Theologizing the Pill:

Christianity, Women’s Magazines, and Birth Control, 1960-1972

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Abstract: This paper examines Christian women’s responses to the legalization of the birth control pill in America through conversations within women’s magazines of the 1960s and ‘70s. During this time period, women were largely shut out of Christian magazines, and as a result, their voices are frequently underrepresented in broader scholarship on Christianity and contraception. Through women’s magazines, a privileged subset of Christian women was able to express their opinions and beliefs on the role of the birth control pill in their faith lives. At the center of this debate was Catholic women, who struggled to come to terms with the spiritual commitments they held to their faith versus the practical commitments they held to their families. While not necessarily facing the same kind of deep theological struggles in their own lives, Protestant women were also quick to offer their thoughts on the Catholic Church and the Pill. Steeped in various degrees of anti-Catholicism, their sentiments made it clear that these Protestant women opposed what they interpreted as the Catholic Church’s restrictive influence on access to birth control. In light of these primary sources, this paper makes a two-pronged argument that (1) women’s magazines should be attended to with a greater degree of serious scholarly analysis, particularly within the field of religious studies, and (2) within women’s magazines of this time period, Christian women engaged in wide-ranging conversations about faith and the Pill, particularly involving the Catholic Church’s role in regulating that relationship.

Keywords: contraception, birth control, population control, family planning, women’s magazines, women, Catholicism, Protestantism, Christianity, anti-Catholicism, Vatican II, *Humanae Vitae*, twentieth century, 1960s, 1970s
The July 1965 issue of Redbook is an example of the typical 1960s women’s magazine in every way. Well-dressed white women flash toothy grins as they advertise the newest cleaning product, extolling the benefits that this particular vacuum cleaner or that particular dish soap could bring to each reader’s household. Advice columns abound, offering answers to women’s quandaries on fashion, etiquette, and culinary arts. And on page six, nestled among a full-color ad for Gilbey’s Vodka and a tutorial explaining how to make finger puppets for children out of old peanut shells, sits one reader’s words on faith, family, the birth control pill, and the future of the Catholic Church. As the winner for Redbook’s monthly “A Young Mother’s Story,” 39-year-old B.J. Taylor from Mountlake Terrace, Washington tells the compelling narrative of her deeply held religious beliefs as a convert to Catholicism and the internal struggle she faced in reconciling her decision to begin using the birth control pill with the tenets of her faith.

While Taylor’s article, entitled “This Baby Will Be My Last,” may seem out of place among the frivolities of 1960s consumerism, conversations of this tenor were not entirely uncommon in the pages of publications like Redbook, Good Housekeeping, and Ladies’ Home Journal. Advertisements for beauty products and household appliances frequently shared space with articles or columns that discussed the serious, pressing moral and theological concerns of Christian women in America, who debated with one another about the role of the birth control pill.

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1 This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Jo Ann Tomm, whose enthusiasm for the Protestant Reformation is the reason why I came to divinity school. Her unconditional pride in me and everlasting support for my work provided me with the motivation to finish this paper in the midst of a global pandemic.

For the time and energy they spent thoughtfully critiquing my work and answering my many questions, I would especially like to thank my advisors, Catherine Brekus and Natalie Malter. Special thanks also to Monica Mercado, whose guidance in the early stages of my research helped me find the women’s magazines around which this project is centered. I am exceptionally grateful to the other members of my research cohort, Melissa Cedillo, Kate Hoeting, Madeline Levy, and Mary Moon, for their insightful feedback and camaraderie throughout the research and writing process. And most importantly, my deepest love and gratitude goes to my pod, Kate Hoeting (again), Mary Perez, and Julia Reimann, who have made virtual divinity school bearable.
pill in their faith lives. For many of these women, these magazines might have been the only public and published spaces that were open to them to air their concerns and to ask questions.

During this time period, explicitly religious publications like *Commonweal* and *America*, both Catholic publications, and *Christianity Today* and *Christian Century*, evangelical Protestant and mainline Protestant publications respectively, were starting to feature women more prominently as both the writers and subjects of articles.\(^2\) However, all of them ignored the firsthand perspectives of laywomen, who were directly experiencing and grappling with the high-level conversations over birth control that these publications discussed.

Furthermore, existing scholarship on Christian women’s attitudes toward birth control during the 1960s is slim. On one hand, many scholars who have written about Christianity and contraception in the late twentieth century have centered the voices of male doctors and clergy in their analysis. While unfortunate, this focus is understandable to a degree: many mainline Protestant denominations did not begin to ordain women in large numbers until the 1970s, and with Catholic women underrepresented in the ranks of prominent Catholic clergy and theologians at the time, it makes sense that scholars of religion have gravitated toward the voices of the men who made public statements on behalf of their traditions. For example, Leslie Tentler’s influential *Catholics and Contraception: An American History*, incorporates Catholic laywomen’s voices, but most of the direct quotations come from men’s articles in Catholic publications. On the other hand, scholars of women’s magazines have rarely written about

\(^2\) While women’s magazines from this time period can be coded as implicitly Christian—due to the fact that most of the religion-related content in these magazines was centered around and produced with Christian women in mind—they were neither created nor marketed for discussions of theological issues. Thus, in labeling *Christianity Today, Christian Century, America*, and *Commonweal* as denominational publications, or explicitly Christian publications, I am merely trying to distinguish them in religious terms from the women’s magazines I am studying, which operated under more or less secular pretenses. However, this distinction is not meant to erase the discourse and advocacy that women have sustained through explicitly Christian publications throughout American history. For an example of women’s roles in early American religious publications, see Lisa J. Shaver’s *Beyond the Pulpit: Women’s Rhetorical Roles in the Antebellum Religious Press*.  

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religion, focusing instead on political discourse in these publications as well as the negative impact that women’s magazines have had on women’s body image, conceptions of beauty, and perceptions of health and weight loss.

Few scholars have recognized that women’s magazines are an important resource for topics like theology or ethics. Since the advent of the medium, American women’s magazines have often been denigrated as a space for shallow, superficial conversations among women who have nothing better to do than discuss their clothes or makeup. When these magazines do venture into the realm of weightier material, however, they are nonetheless still mocked and criticized as venturing into territory unfit for the venue.3

This paper uses an unconventional source base, women’s magazines, to shed light on Christian women’s debates outside of formal church structures about the morality of the birth control pill.4 While women’s magazines did not represent the full range of Christian women’s perspectives at the time, especially since they privileged the voices of white, upper-middle class, American women in heterosexual relationships, they painted a fuller picture of how some women navigated the uncertain theological terrain created by the invention of the birth control pill in the 1950s and the legalization of contraception in the 1960s and ‘70s.

By undertaking an analysis of women’s magazines as intellectual platforms for theological conversation, we learn that Christian women held a diverse array of opinions about faith and the Pill, particularly when it came to the Catholic Church’s role in regulating that

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3 In 21st-century America, this critique remains particularly poignant in light of consistent attacks on *Teen Vogue*, a publication for young women that has recently made a perceptible shift in its content and branding to more outspokenly embrace liberal stances on political issues. For example, see Natalie Coulter and Kristine Moruzi’s “Woke girls: from The Girl’s Realm to Teen Vogue” or Jessalynn Keller’s “A Politics of Snap: Teen Vogue’s Public Feminism.”

4 The women’s magazines featured in the analysis that follows are all accessible via the digitized Women’s Magazine Archive, and I have chosen to include these specific publications mainly because of their digital accessibility. Publications chosen for analysis include *Cosmopolitan, Good Housekeeping, Ladies’ Home Journal,* and *Redbook.*
relationship. At the center of this debate was Catholic women, who struggled to come to terms with the spiritual commitments they held to their faith versus the practical commitments they held to their families. While not necessarily facing the same kind of deep theological struggles in their own lives, Protestant women were quick to offer their thoughts on the Catholic Church and the Pill. Steeped in various degrees of anti-Catholicism, their sentiments made it clear that these Protestant women opposed what they interpreted as the Catholic Church’s restrictive influence on access to birth control. Through articles and letters to the editor, both Catholic and Protestant women provided their own perspectives on the matter of Christianity and the birth control pill, countering the institutional and authoritative voices of Christian men, who were given disproportionate credence in the public square.

Setting the Scene: The Birth Control Pill, The Women’s Magazine, and the Catholic Church

The years between 1960 and 1972 saw drastic developments in the field of reproductive health and in legal, social, political, and religious responses to these advancements. In 1960, the FDA gave federal approval for the use of Enovid, the first oral contraceptive to legally enter the market in the United States. Before its approval in the United States, an early version of this birth control pill was employed in clinical trials in Puerto Rico by physicians Gregory Pincus and John Rock, the latter of whom later established himself as an important figure in ensuing conversations surrounding religion and the Pill.

Despite the fact that oral contraceptives were now available and cleared for medical use in America, they were still illegal in many states. However, it was not long after the federal

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6 May, *America and the Pill*, 29.
approval of Enovid that a case questioning the constitutionality of state-wide contraception bans made its way to the Supreme Court. In 1961, *Griswold v. Connecticut* legalized contraceptive use for married couples.⁷ Despite this major step toward the full legalization of oral contraceptives in America, it was not until the 1972 decision of *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, which provided a legal right for single women to buy and use oral contraceptives, that the birth control pill was legally accessible for all American women.⁸ ⁹ In the interim period of legal uncertainty between *Griswold* and *Eisenstadt*, the readers of women’s magazines frequently debated the ethics and morality of the use of the Pill by unmarried women.

Although discussions surrounding the moral permissibility of contraception were certainly not new to Christianity in the mid-twentieth century, the legalization and growing use of the Pill brought a renewed significance and a particularized context to these conversations. Protestant views on contraception were largely settled by 1960s, with most Protestants finding contraceptive use theologically permissible.¹⁰ As a result, much of the attention over questions related to Christianity and the Pill during this time period turned to the Catholic Church. These debates came to a head for Catholics with the convening of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) in 1962. By the closing of Vatican II’s fourth and final session in 1965, many American Catholics were hopeful that the Catholic Church’s stance on artificial methods of contraception like the birth control pill would soon turn in favor of its use.¹¹

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⁹ An important clarification to this historical marker is that even though the Pill was technically legal for all Americans, this did not mean that everyone who wanted to use oral contraceptives was now necessarily able to. During this time period, access to the Pill was still restricted and limited by numerous socio-economic factors, many of which continue to act as barriers to access today.
¹⁰ For further insight on Protestant perspectives on contraception in the mid-twentieth century, see, for example, Samira K. Mehta’s “Family Planning is a Christian Duty: Religion, Population Control, and the Pill in the 1960s,” in *Devotions and Desires: Histories of Sexuality and Religion in the Twentieth-Century United States*.
For Catholic supporters of contraceptive use, the outlook continued to seem promising in the direct wake of Vatican II. In 1965, only one year after Vatican II came to a close, Pope John XXIII convened the Pontifical Commission for the Study of Population, Family and Births. This commission was consequently expanded from six members to seventy-two by his successor, Pope Paul VI.\textsuperscript{12} Among these new members were three lay couples, including an American husband and wife, Pat and Patty Crowley. At the time of their appointment to the Commission, the Crowleys served as leaders in the Christian Family Movement. Through this connection, they were able to survey thousands of Catholic couples, asking them about their experiences with the rhythm method.\textsuperscript{13} Upon being invited to join the Commission, they presented these responses to the other members. In bringing the survey results to the Commission, the Crowleys directly introduced the perspectives of lay Catholics into the conversation and highlighted many of the concerns and struggles that were also at the heart of debates over Catholicism and contraception in women’s magazines. These survey responses were apparently exceedingly impactful on the opinions of the clergy who served on the Commission and as a result, may have had a direct influence on the statement that the Commission ultimately made in the summer of 1966, coming out in support of changing Catholic teachings on artificial contraception.\textsuperscript{14}

However, despite this perception of growing support, Pope Paul VI’s release of \textit{Humanae Vitae} in 1968 officially reasserted Church teachings against artificial contraceptive use.\textsuperscript{15} Similar to the legal ambiguity that women’s magazine readers were experiencing and responding to in their comments on contraception during this time period, Catholic women’s magazine readers in

\textsuperscript{12} Tentler, \textit{Catholics and Contraception}, 207.
\textsuperscript{13} Tentler, \textit{Catholics and Contraception}, 222.
\textsuperscript{14} Tentler, \textit{Catholics and Contraception}, 207.
\textsuperscript{15} Tentler, \textit{Catholics and Contraception}, 207.
particular grappled with the uncertainty that they faced in the midst of changing sets of guidance that were at first, unclear and eventually, disappointing to many.

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**Articles written by “experts”**

There are three main types of sections in the traditional mid-twentieth century women’s magazine that served as venues for discussions about Christianity and the birth control pill. The first, and likely the most obvious, of these areas was the typical long-form article found in the middle of most women’s magazines. I broadly categorize these primary sources as articles written by “experts” to generically differentiate their authorship for multiple reasons. The first is to distinguish them from articles and other content that was created explicitly by readers. All of the people who authored pieces that appear in this section were writing in a capacity other than as a reader of the magazine, who voluntarily submitted their own opinions or stories for a small monetary reward. This meant that experts were generally writing as a staff writer or editor for the magazine, or as an author or speaker trying to gain popular attention for their projects through these articles. In this context, it is important to note that experts were not always necessarily men, although the men who appeared in these women’s magazines were generally always experts. In other words, both men and women appeared in the capacity of the expert, but men rarely appeared in these publications from a first-person perspective, simply as interested readers, affected practitioners of Christianity or concerned fathers and husbands, like women often did.

The second reason I refer to these long-form authors as formal “experts” has to do with their work experience and educational training. While all magazine contributors, whether they were staff writers or women’s magazine readers, brought a certain kind of personal expertise to
the subject matter, the authors I have labeled as experts were more formally educated on the political, social, and theological dimensions of the birth control question. In other words, women’s magazine readers were certainly the experts of their own lives, yet they were not always treated as such based on whose opinion got featured most prominently in the landscape of the women’s magazine. Most women who served in an expert role as long-form article writers had published books on the matter or held jobs as doctors or leaders of public health organizations. Overall, they were likely recruited to write for the magazine specifically because of the demonstrated work they had done on this subject. This form of knowledge is not necessarily better than the kind that readers of these magazines possessed, but it is different and therefore important to distinguish.

One of these well-known “experts” on the issue of religion and birth control in the pages of mid-twentieth century women’s magazines was author Sally Cunneen. Cunneen, who shared an excerpt of her book *Sex: Female; Religion: Catholic* in the July 1968 issue of *Ladies’ Home Journal*, also served as an associate editor at the Catholic quarterly *Cross Currents* in addition to her independent writing career.16 Researched and written in response to the aftermath of Vatican II, *Sex: Female; Religion: Catholic* analyzed survey data from just under 1,500 *Cross Currents* readers. Hypothesizing that Catholic women “were undergoing an unusual heightening of consciousness in response to the unprecedented challenge to relate their faith to their world of experience,” Cunneen combed through this data and emerged with firsthand insights into how Catholic women viewed the role of women in the Bible, in the Catholic Church, in their marriages, and in their families.17 As a Catholic woman, a contributor to a women’s magazine, and an editor for a major Catholic publication, Cunneen’s role in this narrative was a

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16 See Figure 1 in the Appendix for a photo of the introductory page of Cunneen’s article.
multifaceted one. Her own experiences as well as her professional expertise provided multiple angles to the issue of Catholicism and contraception that other authors were simply unable to present in their own work.

In her work that appears in *Ladies’ Home Journal*, Cunneen centered the voices of Catholic women and prioritized the narration of their own experiences rather than her editorializing of them. The book from which this article was taken featured numerous quotes from the 635 respondents that Cunneen surveyed, as evidenced by the multiplicity of viewpoints expressed in the piece. Despite an inclination to include perspectives other than her own, however, Cunneen was not hesitant to tell women’s magazine readers what she thought about discussions surrounding Catholic women and birth control. To this end, she opened the article with her own thoughts on the matter, writing:

> Hopefully, the public will soon tire of stories about the Catholic ‘discovery’ that sex is good. Of course, the over-reaction was due to the incredible gap that had existed between the silent practice of growing numbers of Catholics and the prohibitions of the teaching Church. Many would agree with the housewife who writes, ‘The exchange of confidential details appalls me. I’m sick of the whole business of birth control.’ She, of course, had made her own decision to use it some time ago, and had no need of the forum.

Cunneen’s analysis and the important context she provided highlighted a perspective that was missing from so many of the other articles written in women’s magazines at the time about the Catholic Church and the birth control pill. Many of those authors spent the majority of their articles discussing the trials of clergy who struggled with how to advise laypeople on conducting both their faith lives and their family lives in the midst of ambiguous guidance about the newest developments in family planning. While Cunneen’s article served as more of a summary of attitudes than as a piece meant to convey a singular argument on the topic of the Catholic Church.

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and the birth control pill, it skillfully illustrated that Catholic women were by no means an ideological or theological monolith when it came to matters of reproductive health. “How Catholic Women Really Feel About Sex and the Pill” shed light on another dimension of this issue and exhibited the robust diversity in thought that existed among Catholic women at the time when it came to this very polarizing topic.

Although not writing about Christianity and contraception from a personal perspective, women’s magazine staff writers also contributed to this growing body of work and filled an expert role. Lois Chevalier, a health and wellness writer for Ladies’ Home Journal, usually wrote about medical news and advancements and authored a monthly column, called “Medifacts.” However, in Ladies’ Home Journal’s March 1966 issue, Chevalier’s analysis took a brief theological turn with the publication of her article, “The secret drama behind the Pope’s momentous decision on birth control.”19 While Chevalier’s article paid the most attention to the confidential deliberations between key players within the Papal Commission for the Study of Population, the Family and Birth, the stories of Catholic laypeople—and American Catholics in particular—ran as a narrative undercurrent throughout the whole piece. The introductory paragraph that Chevalier used to frame the issue even directly quoted an anonymous American Catholic who lent their voice as a source of input to the Papal Commission: “Emotionally and psychologically the rhythm method has been harmful to our marriage,” divulged the unnamed layperson whom Chevalier quoted. “Our love, which is continually deepening in Christ and in each other, must, of its nature, seek union. This union is almost continually denied, and the frustration is great.”20

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19 See Figure 2 in the Appendix for a photo of the introductory page of Chevalier’s article.
The ephemeral nature of women’s magazine articles often makes it difficult to gauge their impact on readers and on society as a whole. Unless they chose to submit a letter to the editor, women’s magazine readers passively engaged with this content, specifically in the sense that their reactions were not often recorded in the magazines themselves. As a result, the reactions that these articles provoked from their readers were often unknown, creating a situation in which even speculation about the ultimate effects of women’s magazine articles presents a thorny issue. However, in the case of Chevalier’s article, we are offered a small insight into how the expertise of women’s magazine contributors might have been received during this time period. On March 2nd, 1966, the Senate Subcommittee on Foreign Aid Expenditures held one of a series of hearings related to the “Population Crisis.” That day, Chevalier’s article was submitted to the record as Exhibit 78, the final document collected during the session. Senator Ernest Gruening of Alaska, who introduced it into the record, labeled it a “timely, interesting, and provocative article.”

While women’s magazine contributors served as experts in their own context, this instance points to the fact that their influence as authoritative voices could have, in some cases, did extend past the pages of Ladies’ Home Journal and Cosmopolitan into other social and political realms.

While the perspectives of female experts found a particularly hospitable environment in these women’s magazines, the voice of the male expert often emerged to function as a commentator, advocate, or voice of reason. Importantly, both men and women were often positioned as experts, but men were rarely portrayed as non-experts. In other words, most of the time, when men appeared in women’s magazines to discuss Christianity and birth control, they would come already contextualized through titles like Dr., Reverend, or Professor. The

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21 Population Crisis: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Foreign Aid Expenditures of the Committee on Government Operations United States Senate, 89th Congress (March 2nd, 1966) (Exhibit 78).
incompatibility of male voices in women’s magazines with a non-expert status was not entirely a negative, though. Having a Catholic mother of 13 children, a veritable non-expert by the established standards, to appear in the same publication and occupy the same amount of space with her own thoughts and experiences as a professor of theology from Notre Dame or one of the inventors of the Pill, was a radically egalitarian undertaking. Although men took up a disproportionate amount of women’s magazine real estate speculating and pontificating on an issue that had little to do with their own bodies, their presence as well-known experts leveled the playing field for everyday women, implicitly elevating them to the status of an expert.

One male expert whose voice played an incommensurate role in the birth control discourse found in women’s magazines was Dr. John Rock. Rock was a Catholic physician and author whose medical work on the creation and testing of Enovid, combined with his theological interests on the intersection of religion and contraception, resulted in frequent citation of Rock as an expert in a variety of women’s magazine articles. There were generally two different capacities in which Rock was asked to comment. The first was that of a medical professional who could speak to the relative safety and the potential side effects of various methods of contraception.

The second—and more important, in this context—role that Rock held in these discussions was that of a committed Catholic who had both the standing and the expertise to speak on the intricacies of family planning and Catholic faith. The unique perspective that he held as both a medical professional and a professing Catholic meant that other writers would obtain quotes from him about both the safety and the morality of oral contraceptives, sometimes in different paragraphs within the same article. Therefore, in addition to creating his own long-form articles, Rock was also frequently interviewed by other authors for their own pieces. Along
these lines, Rock was often quoted at some point throughout women’s magazine articles on
Christianity and contraception as a general commentator on the birth control pill and the Catholic
Church, although it was also not uncommon for his thoughts on religion and the pill to also end
up in articles about the medical necessity of oral contraceptives either. Perhaps surprisingly,
some of the women’s magazine articles that debated how safe these newly released oral
contraceptives were would often provide a brief comment, no more than a sentence or two,
speaking to the moral and religious permissibility of the medication as well.

Acting through an obligation as a Catholic expert on the matter of religion and
contraception, Rock penned an article in Good Housekeeping to outline his credentials as well as
put forth his vision for a birth control debate that could get members of all religious groups on
the same page. Rock’s Good Housekeeping article, which was published in the July 1961 issue,
briefly summarized what became the main points of the book he would publish in 1963, entitled
The Time Has Come: A Catholic Doctor’s Proposal to End the Battle Over Birth Control.22 In
this piece, Rock intertwined discussion of recent medical advances related to oral contraceptives
with breakdowns of how various Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish religious leaders and
organizations were responding to these developments. In a rhetorical move that was
characteristic of most of his writing on the Pill and interfaith relations, this article concluded with
a call for Catholics, Protestants, and Jews to work together with government leaders and public
health officials in a quest for “methods of conception control which are effective in meeting the
worldwide need for family limitation and which can help to end one of the bitterest and
potentially most harmful religious controversies in history.”23

22 See Figure 3 in the Appendix for a photo of the introductory page of Rock’s article.
While John Rock spoke from his own perspective as a Catholic to assert that Catholicism could play a productive and diplomatic role in easing religious tensions over contraception, there were other male experts whose positions furthered anti-Catholic narratives related to Catholicism and family planning. In the September 1964 issue of *Cosmopolitan*, staff writer Thomas J. Fleming did just this through his article “Catholics and Birth Control.”\(^{24}\) Ironically, the article was introduced by a full-page photo of Rock, who was pictured hunched over a desk, engrossed in his next book project. “It is difficult to believe that God gave man his intellect to safeguard him whenever his inner biology is inadequate,” said a quote that appeared under Rock’s picture.\(^{25}\)

The actual text of Fleming’s article began on a shocking note, one that was meant to establish a serious tone and inspire a great sense of urgency in the reader. “By the time you finish reading this article, some six thousand children will have been born,” Fleming wrote of the eight-page piece.\(^{26}\) It was clear from the very beginning of the article that Fleming set out to frame the issue of the Catholic Church’s deliberations on the birth control question as a matter of worldwide importance, one to be interpreted in light of what Fleming and others perceived as the disastrous and uncontrollable ballooning of the global population. It did not take long for Fleming to make this connection abundantly clear: “Three children may seem like the ideal family to the typical non-Catholic American, but to the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, it is anything but ideal,” he cautioned.\(^{27}\)

The core of the article took a wide-ranging look at the Catholic landscape as it concerned the situation of birth control. While Fleming devoted a significant amount of time discussing the

\(^{24}\) See Figure 4 in the Appendix for a photo of the introductory page of Fleming’s article.

\(^{25}\) Thomas J. Fleming, “Catholics and Birth Control,” *Cosmopolitan* 157, no. 3 (Sep. 1964): 64.

\(^{26}\) Fleming, “Catholics and Birth Control,” 65.

\(^{27}\) Fleming, “Catholics and Birth Control,” 65.
opinions of the Pope, Catholic clergy and theologians, and the writers and editors of major Catholic publications, he also made sure not to leave out the perspectives of Catholic laywomen and their husbands. In doing so, the article juxtaposed the indecision of the Vatican with the frustration and apprehension of thousands of American Catholics. In a particularly noteworthy section of the article detailing lay Catholics’ conflicted feelings about the rhythm method, Fleming wrote: “One young Catholic, whose wife’s cycle was regular enough to chart monthly safe days, says disgustedly: ‘It’s like making love on a railroad timetable.’”  

However, despite a turn to the personal experiences and insights of individual American Catholics, this analysis was bookended by mentions of the global threat of overpopulation, which Fleming directly correlated with Catholic prohibition of artificial contraception. “Experts watching the upward surging arrows on world population graphs can only hope that the church does not take several centuries to make up its mind, as it did on usury,” Fleming ultimately warned.

Fleming’s turn to an anti-Catholic narrative of overpopulation was not an uncommon argument to make in mid-twentieth century discourse about contraception. Even in women’s magazines themselves, conversations about the perceived dangers of overpopulation were abundant. This discourse generally fell into two different categories: the first, expressed in Fleming’s article, took a more anti-Catholic angle to the issue and centered concerns around a supposed Catholic inability to limit their family sizes for the good of the planet. These arguments furthered the viewpoint that Catholics were thoughtlessly and irresponsibly having too many children, thus contributing disproportionately to skyrocketing populations.

The second category, though not explicitly centered in religion, was just as odious and merits just as much attention. This line of argument—that people living in impoverished and

28 Fleming, “Catholics and Birth Control,” 68.
29 Fleming, “Catholics and Birth Control,” 72.
“underdeveloped” cities both within the United States and across the world were putting an inordinate strain on global resources by filling the world with too many children—was a theory based in racist, classist, and colonialist assumptions over who was fit to procreate and who was not. Women’s magazines as a whole were complicit in perpetuating and sustaining this line of thinking. As an example, this rhetoric was present in the March 1965 issue of *Cosmopolitan*, which included an article entitled “What the Planned Parenthood People Are Up To.” The author of the piece, Glen White, both extensively chronicled the Catholic Church’s opposition to artificial contraception and discussed the supposedly alarming state of population growth worldwide. In the following section of the article, one that was representative of his argument overall, White wrote:

> Realization of the horrible portent of these kinds of population increases has changed some attitudes toward birth control—that and the fact that population increases in the United States and abroad directly relate to the increasing local and Federal taxes that United States citizens must pay. Most American aid to underdeveloped nations is consumed by their increasing populations. Unless their birth rates are lowered, there is little likelihood they can ever become economically self-sufficient. Families with too little income and too many offspring jammed in the slums of every large city are directly, or indirectly, a mounting drain on public funds.\(^31\)

White’s quote, taken in context with the rest of the article, illustrates the linkage between these two strains of the same argument. Not only were anti-Catholic and eugenic lines of reasoning surrounding contraception and overpopulation both deeply related to one another on a broader level, they also appeared in the same discussions, as evidenced by this article from *Cosmopolitan.*

While men mainly appeared in the landscape of women’s magazines as the authors of long-form articles or as experts cited in others’ articles, they also occasionally popped up on

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30 See Figure 5 in the Appendix for a photo of the introductory page of White’s article.
letters to the editor pages. These male commentators mostly came from academia or medicine, and their opinions were generally placed among the letters to the editor of female readers, in order to provide either a moderating or a supporting influence. One example of this phenomenon appeared in the September 1961 issue of *Good Housekeeping* in response to the article that John Rock authored. The letters to the editor section related to this article contained three different responses. The first—from Rev. John A. O’Brien, Ph.D, who listed his occupation as a Research Professor of Theology at Notre Dame—spoke glowingly of Rock’s call for religious unification behind the birth control pill. “I join Dr. Rock, Episcopal Bishop James A. Pike and millions of other citizens of all faiths,” he said, “in urging that the federal government launch through the National Institutes of Health, a crash program of research to secure a method of birth regulation acceptable to all.”

He ended his note with a call to “…end birth-control strife now by respecting the sincerity and good faith of those who hold divergent religious views.”

The second letter responding to Rock’s article came from Cass Canfield, the president of Planned Parenthood at the time. Canfield similarly wrote that he found Rock’s article “stimulating and provocative.” He continued on to emphasize Planned Parenthood’s support for the reconciliation of views between Catholics and non-Catholics, labeling the conflict as “both divisive and unnecessary.” Finally, he concluded with a vow of support for Rock’s article and expressed the hope that Rock’s article in *Good Housekeeping* would produce additional efforts to explore an end to the strife between religious parties on opposing sides of the birth control issue.

The third and final letter was the one reader-authored opinion in the trio. Noticeably shorter than the other two, this opinion was framed by ellipses, indicating that it was likely one

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sentence removed from a longer letter, not a neatly packaged, paragraph-long submission like the other two letters to the editor. In her comments, Mrs. Richard H. Knight from Syracuse, New York thanked Dr. Rock, whose work allowed her to “fully understand the entire scope of the birth-control problem.” While O’Brien and Canfield’s letters were presented as comments from peers meant to bolster and reaffirm Rock’s work, the one letter excerpt from a female reader acknowledged an intellectual relationship of unequal standing through its expression of gratitude for Rock’s education on the relevant issues.

Aside from the letters to the editor sections, the space that male experts took up in women’s magazines did not overlap often with that of female experts. One notable overlap, however, proves that despite its influence, the voice of the male expert did not easily overpower the role of the female expert in women’s magazines of the 1960s and ‘70s. For example, in its February 1967 issue, *Good Housekeeping* ran an article entitled “Should Birth Control Be Available to Married Women?” The first paragraph of the article contained a response from Reverend Frederic C. Wood, Jr., a professor and chaplain at Goucher College who was explicitly named by the magazine as “our expert.” Wood argued that birth control should be provided to married women, partially because “The exclusive identification of birth control with marriage obscures the real moral issues involved in the sexual act—the nature of the relationship and the social responsibility both parties assume within or outside marriage.”

Acting in concert as an expert body, *Good Housekeeping* readers definitively disagreed with this assessment. Only twenty-seven percent of respondents fully agreed with Wood’s argument that unmarried women should be allowed to use birth control, while forty-two percent

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37 See Figure 6 in the Appendix for a photo of the introductory page of this article.
fully disagreed. Readers held different religiously based and non-religiously based rationales for their responses; however, as the unnamed author of the article summarized, “the opposition to the clergyman is primarily moral; the support, practical.” A quote included from one of the readers who was polled, a woman from Ohio over the age of 45, aptly expressed this moral opposition in her response. “How can a Christian chaplain possibly connect the free use of one’s body before marriage with the Christian concept of marriage?” she asked. Overall, although this feedback was not produced by a singular female expert, the majority opinion of the readers who participated in the poll presented an active counter to the expertise that Reverend Wood asserted in the article.

Articles written by women’s magazine readers

Perhaps the most insightful type of writing to find in these magazines on the topic of contraception and Christianity is entire articles written by women’s magazine readers themselves. While difficult to locate, these sources provide the deepest understandings into the cultural spaces where women’s personal views on contraception and their religious beliefs were welcomed; what sort of practical implications these issues held in both their own lives and their families’ lives; and how they hoped that their stories would ultimately impact other readers. Two such articles can be found in the women’s magazines from my analytical pool: the first from a mid-1960s issues of Redbook, and the second from a 1970s issue of Good Housekeeping.

The first and earlier published article comes from the July 1965 issue of Redbook. The author, a 39-year-old woman from Mountlake Terrace, Washington named B.J. Taylor, was the

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39 “Should Birth Control Be Available to Unmarried Women?” 12.
40 “Should Birth Control Be Available to Unmarried Women?” 14.
41 “Should Birth Control Be Available to Unmarried Women?” 14.
winner of *Redbook*’s monthly “Young Mother’s Story, which paid readers $500 per winning article to write 1,000 to 2,000 words “describing a significant problem in the life of a young mother.”⁴² This problem, the advertisement in the magazine said, was supposed to entail “an account of some experience in your family, social or marital life that you feel may be particularly interesting and helpful to other young mothers.”⁴³ Taylor’s article, entitled “This Baby Will Be My Last,” was prefaced with this description: “A young Catholic mother explains how she came to one of the most difficult decisions of her life—and what it will mean to her marriage.”⁴⁴

The first page of the article featured a headshot in which Taylor was pleasant faced, but not smiling. In the introductory paragraphs surrounding this photo, Taylor outlined her position as a mother, a wife, and a Catholic, all three identities that she viewed as key components of the situation at hand.⁴⁵ Taylor explained that by the age of 39, she had 11 children, had experienced four miscarriages, and at the time of the article’s publication, was in the midst of her 16th pregnancy in 20 years. “And I can say, with heartfelt relief,” she concluded, “that this will be my last baby.”⁴⁶ In terms of her history as a Catholic, Taylor told readers that she converted to Catholicism shortly before her marriage because her husband—whom she described as a “dark and Irish and handsome”⁴⁷ sailor newly returned from World War II—was already Catholic.⁴⁸

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⁴³ “Young Mothers,” 6.
⁴⁵ See Figure 7 in the Appendix for a photo of the introductory page of Taylor’s article.
⁴⁶ Taylor, “This Baby Will Be My Last,” 6.
⁴⁷ Although this is the only mention that Taylor gave throughout the entire piece of her husband’s ethnic background, it is a notable instance of the possible religio-racialization of the Irish Catholic identity, which in some ways seems to still be present here given the possible implications of Taylor’s description. For more on the larger concept of religio-racialization, see Judith Weisenfeld’s *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity During the Great Migration*. For more on the racialization of Irish Catholic immigrants, see Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White*.
⁴⁸ Taylor, “This Baby Will Be My Last,” 6.
As a convert to Catholicism, Taylor brought a unique perspective to both Catholicism and to the Protestantism of her childhood. “When I started my instruction in the Catholic faith,” she wrote, “I had almost come to the belief that there was no way of explaining this mad world, or the senseless pain and suffering that I saw on every side. I had been raised in a fallen-away pseudo-Protestant family without an actual belief in the idea of God.” Taylor described her turn to Catholicism as a life-altering decision that truly transformed her outlook on her own existence, having previously taken up a dark and hopeless explanation of life after witnessing from afar the chaos and suffering of World War II. While Taylor noted that she initially expressed some hesitation in the midst of her Catholic instruction about the rhythm method, mainly due to her own unpredictable menstrual cycle, she and her husband decided to “work hard enough with courage and faith” and “trust in God’s help to provide for the children that we expected to have.”

As Taylor and her husband progressed in their marriage, and as Taylor’s husband progressed in his military career, she became pregnant many times. Concurrently, their rapidly expanding family moved across the country and all over the world for her husband’s military placements. During this time period, Taylor and her husband continued to rely on the rhythm method. “Through it all,” she said, “I held on with a desperate grip to my belief in God’s providence and to my final intellectual conviction that the Church was actually right when it said that using artificial means to interfere with conception is against man’s essential human dignity.” Although money was scarce, the Taylors were able to support their nine “vigorous

49 Taylor, “This Baby Will Be My Last,” 6.  
50 Taylor, “This Baby Will Be My Last,” 6.  
51 Taylor, “This Baby Will Be My Last,” 6.
and handsome” children on the relatively small salary Taylor’s husband received from the military.\textsuperscript{52}

However, their situation changed when Taylor’s tenth child was born prematurely and with significant birth defects. For the first three years of his life, Taylor’s son was often severely ill and required multiple major surgeries, corrective braces, bone grafts, and numerous trips to the hospital for reoccurring bouts of pneumonia, all of which posed an enormous financial burden on the family. Spread thin by the anxiety of caring for a chronically ill child and the stress of having enough money to support her family, Taylor was terrified of becoming pregnant again. In what Taylor characterized as a positive turn to her story, Taylor did not become pregnant for three years following her son’s birth. Her husband also retired from the Navy, securing both retirement pay and a job that provided him with a larger income.

Six months prior to writing this article, Taylor had once again given birth to another son, her eleventh child. While Taylor was overjoyed by the fact that her son faced no health problems at birth, splitting a still relatively small paycheck among 13 people equated to approximately $45 per person each month, which Taylor explained was the subsistence level provided for state welfare payments in Washington at the time.\textsuperscript{53} Taylor’s comments reflected an increasing sense of overwhelming worry at this fact, and she recounted how different her life in 1965 as a mother of eleven children was compared to when she was newly married and had just converted to Catholicism:

I have almost lost the courage that I had as an eager young bride, when I was so inspired by my new-found conviction that the world was a good place and existence essentially worthwhile. I am a woman of almost 40 with a patchwork of worry wrinkles on my forehead and disfiguring varicose veins in my legs, a woman who talks too much when she happens to encounter someone she can trap

\textsuperscript{52} Taylor, “This Baby Will Be My Last,” 6.
\textsuperscript{53} Taylor, “This Baby Will Be My Last,” 8.
into an adult conversation that does not include babies and bottles and the price of meat.⁵⁴

Taylor went on to further express frustration at the empty platitudes offered to her over the years when she brought her concerns to priests during confession. The phrase “‘Pray for grace,’” she wrote, was “cold comfort to a mother who cannot manage to find the money to buy new shoes for a child who has worn his old ones through to the ground.”⁵⁵ In conversations with her husband during this uncertain time, Taylor came to the conclusion that while using birth control was wrong according to Church teachings, it was also wrong and immoral to raise children with only the scarce level of financial support that the couple was able to provide. Nevertheless, both she and her husband decided that despite their hardships, they would continue to employ the rhythm method until the Catholic Church came to a new and different conclusion that supported the use of artificial contraceptives.

Despite her renewed commitment to abstaining from oral contraceptive use, Taylor continued to entertain questions related to her family planning dilemma and even took note of recent developments among Catholic clergy’s changing opinions on the issue. “If artificial birth control is antihuman, what was this pointless fertility in a world that has been proved to be well on the way to overcrowding?” she asked.⁵⁶ Taylor continued on to note that, “Recently I read some encouraging things in the secular magazines about the Church’s attitude toward the new medical discoveries in reproduction. What especially interested me was the new birth-control pills. The Church’s more liberal theologians were reputed to consider use of these pills as moral in some cases.”⁵⁷ Taylor’s aside in this section of the story that she learned from “secular

⁵⁴ Taylor, “This Baby Will Be My Last,” 8.
⁵⁵ Taylor, “This Baby Will Be My Last,” 8.
⁵⁶ Taylor’s comments about overcrowding here relate to the broader eugenic discussions about population control found throughout women’s magazines and within American political discourse during this time period.
⁵⁷ Taylor, “This Baby Will Be My Last,” 8.
magazines” about changing Catholic attitudes on reproduction is particularly striking because it demonstrates that women were in fact benefitting from and learning more about conversations surrounding Christianity and contraception in women’s magazines themselves.

The final tipping point for Taylor came when she learned of her twelfth, most recent pregnancy. She decided to seek the advice of a priest from the local seminary, one whom she thought would have a complete understanding of the Catholic Church’s current interpretive stance on birth control pills. Taylor’s conversation with this priest brought her the answer she was hoping for, and she was told that it was her “obvious moral duty to go to a competent doctor and obtain a prescription to take the pills indefinitely.” The priest reasoned that because of Taylor’s irregular menstrual cycle, she had the natural right to restore regularity to her bodily functions, even if one of the other, related effects in doing so was temporary infertility. Relatedly, Taylor wrote, “he saw no reason except individual conscience to prevent a young couple from using these progesterone pills when they were just starting out in marriage.” Taylor was immediately relieved and excited at the prospect of how this news could change both her outlook on her own marriage and the future expectations of her children if they chose to enter into marriage.

Taylor’s piece concluded with her own vision and hopes regarding where the Catholic Church was headed in the coming years on issues of fertility and family planning. She pictured “a different way of living for believing Catholics in the world today,” one where clergy understood the practical difficulties that many couples faced in employing only the rhythm method and where scientists concentrated their energy on finding a method of contraception

58 Taylor, “This Baby Will Be My Last,” 10.
59 Taylor, “This Baby Will Be My Last,” 10.
compatible with “planning a truly Christian family of welcome children.” The article ended with the pronouncement that from Taylor’s assessment, “The Holy Spirit is finally moving over the face of the waters and reforming His Church again.” Published in July 1965 and likely written at least a few months before that, Taylor could not have predicted what was to come with the conclusion of Vatican II in December of the same year and the ensuing release of *Humane Vitae* three years later that would put an end to much of the vision that Taylor so optimistically put forth.

A second article written by another women’s magazine reader appeared in the February 1970 issue of *Good Housekeeping*. Published two years after the July 1968 release of *Humanae Vitae*, it provided countless more questions about the struggles that Catholic women faced while navigating the issue of birth control and their Catholic faith. Surprisingly, the author of this article was not listed anywhere before, after, or throughout the piece itself, and a scouring of the issue’s table of contents also provided no clear answer to the woman’s identity. However, her anonymity was slightly weakened by a photo that appeared on the first page of the article, presumably depicting the author, her husband, and one of their children. While the text of the article itself did not shed light on why the author chose to remain partially anonymous, it is easy to speculate that the reader in question may have opted to appear without a name due to the controversial nature of the subject on which she wrote. Given the potential hesitance inferred by the author’s anonymity, it is important to consider why both this nameless author and B.J. Taylor felt that their stories were meaningful enough to risk their own well-being by publicly releasing their own opinions on Catholicism and the birth control pill. Considering each author’s intended

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60 Taylor, “This Baby Will Be My Last,” 10.
61 Taylor, “This Baby Will Be My Last,” 10.
62 See Figure 8 in the Appendix for a photo of the introductory page of this article.
audience may begin to answer this question, but ultimately, one can only imagine the moral and ethical considerations that these women undertook as they made the choice to transition from the role of the invisible reader to the visible—and vulnerable—author.

This article, entitled “My Problem: Failure of the Rhythm Method,” was written as part of a *Good Housekeeping* series entitled “My Problem and How I Solved It.” As a prefatory explanation situated above the article’s title, the author summarized that “It was an agonizing decision my husband and I made. Our faith in our church never waivered [sic], but we felt we had to turn against one of its teachings.”

Though the framing of the article, necessitated in part by the series in which it appeared, was initially set up to sound like it presented an issue that could be easily fixed in the span of a five-page article, it was quickly apparent that this anonymous author’s trials around family planning and her faith were deep, long-running, and intensely dramatic. The author, who was twenty-five years old at the time of the article, began by establishing her Catholic credentials prior to her decision to use the birth control pill, saying that she and her husband, David, had been “reared as Catholics by conscientious parents, and we, in turn, are raising our children to have the same reverence and love for our religion that we have had from childhood.” However, the author contrasted, after choosing to use oral contraceptives, she reluctantly described herself and her husband as “conspirators against procreation, unable to participate in Communion or other church rites.”

The author and her husband met while both were attending a Catholic college and knew soon after meeting that they wanted to get married immediately once they graduated. To prepare,

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they took a marriage course during their senior year of college and consulted with a Catholic doctor who was affiliated with the school in order to create a schedule that would allow them to follow the rhythm method. Despite this preparation, the couple began to have slight reservations about the efficacy of the rhythm method and started exploring other contraceptive options. Shortly before getting married, the couple had a conversation with their priest, “Father Mayhew, our friend and confidant and the priest who would marry us. He managed to convince us that we could not defy the church in this regard.” With that admonition, the pair entered their marriage ready to begin their lives as a married couple and as young professionals, she as a teacher at a local Catholic elementary school and he as a graduate student with aspirations to become a professor.

Predictably, however, a problem soon arose for this anonymous author and her new husband: the couple was married in June, and by September, the author knew “with dread certainty” that she was pregnant. After a pregnancy that landed the author in the hospital with intense hemorrhaging and that destroyed the couple’s finances through thousands of dollars of medical debt, the couple was exhausted and worried, yet overjoyed with the birth of their first child, a son named David Jr. (Davey). Shortly after Davey’s birth, the author was promised her previous teaching job at St. Theresa’s for the coming school year, David re-enrolled in graduate school, and a family friend had offered to watch their child during the workday. Despite some unexpected setbacks, everything seemed to be falling into place.

In an almost cinematic turn of events, the author directly followed this scene with yet another occurrence of unexpected news: around the time that Davey turned four months old, the author found out she was pregnant with her second child, and the family’s plans once again came

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crashing down. “I was heartbroken for David, sick with shame at myself,” she wrote. “I felt like the most miserable of failures, an addlepated incompetent who couldn’t seem to keep track of her menstrual cycle accurately.” 68 (Earlier in their marriage, the couple had gone to a non-Catholic doctor who confirmed that the author’s irregular periods would make it difficult for them to adhere to the rhythm method calendar they had created in college.) At this point, the author was left pleased at the prospect of having another child, yet deeply worried about what adding another person to their family would mean for the financial and emotional well-being of the other family members.

“I remember the year following Stephen’s birth with that kind of movie-scene clarity a real nightmare has,” the author continued. 69 Once again unemployed, she was anxious and exhausted all the time, caring for two small children in an apartment that was barely big enough for three people. She and her husband, who had taken on a second job working at a university bookstore on the weekends, were consistently annoyed with one another and in a constant state of fear surrounding any physical interactions between the two of them. The author detailed the drastic measures that the couple took to prevent another unplanned pregnancy: “Although we couldn’t afford them,” she wrote, “we bought twin beds and gave our double bed away. We still believed we must follow our church’s teachings on birth control. We felt we had to think of our two little sons and David’s abandoned hopes as manifestations of God’s will.” 70

Despite these precautions, the author found out shortly after her second child’s first birthday that she was pregnant with her third child. Oddly relieved by this news and the ensuing pregnancy, the author “did the most serious thinking of my life in the five peaceful days I spent

in the hospital when Sarah was born. And when I came home, David and I talked longer and more seriously than we ever had before.”

The two came to the conclusion that for the sake of their family, their finances, and their health, they had to go against the teachings of the Catholic Church and explore contraceptive options other than the rhythm method.

The concluding section of the article detailed the intensely emotional moral and theological struggles that both the author and her husband experienced over the decision for her to start using the birth control pill. The couple continued to maintain deep connections to their local parish and remained committed Catholics. “We love our faith and we live in it in every way we can,” wrote the author. Yet she and her husband were unable to participate in the Eucharist each week because they did not attend confession, knowing that confessing the author’s use of the birth control pill would bar them from absolution.

In the paragraphs that followed, the author advocated earnestly for her view of who God was and how God worked:

We cannot believe that God made marital love for the purpose of procreation alone. We cannot believe God wanted David to be burdened so heavily. We think He is a loving God, willing to wait a few years before a young couple creates a new soul to love and honor Him. We think He is a compassionate God who understands that children need security to grow and that if they are to give them this security, parents must know they can provide for them. We are supposed to have free will, which is a gift from God. I am sure he intended us to use it effectively, to make the best we can out of what has been given us.

The author ended her article with a potential look to the future, but with a knowing resignation to the current status of her role in the Church as someone who used oral contraceptives. She told of a “little church in a nearby town” where “a younger priest who hears confessions forgives for God those who take the Pill.”

\[\text{71 “My Problem: Failure of the Rhythm Method,” 18.}\]
\[\text{72 “My Problem: Failure of the Rhythm Method,” 18.}\]
\[\text{73 “My Problem: Failure of the Rhythm Method,” 18, 24.}\]
\[\text{74 “My Problem: Failure of the Rhythm Method,” 24.}\]
to travel to that church so that she and her husband could both receive Communion. “But forgiveness shouldn’t be a matter of geography,” she concluded. “Penance is not to be measured in miles.”75 This final admission was accompanied by a recognition that she held a deep hope that God would ultimately not punish her or her husband for their desire to limit their family to the number of children that they could only support financially. However, this was also coupled with the acceptance that even if the author herself thought that her decision was permissible with God, it was not permissible in the eyes of all the church officials to whom she was required to answer in everyday life.

Although these two stories appeared in two different magazines five years apart from one another, both point to broader themes that are crucial to understanding how Catholic laywomen experienced the decisions of doctors, Church officials, and theologians in their everyday lives. They speak to the very real and urgent consequences of the perplexing interactions taking place between religion, law, and medicine at the time, and they tell a story that Christian magazines often struggled to capture through the experts they quoted and the authors they featured. For example, these women illustrate the differing and, in many cases, narrowly tailored and individualistic roles of clergy who advised on matters related to family planning during this time period. With the increasing liberalization of the clergy, the stories of the priests in both accounts illustrate on a local level that there were practical implications to such claims of a priesthood growing less rigid in their theological interpretations.76 The importance of local priests—who were more removed from papal authority and as a result, might have been more likely to

76 Although I was unable to find any materials in the women’s magazines I analyzed related to the liberalization of Catholic clergy, I did come across an article that discussed the liberalization of Protestant clergy. The August 1961 issue of Redbook contained an article entitled “The Surprising Beliefs of Our Future Ministers,” which assessed the responses of seminary and divinity school students via a survey that covered their stances both on modes of biblical interpretation and pressing social issues of the day.
consider alternative interpretations of the Catholic Church’s teachings on contraception—is central to understanding both of these women’s stories. In B.J. Taylor’s case, a local priest provided her with the difference between financial, marital, and emotional ruin and peace of mind. Although Taylor and her husband were already tentatively considering contraceptive use, her priest’s approval of the undertaking ultimately equipped Taylor with the moral clarity she wanted to finalize the decision. In the case of the anonymous author of the *Good Housekeeping* article, her decision to resist traveling to a nearby parish to receive Communion in spite of her contraceptive use sat at the center of her theological justification and her hope for a Church that would one day allow her to partake in the sacraments anywhere. Though clergy served a different function in both women’s narratives, it is clear that individual priests did the work of arbitrating concerns over salvation and the Pill.

In addition, the authors of both of these pieces were quick to assert their Catholic credentials in the very first lines of their articles, to authorize themselves as good, faithful, and involved members of the Catholic Church who stumbled into a situation that put them at odds with the institution they loved. Taylor’s status as a convert to Catholicism in particular marks her claim to authority and once again raises questions of audience for both women. Specifically, why did Taylor feel that she needed to so strongly disavow Protestantism and outline her prolonged commitment to Catholicism? Why did the anonymous author in the *Good Housekeeping* article decide to preface her story with the details that she was raised in a Catholic household and intended to raise her own children in a Catholic household as well? These early establishments of Catholic identity seem in part self-serving, made out of a sense of both self-consciousness and self-preservation, given that both women’s struggles with the Catholic Church’s teachings were now becoming public and up for scrutiny. However, another element persists as well, one that
points to a firmer answer to questions about their respective audiences. Specifically, by labeling themselves as committed Catholics and by providing narrative details that illustrated this commitment, these authors were signaling to other Catholic women reading the magazines that they were not alone. These stories could serve either as calls to action or as tales of warning for Catholic who were similarly situated.

Ultimately, both women also ended their essays with expressions of sadness and frustration towards higher-level clergy, whom they felt were forcing them to choose between their faith and family planning. Both also concluded with pleas to the Catholic Church that their own contraceptive practices be accepted. In the face of this desperation, the women still spoke of the immense relief they felt when they came to the decision to start using the birth control pill, knowing the positive impact it would have on the daily operation of their marriages, families, and finances. In some ways, it is likely that it was this relief that afforded them the time and the resources to document their personal narratives and submit them to women’s magazines in the first place. Overall, these sentiments, powerfully expressed in the pages of Redbook and Good Housekeeping, more broadly reflect the dynamics at play in households all across the country for women whose voices were not as easily accessible as the ones found in the pages of these magazines.

Letters to the editor

Another spot in which everyday women could stake their claim in the landscape of mid-twentieth century women’s magazine was the letters to the editor section, situated at the front of most publications. Letters to the editor columns that pertained to contraception and Christianity worked as crucial sites of interaction between readers of different, yet still largely Christian,
religious affiliations. Both the areas of agreement and the differences in conviction expressed in these letters show how necessary a space like this was for women from different religious groups, and even from within the same one, to have a “neutral” venue where they could discuss these critical moral issues with their peers. Though generally brief and surrounded by letters on wildly varying topics, these letters were invaluable places of conversation between multiple readers at a time and importantly, between Catholic and Protestant readers.

One factor that we can point to in evaluating who was most actively engaging with the women’s magazine of the mid-twentieth century is who was responding to these articles via letters to the editor. Although on the whole it can occasionally be difficult to ascertain the religious affiliation of the overall readership of a particular women’s magazine, it is often quite easy to figure out an individual reader’s religious affiliation, specifically in the letters to the editor section of the magazine to which they wrote. Women who wrote letters in response to articles that featured Christianity and the birth control pill frequently identified themselves by their specific religious affiliation in the first line or two of the letter. For example, in a response to reader Mrs. Bill Cooley’s letter to the editor about the article “Should Birth Control Be Available to Unmarried Women?”, Good Housekeeping reader Marta Davis decried Cooley’s moral rigidity. “Frankly, as a Unitarian whose membership (80 percent in a recent survey) approves of intercourse between unmarried persons,” she wrote, “I resent others trying to force their values on me.”77 In identifying her Unitarian affiliation, Davis set herself up in contrast to a presumably non-Unitarian religious other in the form of Mrs. Cooley, who Davis viewed as limiting her own ability to support contraception access for unmarried women.

Furthermore, the fact that mainly Christian women commented on issues of faith and family planning in letters to the editor pages seems to further confirm the overwhelming Christian presence in women’s magazines readerships as a whole. An article from the January 1963 issue of *Good Housekeeping*, entitled “A special report: What Women Think About Religion,” reflected this representation. This survey, which framed its questions in implicitly Christian terms, asked about readers’ own religious beliefs; how readers were deciding to raise their children in terms of a religious or non-religious upbringing; and how readers envisioned the role of religion in public life. For example, a survey question which asked women to respond to the statement “There is life after death,” received 71% “Yes” answers, 5% “No” answers, 17% “Don’t Know,” and 7% who declined to answer. The overwhelming affirmative response to this question suggests that many *Good Housekeeping* readers held at least some beliefs that were based in the teachings of Christianity, and that correspondingly, major questions surrounding religion found in publications like *Good Housekeeping* were centered within a Christian framework. A Gallup poll conducted in 1960 confirms the overwhelming demographic prominence of Christians in the United States at this time: of those who were asked about their religious preference, 67 percent of respondents chose “Protestant,” while 25 percent of respondents chose “Catholic.”

If a letter writer was Protestant, and they neglected to clarify which specific denomination of Protestantism they belonged to, it was highly probable that at some point in that letter, they would mention that they were Christian but not Catholic. For example, the December 1964 issue of *Cosmopolitan* devoted a section of its reader mail to the “Pros and Cons of Birth

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Control.” In this segment, the magazine set up a contrast, not between one reader who was staunchly opposed to the use of contraception and another reader who was enthusiastically in favor of it, but rather published one letter from a self-proclaimed “non-Catholic mother” and the other from a self-described “Catholic mother.” Much as the overall distinction of “Christian, but not Catholic” suggests, this interaction hints at the anti-Catholic positioning that was occasionally constructed in the letters to the editor sections of these magazines and that was furthered in the language that letter writers employed.

Both of the letters in question were written in response to the September 1964 article *Cosmopolitan* had published a few months before, entitled “Catholics and Birth Control.” As described in a previous section on long-form articles written by male experts, this article, by *Cosmopolitan* staff member Thomas J. Fleming, leaned heavily into the perceived urgency of the matter of population control, deeply connecting it to a lack of Catholic consensus on the matter of birth control. The strong anti-Catholicism, expressed in this piece as concern for Catholic clergy to make up their minds on the question of birth control for the sake of the world’s population, was echoed to a degree in the letters to the editor that followed three months later.

The first reader to voice her critique on the article, and on the issue of religion and contraception more generally, was Mrs. Frederick Scholz of Chester, New Jersey. Importantly, Scholz opened her letter drawing a clear distinction between herself and those whose religious beliefs she chose to counter. “Being a non-Catholic mother,” Scholz explained that she was a proponent of the Pill, believing it to be a generally good and necessary instrument, especially for parents who were concerned about the ability to provide for their children. The way that she phrased this introductory sentence inferred an assumption on Scholz’s part that all readers would

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80 Mrs. Frederick Scholz, letter to the editor, *Cosmopolitan*, December 1964.
implicitly understand that her identification as a “non-Catholic mother” automatically labeled her as a supporter of contraception. “However,” Scholz countered, “I have no intention of forcing my belief on people who do not feel as I do. Therefore, I don’t like it when some of those people tell me I must practice their beliefs instead of my own.”\(^81\) Scholz’s problem was not necessarily that some Catholics thought that the birth control pill was morally wrong; rather, she took issue with the fact that in her mind, the Catholic Church thought that it was permissible to prohibit others, whether Catholic or not, from using contraceptives.

It is unclear whether Mrs. Scholz was attempting to advocate on the behalf of Catholic women who wanted to use oral contraceptives but felt hindered by the Church, or if she was just trying to make a broadly anti-Catholic argument about birth control and individual choice. While Scholz’s motives could have encompassed both of these reasonings, her initial self-categorization as a “non-Catholic” presents a definitive context for her comments. Specifically, the fact that Scholz chose to describe herself as primarily in opposition to Catholicism, rather than self-identifying as a Protestant, points toward a latent anti-Catholicism, subtly demarcated by the depiction of her beliefs. Ultimately, Scholz’s warning to opponents of contraception to not “force me to act as you believe, and don’t force those many, many people all over the world who want and desperately need information to be deprived of it” spoke to a forceful opposition to the Catholic Church as an institution, a critique that was countered by the letter that followed it in *Cosmopolitan*’s “From Our Readers” page.\(^82\)

Mrs. Joan Bob of Wayne, New Jersey, wrote into *Cosmopolitan* to lend her opinion on this piece from her perspective as a Catholic mother. Despite her positionality, Mrs. Bob’s letter did not speak explicitly to the points raised in Mrs. Scholz’s comments. Instead, she wrote to

\(^81\) Scholz, letter to the editor, Dec. 1964.
\(^82\) Scholz, letter to the editor, Dec. 1964.
express her frustration with the author of the article’s framing of the situation, particularly how he portrayed the actors in the piece as solidly “good” or bad,” when she believed these figures should have been juxtaposed in the exact opposite way. “I felt while reading the article, that I was immersed in a great soap opera,” she wrote. “All the characters are Catholics, practicing and nonpracticing.”83 The “good guys,” were couples she described as “those who practice their faith, love God and obey his commandments.”84 In Bob’s opinion, these were the characters who the author categorized as having a bad life filled with too many children because they did not use contraception. On the other hand, she argued that the author had set up Catholic couples who did use contraception—people whom she considered to be the “bad guys”—as people who were living an objectively good life, one with fewer children. Ultimately, Bob argued that the author of the piece made his article silly and confusing with his incorrect assumptions about Catholics and their opposing positions on contraception.

Excerpts from the letters to the editor section like these show that not only did women’s magazines display an assortment of viewpoints, but within these disagreements, they also showcased the subtleties of anti-Catholicism, whether intentionally or not. Bob’s response indicates a range in anti-Catholic responses in terms of who the intended target was. In this case, the anti-Catholic reader in question seems to have responded negatively to the institution of the Catholic Church as a whole rather than to an individual woman’s story.

Taken as a whole, this set of letters also reveals an important point about anti-Catholicism in the face of Protestant-Catholic relations during this time period. Namely, women’s magazine articles that took a broader look at the dynamics between Catholics and Protestants in the 1960s and ‘70s argued that there was more cooperation and communication

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83 Mrs. Joan Bob, letter to the editor, Cosmopolitan, December 1964.
84 Bob, letter to the editor, Dec. 1964.
between the two groups than ever before. However, interactions like the one that took place between Scholz and Bob belie this blanket assertion, suggesting that laypeople-centered conversations may have been more tenuous in some ways than women’s magazine articles written about Catholic-Protestant ecumenism during this time period let on. Already entrenched in the national vocabulary of Will Herberg’s *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* and John Rock’s calls for interfaith cooperation on the matter of the birth control pill, women’s magazine writers reflected positively on the modern state of the relationship between Catholics and Protestants in America. Three articles in particular—Thomas J. Fleming’s 1961 *Cosmopolitan* article “Catholics and Protestants: Will They Ever Get Together?”, Walter Goodman’s 1960 *Redbook* article “Must Birth Control Divide Our Religions?”, and Goodman’s 1964 article in the same publication, entitled “Striking Changes in the Way Protestants & Catholics Feel About Each Other”—stand out in this discussion.

The final article in that list read like an optimistic follow-up to Walter Goodman’s 1960 piece.85 In “Striking Changes in the Way Protestants & Catholics Feel About Each Other,” Goodman acknowledged that heated social, political, and theological debates between Protestants and Catholics still existed, “reawakening prejudices that we would prefer to believe do not exist.”86 However, bolstered by polling results he had collected from a survey of *Redbook* readers, Goodman covered five divisive social issues (“Birth Control,” “Schools,” “A Catholic President,” “Interfaith Marriage,” and “The Pope and Christian Unity”) and debunked the misconception that Catholics and Protestants were hopelessly interlocked in a fruitless battle over an official Christian position on each topic. Reproduced at the end of the article, the survey

85 See Figure 9 in the Appendix for a photo of the introductory page of Goodman’s 1964 article.
results that Goodman cited provide a surprising amount of clear and definitive support for his position. Responding to the question of whether or not they “Believe there is less anti-Catholic feeling among Protestants than five years ago,” fifty-one percent of Catholics who were polled agreed with the statement, while thirty-one percent of Protestants also agreed with that assessment. Given these starkly affirming numbers and the general consensus between the three articles previously listed, it would be easy to argue that anti-Catholicism was not at play in the pages of these women’s magazines. However, this analytical frame ignores the implicit anti-Catholic sentiment that was subtly expressed in certain arguments made by women’s magazine readers and writers. Despite the facts that anti-Catholicism was becoming less outwardly virulent and that many American Catholics were in support of artificial contraception, just like their Protestant counterparts, a latent anti-Catholicism remained in between the lines of ecumenical interactions among Christian women’s magazine readers.

Despite these displays of anti-Catholicism, the letters to the editor section of the typical 1960s and ‘70s women’s magazine did not only serve as an arena for women of different religious affiliations to explore their agreements and disagreements. They also served as a forum for Catholic women to comment among and against themselves and to offer critique and support for one another. One powerful example came from the April 1970 issue of Good Housekeeping, where a section of the letters to the editor page called “Religion and the Pill” appeared in response to the February 1970 publication of “My Problem: Failure of the Rhythm Method.” Although neither of the letter writers explicitly identified themselves as a “Catholic mother” or a “Catholic wife,” their familiarity with Catholic teachings as well as the personal experiences they

recounted provide enough context to assume that both women were affiliated with the Catholic Church.

The first letter, written by Mrs. M. E. Mann from St. Paul, Minnesota, put forth a nuanced theological argument to provide justification for the author’s decision. “Before too many people throw brick-bats at the Catholic Church because of your article ‘Failure of the Rhythm Method’ (February 1970), a few things should be borne in mind,” Mann preaced.88 Instead of reacting in anger, Mann said, readers should first keep in mind that the Catholic Church still allowed those who were unable to produce children, either due to age or to disability, to get married. Therefore, Mann argued, it should not be assumed that the Catholic Church only condoned sexual partnerships in marriage for the purpose of procreation. Mann continued on to say that in addition, the young Catholic author of the February 1970 issue should have explicitly sought advice from her doctor about her irregular periods in order to demonstrate that at the heart of her contraception use was an established medical problem, rather than the superficial desire to seek an artificial replacement for the rhythm method.89 Although Mann’s motives in writing this letter are not entirely clear, it seems as if she was attempting to give an “out” to the author of the original article and to provide her with some additional, though somewhat disparaging, medical and theological reasoning to bolster her decision.

The second letter writer, Mrs. L. H. Hennessey from New Orleans, Louisiana, took a similar, yet much more open and deliberate tone with her advice to the Catholic author of the original piece. Ultimately, Hennessey argued, the woman had no need to feel conflicted or ashamed about her use of the birth control pill because so many other Catholic women utilized

88 Mrs. M. E. Mann, letter to the editor, Good Housekeeping, April 1970.
89 As you might recall from the previous discussion of “The Failure of the Rhythm Method,” the anonymous author noted that she and her husband struggled to follow the rhythm method schedule they created due to her irregular periods.
various methods of contraception at the time and continued to attend confession and receive Communion. Speaking from her own personal experience, Hennessey said that: “As a mother of seven who has taken the Pill but never kept away from the Sacraments, I find I need both to strengthen my life. Holy Communion is the bread of life; the Pill is a life preserver.” These last two lines of Hennessey’s letter functioned as a direct call to the anonymous author to reject the insecurity and shame she felt around using contraception as a practicing Catholic, while still incorporating a compassionate and deeply considered viewpoint grounded in personal experience.

When it came to debates over contraceptive use and religious practice, letters to the editor pages in women’s magazines served multiple, and sometimes conflicting, functions depending on the context. On one hand, women could write in to express their personal opinions on contraception and religion and see their letter placed next to another one that directly contradicted their own. On the other hand, the letters to the editor stood in as a resource where women could support one another in their ethical questions and could offer up creative solutions and explanations for the theological issues that others were writing about. In all, letters to the editor about Christianity and the birth control pill that appeared in women’s magazines were not wholly supportive of the Pill, nor did they completely condemn the co-existence of Christian (and in most cases, particularly Catholic) beliefs and contraceptive use. They were filled with the type of intellectual and ideological diversity that women were not often regularly afforded the space to express in other high-profile, formally published fora.

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As a whole, the body of work produced in women’s magazines reflected important conversations involving salient social, political, cultural, and theological issues of the time in a way that was unique to the form of the women’s magazine itself. Christian magazines like Christianity Today, Christian Century, and Commonweal, were still at a point where women were sparingly included as contributors and commentators on issues related to their own theological beliefs. In these magazines, women’s voices did not constitute a critical mass on the issues that directly impacted them the most. As a result, whether consciously or unconsciously, they created and developed spaces in women’s magazines where politics, theology, and ethics could coexist with fashion, culinary arts, and cosmetics.

In her article ““A Friend, A Nimble Mind, and a Book”: Girls’ Literary Criticism in Seventeen Magazine, 1958-1969,” Jill Anderson examines Seventeen’s “Curl Up and Read” series, which featured fiction and non-fiction book reviews written by the publication’s teen readers. Through her analysis of these materials, Anderson comes to the conclusion that these book reviews, and the letters that responded to them, acted as important arenas for fostering girls’ intellectual and social development. Ultimately, Anderson argues that “Seventeen magazine, a publication deeply invested in enforcing heteronormativity and conventional models of girlhood and womanhood, was in fact a more complex and multivocal serial text whose editors actively sought out, cultivated, and published girls’ creative and intellectual work.”

Although there are significant differences between the readership, content, and purpose of Seventeen and women’s magazines of the 1960s and ’70s, both Anderson’s thesis and her mode of analysis broaden critical examination techniques that can also apply to women’s magazines. By looking past the surface-level, yet still pertinent, critiques of materialism,

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consumerism, and unhealthy body image that many of these magazines promote, it is still possible to find valuable insight in the intellectual material that sits beneath it. Religion initially seems like a topic too serious to appear in women’s magazines. However, this is clearly not the case upon further analysis, and it would be misguided to allow these misconceptions shape future research. As Anderson demonstrates, it is both possible and even beneficial to take a second look at these sources and consider their potential for innovative scholarship, while keeping in mind the historical drawbacks and situatedness they possess.

In the context of this narrative, women’s magazines served as important vehicles for discussions about Christianity and contraception. Virtually locked out of denominational publications and their debates about the Pill, Christian women in the 1960s and ‘70s took advantage of the publications that were available to them at the time to hold their own religiously focused conversations. Consequently, the pages of women’s magazines captured the deep and meaningful moral and theological struggles that Christian women faced in grappling with the matter of contraceptive use and their religious commitments. Importantly, these magazines reveal that Christian women held varying positions on contraception, motivated by a diverse array of reasons. In particular, Christian women employed this space to express their opinions about the Catholic Church’s stance on contraception, whether it was in the form of a heartfelt article written by a Catholic mother who described her anguish over the Church’s unclear and inconsistent guidance on contraception pre-Vatican II or an angry Protestant’s letter to the editor, asserting that the Catholic Church had no right to control women’s contraceptive use. Ultimately, the stories and reporting that women contributed to these publications produced a corpus that intimately reflects the trials that Christian women, and especially Catholic women in particular, handled in their everyday lives.
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Appendix

Figure 1 – “How Catholic Women Really Feel about Sex and the Pill” by Sally Cunneen

It seemed impossible to have patience with the Church until it emerged into the modern world,” says a mother of five from the state of Washington. “And it has a long way to go.”

But this awakening really has begun. Hopefully, the public will soon tire of stories about the Catholic “discovery” that sex is good. Of course, the over-reaction was due to the incredible gap that had existed between the silent practice of growing numbers of Catholics and the prohibitions of the teaching Church. Many would agree with the housewife who writes, “The exchange of confidential details appalls me. I’m sick of the whole business of birth control.” She, of course, had made her own decision to use it some time ago, and had no need of the forum.

But more Catholics are probably in the situation of the mother of five in her twenties who answered the question, “Has the teaching of the Church on birth control caused you personal or theoretical difficulties?” by saying, “Not difficulties, but much food for thought. My attitude has evolved, as I believe the Church’s is doing, only mine has done it faster, since my life is much shorter.”

The first question I asked in my survey of Catholic women was: “How would you rate the teaching of the Church as you received it in terms of its contribution to your attempts to deal with the reality of sex in your existence— as a help, as a neutral factor, or as a hindrance?” Twenty-eight percent of the women replied said that sex teaching had been a help, 20 percent said it had been a hindrance, and 28 percent were neutral. Among single women, 22 percent called it a help and 43 percent a hindrance, with 25 percent neutral. Married women (28 percent) thought it had been a hindrance rather than a help (21 percent), with 24 percent neutral.

A succinct statement of her sexual odyssey comes from Angela di Salvo who says: “When I was in college in the ’forties, the principal teaching regarding sex might be best called a sort of biological determination. It was very irrelevant. Experience itself and my own sense of identity helped me form a joyful attitude.

And an ex-man who is now the mother of 10 children asks: “Why is the Church so overboard on sex instead of the nuclear bomb, war and the condition of the poor? There are other sins besides sexual sins.”

Many women referred to this disproportionate concern with sex. Some recent studies provide wider support for their impressions. One found in 1963 that “Catholic campuses treated sexual misconduct more seriously than classroom cheating.”

A number of women argued for greater use of modern psychology and sociology to reduce the anxiety of the typical Catholic about sexual behavior. The most frequent theme stressed is the need, pointed out by a Minnesota wife, “for freedom of conscience and a complete change of emphasis in the Church from legalism to living counsels.” She continues: “In the first flush of conversion, I made an effort to find meaning in the Church’s teaching on sex (or popular ideas of it). The sudden self-consciousness nearly wrecked our marriage. Simultaneously I began to notice popular Catholic magazine articles on children and sex—ridiculous stratifications about innuendo and their genitals. Finally restored to sanity on the subject, I decided I would never consult a Catholic ‘authority’ on any phase of sex again.”

The girl who received her attitudes from nuns was often subjected to a mixture of greater ignorance combined with disaste. “The sense of proportion was so distorted,” says a single working girl, “I grew up thinking that listening to a passionate song or reading certain books was as sinful as adultery itself, and that the major battle I would have to face in life was a fight against sexual passion. Two extremes emerge from such a background: either you are too casual about sex, or you are inordinately defensive and self-rightheous.”

“The only attitude I ever got,” laments a young wife from Minneapolis, “was that sex is wrong, and should be avoided at all costs. It is nothing but a necessary evil which exists because, unfortunately, this is the way God decided reproduction should take place. The teaching on birth control supports this theory. Don’t have sex just to show affection; you are little less than an animal if you admit to enjoying it.”

Not all the married women have been able to shake off these early sturctures. The mother of five from Oak Park, Ill., confesses: “Sex was and still is a duty. I would like to let myself go and enjoy it, but at those times I am afraid I would get pregnant—and I do not want to be pregnant again. So it is a once-a-month-or-less dreadful thing instead of a spontaneous sharing of mutual delight.” Another Illinois housewife in her sixties believes that, “Although the Church is now trying to re- }
Figure 2 – “The secret drama behind the Pope’s momentous decision on birth control” by Lois Chevalier

“Emotionally and psychologically the rhythm method has been harmful to our marriage. Our love, which is continually deepening in Christ and in each other, must, of its nature, seek union. This union is almost continually denied, and the frustration is great.”

These are the words of one faithful American Catholic, written especially for the eyes of a secret group with a task unprecedented in all history; the Papal Commission for the Study of Population, the Family and Birth.

Another said: “Ten children in twelve years—it hardly seems as if it works. After a complete nervous breakdown and an attempted suicide, we have nothing left to do but abstain.”

The anguish of these Catholic couples, along with many other grave considerations, is the special burden of Pope Paul VI, who must decide if the Church can change a teaching that it has upheld for nearly 2,000 years—that contraception is a serious sin.

Perhaps never has one man faced a decision that so intimately affects so many lives. The Roman Catholic Church numbers 580 million members—the largest religious denomination in the world. They are of all colors, all nationalities and varying degrees of faithfulness. And it can now be documented that the Church’s position on birth control divides them far more violently than has hitherto come to light.

What will Paul VI do? Originally, almost two years ago, he said he would decide the question himself. Last June, after his study commission had been greatly enlarged and charged by the Pope in person to find “an answer,” he said, “We hope soon to be able to say our word, supported by the light of human science.” Last fall he said, “The documents on this question are piling up on my desk.” Then, last December, he approved a report of the Ecumenical Council announcing that the matter needs “more diligent study.”

Meanwhile, the members of the birth-control commission are in turmoil. “We have had only one meeting, and that was too short,” an American member told the Journal. “The Pope asked us to hurry and complete our work. Why are we inactive now? We are trying to work by correspondence. We have had a regional meeting of Americans. But this is not enough. Many of us are frustrated and impatient. The Church is in chaos. We can’t delay.”

The man who said this, and much else, is a normally calm, respected professor at a great American university. He may not be identified because all commission members were told to be silent. Indeed, the commission’s membership was never made public. Its meeting place was supposed to be secret, and so were its deliberations. And its procedures. And its report to the Pope—83 pages under a salmon-colored paper cover, distributed in several languages, including Latin. Even fact that there is a small standing executive committee which has had at least one supremely private meeting, last June, was never officially disclosed.

Behind the delay and the official silence, it now develops, there is considerable gnashing of teeth and whispered rage. This intense feeling is of the kind not found in other theological controversies of modern times.

Liberal commission members, who favor some changes in the teachings of the Church, assert that the commission’s work is being sabotaged by a denial of funds to hold meetings and provide such essential working tools as adequate translation services. They say that some documents fail to reach the higher authorities for whom they are intended and that the texts of others have been tampered with in transmission. They freely impugn the motives of the opposition. For example, they charge that three archconservative commission members are not fighting for a cause so much as for vindication of themselves and of ideas that they have taught so long they just cannot give them up.

Canon Victor Heylen, a professor of moral theology at the University of Louvain, Belgium, and secretary of the Ecumenical Council’s subcommission on marriage, is even ready to point a finger at the three: the Rev. Father Jan Visser, rector of St. Alphonsus College, and the Rev. Father Marcelino Zalba, a moral theologian from the Pontifical Gregorian University, both in Rome;
Figure 3 – “We can end the battle over birth control!” by John Rock

An eminent Catholic doctor insists that we find the solution to a divisive religious controversy. He candidly discusses what we have to do to counter the population explosion and how we must search for methods morally acceptable to all.

An understanding of the inflammable birth-control controversy involves some knowledge of theology, medicine, politics and common sense. Perhaps because my career has touched on the first three, I am impelled to speak out now. Indeed, I feel obliged to do so, for the advancement of everything that has given meaning to my life.

I am convinced the birth-control issue can be resolved to everyone’s satisfaction and benefit.

I don’t mean by this that Catholics, Protestants, Jews and others will see eye-to-eye on this subject in the immediate future.

I do mean that solutions can be worked out which will help us avoid the distressing public acrimony we have witnessed during the last few years.

I mean also that the time may not be far distant when a much closer harmony will be developed even in the doctrines of the various religious groups.

To show why I believe such a happy solution is possible, I must first define the controversy with more precision than newspaper headlines (“Catholics oppose birth control” or “non-Catholics support birth control”) usually do.
Figure 4 – “Catholics and Birth Control” by Thomas J. Fleming

CATHOLICS AND BIRTH CONTROL

With the planet rapidly running out of living space, the need to slow down our dangerous population explosion has become a matter of desperate urgency. Long the chief adversary of most planned parenthood methods, the Catholic Church is now under pressure—from thousands of adherents who demand the right to have smaller families—to re-examine its rigid doctrine.

BY THOMAS J. FLEMING

By the time you finish reading this article, some six thousand children will have been born. Babies are currently popping onto our planet at the rate of almost two hundred per minute—a staggering 850 per cent increase over earlier centuries. It took our globe from the dawn of history to the present to produce a population of more than three billion people. The next three and a half billion, according to the population experts, will be produced in the next forty years. We will approach the seven-billion mark about the year 2000, at which time, say gloomier statisticians, Dooms-day will have been reached. For at that time, if our population continues to increase at its present rate, the world literally will run out of habitable land.

These figures explain why people of every faith and no faith in all parts of the world are watching with fascination and anxiety the current upheaval in the Catholic Church over its teaching on birth control. As William Petersen, author of the recent highly respected book Population, points out, “The Catholic Church remains the strongest adversary of planned parenthood movements in the West, as well as in international bodies like the World Health Organization.”

Although nations like India, which adds eight million to its numbers each year, are in desperate need of immediate help, the United States can by no means consider itself a disinterested bystander. Only a few months ago, Ronald Freedman, a University of Michigan sociologist, warned that the “rather moderate” average family of three children will give the United States an alarming 360,000,000 people by 2000 a.d. Three children may seem like the ideal family to the typical non-Catholic American, but to the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, it is anything but ideal. In 1958, the late Pope Pius XII, addressing the Italian Association of Large Families, summed up Catholic ideals. “You are not just any families at all; you are and represent large families, those most blessed by the church as its most precious treasures.”

About one out of every four Americans is now Catholic; within another decade the proportion may be one in three. Whether these citizens practice family limitation like the majority of Americans, or feel impelled, in response to their church’s urging, to have six, seven, eight, children, will have tremendous impact on all aspects of American life.

The church’s position also drastically affects government policy. The United States has been unable to include a thorough-going birth control program in its foreign aid to countries such as India because of Catholic objections. Local governments have seen numerous wrangles between Protestants and Catholics over the dispensing of birth control information and services in city hospitals and public welfare programs. Not long ago, Richard J. Hughes, the Catholic governor of New Jersey (and father of ten), outraged Americans of other faiths with his reply to a query about having state welfare agencies distribute birth control information to cut down the number of illegitimate children. Snapped Governor Hughes: “One solution [to the problem] (continued)
What the Planned Parenthood People Are Up To

Fifty years ago Margaret Sanger organized a movement that "was born in agony and grew in conflict." Today the fight has been taken up by the very forces that once opposed her—the church, the state and men themselves.

The world has changed incredibly in the span of a single lifetime. Margaret Sanger, who invented the term birth control in 1912 and has been for years honorary chairman of the organization founded to promote it, is still living as these words are being written—and still offering a few of her own. "I had to be very careful about the words I used," she recently told a reporter. "Even my father—an outspoken Irishman who brought me up to do my own thinking—said to me one day: 'Margaret, don't you find some other subject in the world to talk about besides the bedroom? And he whispered when he said bedroom!'

No man whispers bedroom any more, but the organization most closely associated with the birth control movement in the United States has a euphemistic title: Planned Parenthood Federation of America. World Population Emergency Campaign, or PP-WP for short. Even stranger to say, it is administered almost exclusively by men. Dr. Alan F. Guttmacher is president; Mr. Donald B. Straus, a noted labor arbitrator, holds the top volunteer position as chairman; the highly valued corporation executives, Mr. Eugene R. Black, Mr. Lamont du Pont Copeland, and William H. Draper, Jr., are vice-chairmen, along with Mr. Arnold Marchmont, and two women—Mrs. Robert Ferguson and Mrs. Philip Pillsbury. Mr. Cass Canfield, editor and publisher, is chairman of the executive committee. There are fifty-five men and forty-one women on the national board of directors.

The two former United States Presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Harry S. Truman, are honorary fund-raising co-chairmen. Fourteen other men, all outstanding national leaders, and only one woman, Mrs. Albert D. Lasker, are honorary sponsors.

This preponderance of top-ranking male support for birth control is unique in history. So is the problem. How it came about is a long, dramatic—and unfinished—story.

Every Baby Wanted

The Voluntary Parenthood League was organized in 1914 by Mary Ware Dennett and others interested in suffragette and feminist movements. At that time Mrs. Sanger was in Europe attempting to learn more about contraceptive methods. The crusade to permit women to have babies only if they wanted them was a part of the feminist movement in the United States in the early decades of this century. Women led women into action. Few men had anything good to say about it.

There were exceptions—Mrs. Sanger's first husband, for example, went to jail for her cause. There were other men, in this country and abroad, who gave the birth control movement strong support. But most men, even those who in principle favored birth control, could not bring themselves to discuss it in public. The words were too indecent; moreover, the entire feminist movement was a threat to male dominance. Not many men were willing to assist in playing what they took to be the natural rights of their sex in jeopardy.

Although early advocates of birth control were a part of the struggle for women's rights, they were motivated primarily by their concern for the individual mother, poor and often ailing, who had no choice but to conceive babies "as it happened"—even though many births often meant misery and neglect for the children and an early death for the mother. There was a choice for the rich and informed, but not for the poor and illiterate. In their attempt to correct this injustice, the birth control proponents faced formidable obstacles—massive indifference and contempt, the general belief that preventing conception was immoral, the organized opposition of the Catholic church, and the fact that the dis-
Figure 6 – “Should Birth Control Be Available to Unmarried Women?”

SHOULD BIRTH CONTROL BE AVAILABLE TO UNMARRIED WOMEN?

YES, says the Reverend Frederic C. Wood, Jr.

This is the fourth in Good Housekeeping’s continuing survey of the opinions of its readers on controversial issues. From previous surveys you are probably familiar with our procedure. Each month the editors solicit an opinion on a timely, provocative question from an outstanding authority on the subject. Then we turn around and submit the expert’s views to a sampling of the 20,000 members of the Good Housekeeping Consumer Panel. These readers—1,000 of them in each opinion study—are asked whether they agree or disagree with the expert’s statement and to give their reasons for the position they take.

Our question this month: Should the means of birth control be made available to unmarried women?

Our expert: the Reverend Frederic C. Wood, Jr., chaplain and assistant professor of religion at Goucher College in Maryland. Dr. Wood, a graduate of Union Theological Seminary in New York, is an ordained Protestant Episcopal priest. He served three years as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Navy. He is married and the father of three daughters aged six to ten. The opinions he expresses in the following statement are his own and do not reflect the policies of Goucher College.

Dr. Wood’s statement: “I believe that means of birth control should be made available to unmarried women at the discretion of registered physicians because:

1. Many doctors already provide contraceptive devices to unmarried women. Public approval of such a practice would reduce unfair pressures on doctors and establish a more receptive climate for marital and personal counseling.
2. The exclusive identification of birth control with marriage obscures the real moral issues involved in the sexual act—the nature of the relationship and the social responsibility both parties assume within or outside marriage.
3. Birth control devices are readily available to men. To withhold even better techniques from unmarried women confirms an immoral double standard.
4. Withholding birth control from unmarried persons aggravates rather than alleviates social problems, especially venereal disease and illegitimacy.
5. Recognized availability of contraceptive devices would not necessarily lead to an increase in irresponsible premarital behavior.”

NO, say readers of Good Housekeeping

For every two readers of Good Housekeeping who believe that birth control should be available to unmarried women, approximately three believe that it should not. Forty-two percent of readers who responded to this month’s GH poll went on record in full opposition to the views of the Reverend Frederic C. Wood and only twenty-seven percent expressed complete agreement with the chaplain’s opinions.

But as you can see by the accompanying chart, the votes in full agreement and disagreement with Dr. Wood tell only part of the story. In this poll a notably high percentage of respondents registered partial agreement or disagreement, or even a combination of agreement and disagreement. Those who agree in part total 18 percent; disagree in part, 7 percent; both agree and disagree in part, 2 percent.

This large, in-between, pro-and-con vote is in itself significant. It is the kind of result pollsters have learned to expect whenever a long-held public policy is under re-evaluation. Possibly then, the most important finding of this fourth GH survey is this indication that birth control policy is, indeed, now under serious scrutiny by thoughtful women, and that while they are reconsidering the issues, they prefer not to take a position at either extreme.

While readers give no approval for a changed public policy on this question at this time, their replies do reflect an important development. To most people, “birth control” spells “pills.” continued on page 14
I am not a young mother—I am 39 years old this year. I am, however, a mother. I have had 11 children and four miscarriages and am now pregnant for the 16th time in 20 years. And I can say, with heartfelt relief, that this will be my last baby.

I am, of course, a Catholic, and by my own choice. I became a convert to Catholicism when I took the necessary instruction in my husband’s religion before we were married.

I met my husband when he was a sailor in the U.S. Navy, newly returned from three years in the hideous warfare of the South Pacific in the closing days of World War II. He was dark and Irish and handsome. This combination, plus my ardent desire for a home and family, was more than I could resist.

When I started my instruction in the Catholic faith, I had almost come to the belief that there was no way of explaining this mad world, or the senseless pain and suffering that I saw on every side. I had been raised in a fallen-away pseudo-Protestant family without an actual belief in the idea of God.

I knew from personal experience what a mess the hedonistic, live-for-the-moment philosophy can make of family life. I had almost given up the search for a living religion in which I could believe, one that was logical and real. I had despaired of finding an explanation for the chaos I saw around me in the lives of my friends and in the horrifying spectacle of world-wide slaughter.

I don’t know who was the more astounded, Jim or the good old Father Greene, when I said that I wished to become a Catholic. I made my decision with the feeling of having at last found a meaningful reason for existence.

During the instruction I did feel some apprehension about the injunction against what was termed “artificial birth control.” My menstrual cycle had always been unpredictable, and I can remember Jim’s shocked reaction when I figured out how much abstinence the rhythm method would require in our case. But we agreed that if we were willing to work hard enough with courage and faith, we could trust in God’s help to provide for the children that we expected to have.

My mother, who was a registered nurse, had reassured me with an accurate and clinical knowledge of reproduction and human biology. She snorted when she learned of our intention. “You fool! You will have fifteen kids; or if you don’t, your husband will leave you because you aren’t a wife to him.”

Ironically, she has been nearly right. I had babies from the Panama Canal Zone to Alaska, from Maine to California, as we traveled in the military service, moving on the average of every two years.

During this time I adhered scrupulously to the one method of birth planning sanctioned by the Church. I went to specialists and carefully took my temperature every morning for indications of ovulation. Jim and I abstained for periods as long as five months at a time when, after the birth of a child, my menstrual cycle was particularly erratic.

Through it all I held on with a desperate grip to my belief in God’s providence and to my final intellectual conviction that the Church was actually right when it said that using artificial means to interfere with conception is against man’s essential human dignity. My children were vigorous and handsome, and somehow we managed to support them on a chieft petty officer’s pay.

Then my tenth child, a premature baby boy, was born in a pitifully crippled condition from some abnormality in the way the fetus had developed. I became terrified of having another crippled child. For his first three years our son teetered on and off the critical list, through four major operations and severe financial hardship for us. As Armed Services dependents, we were granted free medical care, but he had to have braces and bone grafts, and was prey to recurrent bouts of pneumonia that developed overnight and couldn’t wait for us to drive 20 miles to the Service dispensary.

By luck, I was not pregnant for the next three years. During that time my husband retired from the Navy, drawing retirement pay of $183 a month for his 21 years’ service. He found a job as a sales representative by good luck and grit, plus the ability to adapt and learn new things that is one of his strong points. His wages are around $450 a month.

Six months ago we had another baby boy, normal in every way.
MY PROBLEM AND HOW I SOLVED IT

It was an agonizing decision my husband and I made. Our faith in our church never waivered, but we felt we had to turn against one of its teachings.

Failure of the Rhythm Method

A little over four years ago, when David and I were married, neither of us would have believed that anything could shatter the comfortable security we felt in our faith. Both of us had been reared as Catholics by conscientious parents, and we, in turn, are raising our children to have the same reverence and love for our religion that we have had from childhood.

And yet, a few months ago we made a decision that has resulted in our no longer being full members of our church. In its eyes, we are living in mortal sin. Because I take an oral contraceptive, for no reason the church considers acceptable, we are conspirators against procreation, unable to participate in Communion or other church rites.

It was a hideously painful decision, and yet I cannot help but believe it was the right one.

David is 25 and so am I. We went to parochial schools in different parts of the country and met in our first year at a Catholic college. We began dating soon after, and by Christmas vacation we knew that we loved each other. After that, there was never any doubt we wanted to be married. But we were going to be sensible about it. We would wait until after graduation.

Both of us intended to be teachers and we knew how important it was for David to earn a Master's degree, so that he could teach history at better than a high school level. The plan was that after we were married I would get a job teaching elementary school, while David went through graduate school.

In our senior year in college, David and I took the marriage course and signed up for the pre-Cana conferences that our church feels better prepares a couple for marriage and a solid relationship. Until then, I believe, neither of us had ever seriously questioned anything in our religion. We had always accepted church dogmas and the necessity of believing in the church's teachings and things on faith.

But the discussions on contraception made us, for the first time, listen with reservations.

"David, can you really believe it is a sin to postpone having children?" I asked more than once. "We know we want to have children and provide for them to the best of our ability. Is it really wrong to put off having children until we know we can take care of them?"

Although my logic sounded convincing, in our hearts we knew it made us uneasy to reject any of our church's teachings.

Soon before graduation, David was accepted in graduate school at a nearby university. We were ecstatic, and even more so after we had been to the university town where he would be. In 24 hours I had been interviewed at St. Theresa's and accepted as a first-grade teacher for the coming fall, and we had found a three-continued on page 12
Figure 9 – “Striking Changes in the Way Protestants & Catholics Feel About Each Other” by Walter Goodman

STRIKING CHANGES IN THE WAY PROTESTANTS & CATHOLICS FEEL ABOUT EACH OTHER

A new Redbook survey shows that these two religious groups are taking a fresh look at such controversial subjects as birth control, intermarriage and parochial schools.

Few weeks go by that some issue does not arise somewhere in the United States to divide Protestants and Catholics along sectarian lines. It may come up at a PTA meeting, in a polling booth, in the U.S. Senate. Sometimes it is rooted in religious belief—like the explosive controversy over birth control. Sometimes it is a constitutional issue—as whether Federal aid should go to parochial schools. Whatever the source, these disputes have the disagreeable effect of reawakening prejudices that we would prefer to believe do not exist.

This has been the uneasy situation through most of our nation’s history, and its end is not in sight. During the past few years, however, there have been important changes in Protestant-Catholic relations in this country. As one minister describes it: “There has been a thaw from top to bottom and from coast to coast, the likes of which nobody would have thought possible.”

To pinpoint what has been happening to religious controversy in America, and why, Redbook commissioned the Gallup Organization to interview a cross section of our adult population. The new findings, along with past polls and recent events, can help us gauge the temperature of the thaw.

BIRTH CONTROL
A few years ago, the Minneapolis Star and Tribune Company asked several hundred Protestants and Catholics in Minnesota whether they had any personal or religious feelings about birth control. Three out of four Catholics replied yes, and most of them said they were “against birth control for religious reasons.” In states like Massachusetts and Connecticut, efforts to repeal decades-old anti-birth-control laws have met with adamant opposition from Roman Catholic groups. “The fact of the matter is,” says Msgr. George A. Kelly, director of the Family Life Bureau of the Archdiocese of New York, “that we are engaged in a serious conflict over the very nature of sex, marriage and family life itself.”

The important new factor in this old controversy is that it is now being debated openly by Catholics themselves. According to a 1963 Gallup poll, half of America’s Catholics think that birth-control information should be available to anyone who wants it. And more than one third of the Catholics we interviewed a few weeks ago told us they approved of birth control and disagreed with their own church on the issue.

Since birth control has not been the subject of an “infallible” pronouncement by a pope, discussion is permitted within the Church—and today it is thriving as never before. Joseph Cardinal Ritter of St. Louis puts the moderate position this way: “There is an erroneous idea that Catholic couples should have as many children as God will give them. God bless them if they desire it, but there’s no such Church law.”

The Catholic Church does hold, however, that birth-control techniques other than the “rhythm method”—refraining from intercourse during a woman’s fertile period—are violations of the natural law because they interfere with the consequences of the marital act. In the past year Catholic discussion has centered around the suggestion of Dr. John Rock, Catholic pioneer in the development of a contraceptive pill, that his church can and