could suggest that Griffith's analysis mistakenly inverts the arrow of causation linking the politics of sex and religion to political polarization.

That aside, other aspects of her analysis are merely underdeveloped. For instance, *Moral Combat's* implications for intersectional research on religion, sex, and politics are addressed only implicitly. It is true that Griffith notes the explicit role of intersectional feminism in the 2017 Women's March (320), but her episodic approach requires that many overlapping issues be analyzed in isolation from one another. For example, while she addresses interracial and same-sex relationships in separate chapters, the interplay of race and LGBTQ issues is ignored in both. Nevertheless, her chapter on interracial relationships, with its need to tackle issues involving sexism and misogyny on one hand and racism on the other, is perhaps the book's strongest contribution to intersectional research. Among Griffith's many thought-provoking observations throughout the chapter are that Southern politicians used the specter of black women's suffrage to undermine the Nineteenth Amendment, that lynching black men accused of rape was often sanctioned by religious actors, and that readings from Scripture first used to legitimize slavery were exploited to justify anti-miscegenation laws (and segregation writ large). Only the chapter's silence on the Black Church undercuts its power. By contrast, her later discussion of Clarence Thomas' Supreme Court confirmation hearings fails to address the interplay of race, sex, and class in as compelling a way. For instance, Griffith misses the ways in which Hill's accusations against Thomas divided the African American community along gendered and socioeconomic lines.

Of course, another of Griffith's noteworthy contributions stems from the book's discussion of the eugenic and ableist tendencies that mar the legacy of first wave feminism in Chapter 1. She also highlights the classed and racialized nature of the movement, noting not only that poor Catholic women stood envious of their wealthy

Protestant counterparts because they believed the latter possessed secret methods for avoiding pregnancy (5), but also that Protestant and feminist contraception advocates aimed to save the white race from “unfit” groups by limiting the reproduction of “imbeciles” and non-whites (12, 24). However, the intersections of (dis)ability, race, religion, sex, and class were quite a bit more intricate in this period than Griffith suggests. The WASPish tendency towards anticatholic nativism is a good example of this, but she either misinterprets or under-analyzes some key evidence that causes her to understate the complexity of these relationships. Citing an article in *The Catholic World* (i.e., Ross 1923), Griffith suggests that conservative Catholics developed a misperception of anticatholic persecution in response to Sanger’s efforts to legalize contraception (25-26). But the evidence she cites to justify this assertion was written in response to a legitimate threat posed by the reemergence of the KKK in Georgia and Texas. That is, Fr. J. Elliot Ross (1923), the Paulist priest behind the article, was responding to the Klan’s anti-immigrant activities—not debates over birth control. Thus, unless Griffith means to suggest that the Klan viewed contraception as a weapon in its fight against Eastern European Catholic immigrants, I suspect readers may find that Melissa Wilde (2020) does a better job fleshing out the intersection of religion and racism in early contraception debates (for a more general discussion, also see Joshi 2020).

In any case, what ultimately emerges as Griffith’s most important contribution is her observation that the deep divide over gender, sex, and sexuality in American politics has almost always represented a deep divide within American Christianity (and religion more broadly). As such, it would have been interesting if she had remarked on the tension between religious freedom and sexual freedom at greater length. Though religious freedom and sexual freedom are often portrayed as being at odds with one another, *Moral Combat* makes it clear that debates over the limits of proper sexual behavior emerge from debates about the morality of sex within and between competing religious groups. Put another way, Griffith’s impressive book indicates that disputes over contraception, censorship, abortion, LGBTQ rights, and other issues emerge from exegetical disagreements derived from competing interpretations of Scripture, theology, and dogma. Thus, although

Griffith does not state this point explicitly, it will be difficult for readers to walk away from *Moral Combat* without concluding that sexual diversity is, in essence, an extension of religious diversity, which in turn means that *sexual freedom is religious freedom!*

To conclude, *Moral Combat* is a thought-provoking—if imperfect—book that does a good job elucidating how the interplay of sex, religion, and politics helped carve deep fissures in American public life over the course of the last century. Accessible to even the general reader, it will likely appeal to both graduate and undergraduate students. And while it could no doubt find a receptive audience among scholars of political science, American history, religious studies, or women and gender studies, the book should be required reading for anyone interested in the intersection of politics, sex, and religion.

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