SEX, GOD, AND THE AMERICAN FLAG

Tradition and Change in Moral Values

We need to inform ourselves of how the communists are all doing their part to soften the younger generation to a point of “moral decay.” With alcohol, narcotics, obscene literature available to our youth, and with much of our TV-fare featuring crime, violence and loose morality, it is time our homes, churches, schools, and government combine to convince youth that honesty and decent living represent the highest type of intelligence and patriotism.

Holly Holmes, May 1, 1961

In their campaigns to direct Americans to follow their ideas on politics, social behaviors, and culture, rightist women frequently employed the words “moral” or “morality.” Indeed, their definition of morality lies at the heart of most issues examined in this book. Right-wing women considered their beliefs, positions on issues, and actions to be “moral,” while those of the opposition were not. Those who were mothers took a particular interest in seeing that their children received an upbringing that maintained their moral codes. Their efforts to censor textbooks and to rid schools of teachers and administrators who did not subscribe to their way of thinking were largely due to fears that young minds would be corrupted by “un-American” ideals.

Similarly, rightist campaigns to block fluoridation, mental health programs, and polio vaccinations usually centered upon concerns that government, scientists, liberals, communists, and other “outsiders” were conspiring to use such devices as drugs to manipulate the thinking of all Americans—but particularly the country’s youth. Right-wing women
were especially disturbed over the desegregation of public schools. Besides their fear of social mixing of the races and declining standards of behavior, they foresaw integration reaching beyond the classroom and into the bedroom. Meanwhile, three additional struggles developed that brought moral standards and behavior into a sharp, central focus. These were the issues of sex education, school prayer, and patriotic behavior.

For generations, parents have voiced anxiety over the morals of youth. Parents of baby boomers were no different. Loretta Killian, a mother of a son and a daughter, expressed an anguish that many mothers were experiencing during the 1960s and early 1970s when she asked President Nixon, “Where has all the morality gone?” Girls were wearing too much makeup; both boys and girls were trying to be “sexy.” Teenage pregnancy was the result. The youth of the time, she declared, were “not using the good Brains that the Good Lord gave them.”¹

The role of the American mother, since the time of what historian Linda Kerber calls “Republican motherhood” in the early years of the nation,
was to care for, protect, and educate her children. It was the mother’s responsibility to instill strong moral values within the family unit. During the early nineteenth century, American mothers formed church and other associations to insure they were using the most effective methods to rear their children to fear God and to lead pure lives. As the century progressed, women began to enlarge their influence to the public realm, often banding together to publicly oppose behaviors that they believed threatened American morality. An example is the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, which organized in 1874 over the concern that alcoholism had a deleterious effect upon families. While historian D’Ann Campbell maintains that by 1940 the distinctive link between morality and gender roles had largely dissolved, that was not the case for right-wing women; nor was that totally true for other women. During the third quarter of the twentieth century many mothers, all over the country, responded to the real or imagined threats against the lives or sensibilities of their offspring. Some considered the burden of saving their children from moral decay to be solely the responsibility of women. Blanche Winters, one of the few rightists who identified herself as a feminist, was convinced of this. In the early 1950s, Winters, who led the right-wing American Woman’s Party, announced that “youth problems and juvenile delinquency [are] strictly women’s business.”

After a steady decline in crime during the aftermath of World War II and through the 1950s, a dramatic rise in serious crime, including murder, rape, and auto theft took place during the mid-1960s. This surge in criminal activity, combined with premarital sex and the use of mind-altering drugs among the nation’s youth, loomed large during the 1960s and into the 1970s. Right-wing women, as well as many men and women whose ideologies could be found all along the political and social spectrums, shared anxieties over what they saw as changing moral values of America’s young. Yet the right-wing women examined here held ideas about the origins of youthful morality that differed from most of the mainstream and the political left. That is, many of them detected conspiracies behind the moral choices that large numbers of the younger generation were making. Thus, in regard to moral issues, these right-wing women put a great amount of emphasis upon youthful behavior and what the young were learning—particularly in school—about sex, religion, and patriotism. They viewed those three issues as major factors in determining the moral
direction the nation would take in the future; thus, they felt it their duty to actively promote their versions of morality.

**Sex Education**

Sex education in the public schools had been the subject of debate since early in the twentieth century when moral reformers emphasized “social hygiene,” seeking to eliminate prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases. During the first half of the century, however, controversy was usually minimal and often local. The first recorded attempt to introduce sex education in a citywide public school system occurred in Chicago in 1913. It was part of Progressive reformers’ crusade against prostitution and venereal diseases and focused on teaching personal purity and convincing youths of the dangers of illicit sex. Despite its moralistic purpose, a great number of Chicagoans disapproved of the program, including the city’s religious leaders, and the experiment with sex education in Chicago was short-lived. During the 1920s, more schools began to introduce sex education into their curricula, again with the idea of teaching youth to resist sexual urges.

Roman Catholic leaders were frequently behind the opposition to sex education, although there was other organized opposition as well. Popular dissent over sex education grew during the 1960s, and it was during that decade that the topic rose on the agenda of right-wing women, as they rallied to keep “sex education” and “family life education” (terms they often used interchangeably) off school curricula. These women had an attitude similar to that of Howard Whitman, a writer on human affairs, who theorized that the rise in sexual activity among youth in the postwar period was due to youth lacking direction as to traditional standards of morality. He placed the responsibility of teaching morality in the hands of parents, contending that youth had a “natural urge” in addition to the sexual urge, which was the urge to be good. What youth needed was direction. Both Whitman and rightist women believed in parental direction, not sex instruction in schools.

As in Chicago in 1913, from the 1910s through most of the 1950s, abstinence from sexual activity was at the core of sex education. However, by the 1960s, as the reality of youth’s participation in premarital sex set in, some progressives sought to use the classroom to provide students
with broader knowledge about their sexuality. The reformers believed that among other positive results, such knowledge could help prevent students from experimenting with sex.

Rightist Frances Bartlett, whose activism on behalf of the education of youth dated back well over a decade, did not agree. In the summer of 1963 she jumped into the sex education discussion with a series of articles in her FACTS in Education newsletter. An article in her May-June issue asked the question, “‘Modern’ Morality: Is it Moral?” If instruction on sex was put in the hands of school teachers, her answer to the question was—at least in most instances—no. Bartlett believed that sex education was primarily the responsibility of the parents, who were probably just as capable at providing sex instruction as the “untrained, irresponsible, and often neurotic teacher.” Bartlett claimed to not disapprove of “the scientific and objective approach” provided in classes such as biology, life science, and physical education, including sex hygiene in the latter course, but she found sex education per se inappropriate. She argued that too much was being taught too early, and it was being taught without “regard to the spiritual aspects of marriage and family life.”14 Morality, she maintained, was missing from the school curriculum.

In the July-August 1963 issue of FACTS, Bartlett challenged those who had been claiming that exposing children “to a vast knowledge of sex information at an early age is the surest way to avoid problems.” There were, she wrote, no facts to support the advocates’ thesis, and she claimed that sex education programs had backfired in many schools. In New York City, for example, “in one year, the schools had to excuse 1,500 pregnant girls under 15 years of age.” She added that there was news of a variety of agencies, including some within the federal government, that were providing hundreds of millions of dollars in assistance to children and unwed mothers. As Bartlett saw it, such intervention was damaging to American society overall, writing, “society in its culture of indulgence bends over backwards to eliminate any sense of guilt or stigma of embarrassment to the girl who gets into trouble. And it is just this cover-up policy that [FBI Director] J. Edgar Hoover says is encouraging all forms of juvenile delinquency.”15

Bartlett made clear her beliefs that government agencies were contributing to the problem of unwed motherhood becoming too easy and that, in the end, it was the taxpayer who was stuck with the bill.16 In addition