Contraception—Tradition Revisited

by G. Egner

In giving the fullest account ever of attitudes to contraception throughout the history of the Church, Professor Noonan has done us all a service and written an important and valuable book.[1] His perception and industry are admirable; so, I would add, is the intellectual and physical stamina which has brought him across so vast a sahara of human folly. He does not disguise his opinion that the tradition is open to change, but his account contains a wealth of texts and references that provide matter for the reader's verdict without dictating it. I should like to pick out some of the themes in his story – some only, by no means all – and reflect on them.[2]

Two extreme conclusions about sex were drawn in the early Church. One denied that it was a matter for legislation among the redeemed; the other obliged the redeemed to abstain from it under pain of sin. The outrageous consequences of the former opinion made it less dangerous than the latter, in favour of which there were texts enough in the New Testament which, taken out of context, could be cited. The curiously lame replies of the orthodox Alexandrian theologians to this encratism appealed less to Scripture than to the contemporary philosophy of Stoicism, which conceived legitimate sexual activity in purely procreative terms, and drew strict analogies with agriculture and stock-breeding. For Christians to use sex in such a way was, theologians contended, legitimate; its use inspired by passion was sinful; and any use of it where procreation was impossible (as in pregnancy) or prevented (by drugs) removed the one bulwark against the rigorist objections, and so was also wrong. (At the same time, the anaphrodisiac effects of the willow-tree could be commended, even though this was also believed to induce sterility.)

[1]*Contraception, a history of its treatment by the Catholic theologians and canonists.* By John T. Noonan, Harvard University Press. Oxford University Press, 1965. 64s. London.

[2]To get some ritual grumbles over first. I am not happy about the translation from the Roman Catechism on p. 361. Tobit, *pace* p. 81, is translated from the Greek in the *Bible de Jerusalem.* The author sometimes annoyingly quotes Latin works by English titles only; he uses the Yankee genteelism 'rooster' for 'cock'; and if the Latin of his dedication had a tail, it would wag it. There are other points, and in a work of this size, readers are liable to find topics they would have liked to see more fully treated. But for what my testimony is worth, I should say that my own acquaintance with the subject – far less extensive than the author's – corroborates his findings, and fills me with admiration at the scope of his researches.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1966.tb00996.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sounder exegesis would have led to a sounder evaluation of sexuality in the Bible, but the orthodox seemed to share some of their adversaries' prejudices against the Old Testament, and indeed any text which told against their mixture of stoicism and eschatology was either ignored, or dissipated in a froth of allegory. Of Jewish opinions about sterilisants, they seem to have been wholly ignorant: from Noonan's account, it appears that some rabbis offered the rough but reasonable solution of allowing women, but not men, to use them. Jerome, whose opinions about sex were as extreme in expression as in content, falsified his translation of the Bible to support his own prejudices.[3] But it was Augustine who gave the Stoic inheritance a firm foothold in Christian theology, in his debates with Manichees and Pelagians.

The Manichees attributed the human body to the powers of darkness, but added that some of the divine light was confined in it. Procreation was wrong, for it perpetuated this imprisonment, but the non-generative emission of seed released the light to return to God, who had already used this technique in his battle with evil.[4] Pelagians, on the other hand, denied the presence of inherited sin in man, stressed his innate ability to overcome evil, and praised marriage and procreation as the best state of life. Augustine's answer to these heresies combined a Stoic view of sexuality with scriptural exegesis. Procreation is not an imprisonment of divine light, nor is sexuality, when directed at procreation, morally distinct from eating to nourish the body. But intercourse performed for pleasure is sinful, though as a rule not mortally sinful: this is the use of sex that Paul 'concedes with pardon' (Noonan might have made it clearer that it is Augustine's Latin translation which does this, not St Paul). Physical procreation is now less important than spiritual, and couples advanced in perfection will abstain from sex altogether. While scripture spoke of *una caro*, Augustine uses the phrase '*totus caro*' – coition drags down the mind and makes a man all flesh. The Pelagians, on the other hand, are refuted by an exegesis of the Epistle to the Romans, where Augustine innovates by identifying the battle between intention and temptation with the rebellious nature of sexual passion. Intercourse as such is not sinful, but it involves this concupiscence as a consequence of sin, and man, thus procreated, inherits thereby the sin of Adam.

[3]Onan's sin becomes 'res detestabilis' where the original demands 'displeased the Lord'. The *fervorino* uttered by Tobias on his wedding night makes procreation the sole purpose of intercourse, and omits the verse from Genesis that it is not good for man to be alone; the angel Raphael in the same book utters Stoic sentiments to him. (Of course, one could charitably conclude that these convenient variants from the Greek text were all present in the Aramaic MS translated, in one day, by Jerome.)

[4]I abbreviate this tediously gross cosmogony. Noonan also mentions curious non-generative rites alleged by Augustine to have been performed among the Manichees. For a circumstantial account of these, the historian is indebted to St Ephiphanius.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1966.tb00996.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

With such views on sexuality, Augustine logically condemns as shameful and illicit any sexual intercourse where the procreation of children is avoided. It is wrong to use the Safe Period (*sic:* the incredulous can look up P.L. 32: 1373); it is wrong to practise *coitus interruptus*; it is wrong to take sterilising drugs. All such actions necessarily exclude the one purpose of intercourse which can excuse it, the one motive why marriage should be contracted. Noonan rightly points out that Augustine's own life was relevant to the conclusions he reached. As a Manichee, he had a stable union with one woman, and his religious beliefs would have obliged him to practise birth control with her.[5] When nearly thirty, he separated himself and his son from his affectionate and loyal partner, in order to marry someone acceptable to his dominating mother. (Noonan, while justly observing that the love in Augustine's union seems to have been on the woman's side, fails to add that he immediately took another mistress until his fiancee should come of age.) We are surely entitled to ask how far Augustine's personal circumstances were likely to make him do justice to the theology of marriage.

His writings were part of a polemic with two extreme theologies. They embodied the thought of a man whose conversion to Christianity went with a renunciation of the Manichean teaching that procreation should have no part in virtuous sexual activity, and with an abandoning of the erotic irregularities in which he had indulged without great personal love, but with a guilty conscience. The Christian tradition he embraced, by appropriating the Stoics' austerely agricultural view of sex, offered a forthright answer to the Manichean challenge; but the psychological attraction it must have had for Augustine does not alter the fact that it was a suppression rather than a solution of the problem. Most important of all, Augustine's efforts were aimed at synthesising a traditional account of sexuality with the doctrine of original sin. On sexuality as such, his opinions surpass those of his predecessors in rhetoric, not in content; and that their unoriginal poverty should have remained unscrutinised for the next thousand years is at first sight puzzling.[6]

We shall be less puzzled if we remember that Augustine's theories

[5]Augustine says he was taught to use the sterile period by his religious instructors, and the only child his mistress bore him in eleven years was conceived shortly after their liaison began. Incidentally, the Manichees (like others) miscalculated the period, and enjoined abstinence on the days immediately after menstruation. But if Augustine's mistress had a very short cycle – like Bathsheba, cf. 2 Sam. xi and Lev. xv, 19 – the method would work *per accidens*.

[6]Whatever the merits or demerits of Augustine's views, other and more potent influences were at work to ensure their victory over those of the Manichees. Within a lifetime of the Edict of Milan to which Christians owed the toleration of their religion, they had secured the enactment of laws which forbade Manichees to proselytise, confiscated their churches, and prohibited them from inheriting or bequeathing property. The first Manichee martyr died in 385, when his co-religionists were already reduced to worshipping in the very catacombs which had but recently harboured their persecutors.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1966.tb00996.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

had nearly seven hundred years in which to take root. The collapse of the Roman Empire and the decay of learning left the custody of Christian belief to a monastically based church more concerned with preserving the inheritance of better days than with independent thought. The monks countered the barbarism of their age with rigour rather than with dispassionate reason: the moralising character of what learning they did possess, and the esteem in which they held Augustine and other fathers, perpetuated among them in an even stricter form the originally Stoic influence to which the patristic authorities had been subjected. For Caesarius of Arles (d. 543), intercourse in pregnancy was a sin, the taking of sterilisants like homicide, and even the use of anti-sterilisants prohibited, as being an interference with God's will. Gregory the Great (d. 604), whose influence on later authorities was enormous, made all intercourse a sin, which needed penance for its atonement. Yet despite the legacy of patristic attitudes to sex, church legislation was insufficiently explicit against contraception, and forgery had to be resorted to. Martin of Braga (d. 579), tampered with a canon of the fourth-century council of Ancyra, by extending to contraception its sanctions against abortion. Burchard, Bishop of Worms about the year 1000, foisted a tenth-century description of contraception as homicide into the acts of the ninth-century council of Worms. With the use of these literary forms, shall we say, there went a lack of any positive view about the purpose of intercourse. Pleasure as a motive was excluded; but writers of the age shew no interest in the notion of increase and multiplication either. Despite the dwindling population, the Gregorian Sacramentary said nothing in its Good Friday petitions about the need for increasing it, and its form of marriage gave little room to the topic. Procreation was good in that it provided some justification for sexual intercourse; it was not of value in itself. One is reminded of the Puritan's objection to bear-baiting. . . .

The influence of Augustine was now to be reinforced by another historical chance. The revival of learning in the twelfth century, which might have led to a re-examination of the theology of sex and marriage, coincided with the heresy of Catharism, whose quasi-Manichean dualism led to the same opposition to the procreative use of sex, and to an alleged antinomianism in all other questions of sexual behaviour. Given such a heresy, and given the atrocious barbarism by which it was suppressed, it is not surprising that theologians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries made no fundamental change in the view of sex they had inherited. The monastic rigorism survived in Huguccio and his pupil, later Innocent III (d. 1216), who both associated any use of intercourse with sin. Huguccio condemned intercourse for pleasure as mortally sinful; other theologians – including St Bonaventure himself – said that virtuous intercourse entailed an abhorrence of the pleasure which accompanied it. Not all theologians of the thirteenth century fell

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1966.tb00996.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

into these excesses, but they did find in Aristotle's teleological and vitalist philosophy a system into which their own Augustinian view of sexuality could be incorporated. Aquinas, as Noonan points out, drew a parallel between the frustration of the procreative purpose of sex and mistakes in the first principles of speculative reason – in both instances, it is the very basis of the structure that is being attacked. Again, since sexuality is for procreation, it is without sin when used for this purpose; to use it for delight, for health, or as a remedy against temptation, is sinful, though not mortally sinful. Aquinas reconciles this with Pauline statements about the marriage-debt by a distinction between paying and demanding this debt. The former is not sinful; the latter is sinful unless made on procreative grounds. Noonan rightly notices the importance of what Aquinas says about the lawfulness of marriage between the sterile, or the unlawfulness of fornication between them: it is the common species of the act that makes it generative, even though in a particular case it cannot lead to generation, for law is decided by the ordinary run of things. This solution gives to the inseminatory act a moral relevance of its own, taken in isolation, that has come to prominence in recent debates over contraception. Indeed, I think the author could have given greater emphasis than he does to the 'trans-personal' way in which Aquinas deals with the purpose of sexual intercourse. As food is to the individual's body, so is intercourse to the species; and seed, the instrument for this, is unlike any other secretion. It has a purpose closely connected with human life (Aquinas uses Aristotle's phrase about there being 'something divine' about the seed), and must be used for that purpose. Here it is the species, and its preservation through the transmission of seed, which provides the norm for morality, not the persons involved in the transmission. (Were there space, I should like to query a remark Noonan makes about Aquinas and the natural law on p. 240.)

An interesting chapter is devoted to what are called 'counter-approaches' in the Middle Ages. Albert the Great, unlike his pupil Aquinas, seems to have taught that intercourse not undertaken from procreative motives could be sinless, for it might be regarded as a 'remembrance of the sacrament' uniting husband and wife. This profound but unelaborated innovation found no support among well-known theologians, though a similar opinion is mentioned later by Richard Middleton (an English Franciscan of the thirteenth century, who still lurks in text-books, disguised as 'Ricardus de Mediavilla'). Another dissociation of sexuality from its procreative purpose is seen in theological speculations over *coitus reservatus*. Penetration without insemination was commended by writers associated with Catharism, and it is surprising to find a rigorist like Huguccio allowing it. His reasons are equally surprising: by letting his wife come to an orgasm without himself reaching one, the husband can preserve himself from the sin involved in sexual

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1966.tb00996.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

climax! Although *coitus reservatus* was cautiously accepted by other theologians, none seems to have explained how such a dissociation of sexuality from procreation could be reconciled with the augustinian theory they all held in common. Noonan also gives an idea of the contraceptive knowledge available in the Middle Ages, at a time when increases in population were drastically offset by the Black Death. Many of the remedies were illusory, some would have been effective; Avicenna was the authority, and no effort was made to prohibit the study and adaptation of his works. Although there are witnesses enough to shew that both *coitus interruptus* and sterilisants were condemned, attacks on contraceptive practices do not seem to have been universally prominent in medieval preaching and instruction.[7]

The years around 1500 saw innovation. Martin Le Maistre of Paris (d. 1481), using Aristotle's account of pleasure as a means of bettering the condition of the person, inferred that there was no sin if intercourse was sought for this motive. The Scotsman John Major, also of Paris, and professor of theology at Glasgow in 1518, described the traditional doctrine as too strict, and explicitly rejected both Augustine's view on the point, and the venerable Stoic parallel between human and sub-human sexuality. Many years were to pass before these examples would be followed, but some shifts in opinion and emphasis did come about in the sixteenth century. Reputable theologians began to allow as blameless the motive of seeking intercourse to avoid incontinence, and the Catechism of the Council of Trent does not deny the suggestion. (The change probably was strengthened by the reaction against the excessive Augustinianism of the reformers – Bellarmine was to question the relation asserted between sexual passion and original sin.) The legitimacy of intercourse for pleasure was not broached again until Thomas Sanchez (d. 1610), in a way reminiscent of Albert the Great, suggested that the actions of two spouses in a state of grace are already implicitly referred to God, so that there is no sin if they copulate, not from procreative motives, but 'simply as spouses'. (I should describe the theories of Sanchez as more tentative and confused than Noonan does.) There was much acrimonious debate on the point at the end of the seventeenth century, when the pursuit of pleasure was alleged to be an inversion of the order of nature. What is most interesting in the controversy is the clear perception by the rigorist theologians that to suggest the legitimacy of avoiding incontinence or seeking

[7]Thus, Chaucer's Parson condemns *coitus interruptus* and pessaries in his sermon, classifying them with abortion as a species of homicide. Dante, on the other hand, does not refer to contraception in the Divine Comedy. I note with regret that Noonan says nothing about the medieval vade-mecum of eroticism, *De Coitu*, ascribed by Chaucer to 'the cursed monk dan Constantyn', and consulted by an anxious husband in the Merchant's Tale. Does it still exist?

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1966.tb00996.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

pleasure as motives for intercourse was to break with the traditional teaching they held themselves.[8]

For all these debates, the sinfulness of directly anti-procreative actions was still asserted, and indeed, the time was unfavourable to any fundamental change. The Church of the counter-reformation was more concerned with apologetics and pastoral instruction than with any profounder re-appraisal of marriage, or of a tradition which seemed by now to be part of the order of things. Nor had anti-conceptional techniques shewn any remarkable development; nor was there any institutional lobby to urge a change, as there was for usury. Significantly, it was not until Liguori's time that the preposterous allegation of homicide against contraception, though rejected by Albert and Aquinas, finally petered out.[9] What can be noticed in theological writings and catechisms after Trent is the coupling of the finality of intercourse with the finality of marriage itself. To do this entailed the estimation of marital morality in wider terms than the inseminatory act considered in isolation. Thus, where some theologians (even Liguori, a century later) forbade a raped woman to expel the seed from its 'natural place', Sanchez and others claimed that the right to self-defence gave her control over it. Ledesma, another seventeenth-century theologian, limited the right to demand the marriage-debt, not just by dangers to the wife's health, but by considerations based on the upbringing of the children. No attempt was made to reconcile these criteria with the older, impersonal view of intercourse; but one interesting practical development is noticed by Noonan in the years after Trent. The obligation of confessors to interrogate and to instruct about contraception was less commonly urged than in medieval times. The reticence of the Roman Ritual (1614) set an example which others followed; and the widely used manual for confessors by Liguori consolidated a tradition which counselled the utmost reserve in the matter.

The nineteenth century saw, first in England and the United States, the invention and advocacy of new contraceptive devices, but it was the situation in France which affected most strongly the Catholic attitude to contraception. There survived in France and Belgium that older and strictly augustinian approach to sex which has already been mentioned; and it was in France that there occurred the most startling fall in the birth-rate in European history – a drop of 17 per cent between 1771 and 1800, and a further drop of over 20

[8]Not surprisingly, there was an Irishman among the rigorists – John Sinnigh, alarmingly known as 'The Virgin Doctor'.

[9]The vigorous fanatic Sixtus V not only made the allegation, but enacted corresponding penalties in Rome for the offence. Gregory XIII discreetly annulled the draconian but unsuccessful measures of his predecessor.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1966.tb00996.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

per cent from the beginning of the nineteenth century to 1850.[10] The steep decline probably went with the uniquely radical rejection of traditional values and of ecclesiastical authority which had taken place in France: at all events, it was in that country that a campaign developed to harden the attitude towards contraception. Throughout the nineteenth century, a series of questions submitted by French bishops to Roman congregations gradually – but only gradually – effected a change in the traditional Liguorian practice of not interrogating penitents on such matters. The question does not seem to have preoccupied the Roman authorities for quite a time – the omnium gatherum of Pius IX's Syllabus (1864) had no anathema against contraception, though Owen's and Knowlton's books were already well known; nor, as late as 1880, did Leo XIII's encyclical on marriage refer to the topic.

The hardening is, it would seem, to be attributed to national rather than to theological considerations. France and Belgium were the scenes for violent conflict between religion and secularism, and both were countries where demographic questions were of national importance.[11] Mercier and the Belgian bishops, at the instigation of the moralist Vermeersch, sought to save their country going the way of France by a joint pastoral letter in 1909... The French hierarchy, some of whom had been using ever since the *débâcle* of 1870 the 'empty cradles' argument (i.e., more contraception equals less cannon-fodder), followed the Belgian example in 1919, and helped to secure restrictions on contraception which still linger in France. America, where the clergy had previously been more concerned over mixed marriages, joined in, in the same year, and the strong opposition of Bourne and the English bishops to Lambeth's cautious approval of contraception in 1930 is said to have been instrumental in securing the vehement denunciations of Pius XI's *Casti Connubii*.[12]

At the same time as this greater insistence on the proclamation and enforcement of the discipline against contraception, the first steps were being taken to determine which periods in a woman's cycle were fertile and which were sterile. Pouchet's (incorrect) conclusions of 1845 began to be used by some theologians as an alternative to other anti-conceptional means. Approval was guarded –

[10]Noonan might have consulted Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (1721), which suggest that the birth-rate was already falling in France among the middle classes (see Letter 122). I should add here one valuable point made in this chapter by Noonan: the augustinian traditions which survived in France and the Low Countries were taken to the English-speaking world by English and American priests who studied on the continent.

[11]The author could have pointed out that the Fleming-Walloon rivalry in Belgium made population problems especially urgent for a Church whose strength lay with the oppressed Flemings.

[12]The author does not mention the fact that the denunciations were not vehement enough for some people, and that a falsified translation of the encyclical was circulated in English. See the article by D. Cloud in the *Clergy Review*, June 1962.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1966.tb00996.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

couples using the method 'were not to be disturbed' – and when Lecomte published a book on the subject at Louvain in 1873 it was attacked for going against the order of nature, and had to be withdrawn. Rome said no more than that the method might be suggested to couples who were 'onanists': and the context of the reply indicated that the suggestion might amount here to counselling the lesser of two evils. The issue remained dormant till the late 1920's, when the researches of Ogino and Knaus began to put the method on a sounder footing. Theologians were not enthusiastic. A cryptic reference in *Casti Connubii* was interpreted by some as permitting its use, by others as referring only to intercourse after the menopause. Vermeersch contended that, being against the primary end of marriage, the method could be disseminated only with the greatest caution; similar opinions were voiced in other countries, and it was only the discourses of Pius XII which, for all their qualifications, turned the tide in favour of the practice, and, in doing so, both embodied and encouraged a revolution in Catholic thought. What the Pope said was not revolutionary because it implicitly rejected the large family as the norm for Catholic parents – we have seen that such an ideal was a recent arrival in church teaching. The innovation went deeper: here, for the first time in the history of the Church, the highest authority was acknowledging the personal and emotional values in sexual intercourse for its own sake, by commending a technique which separated sexuality from procreation. That Pius XII spoke as he did went with another and just as profound innovation – marriage and sex were now being given an attention and respect based upon personal experience, and upon psychological and sociological knowledge, which they had not been given and could not have been given in the past.

These changes are part of a general development in man's place in the world. He is historically conscious today to an extent he never was in the past: and this affects, not only his estimate of himself, but his judgment upon estimates of himself made in earlier times. It is readily admitted that theology today gives sex and marriage a more honourable place than it once did: what needs admitting as well is the demand that we face as honestly as we can the deficiencies of earlier attitudes, and see how these were conditioned by circumstances. The early challenge of the Gnostic encratites had to be met by theologians unaware of all that exegesis of the scriptures could give them, preoccupied (like their adversaries) with one aspect only of New Testament teaching, and with no better philosophical equipment than the essentially second-rate system of late stoicism. The turbulent personal history of Augustine, his opponents' dualistic hatred of procreation (or – among the Pelagians – rather philistine refusal to face the problem of evil), and his own preoccupation with questions of sin and weakness, all gave an eloquent coherence to this earlier tradition, which had the ensuing dark ages in which to

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1966.tb00996.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

sink deep into ecclesiastical thought. Medieval achievements in theology did not question the presuppositions of the augustinian inheritance, but incorporated it into an impressive, impersonal, and all too closely woven philosophical synthesis which, when Christianity was divided, became part of the patrimony to be defended against innovation. That the synthesis had done nothing to remedy the radical poverty of the inherited views was not likely to be noticed by the closed and repetitive caste of clerical theologians, nor, when the challenge came in the last century, did it come in favourable circumstances. The innovators were often committed to a rejection of all traditional teaching on sex and marriage, and sometimes to a rejection of religion altogether; those who had to answer them were handicapped by the contemporary degeneracy of moral theology, and indeed of all ecclesiastical thought. A conflict of ideologies was exacerbated by the advocacy of values connected with the nation-state, and the torpid theory and tolerant practice hardened into an attitude whose vehemence was not backed by an adequate and coherent intellectual structure.

It is, of course, possible to believe that the tradition is still valid: that the Church, to use Koestler's phrase, has been sleep-walking its way to the truth through adventitious and sometimes disreputable means. It is possible: but Noonan's work has made it perceptibly less plausible. And indeed the position now defended by official Catholic apologists is itself a witness to the implausibility. Recent debates over contraception – all too often concerned with casuistry over pharmaceutical or surgical sterilisation – have at least made it clear that the Catholic position lies in a postulate of immunity from direct interference for the human generative system. But this immunity has now been isolated from the general attitude to sexuality of which it was once a part. When procreation was the only justifying motive for seeking intercourse, one and the same doctrine (I am thinking of Chaucer's Parson, but there are innumerable other examples to choose from) could coherently prohibit as mortally sinful, pessaries, *coitus interruptus*, and intercourse for 'amorous love and burning delight'. In each of the three cases, a desire for pleasure overrode the proper, procreatory motive. Procreation no longer occupies the place it did, but the prohibition of direct interference with the inseminatory act still lingers on, the ghost of a departed finality. Philosophical defenders of the present position, respecting as they do the new attitude to sexuality, can no longer use as it stands, the coherent but transpersonal argument of Aquinas. They have to begin with the copulatory action of individuals, and must claim to discern in it the inviolable purpose and pattern which will furnish them with their conclusion: and the enterprise involves them (I can only assert, the matter is too lengthy for exposition here and now) in a grossly inadequate theory of meaning. The situation created by all this needs informed and free discussion to disentangle it – which is

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1966.tb00996.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

where the debate begins to touch matters of ecclesiastical policy.

Those who hold high office in the Church are understandably cautious in admitting the need for change. Quite apart from considerations based on personal or managerial psychology, they rightly feel themselves bound to be especially zealous for the preservation of the gospel entrusted to their preaching. But this zeal can go with an attitude to ecclesiastical discipline just as understandable, but quite distinct from the zeal and quite dubious: an attitude that change in the Church should be something imposed on those who obey by those who command, who have themselves declared the change to be necessary on grounds whose sacred character puts them beyond scrutiny. It ought to be unnecessary nowadays to say much about the defects of such a view, and of the need for doctrine to develop in the Church as a result of God's power working through increased knowledge and awareness in all its members: but there is a special reason for recalling the fact here. Noonan's book shews, if it shews anything, that the traditional attitude to contraception, like the traditional attitude to sexuality and marriage of which it is a part, is shallow, repetitive, and uncritical. The prejudices of one age became the household gods of the next, and the turmoil of debate in our own time is due less to innovation than to creation and to the labour that goes with it. Questions are being asked, values being admitted, which have waited until now for consideration. Is it surprising that consciences should be disturbed? And is it not indispensable that discussion should be able to reveal the full complexity of the problem, and approaches to its solution?

It is the first of these questions – once more, quite understandably – that is likely to preoccupy Church authorities. The very idea of deep dissent among the faithful is itself too novel for some; and most will be inclined to seek and to emphasise the greatest measure of agreement between all members of the Church. However laudable the wish may be, it is sometimes accompanied by a restrictive exercise of power, to make sure reality measures up to the aspiration. A subject where agreement is not reached will be deemed over-discussed; or too delicate for public discussion; or worthwhile discussion will be defined as that conducted *in camera* by numinously remote experts: and in each case, the disciplinary consequence will be a prohibition of further debate in any quarter where ecclesiastical censorship can still bite. The torrent of argument over contraception in the last two years can obscure the extent of this censorship, but its most obvious and most lamentable consequence is that the quality of the debate has borne all too little proportion to its quantity. Altercations in correspondence-columns, newspaper articles (and book-reviews in periodicals) may hearten the reader with a spectacle of healthy dissent, but they cannot replace a substantial expression and exchange of opinion. Where these are absent, the wisdom and perception of the Church are to that extent impeded; and those who

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1966.tb00996.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

defend the *status quo* enjoy an immunity from contradiction which – human nature being what it is – is not slow to corrupt the worth of their apologetics.

The situation is curiously reminiscent of biblical studies in the days (still near, yet how far away they seem!) before fundamentalism was jettisoned. A venerable tradition had been challenged, and of those who challenged it in the first instance, some rejected the substance of christianity altogether: the new ideas seemed bound up with attitudes and presuppositions which the Church held – and still holds – incompatible with the faith. It would have been for the Catholic exegete (we should now say) to examine this challenge, to see what was of value in its principles and techniques, and to adopt and further these values himself. We know that things did not work out like this. Ecclesiastical authority not only persevered in improbable opinions, it conscripted scholars to support them in their teaching, and silenced those who would not do so. Study of the Bible needed to be supplemented by lessons in diplomacy, in the art of indirect suggestion, and in public relations. Of what did get into print, too much was a heroic effort to give intellectual reasons for what ecclesiastical law had made a foregone conclusion, and there was too often a touch of that mixture of the implausible and the uncandid which Georges Bernanos used to call 'la volonté du mensonge'. It all seems past history now, but the debate over contraception is still impeded by a comprehensible but disastrous belief in high places that discussion ought to be committed in advance to reaching acceptable conclusions; and that the tradition behind the opinion in possession gives a charismatic guarantee to arguments advanced in its favour. If this complaint seems unfounded, we can consider a recent, specific instance.

In May 1964, a statement from the English Hierarchy rejected as impossible any substantial change in the official attitude to contraception. No one should think of questioning the bishops' right to speak their mind on so important an issue.[13] But some justifiably questioned the translation in it of a text from Augustine. After citing a condemnation by Pius XI in *Casti Connubii*, the statement went on:

> 'The Pope in saying this was not introducing a new doctrine. Fifteen hundred years ago St Augustine bore witness to the same belief and practice in the Catholic Church: "Intercourse is unlawful and wicked where the conception of the offspring is prevented" (*de Coniug. Adult. ii : 12*).'

[13]The unfortunate timing of the statement (it appeared just after an article in the opposite sense by Archbishop Roberts) has been noticed by a number of writers. But fairly reliable gossip says that the document had been prepared some time before; that attempts were made at the last minute to withdraw it, precisely to avoid embarrassment; but that a quorum of bishops could not be contacted in time to prevent publication. I admit that the protocol involved remains obscure.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1966.tb00996.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

True enough, Augustine's 'devitatur' should have been 'avoided', not 'prevented', and the mistake does alter the force of the quotation. Unfortunately, it would seem that the real mistake was more than linguistic, for the erroneous translation is just what appears in the C.T.S. version of *Casti Connubii*. In other words (at least, I can think of no better explanation) the alleged appeal to Augustine's testimony is nothing of the kind, but only a second-hand quotation, a repetition of what the encyclical cites from him; and the borrowing was done, not from the encyclical itself, but from an unchecked pamphlet translation of it. It is regrettable that episcopal witness to tradition – significant and valuable in itself, whether one agrees with its content or not – should be disfigured by a slovenliness which ordinary academic standards would condemn out of hand: but then academic standards presuppose a free exchange of opinion between responsible men.

'*La mise en sommeil de la théologie prépare toujours à l'Eglise de douloureux revéils.*'[14] We have no right to expect that the attention now being paid to personal and emotional values in marriage will not involve a searching and painful scrutiny of a position which was reached without taking any account of these values. We have no right to expect that zeal for the faith will not sometimes pass over into zeal for what is mistakenly believed to be part of that faith. But we surely do have a right to expect that members of the Church shall not be prevented from giving a rational exposition of their views simply because the views happen to be unpopular with those in a position to silence this or that particular expression of dissent.

A more cheerful thought can serve as a conclusion. I have already remarked how far away the days seem when biblical scholars in the church often had to write for their desk-drawer rather than for publication. Chronologically, of course, the days are not distant; but Roman Catholicism has a power of elimination that many living organisms might envy. Once a position has been abandoned, surprisingly little time is needed for the belief to develop that it was never occupied, and we do need to remind ourselves occasionally that we have come a long way. It is not fanciful to see a similar shift in appraisal of the official attitude to contraception. Pious Catholics who now admit as a matter conceded by all that some modification and development is to be expected in the teaching about birth-control would have rejected any such suggestion with horror five years ago; and ten years ago most of them would have been just as opposed to any method whatever of dissociating sexuality from procreation. However helpful this negative capability may be for promoting peace in the Church, the theologian must face the historical facts of change without attempting to palliate them. His task is not enviable. A tradition, containing elements differing

[14]P. Galtier, *L'Unite du Christ.*

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1966.tb00996.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

widely in value, and developed in ways conditioned by history and by circumstances, has become accepted as an indivisible and inalienable heritage. The process of revision is painful, and all the more painful for being postponed. But not to revise would be dishonest: we have lost our historical innocence.

Professor Noonan's book is not only a masterly survey of the tradition; its very breadth makes it a significant part of the re-appraisal to which, after so many false starts, the tradition is at last being subjected.

The Hibbert Journal

An International, Inter-religious Quarterly

The Winter number includes:

Buddhism and Haiku, R. H. BLYTH
The Face of the Buddha, J. VIJAY TUNGA (*with illustrations*)
The Influence of Homer Lane (*part* 2), W. DAVID WILLS
Pages from the Diary of a Sudanese Student, FRANCIS M. DENG
History and Understanding, PAUL L. HOLMER
The Miracle (*story*), ROBERT MORGAN
Edith Stein and Simone Weil, NEVILLE BRAYBROOKE
Poetry – 'Religion today' – New books

3/6, by post 3/10; 13/6 a year post free

George Allen & Unwin Ltd
40 Museum St., London W.C.1

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1966.tb00996.x Published online by Cambridge University Press