Introduction

Liberal Protestants and the Sex Education Movement

In 2019, evangelical psychologist James Dobson warned Colorado families that their "deeply held Christian convictions" were under attack.[1] He was referring to a proposed bill to expand public school sex education programs, over which a heated debate had erupted in the state. Even though Colorado had previously banned abstinence-only education, the proposal to provide additional funding and add topics such as sexual consent to the already existing comprehensive sexuality education programs led to an outpouring of opposition and support. Letters flooded in, citizens drove to the capital to testify for and against the bill, and legislators gave emotional pleas on each side. Now, over fifty years after the initial round of the sex education controversies in the United States, the debate is alive and well between those advocating comprehensive sexuality education and those who promote abstinence-only education. Even though many curricula actually provide a mixture of progressive and conservative messages, strong alignments with either approach have caused rifts and cultural confusion over whether young Americans need more or less information about sex.

Conservative evangelical Christians like James Dobson who championed the message of remaining abstinent until marriage have been the loudest religious voices within recent controversies, leading to the impression that "religion"—as if this were a unified concept—seeks to restrict sexual information.[2] The association of sex education with the secular nature of public schools has contributed to this claim. However, a longer historical view challenges these simplifications, revealing that religious sex educators have shaped the movement for public sex education continuously since its roots in the late nineteenth-century United States. They co-founded the major organizations that guided sex education, including the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) in 1914 and the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) in 1964. Since then, religious sex

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educators have worked continuously through or in partnership with these groups. Their advocacy paved the way for many types of sex education, some of which directly countered their goals for both religion and sexuality.

Before conservative Christians launched a series of attacks on sex education in the late 1960s, religious liberals—primarily liberal Protestants—set the tone for religion within public sex education. Those motivated by liberal religious interpretations pushed sex education in new directions and into different public spaces, contributing to a number of substantial shifts in themes and instructional approaches. Ultimately, they created many of the terms on which recent sex education debates have been waged. Through engagement in sex education and acceptance as authorities on the moral dimensions of sexuality, they found opportunities to integrate their progressive religious worldviews and agendas with scientific and cultural understandings of sexuality. Encounters with medical and social scientific trends within sex education organizations inspired strategies for adapting Christianity to a quickly changing society, thereby showing its continued vitality.

The history of sex education therefore cannot be separated from the story of liberal Protestants in the United States. While some Protestant sex educators took part in more radical liberal religious movements such as Unitarianism and the Free Religious Association, most were of the moderate variety of Protestant liberalism affiliated with mainline denominations, especially those that became members of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America (FCC) and its successor, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America (NCC). With diverse Christian interpretations and motivations at the table, they found common ground in their interest in sex education as a way to guide children, strengthen marriages, and deepen America's attention to morality. As liberal Protestants, they shared a commitment to adapting Christianity to modern culture. Anchoring their sex education work was a belief in the fundamental compatibility of religious and scientific truths and the ongoing revelation of God through the world over time. Because they believed God's truths were revealed through both nature and society, science could help humans to know God better and social reform could bring about the Kingdom of God on Earth. Many were influenced by the social gospel, a loosely organized Christian movement committed to social reforms in order to fulfill this progressive religious vision for society. They promoted ecumenical cooperation and appreciated historical critical readings of the Bible that situated biblical truths within their historical contexts and literary genres.[3] Liberal Protestant

stances were increasingly defined in opposition to the Protestant fundamentalist movement, which distanced itself from other Christians, mainstream scientific authority, and selective dimensions of secular culture.[4]

Liberal Protestant sex educators invoked moral frameworks to both expand instruction and inhibit sexual behavior, and these efforts, I argue, laid groundwork for the later emergence of *both* comprehensive sexuality education and abstinence-only education. While values deemed "liberal" and "conservative" within contemporary sex education disputes seem starkly opposed, that was not always the case. Throughout much of this history, contractive and expansive positions about sexuality were combined or existed alongside one another rather than being separated into opposing camps. Amalgamation was, in part, a way to gain cultural acceptance. Sex educators tempered more radical ideas of the time, including their basic goal of teaching sexual information to youth, with moderate and conservative messages, often strategically framing the former as in service to the latter. Religious language also softened the impersonal, detail-oriented terminology of science, which was sometimes viewed as too harsh or shocking for such a socially charged topic. Although scientifically trained sex educators argued that objective distance and precision could raise the subject out of the gutters and sanitize it, the question of obscenity continued to lurk near the surface. Liberal religious sex educators paired the "scientific exemption" that shielded most medical professionals from censorship on issues of sexuality with what I call the *moral exemption* that bolstered its protection as a topic addressed by respectable Christians.[5]

Liberal religious people were well positioned to mediate the challenge of balancing change and continuity within sex education because of their interest in adapting religious traditions to modern conditions. They advanced conservative perspectives by teaching sex education as moral education and emphasizing premarital sexual purity, the restriction of sexual behavior to monogamous marriages between men and women, and the importance of framing sexuality by Christian family values. Attaching these stances to their cause leveraged significant cultural currency because the concept of families based around monogamous marriages had deep-seated connections to American culture.[6] Through their prescriptive lessons, they also shaped constructions of heterosexuality and family life that took on hegemonic status by the mid-twentieth century. At the same time, religious sex educators developed progressive approaches that employed the concept of morality to promote frank public discourse, to broaden sexuality's scope beyond

physical intercourse, to advocate positive interpretations of sexuality, and to adapt to scientific advancements and societal changes. In the 1960s, some of them would also use the idea of the "new morality" to open conversations about sexual diversity.

Interest in morality, therefore, played a role in both progressive and restrictive impulses within the sex education movement. While religious sex educators were certainly not the only ones advocating the moral dimension of sex education—many educators and physicians echoed these interests—those who actively identified their sex education work with religion were most vocal and persistent in keeping morality tied to the cause of sex education. The framework of morality gained traction among scientific sex educators, many of whom were eager to disprove the notion that doctors condoned illicit sexual activity just because they offered "quick fixes" for preventing or treating venereal disease. A growing number of education experts within the movement, too, embraced it out of concern for developing morally responsible citizens.

As a desire to shape moral behavior permeated sex education, religious people had a diffuse but powerful avenue for advancing their values, one that simultaneously helped them to convince churches that sex educators were moral reformers. Liberal religious sex educators' broad framing of morality rested on their belief in the goodness of human nature and the capability of humans to strive toward ethical actions. Because they viewed God as immanent in nature and society, the Bible was treated as one source of moral authority among many, and its lessons needed to be understood within their original contexts and adapted in order to be most useful. For sex educators, morality took on new meanings in different settings, from the push for moral education about character building to the later situation ethics of the "new morality," becoming a catchall for introducing various religious concerns into the movement. As religious studies scholar Anthony Petro noted in his study of Christian responses to AIDS, "Few words have the potential to carry as much authority or to be as rhetorically flexible as *morality*." As such, it has become an important "site of translation" between the religious and the secular.[7]

In addition to the concept of morality, the ideal of nonsectarian Christianity facilitated the introduction of religious concerns into secular versions of sex education. Instead of just secular and religious spheres, the liberal Protestants of early sex education divided their explicitly religious efforts further between nonsectarian and denominational work. The

boundaries between these categories required ongoing negotiations, especially with the growing public awareness that "nonsectarian" approaches within public schools reflected strong Protestant biases and insufficiently accommodated Catholics and Jews—the religious "others" with whom Protestants most frequently interacted. Public schools became more associated with secularism as explicit religious exercises were increasingly removed in the early twentieth century. Because sex education faced a slow and rocky start in schools (with the exception of colleges), most sex education work occurred through nonsectarian voluntary organizations that promoted a general but predominantly liberal view of Christianity—and, by the mid-twentieth century, a "Judeo-Christian" notion of religion—with which they believed almost all people could agree. From this foundation of nonsectarian voluntary work, religious leaders then brought sex education to their churches and denominations, where more specific theologies influenced the topic of sexuality.

Liberal Protestant sex educators celebrated this trifold division of labor between the secular, the nonsectarian, and denominations, seeing each arena as complementary and necessary to the others. When engaging the broader public beyond specific churches, they balanced between secular and nonsectarian values that they viewed as broadly acceptable to guide the public; this was one of their answers to accommodating religious pluralism in a country that separated church and state. After the 1960s, complementarity and cooperation between these three areas of sex education could no longer be assumed as sex education began to grow within public schools, which became more wary of both denominational and nonsectarian religious approaches. These alignments redistributed more of the liberal religious sex education work into denominations, leaving a public void that conservative Christians would fill with abstinence-only education.

Nonsectarian Christian versions of sex education flourished within organizations like the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Federal Council of Churches and its successor, the National Council of Churches, as well as through the military education provided by chaplains. Nonsectarian Christianity also operated quite freely within ASHA and the early days of SIECUS, mingling with and being supported by the scientific orientation of the movements. The strategy of masking Protestant distinctiveness in the framework of nonsectarian universality was an old one to gain religious consensus.[8] In this case, it worked to integrate liberal Protestant values into a movement dominated by scientific professionals and education experts. At

the same time, downplaying explicit markers of Protestantism such as theological doctrines, biblical passages, and evangelism in favor of general Christian ideas of morality and family values distanced sex educators from more conservative Protestants, who liberals scorned as promoting religious dogmas and the repression of sexuality.

Morality permeated many dimensions of sex education. Indeed, studies have noted a preoccupation with morals within every phase of its history, which underscores the need for research on religious involvement.[9] However, scholars' primary interest in professionals of science, public health, education, or the government has produced academic interpretations of morality as intrusive—a nuisance that tarnished secular plans. For example, in her history of the government's hygiene campaigns, Alexandra Lord argued that moral frameworks prevented scientists and public health officials from effectively dealing with syphilis and gonorrhea.[10] Many comprehensive sexuality educators, too, have reinforced this narrative, lumping morality with the abstinence-only work that runs counter to their goals. While moral considerations undoubtedly informed and complicated scientific treatment of venereal diseases and the teaching of public sex education, they also motivated many sex educators, spurred public interest, provided legitimacy in the context of obscenity charges and cultural silences, and situated sex education within a larger social matrix, expanding responsibility to individuals, parents, churches, schools, and government. By retelling the history of the sex education movement with a focus on religion, I contextualize morality's entanglements with other agendas and elucidate its various uses and meanings. While morality was not merely a synonym for religion, religious representatives maintained a strong claim to be the moral experts of the movement and left an imprint of religion on the term.

Liberal religious sex educators sought to improve morality at the national level by acting outside of traditional religious institutions, as many Americans feared that churches were no longer the most effective instruments for influencing society. For Protestant sex educators, their work enacted the social gospel of building the Kingdom of God on earth through the improvement of society. Applying Christian messages to social problems beyond churches reaffirmed religion's immediate significance. The work came full circle when Protestant sex educators brought the work back to their churches, transforming these institutions into tools for sex education. In the long term, however, religious contributors to the mainstream sex education movement created the terms of their own exit. By ceding certain authority

to scientific experts and allowing denominations to take over the religious dimensions of sex education, liberal religious leadership in the secular realm of sex education became less visible.

Historical Phases of the Sex Education Movement

Broadly defined, public sex education refers to large-scale, organized efforts to instruct Americans about sex. It includes, but is not limited to, programs within schools. To anchor this study, I focus on national organizations that inspired, collaborated, and reported on these efforts, namely, ASHA for the period prior to the 1960s and SIECUS for the remainder of the century. The significance of these groups has been well established by historians of sex education, although the organizations' inclusion of and partnerships with religious people have been largely unexplored.[11]

Exploring the history of sex education through the lens of religious studies reveals new actors, themes, and strategies that impacted each phase. It also introduces different timeframes for some events when compared to studies that focus on scientific contributions. I contextualize religious influences within five phases of the movement for public sex education: (1) the roots of social hygiene campaigns against venereal diseases and prostitutes; (2) the early institutionalization of sex education programs through ASHA, the YMCA, and the military; and the subsequent developments of (3) family life education, (4) comprehensive sexuality education, and (5) abstinence-only education. While many histories of sex education begin with accounts of dermatologist Prince Albert Morrow in the early twentieth century, I trace the roots of his social hygiene movement to liberal Protestant social purity reformers of the late nineteenth century. Similarly, through my attention to the leadership of minister Anna Garlin Spencer, I locate the beginning of family life education more than twenty years earlier than other studies.[12] My approach shows not only religion's prominent role in the mainstream movement but also the movement's significant impact on its religious participants, especially through their interactions with physicians and public health officials.

Chapter 1 examines the liberal Protestant roots of ASHA, which became a clearinghouse for the early sex education movement. ASHA emerged from the combination of two distinct movements: social purity and social

hygiene.[13] Liberal Protestantism, I argue, came to influence early sex education through the merging of these strands and the collective realization that scientific information was not enough to influence sexual behavior. I locate the roots of ASHA in social purity groups of the 1870s, many of which were led by Unitarians and Quakers and focused on ridding society of the sins of prostitution. Through purity lectures, these associations pushed sexual boundaries by broaching the topic of chastity with children and the issue of venereal disease with young men. Inspired by the cause of women's suffrage, purity reformers also sought to eliminate the double standard of sexuality by raising men to the higher standards expected of women. All the while, they encouraged a restrictive and largely negative view of sexual behavior through the Christian dichotomy of sin and purity. I explore their evolving relationship with the physician-dominated social hygiene movement that began in the early twentieth century, demonstrating that liberal religious concerns about sexual morality impacted sex education through the dynamic interactions between purity reformers and social hygienists. Physicians, educators, and religious leaders came to agree that sex education was a primary means to achieve their respective goals of fighting the rampant spread of venereal diseases, enlightening individuals to develop a civilized mind, and eliminating sexual sins increasingly associated with cities. ASHA became the organization within which all three types of people could work out a joint strategy for teaching the moral side of sex.

After ASHA's official incorporation in 1914, it turned its attention to programs to carry out its visions. Chapter 2 examines the emergence of the YMCA and chaplains as ASHA's partners in providing sex education to young men within colleges, local YMCAs, and the military. This chapter demonstrates how Christian sex educators used the framework of moral education to justify national sex education programs and to bridge religious and scientific interests. Their positioning of sex education as an integral part of moral education was further influenced by two trends within Protestantism: the social gospel and muscular Christianity. Through these interactions, sex education became a liberal Protestant version of muscular Christianity that sought to reform society. For sex educators within the YMCA and chaplaincy, restoration of moral and social order required instruction that could channel uncontrolled male sexual energy into recreational activities, service to the country, and monogamous, heterosexual marriages.

Building upon the framework of moral education, sex education soon expanded beyond personal character training by linking sexuality with family values. Chapter 3 argues that liberal Protestants and their engagements with social science transformed sex education into family life education beginning in the mid-1920s. Liberal Protestant sex educators developed through family life education many of the normative ideas of heterosexuality and the family that took hold by the mid-twentieth century. Three interconnected liberal religious influences transformed sex education into family life education: (1) the leadership of Anna Garlin Spencer, who was a sociologist, a Unitarian minister, and the creator of ASHA's Division of Family Relations; (2) the alliance Spencer forged between ASHA and the Federal Council of Churches (FCC), the leading organization for Protestant mainline churches and the ecumenical movement; and (3) the careful balance struck by Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish family life educators between encouraging the interfaith ideal of "Judeo-Christian" family values while rejecting marriage across religious lines. The shift to family life education activated churches and some synagogues in sex education work, effectively making the FCC a practical arm of the sex education movement. Shared interest in social scientific concerns about family life and methods of counseling grounded the partnership, with both ASHA and the FCC convinced that strengthening marital sexuality would improve society. The dual definition of sexuality as physical intercourse and social relations between the sexes, primarily through gender roles, came to full fruition within family life education.

Out of the liberal Protestant agenda for family life education grew comprehensive sexuality education, which taught sexuality as a public health topic and included information on contraceptives and, eventually, sexual diversity. It developed through the FCC's predecessor, the National Council of Churches (NCC), and Mary Steichen Calderone, a Quaker and a public health professional. Interactions between the NCC and Calderone led to the founding of SIECUS in 1964 as the leader of comprehensive sexuality education. Chapter 4 argues that the "new morality," a liberal theological trend also known as situation ethics, shaped comprehensive sexuality education and incited the intense conservative Christian opposition known as the "sex education controversies." The new morality, with its rejection of absolutist interpretations of right and wrong behavior, tipped sex education—which was gaining ground in public schools—further toward progressive sexual values as it suggested that sexual relationships other than those between husband and wife *could* be moral under certain circumstances. It emphasized the ideas that people should not judge others' actions and that individuals

have rights and responsibilities to make their own moral choices by utilizing reason and the advice of experts. The new morality represented the flourishing of liberal Protestant values of individualism, rational religion, and the embrace of modern professionals. It also made it increasingly difficult to teach the belief that sexual behavior belongs only within heterosexual marriage, even though many early comprehensive sexuality educators held this conviction. Responding to the new morality of comprehensive sexuality education, conservative Christians protested that children would learn an "anything goes" curriculum that violated their beliefs in modesty and the exclusive place of sexuality within a monogamous, heterosexual marriage. During this time, liberal Protestant sex educators could no longer assume cooperation and complementarity between secular, nonsectarian, and denominational spheres. While the public face of the controversy—framed as a battle between conservative religion and the secular public schools—concealed liberal religious voices, they continued to defend SIECUS against those who labeled it anti-Christian.

As Chapter 5 argues, conservative Christian abstinence-only advocates learned a great deal from the liberal Protestants and comprehensive sexuality education they rejected. This recent phase, often defined by the struggle between two competing versions of sex education, began with the emergence of abstinence-only education in the 1980s. After years of opposing sex education, conservative Christians like Tim LaHaye developed their own versions as replacements. Supported by and supporting the newly developed Christian Right and the evangelical pro-family movement, these programs espoused chastity before marriage and omitted information on contraceptive benefits and the diversity of sexual behaviors and identities. As religious studies scholar Sara Moslener has shown, abstinence-only values motivated evangelical purity movements and reflected evangelicalism's relatively recent embrace of psychology.[14] It was no longer a question of *whether* sex education belonged in schools, but rather *which* type would be taught. A landmark event that secured the dominance of abstinence-only education occurred in 1996 with the federal decision to dedicate $50 million per year to programs that promoted only abstinence as acceptable outside of heterosexual, monogamous marriage. Conservatives, too, had learned how to translate religious values into secular spaces in order to gain a bigger audience for their concerns and values.

Abstinence-only programs remained the only version of sex education with dedicated financial support from the federal government until

Congress created additional funding for comprehensive sexuality education in 2010. The epilogue discusses the enormous power of recent presidential administrations to mold sex education through federal funding initiatives. Recent decades have seen the pendulum in full swing, from the increase in abstinence-only support under President George Bush, to advancement of comprehensive sexuality education under President Barack Obama, to serious efforts to shift funds toward abstinence-only programs under current president Donald Trump. The legacies of religious sex educators have shaped the terms of these discussions, especially in portrayals of what is at stake. Throughout this history, religious people have proven that the concept of morality could be used to expand discourses of sexuality beyond physical considerations, to limit these discussions to the restriction of sexual activity, or, in most cases, both. Contrary to narratives that pit secular sex education against religious actors, religious influence has been both multidimensional and pervasive in the development of sex education.

Historical Ironies of Religious Participation in Sex Education

Some confusion about religious involvement in sex education stems from paradoxes that characterized their contributions. American religious actors, especially those seeking to advance trends of modernism in the twentieth century, have often produced opposite results, as historian Martin E. Marty has shown. His interpretative framework of historical ironies draws attention to consequences of religious ambitions that contradicted the original vision, often caused unintentionally by some dimension of the actor's plan.[15] With this in mind, this book highlights gaps between religious intentions and effects while acknowledging that many actors had lofty goals, noble intentions, and little foresight that their strategies might backfire or be considered socially unacceptable (or worse) in the future. Liberal religious people had high hopes for their abilities to improve the nation's morality and social problems through continual expansion of public education about sexuality. Their progressive vision, however, produced regressive outcomes on issues such as race, women's sexuality, religious pluralism, and abstinence.

As a number of studies have thoroughly demonstrated, early sex educators, many of whom saw themselves as cultural and religious progressives, caused deep and lasting harm. As members of the dominant culture, the white

Christian elites of the social purity movement and ASHA perpetuated the racist ideologies shared by many of their peers, constructing sex education curricula and campaigns that were racially segregated. Most espoused eugenic rhetoric, and some were active in the eugenics movement. Although ASHA did not officially endorse the movement, it printed favorable articles on it and cooperated with representatives of the American Eugenics Society through conferences and projects.[16] While some ASHA leaders and publications clearly articulated eugenic agendas to encourage reproduction among those deemed "fit" and to prevent the "unfit" from marrying or reproducing, more often references were vague and ambiguous. Some used the term "eugenics" as merely shorthand for heredity. However, regardless of meaning or intention, eugenic language contributed to the human rights violations enacted by the eugenics movement. In other words, "despite its sloppiness, the rhetoric of eugenics was important in making repressive policies toward the poor and mentally ill thinkable, palatable, and practicable. The constant drumbeat of phrases like 'the menace of the feeble-minded' and 'mental defectives' had its toll on the dehumanization of the 'unfit.' "[17] The entanglement of sex education and eugenics is, unfortunately, not surprising given the strength of white hegemony and popularity of eugenics, but it was also not inevitable, as the roots of sex education within the social purity movement included abolitionists, many of whom resisted the racial hierarchies supported by leading eugenicists.

Adding to the damaging stereotypes and treatment of non-whites and those with mental illnesses and disabilities, early sex educators denigrated sexual minorities and infertile couples with their prescriptive norms that to be a good American was to marry someone of the opposite sex and have children. Such views contributed to individual and systematic discrimination against LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer) people. ASHA also contributed to the silencing of young sexual assault victims as it perpetuated unscientific theories of gonorrhea spread by toilet seats in elementary schools and other public places, in large part because social hygienists could not confront the possibility that girls who contracted gonorrhea were likely the victims of incest.[18] Another scholar has cast ASHA leaders as the "antagonists" in his historical narrative about the sustained mistreatment and detention of women suspected of prostitution under the laws of the American Plan.[19] And, from the perspective of the many women arrested under these laws and forced to receive medical examinations for venereal diseases, they certainly were. While these assessments add much

needed complexity to the work of the early sex educators and their role in history, these people were not simply villains or heroes. In the field of sex education, they made significant progress increasing public discourse about sexual information at the same time they advanced damaging racist and sexist cultural projects. As for the role of religion, religious sex educators were largely complicit in these trends at various phases through participation or lack of protest.[20]

Early leaders of the movement considered themselves on the forefront of raising sexual awareness, but they remained largely silent regarding contemporaneous progressive developments in female sexuality. As they contested many other boundaries, they were guilty of perpetuating the larger culture's denial of women as sexual agents, even as other progressives—especially advocates of free love, companionate marriage, and birth control—and even some popular films began to chip away at that image in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[21] Radical sexual reformers had started to take female desire more seriously and to separate it from reproductive and even marital roles.[22] In comparison, the social hygienists of early sex education seemed quite cautious and conservative. At the same time, as historian Christina Simmons has argued, the movement "opened a small venue for middle-class white women and a few African American men to speak critically about their place in the sexual order."[23]

Early purity reformers, guided by the prescriptive Victorian ideal of white, middle-class women as passionless (and therefore morally superior to men), directed their efforts to controlling male sexuality through education and the suppression of prostitution.[24] As purity reformers enshrined female passivity as a model for men, they further distanced their own identities from female sexuality through campaigns against prostitution. Their approach depicted a dichotomy between pure, Christian women defined by restraint and impure, "fallen" women of sexual depravity, leaving little room in between. Moreover, prostitutes were not made the targets of sex education, further reinforcing the view of sexually engaged females as either too far gone or categorically "other." By supporting education to control male sexuality through images of passionless female reformers and wives and impassioned prostitutes, early sex educators perpetuated frameworks that limited understandings about women and their sexuality instead of expanding such knowledge.

Focus on educating men continued as sex education took hold within spaces where young men were primary audiences, including local YMCAs, the military, and colleges. The movement remained closely tied to efforts to

suppress prostitution, continuing to invoke stereotypical tropes of virgins and whores to motivate men, especially soldiers, to marry good women and to control themselves while away from home. Men's sexuality was, of course, also pigeonholed by these depictions, although patterns started to change when family life education spread through churches and home economics courses. Mid-century courses discussed positive dimensions of women's sexuality more frequently, although largely tied to women's roles as wives and mothers. The most progressive dimensions of these lessons often came from girls themselves, who utilized classroom opportunities to ask questions and to develop a critical approach to gender roles and sexuality.[25] It was not until well into the development of comprehensive sexuality education that sex educators more regularly celebrated women as independent and diverse sexual actors, and even then it was within limits.

An additional reason that the mainstream movement for sex education largely ignored progressive agitations around women's sexuality was its separation from feminist-oriented groups that led those charges, including the call for accessible family planning methods. In its early history, ASHA chose to distance itself from the birth control movement and radical feminists associated with it. ASHA's refusal to take a stance on birth control was an effort to avoid controversial subjects that could distract and divide those dedicated to sex education, especially ASHA's Catholic members because of the Catholic Church's rejection of contraceptives. ASHA's liberal Protestant partners in the FCC moved ahead on this issue, producing a pamphlet in the early 1930s that included statements supporting birth control within marriages. However, liberal Protestants provided other reasons for ASHA to avoid official collaboration with those birth control advocates like Margaret Sanger who espoused socialism, because socialism was viewed as a direct competitor to mainline churches for working class members.[26] Given the breadth and fluidity of the movements for sex education and birth control, there were mainstream sex educators who supported the agenda of birth control access and birth control activists producing significant sex education resources, but ASHA's leaders kept official distance from such overlap at the organizational level.

While ASHA did boast a number of prominent female leaders, including suffragist Anna Garlin Spencer, its ranks were filled mostly with men who chose to link sex education to the respected scientific enterprise rather than feminist causes. After all, the liberal Protestant embrace of mainstream science meant an embrace of science's overwhelmingly male leadership.[27] My study of the early movement that formed around ASHA, therefore, engages

a largely white, male-centered history, acknowledging the ubiquity of racial and gender biases in these contexts. The women who rose through the ranks of ASHA knew how to navigate these waters, which often meant moderating their demands on women's issues. If women pushed their agendas too hard or in the wrong way, Spencer explained that the male leaders "would shut the door opened so generously and give us again men in high authority working in secret for things we could not stop and we women battering outside the doors." She expressed, "I want to keep the doors open" in order to "work from the inside out." Other female leaders within ASHA shared the view that "if we antagonize continually, or if they lose confidence in us, then we defeat ourselves."[28]

Another historical irony emerged from liberal Protestant approaches to religious diversity. In many ways, religious strategies to influence American understandings of sexuality responded to the challenges of teaching a religiously plural public. Liberal Protestants emphasized broad themes of morality and shifted frameworks in order to appeal to an audience that, over time, they recognized as increasingly diverse. In the earliest phase, specific denominational doctrines of salvation and sin were tempered by broader Protestant emphases on purity and health. As sex educators transitioned to a period of institutionalization, they used frameworks of moral education and character training to universalize sexual values for various Christian groups. Shifting to the further-reaching model of family life education supported interfaith efforts between Protestants, Catholics, and Reform Jews, as they sought to galvanize mainline religious people around a shared fear of the dysfunction and disintegration of American families. Amid perceived cultural revolutions of the 1960s, they embraced the concept of the new morality, a form of situation ethics, to argue against a one-size-fits-all approach to decision making. New morality was touted as a method that could be adapted for religious and nonreligious purposes and diverse audiences yet could still provide a moral compass for public school education about sexuality. However, conservative Christian backlash eventually convinced some sex educators that no religious approach, no matter how expansive, could sufficiently accommodate polarizing tendencies within American religion. As a result, many of those articulating liberal religious approaches to sex education withdrew from secular efforts to convince the nation and have instead flourished within particular denominations through church-based sex education programs. Recognition of religious pluralism led to a wider discussion

of sexual pluralism over time, while the progressive impulse to push limits roused conservatives committed to fixed boundaries.

The realization that expansive approaches to religious values, regardless of how nonsectarian they seemed, could never accommodate everyone—and were therefore unsatisfactory for arenas of pluralism such as public schools—yielded unintended consequences. The pendulum swung in the opposite direction, and an approach that eliminated concern for religious pluralism along with discussion of diverse sexualities won the day. Conservative Christians have proposed education about "no sex" (abstinence) to be the most satisfying answer for classrooms. Inability to find a liberal religious approach that accommodated everyone opened the door to exclusive programs that severely restricted sex education and advanced conservative religious agendas.

In further irony, despite fundamental opposition to comprehensive sexuality education, abstinence-only programs came to adopt many approaches previously advanced by liberal religious sex educators. In the late 1960s, when sexual behaviors appeared to be running rampant, opponents embraced the logic that sexual information could influence moral behavior to argue that comprehensive sexuality education was *responsible* for increased promiscuity. While liberal religious sex educators had developed frameworks of purity and family life education to expand discussions about sexuality in their respective times, conservative Christian abstinence-only advocates implemented these same concepts to restrict conversations. Meanwhile, they adapted for their own purposes comprehensive sexuality education's reliance upon medical terminology, an emphasis on health, and a positive view of sexuality as part of identity, all points that they had disparaged in progressive programs. Liberal religious sex educators had, unintentionally, developed resources and opportunities that were later used against them.

Positioning religion at the center of sex education history exposes a different cast of characters, motives, and interpretations. It illuminates issues of church-state separation, ecumenical and interfaith cooperation, and the relation of religion to other cultural authorities and professional spheres. The greatest continuity across this religious history is the insistence that sexual information cannot be separated from sexual morality. Religious supporters and opponents of sex education have both worked to maintain and negotiate the pairing. Acceptance of morality within sex education became particularly evident in protests that emerged whenever someone tried to separate it by treating sexuality as just another topic, sexual disease as just another

disease, and prostitution as just another illegal action. Furthermore, the persistent reminder by religious sex educators that scientific information was *not enough* to change the sexual behavior of youth influenced assessment methods that assumed learning was not enough if it did not change behavior. Interest in impacting and measuring sexual behavior defines many aspects of sex education today, preventing the celebration of informed sexual decision making as valuable in and of itself. The legacy of morality within the sex education movement, although not alone in this task, pushed sex educators of all varieties to keep a close watch on sexual behavior.

Likewise, public responses were based on more than information about the physiological aspects of sexual development and behavior; they were about morals, decency, and visions for an upright life and an improved society. Like Allan M. Brandt's social history of venereal disease, my study considers the concept of sexuality to be shaped by social constructions, including the symbols Americans associated with sex education and the range of topics it covered.[29] Sexuality has been constructed by political, economic, legal, and, as I will argue, religious forces. As religious people pushed to develop sex education, they held onto the reins as best they could. They broke ground for new ways of envisioning responsibility for sex education (expansion) with the goal of controlling sexual behavior (contraction). As they pushed the mainstream movement forward, they often succeeded in adapting and molding it to their religious vision, complete with ambivalences and unexpected outcomes.