

Eugenics and the Approval of Birth Control at the 1930 Lambeth Conference

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Following the vote in favour of birth control at the 1930 Lambeth Conference, the Church of England became the first major Christian denomination explicitly to condone the use of birth control. This paper argues that the bishop of Winchester, Theodore Woods, was the previously unheralded principal actor responsible for reversing the position of the Church. Woods was convinced that the Church needed to 'modernise' its position in order to secure a receptive audience for its higher-ordered teachings on marriage, sex and especially procreation. In turn, he hoped to bring about an increased birthrate amongst the eugenically 'desirable' English middle and upper classes.

Shortly after the 1930 Lambeth Conference, the Church of England published the reports and resolutions produced by the gathered bishops of the worldwide Anglican Communion. Presided over by the newly appointed archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Gordon Lang, the work of the decennial conference held no official claim over any province within the Anglican Communion, the worldwide network of regional church bodies in fellowship with the see of Canterbury. Resolutions adopted by the conference instead provided counsel to bishops, clergymen and laypersons scattered across the globe. The reports in turn elucidated the theological and moral reasoning underpinning the resolutions.¹

Tucked away in the printed collection was the report of the subcommittee on marriage and sex. Drafted principally by the bishop of Winchester, COPEC = Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship; LPL = Lambeth Palace Library, London; NCPM = National Council of Public Morals

¹ For further discussion on the procedural aspects of the 1930 Lambeth Conference see Theodore Woods, *The faith and witness of the Church in this generation*, London 1931, 11–13.

Theodore Woods, the report expressed alarm over the rejection of Church teachings: 'in many quarters Christian morality is receiving the treatment frequently accorded to Christian doctrine', it said. 'It is disowned and even repudiated.'² Such a sea change was said to be the result of a rapidly advancing 'hedonistic and materialistic philosophy' that promised self-fulfilment and immediate gratification. This 'process of secularisation', the report cautioned, was not limited to Britain, but was 'advancing in almost every country in the world'. Turning towards birth control later in its report, the subcommittee supposed that many unmarried couples, swept along by secularism, now employed contraceptives to facilitate distasteful sex acts. Birth control was also thought to be 'frequently used to avoid the responsibilities of parenthood', and so it had 'become a danger to many civilised nations by a disproportionate reduction of their best stocks'.³

Had a casual reader of the published reports and resolutions been unfamiliar with the proceedings of the 1930 conference – which the English press covered at length – she or he may have been surprised to discover that the same subcommittee which warned of the moral and national dangers associated with birth control also submitted a resolution to the conference in favour of contraception. Following lengthy debate, the gathered bishops voted 193 to 67 in support of the limited approval of birth control. The pronouncement (designated as 'Resolution 15') struck a decidedly different tone from the harsh rebuke of birth control issued by the 1920 Lambeth Conference. In contrast to an 'emphatic warning against the use of unnatural means' to avoid conception, the majority of bishops present at the 1930 conference broke with centuries of church tradition and affirmed the permissibility of birth control for married couples who felt a moral obligation to forgo both 'parenthood' and 'complete abstinence'.⁴ As a result of the intentional silencing of critics following the conference, Resolution 15 became the *de facto* position of the Church – making it the first major Christian denomination explicitly to condone the use of birth control in Europe or North America.

One reason Resolution 15 has drawn interest from contemporary scholars is because it marks a turning point in the liberalisation of church positions on sexuality. And in recent decades multiple authors have identified economic, religious, cultural and medical developments within English society (and beyond) that may have encouraged conference delegates to bypass church tradition and vote in favour of

² *The Lambeth Conference 1930: encyclical letter from the bishops with resolutions and reports*, London 1930, 86.

³ *Ibid.* 86, 90.

⁴ *Conference of bishops of the Anglican Communion: holden at Lambeth Palace, July 5 to Aug. 7, 1920: encyclical letter from the bishops with resolutions and reports*, London 1920, 44; *Lambeth Conference 1930*, 43–4.

birth control.⁵ These included greater recognition of the medical dangers associated with childbirth, high unemployment and increased participation by women in political and religious debates.⁶

Notably, Bishop Woods's decisive role in the passing of Resolution 15 has been largely overlooked by past scholarship. This is a significant oversight because, while various developments throughout the 1920s forged a societal and intellectual climate that made the passing of Resolution 15 possible, it was not inevitable. Wood is rightly identified as the proximate cause of the passing of the resolution, as he successfully navigated the various loci of power within the Church. Woods advanced his birth control agenda with several aims in mind. These included easing economic and physical hardships faced by mothers and limiting the use of contraceptives by unmarried couples. However, Woods's chief aim, rooted in eugenic thought, was to reverse the decline in fertility amongst the middle and upper classes in England. Between 1900 and 1930, the birthrate in England and Wales collapsed from 28.7 births per one thousand population to 16.3.⁷ Woods, like many other proponents of eugenics, worried that the decline in the birthrate seemed most pronounced amongst the middle and upper classes. However, his intent was not necessarily to increase the size of the population at home. Woods instead wanted to ensure that the more well-to-do comprised a greater percentage of English citizens. He also desired to strengthen Britain's empire by encouraging middle- and upper-class married couples to produce more sons and daughters who could be sent abroad.

According to Woods, the call of the Church to parenthood fell on deaf ears because the condemnation of birth control by the Church had subverted its own moral authority, as many found it to be a meritless position. This in turn was said to encourage the adoption of 'hedonistic' notions of human purpose rooted in self-gratification. In contrast, Woods believed that the qualified approval of birth control would furnish the Church with the needed moral authority to combat unChristian teachings and convince the middle and upper classes to live out their God-ordained purpose of serving the state through rearing large families. In this way, the cautious approval of birth control at the 1930 Lambeth Conference can be understood as an attempt by Woods to enact a nationwide fertility-manipulation scheme.

⁵ For example see Richard Soloway, *Birth control and the population question in England, 1877–1930*, Chapel Hill, NC 1982, 253–4; Timothy Jones, *Sexual politics in the Church of England, 1857–1957*, Oxford 2012, 152; and Teresa Notare, 'A revolution in Christian morals: Lambeth 1930', unpubl. PhD diss. Catholic University of America 2008, 6–7, 529–31.

⁶ For further discussion on several of these matters see Jones, *Sexual politics*, 137, 145, 152.

⁷ *The registrar-general's statistical review of England and Wales for the year 1945*, London 1945; *Annual report of the registrar-general for England and Wales, 1920*, London 1922.

The road to the 1930 Lambeth Conference

The mainstream of Anglican thought in the early twentieth century, informed by church tradition, vital statistics, medical opinion and notions of social purity, stood against birth control. Unsurprisingly, then, Timothy Jones notes that there was little debate over contraception at the 1908 Lambeth Conference.⁸ There the bishops voted in favour of the following resolution: ‘The Conference regards with alarm the growing practice of the artificial restriction of the family, and earnestly calls upon all Christian people to discountenance the use of all artificial means of restriction as demoralising to character and hostile to national welfare.’⁹

According to influential reports on the declining British birthrate published in 1916 and 1920 by the non-governmental body known as the National Birth-Rate Commission (NRBC), there existed widespread agreement amongst Roman Catholic and Anglican clergymen in opposing birth control. The first report of the NRBC added that, while their denominations did not stake out official positions, most Nonconformists also believed the practice to be immoral.¹⁰ The second report indicated that the spread of birth control knowledge across all segments of society was, on the whole, ‘highly injurious’ to sexual morals and the interests of the nation. While that report claimed that the ‘Christian Churches’ widely condemned birth control, it acknowledged growing public opposition to the positions of Christian denominations. In order to help inform ecclesiastical positions, and more generally the practice of married couples, the second report also outlined various popular arguments made for and against birth control. According to the NRBC, Christian Churches supposed that the use of birth control, which was said to be directly correlated to the plummeting birthrate, lowered the standard for sexual self-control amongst the married, and its use by married couples also supposedly set an injurious example for the unmarried.¹¹ Notably, available records suggest that the only ecclesiastical body in Europe or North America that officially sanctioned the use of birth control prior to the 1930 Lambeth

⁸ Jones, *Sexual politics*, 132–149.

⁹ *Conference of bishops of the Anglican Communion: holden at Lambeth Palace July 6 to August 5, 1908: encyclical letter from the bishops with resolutions and reports*, London 1908, 44: 56.

¹⁰ National Birth-Rate Commission, *The declining birth-rate, its causes and effects: being the report of and the chief evidence taken by the National Birth-Rate Commission, instituted, with official recognition, by the National Council of Public Morals – for the promotion of race regeneration – spiritual, moral, and physical*, New York 1916, 78.

¹¹ National Birth-Rate Commission, *Problems of population and parenthood: being the second report of and the chief evidence taken by the National Birth-Rate Commission, 1918–1920*, New York 1920, pp. xliii–xlvi, clxii.

Conference was the New York East Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.¹²

Jones indicates that the 1920 Lambeth Conference witnessed an uptick in debate over contraception.¹³ However, the bishops ultimately voted in favour of Resolution 68, which declared in part that

The Conference, while declining to lay down rules which will meet the needs of every abnormal case, regards with grave concern the spread in modern society of theories and practices hostile to the family. We utter an emphatic warning against the use of unnatural means for the avoidance of conception, together with the grave dangers – physical, moral and religious – thereby incurred, and against the evils with which the extension of such use threatens the race.¹⁴

No sooner had the 1920 Lambeth Conference come to a close than a chorus of voices rose up to demand that the Church reject Resolution 68 and endorse birth control. Many of these voices came from outside the Church. But increased public opposition from Anglican leaders quickly became evident – with some clergymen going as far as to invite Marie Stopes, the famed birth control proponent, to speak to their congregations.¹⁵ The growing number of clergymen and laypersons who opposed the negative stance of the Church on birth control can be explained in part through the lens of three normatively charged considerations. These included the physical and economic wellbeing of mothers, differential birthrate patterns amongst the social classes (which was associated with various geopolitical and economic difficulties faced by Britain) and the perceived decline in the moral authority of the Church.¹⁶

In regard to the perceived decline in the moral authority of the Church, it is perhaps true that amongst each generation of Christian leaders, many are convinced that they preside over a period of pronounced moral decay. However, what stood out during the interwar period was the acknowledgment by influential personalities like Nina Woods, the spouse of Bishop Woods and president of the Mothers' Union, that Christianity faced stiff opposition from competing and credible moral philosophies, and that

¹² M. K. Hung Cheuk, 'Contraception within marriage: modernity and the development of American Protestant thought, 1930–1969', unpubl. PhD diss. University of Virginia 2014, 3.

¹⁴ *Lambeth Conference 1920*, 44.

¹³ Soloway, *Birth control*, 238, 240.

¹⁶ On the moral authority of the Church see Lord Dawson of Penn, 'Christian morals: sex relationships', in *The official report of the church congress: Birmingham, Oct. 11th to 14th, 1921*, London 1921, 194–200. On concerns for the welfare of women and children see Maude Royden, 'The ethics of birth control', *Church Militant* xii (1924), pp. civ–cx. On the differential birthrate see Marie Stopes, *Radiant motherhood: a book for those who are creating the future*, London 1921, 235–36, 238. On normatively charged considerations see Jan Goldstein, 'Towards an empirical history of moral thinking: the case of racial theory in mid-nineteenth century France', *American Historical Review* cxx (2015), 5.

many women and men were not only erring in their marital, sexual and procreative behaviours, but were also increasingly looking beyond Christianity for guidance on these matters.¹⁷ Evidence offered in support of the supposed decline in Christian moral commitments by Anglican leaders included the popularity of ‘pernicious’ literature, the advertisement of contraceptives, increasing divorce rates (along with legislation expanding the grounds for divorce) and, of course, declining birthrates. However, there was not a widespread, wholesale abandonment of Christianity between the wars. Instead, there was a gradual decline in church attendance and Christian moral culture (as it related to beliefs regarding marriage, procreation and sexuality), though many Church leaders, as Matthew Grimley notes, ‘lacked our hindsight, and what seems to us like very gradual decline often seemed catastrophic to them’.¹⁸ For his part, Sam Brewitt-Taylor rightly argues that ‘Christianity remained the dominant force in mainstream British moral culture’ at both the elite and popular levels throughout the interwar period.¹⁹

Resulting from the perceived, and in some ways actual, decline in their own moral authority on matters relating to marriage, sex and procreation, Anglican leaders like Woods increasingly looked to fertility-manipulation schemes to maintain influence.²⁰ Some Anglican leaders did so in a shared spirit with a myriad of other Christian leaders who were seeking to find ways to ‘navigate a “new” or “transformed” social reality [or a perceived reality shaped by a supposed decline in Christian influence over nearly every aspect of society, as well as other transformational changes like urbanization], which they believed also required an active process of change and adaptation on the part of Christians themselves’, while still others ‘took a more hostile or confrontational view’.²¹

Bishop Woods and The ethics of birth control

The emergence of Woods as the foremost advocate of birth control within the Church was set in motion by the 1924 Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship (COPEC). During a general session, the 1,200

¹⁷ Nina Woods, ‘The Christian ideal’, in Maxwell Leigh (ed.), *Christianity in the modern state: a report of the proceedings of the 65th church congress, held at Bournemouth, 8th to 11th Oct., 1935*, London 1935, 306–10.

¹⁸ Matthew Grimley, *Citizenship, community, and the Church of England: liberal Anglican theories of the state between the wars*, Oxford 2004, 11.

¹⁹ Sam Brewitt-Taylor, *Christian radicalism in the Church of England and the invention of the British sixties, 1957–1970: the hope of a world transformed*, Oxford 2018, 18–19.

²⁰ A fertility-manipulation scheme is the use of coercion, exclusion, instruction or incentivisation aimed at changing procreative behaviours.

²¹ John Carter Wood, ‘Introduction: Christian modernities in Britain and Ireland in the twentieth century’, *Contemporary British History* xxxiv (2020), 505.

delegates assembled in Birmingham for the ecumenical gathering adopted a resolution calling for Christian denominations to ‘thoroughly’ investigate the question of birth control in order to provide ‘definite guidance to perplexed consciences’.²² As an expression of dissatisfaction with the position staked out by the 1920 Lambeth Conference, delegates voted several days later to ‘forward’ the birth control resolution to the archbishop of Canterbury.²³

Prior to COPEC, Woods had been appointed bishop of Winchester and president of the National Council of Public Morals (NCPM).²⁴ He previously served as the bishop of Peterborough, and was widely known in religious circles for his promotion of ecumenism and Christian Socialism. Woods was theologically liberal and a self-described Evangelical, and his public engagement with various social issues secured him a place on the highest rung of the church hierarchy. Under the auspices of the NCPM, Woods had convened a committee prior to COPEC to investigate the moral permissibility of birth control. That committee, with Woods in the chair, set out to provide guidance to Christian married couples and also anyone who felt ‘anxious for the ultimate welfare of the nation to which they belong’.²⁵ Following COPEC, Woods’s committee, at the request of the then archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, took on the additional responsibility of providing guidance to senior Church leadership on birth control. The arrangement was such that Davidson agreed to allow the NCPM to finish its work before he recommended any further actions in response to COPEC. He also advised Woods that the NCPM report would inform the future policies of the Church on contraception.²⁶ Davidson tapped Woods and the NCPM to guide the Church due to prior infighting amongst the bishops. The NCPM was an organisation respected by high-level church leadership, and Woods’s committee – comprised of various religious and non-religious experts – could accomplish its work at a greater distance from internal Church politics.

Woods began to explain his stance on birth control in 1925 with the publication of *The ethics of birth control*. This report was quickly followed up by

²² ‘COPEC: the week’s meetings at Birmingham’, *Church Times*, 11 Apr. 1924.

²³ ‘COPEC: the future’, *Church Times*, 17 Apr. 1924. Lord Dawson of Penn’s speech to the church congress in 1921 in favour of birth control proved to be a key factor in the bishops choosing to re-evaluate the question of birth control after the 1920 Lambeth Conference. However, the bishops were unable to agree on how best to chart a course forward prior to COPEC convening.

²⁴ The NCPM was an ecumenical body concerned with the racial, spiritual and moral ‘regeneration’ of the British race. It was also the parent organisation of the NBRC.

²⁵ NCPM, *The ethics of birth control*, London 1926, p. vii.

²⁶ Archbishop Randall Davidson to Bishop Theodore Woods, 13 May 1924, and Woods to Davidson, 11 Nov. 1925, correspondence of Randall Thomas Davidson, LPL, MS 422.

one Woods produced in cooperation with the Bishops' Meeting.²⁷ The two reports together help reveal the reasons why he believed birthrates were on the decline amongst the middle and upper classes across England. Woods noted in the introduction to *The ethics of birth control* that young men and women regularly disparaged the Church for being out of touch with their generation. He added that these young people possessed little regard for authority, which compelled the committee to avoid appeals to past declarations on birth control made by religious bodies. Differentiating his approach from that of bishops at the Lambeth Conference, Woods claimed that the NCPM, while starting from a religious foundation, sought to remain unencumbered by prejudices and to follow the guides of 'thought' and 'reason'.²⁸

Woods's report stressed that Christianity now faced stiff competition from a competing and credible moral philosophy. And in the body of the report, the committee suggested that the 'revolt' of younger generations went deeper than rejecting 'theological principles' and 'ecclesiastical pronouncements'. The committee warned that the 'basis of marriage', meaning a permanent union between a man and a woman who were brought together for the principal purpose of the rearing of children, was now called into question. A specific threat to traditional conceptions of marriage identified by the committee was the practice of extramarital sexual intercourse. Such a practice was assumed to be enabled by birth control, which prevented the social stigma of giving birth to children out of wedlock. While birth control made 'irregular sexual relations' possible, the report implied (without explicitly mentioning the word) that a 'hedonistic' outlook on life was the driving force behind the rejection of Christian conceptions of marriage.²⁹ This outlook was associated with an approach to sexual ethics referred to by the committee as the 'new morality'. In the journal *Theology*, L. S. Thornton, an Anglican theologian and contemporary of Woods, asserted that the ethical teachings of the new morality rested on three key assertions: (1) the grounding for morality ought to come from the 'facts of human nature'; (2) these facts could be ascertained through the empirical methods of science; and (3) the goal of any moral order ought to be human happiness, 'conceived without reference to ... a supernatural end'.³⁰

Set in opposition to the ethos of the new morality, the NCPM committee reminded its readers that 'self-gratification is not the true purpose of life'. Instead, purpose was said to be found in the development of one's moral character and in the pursuit of service and sacrifice for the benefit of the

²⁷ The Bishops' Meeting, chaired by the archbishop of Canterbury, brought together bishops from across England and Wales to help advise the archbishop on practical and theological matters. ²⁸ NCPM, *Ethics of birth control*, pp. vi–vii. ²⁹ *Ibid.* 2–3.

³⁰ L. S. Thornton, 'Christian morality: reflections upon the present situation', *Theology* xxi (1930), 312–22.

state. One obvious way to serve the state was to rear a large family. 'Healthy children, properly trained, are the nation's most valuable asset', the report reminded the reader. It added that many married couples were guilty of self-indulgence for having only 'one or two or even three children'.³¹ At the 1930 Lambeth Conference Woods and his peers on the subcommittee on marriage and sex similarly argued that the Church faced the onslaught of a 'hedonistic and materialistic philosophy' that eschewed the primary purpose of life, that being spiritual growth and development. The report, along with other documents issued by the 1930 conference, implied that under the pursuit of this individual purpose fell also the pursuit of one's communal purpose, which was conceived of in terms of service to both the Church and nation. Woods's subcommittee warned that the advancing hedonistic philosophy encouraged the pursuit of 'pleasure and satisfaction at the expense of one's soul'. The waxing of hedonism was said to be accompanied by the waning of Christian moral standards and belief in Christian doctrine. Woods's subcommittee also argued at the 1930 conference that many married persons who chose not to have children were guided by a love of pleasure, adding that 'married people do wrong when they refuse to have children whom they could train to serve God and add to the strength of the nation'.³² Therefore, for Woods, the struggle over birthrates was rightly conceived of as part of a broader struggle in English society over competing conceptions of human purpose.

Returning to the findings of the NCPM, that committee endorsed many of the most popular claims made by Anglican proponents of birth control. Among these was the assertion that birth control could not be dismissed out of hand simply for being 'unnatural', as the committee declared that 'civilisation itself has been the story of man's control over nature by mechanical means'. Furthermore, the committee noted a supposed contradiction in that supposedly few opponents of birth control objected to the intentional restriction of children by limiting sexual intercourse to the 'safe period'. However, the committee also emphasised repeatedly that the rearing of large families was a duty to the state and vital to moral development. It went as far as to assert that married couples, provided they possessed the requisite financial means, should have 'at least four to five children'.³³

At the heart of the conclusions put forth by the NCPM in relation to the moral permissibility of birth control was the belief that it was wrong when used for selfish reasons, but that motive, rather than method, ought to be the determining factor. The report expressed uncertainty over the question of whether a married couple who had fulfilled their 'patriotic' duty

³¹ NCPM, *Ethics of birth control*, 5, 9, 8.

³² *Lambeth Conference 1930*, 86, 91, 92.

³³ NCPM, *Ethics of birth control*, 20-1, 10-11, 7.

to the state by producing four or more children ought to be permitted to employ birth control as a means of continuing to foster their sexual relationship (which was said to have a ‘sacramental’ value in regards to strengthening the marriage bond). The committee expressed greater certainty over its belief that the use of birth control was permissible for reasons of economic or medical hardship. But it added that abstinence remained the preferred path (followed by the use of the ‘safe period’).³⁴

Revealing the social restraints of the time, the platform of limited support for birth control put forth by the NCPM bore similarities to the one endorsed by the Workers’ Birth Control Group. This was particularly true in regards to a shared focus on the economic and medical wellbeing of families, and a dissociation from the rhetoric of sexual freedom.³⁵ Taken as a whole, Woods’s report expressed ambivalence as to whether the upper and middle classes possessed an inherent hereditary superiority over the lower classes, though on other occasions Woods indicated that such an inherent superiority did exist. Rather than focusing on heredity, the report highlighted variances in social utility between the offspring of the respective classes. The committee expressed concern that, as the most valuable contributors to the English economy, the middle and upper classes contributed the fewest number of children to the general population.³⁶

Thanks to the credibility assigned to the NCPM, the publishing of *The ethics of birth control* established Woods as a leading expert on contraception within the Church. Woods leveraged his extended influence in January 1926 to persuade the Bishops’ Meeting to establish an exclusively Anglican committee to further investigate the matter. The bishops likewise agreed to use *The ethics of birth control* as a starting point for the committee’s exploration.³⁷ A letter from Davidson to Woods later that year reveals that Woods’s manoeuvrings amongst the bishops had further bolstered his influence. There the archbishop described Woods as the Church’s ‘chief authority’ on birth control.³⁸ Operating under the chairmanship of the bishop of Lincoln, that group delivered its report in June 1926.

The report differentiated itself from the work of the NCPM by foregrounding specific goals that the committee believed the Church ought to concern itself with when issuing any future pronouncements on birth control. One goal was a reduction in divorce and premarital sexual intercourse (problems said to be caused by the spread of birth control and

³⁴ Ibid. 22–3.

³⁵ For example see *Workers’ birth control group*, London 1927, Trades Union Congress archive, Modern Records Centre, Warwick University, MS 292/840/1/11, at < <https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/health/id/1715>>.

³⁶ NCPM, *Ethics of birth control*, 14.

³⁷ Bishops’ Meetings, minutes, 20 Jan. 1926, bishops’ meetings records, LPL, MS 8.

³⁸ Davidson to Woods, 14 Mar. 1926, LPL, MS 422.

social upheaval from the war). The other was an increase in children born to 'devout Christians'.³⁹ The report did not initially present these goals as arguments either for or against birth control. Instead, the committee wanted to make clear that any subsequent pronouncements must be crafted for the purposes of inhibiting the subversive effects of birth control on married life and fertility.

The bishops' report went on to offer an argument in favour of the issuing of a clarifying statement on birth control prior to the 1930 Lambeth Conference. Similar to the stance taken by the NCPM, the bishops' committee did not believe that at the present time the Church ought to endorse birth control. Rather, it ought to make clear that it did not condemn the practice in all circumstances. The committee further hoped that an Anglican commission on birth control might be established prior to the Lambeth Conference, with the intent of informing the work of the global network of bishops. Like the NCPM, the committee made clear that the key factor in determining the morality of the use of birth control was motive: why a couple chose to prevent conception, not how they chose to do so, was of paramount importance. The use of birth control was said to be permissible under the following circumstances: (1) the man and woman engaging in intercourse must be married to one another; (2) the couple must have good reason for considering procreation 'undesirable' for an extended period of time. The committee made clear that 'selfish ends', such as securing a higher standard of living did not provide grounds for the use of contraceptives. The committee further claimed that the 'sacramental' nature of sex provided theological justification for choosing birth control as an alternative to long-term abstinence. In line with centuries of Church teachings, the report affirmed that procreation remained the primary purpose of sex. However, it set itself apart with the claim that when conception was not desirable intercourse would still be justified insofar as it represented the spiritual union between a husband and wife and served to strengthen that union. Sexual pleasure, unsurprisingly, was discounted as a foundational justification for intercourse.⁴⁰

Returning to where the report started, the committee appealed elsewhere to the moral consideration of the declining authority of the Church. Laying out in nascent form the fertility-manipulation scheme Woods later sought to enact at the 1930 Lambeth Conference, the committee stated that a pronouncement on birth control along the lines proposed in the report would bolster the Church's insistence as to the duty of procreation. This in turn would help secure the goal of an increased birthrate. Increasing the birthrate amongst the Church faithful, equated principally

³⁹ *Report of a committee on birth control: appointed by the archbishop in accordance with a resolution of the Bishops' Meeting*, Cambridge 1926, 3–5; Bishops' Meetings, minutes, 22 June 1926, LPL, MS 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 6–7, 8, 10, 13–14.

with the middle and upper classes, was important for the committee because of their perceived social utility. The faithful were thought to ‘perpetuate and augment an element of peculiar value in the national life ... which is, to say the least, not as large as is desirable’. The committee contended that the duty of procreation was increasingly ignored due to the condemnation of birth control issued by the 1920 Lambeth Conference. This ‘absolute’ condemnation subverted the authority of the Church because scores of women and men thought it to be hopelessly outdated.⁴¹ A more measured statement would enhance the moral standing of the Church, thus empowering the Church to persuade the faithful to use birth control less often.⁴²

Arguments in favour of the Church’s ban on birth control were no longer considered to be morally and theologically convincing by some clergymen and laypersons due in part to the sanctioning of the use of the so-called ‘safe period’ by numerous opponents of birth control. As alluded to already, this struck many as a kind of distinction without a difference. Another reason was the increased awareness of the medical dangers associated with childbirth. For example, the League of the Church Militant, along with many proponents of contraception, asserted that bringing a son or daughter into the world was more dangerous for women than was working in a coalmine for men.⁴³ Warnings over the physical (as well as economic) wellbeing of mothers rested on other hard numbers. Britain faced not only high unemployment rates throughout the 1920s, but between the years of 1921 and 1926 maternal mortality rates in England and Wales increased from 3.91 deaths per one thousand births to 4.12.⁴⁴ As issues relating to the economic and physical plight of mothers became more widely known, a compelling moral case emerged for the liberalisation of the Church’s position on birth control.⁴⁵ Did not Jesus call the Church to care for the ‘least of these’? And were not ‘the least of these’ better cared for through increased access to birth control? Following this train of thought, the maverick Anglican preacher, feminist and key leader of the League of the Church Militant, Maude Royden, contended in 1924 that a lack of affordable housing required poor mothers to limit the size of their families. She further claimed that repeated childbirth posed a grave threat to the physical health of mothers, and that the subjection of working-class women to repeated childbirths ‘condemned’ them and their offspring to lives of hardship. Royden, who described herself as a reluctant supporter of birth control, also noted that it was not in the

⁴¹ The 1920 Conference did not condemn birth control in the case of ‘abnormal’ circumstances. ⁴² *Report of a committee on birth control*, 4, 12, 13–14.

⁴³ For example see Royden, ‘The ethics of birth control’, 106.

⁴⁴ Audrey Leathard, *The fight for family planning: the development of family planning services in Britain, 1921–74*, London 1980, 37. ⁴⁵ Jones, *Sexual politics*, 145.

interest of the 'sanctity of human life' to fill the world with 'unwanted' children.⁴⁶

While the bishops discussed contraception amongst themselves, outside the Church the Workers' Birth Control Group was busy lobbying parliament in favour of the distribution of birth control information in government clinics. Such efforts failed to persuade the House of Commons, but a non-binding motion in favour of the distribution of birth control information passed in the House of Lords in April 1926.⁴⁷ During the course of debate within the upper chamber, Archbishop Davidson condemned the motion – but his speech left many with the impression that the Church was moving away from the position on birth control affirmed at the 1920 Lambeth Conference.⁴⁸ Outside the House of Lords, momentum in favour of birth control took the form of the Ministry of Health establishing a committee to investigate maternal mortality in 1928, and the National Council of Women endorsing state provision of contraceptives in 1929.⁴⁹

Within official Church structures, Woods was able to wield the favour bestowed on him by Davidson to submit two reports to the Bishops' Meeting. Yet there were limits to his capacities. After the presentation of the second report to the Bishops' Meeting in 1927, deliberations regarding the response of the Church to the question of birth control were postponed for eighteen months. The delay reflects on the poor leadership offered by Davidson in relation to birth control throughout the 1920s. At that time Davidson was nearly eighty years old, in ill health and preoccupied by pressing matters like the Prayer Book controversy. As Davidson was unable to settle on a decisive course of action on birth control, confusion emerged amongst clergy and laity alike over what exactly his own views were on the topic. Davidson's indecisiveness created a power vacuum that Woods filled with clear moral arguments and definite goals.

When the matter of birth control finally came up for extended discussion at the Bishops' Meeting in June 1928, the bishop of Lincoln was unable to attend. Woods subsequently convinced the bishops to both forgo the discussion and pass a resolution requesting the topic be taken up at the 1930 Lambeth Conference.⁵⁰ Davidson would retire the next month and be replaced by the former archbishop of York, Cosmo Gordon Lang. Lang quickly began to work behind the scenes to ensure Woods's platform would be placed at the forefront of the conference.

⁴⁶ Royden, 'The ethics of birth control', 104, 105, 107, 109.

⁴⁷ Leathard, *Fight for family planning*, 34–5.

⁴⁸ Soloway, *Birth control*, 249–50.

⁴⁹ Leathard, *Fight for family planning*, 38, 42.

⁵⁰ Bishops' Meetings, minutes, 30 June 1928, MS 8.

1930 Lambeth Conference

The 1930 Lambeth Conference brought together 308 bishops from across the world for discussion and debate. The responsibility for selecting conference topics, along with the chairs of the various committees, fell to Lang as the spiritual head of the gathered delegates. The work of the conference was split between six weeks. The first four weeks consisted of speeches introducing conference topics, along with the drafting of resolutions and reports by the various committees (and subcommittees). These documents were then presented to all 308 bishops for their approval during the second half of the conference.

The choice of chairmen was significant because the opinions of the bishops selected by Lang were broadly perceived to be backed by his tacit approval. These men in turn often exercised significant influence over the drafting of conference documents. Writing to Marie Stopes in 1929, William Temple, now archbishop of York, informed her that steps had been taken at the highest levels of Church leadership to ensure the condemnation of birth control at the 1920 conference would not be replicated in 1930.⁵¹ Nine months later, Bishop Theodore Woods assumed the chair of both the committee on the life and witness of the Christian community and its subcommittee on marriage and sex.

Woods's birth control platform was further bolstered by the distribution of two pro-birth control papers to conference delegates. One of these papers, entitled 'The declining birthrate and "birth control"', was drafted by the archbishop's advisory committee on spiritual healing. The second preparatory paper, entitled 'Birth control', was drafted by Woods, and it set out the general principles on contraception that he intended to put forward at the conference. Woods's haphazardly arranged paper required careful reading, but his principal message was clear: a shift in the Church's position on birth control was necessary to protect and advance higher-ordered moral teachings on marriage, procreation and sex.⁵² Of particular importance, the paper asserted that if the Church were to acquiesce on birth control, middle- and upper-class married couples would more readily receive instruction to rear large families. This call to parenthood was thought to be needed in the provinces of the Communion comprised of predominantly white populations, but Woods held England principally in mind. He added that while birth control was widely employed amongst the middle and upper classes across Western Europe, the Dominions and North America, 'unskilled

⁵¹ William Temple to Marie Stopes, 30 Nov. 1929, Marie Stopes papers, British Library, London, MS 58551. This letter is referenced in Soloway, *Birth control*, 251–2.

⁵² Theodore Woods, 'Birth control': preparatory papers, Lambeth Conference 1930, Lambeth Conferences, LPL, MS 168.

labourers' lacked the foresight to use contraceptives, and therefore bred 'unrestrainedly'.⁵³ Woods also included a racial dimension to his assessment of birthrate patterns. He pitted the decline in numbers amongst the middle and upper classes against the comparatively rapid growth of the 'negro' and 'yellow' races living in Africa and East Asia. The bishop warned that, left unchecked, these trends would produce results 'political and economical which are, to say the least, disquieting'.⁵⁴

On the second day of the conference, several English bishops, including Woods, the bishop of Durham, Hensley Henson, and Lord William Cecil stood before the gathered delegates to deliver preliminary remarks on contraception. Woods took his opportunity to argue that the principal challenge faced by the conference was not to decide whether birth control devices were moral in and of themselves – which he firmly believed to be the case. Rather, the job of the bishops was to guide men and women in the responsible use of contraceptives. Put another way, the task at hand was to ensure that 'man's moral responsibility' was equal to 'his capacity for invention'.⁵⁵ Cautioning his colleagues against repeating the alleged mistakes of the 1920 conference, Woods also claimed that birth control was certain to be a permanent fixture in the lives of many married couples. Here, and elsewhere during the conference, Woods attempted to construct a narrative of inevitability around the adoption of a pro-birth control position. The Communion could not expect to halt the use of birth control entirely, he stressed on several occasions, but only direct and limit its usage. Yet Woods took care to avoid the argument of inevitability to justify any and all uses of birth control. He instead made clear at the conference that the use of birth control was permissible only if it were compatible with Christian teachings.⁵⁶ Woods further warned that the English-speaking world faced the rapid 'advancing of secularism' and a decline in the recognised authority of the Church.⁵⁷ In his preparatory paper, Woods similarly argued that the bishops of the Communion were called to provide guidance on birth control during a 'time when the secularization of life, in all its departments, has been proceeding apace; when material standards increasingly prevail; when the philosophy of hedonism, or at least its practice, is widely adopted; and when Christian ideals of morality are in many quarters discarded'.⁵⁸

⁵³ *Ibid.* Woods did not specifically cite the three regions mentioned above, but the reader would have understood which parts of the world he was referencing.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Proceedings, Lambeth Conference 1930, MS 146.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Woods, 'Birth control'. Evidence cited at the Conference for the decline in the moral authority of the Church included the popularity of subversive media, increasing divorce rates and, despite the calls to parenthood made at the 1908 and 1920 Lambeth Conferences, the downward trend in the birthrate.

The vote on Resolution 15

Following introductory speeches at the 1930 Conference, the bishops of the subcommittee on marriage and sex went to work drafting resolutions and an accompanying report. According to the post-Conference recollections of a fellow subcommittee member, Woods was chiefly responsible for the documents that the subcommittee produced.⁵⁹ Once happy with the draft, Woods presented his subcommittee's work to all the bishops gathered together. He encouraged the delegates with the news that, while many young men and women were rejecting the teachings of the Church, these people could be called back to faithfulness – provided the bishops' advice on matters relating to birth control and procreation better squared with contemporary sensibilities. Woods added that his subcommittee had sought to stress the importance of parenthood, and relatedly warn against the selfish use of birth control, which resulted in the diminution of the 'stocks which are most needed, by reason of their quality'. Further revealing his eugenic convictions, Woods asserted that the subcommittee believed the choice to prevent the conception of such 'superior' stocks was deeply unpatriotic. Later in his speech the bishop informed his peers that the conference represented the last chance for delegates to exert influence over the use of birth control: 'in another ten years' time there will be ... an immense extension of this practice, and I submit that to postpone definite counsels till then will be too late'. He then drove his point home with a rhetorical flourish: 'let the Lambeth Conference speak now, or hereafter for ever hold its peace'.⁶⁰

Further evidence of Woods' eugenic inclinations comes from events following the conference. Acting on his own authority, in the winter of 1931 he invited a handful of clergymen and committed Anglican laypersons, including Bishop Ernest Barnes, the Revd S. A. McDowall, geneticist R. Ruggles Gates and the geneticist and statistician R. A. Fisher, to a private conference on eugenics held at his residence. There the delegates agreed to work together to galvanise Church opinion in favour of eugenics. This included support for family allowances aimed principally at the professional middle class, who were said to be limiting the size of their families due to the influence of 'selfish hedonism'. The more well-to-do were explicitly categorised at the gathering as hereditarily superior to those at the lowest end of the social scale (and it was implied that hereditary worth existed on a sliding scale from the professional middle class down to the so-called bottom of the social ladder).⁶¹ Little would come of the

⁵⁹ Notare, 'A revolution in Christian morals', 360–3.

⁶⁰ Proceedings, Lambeth Conference 1930, MS 147.

⁶¹ 'Minutes of the conference on eugenics', 7–8 Feb. 1931, papers of the Right Reverend Ernest William Barnes, Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, EWB 9:19:31.

confidential eugenics conference, as Woods died the following year, but the gathering demonstrates the resolute commitment of Woods to securing an increase in the fertility of the English middle and upper classes – which he described in a 1931 reflection on the passing of Resolution 15 as the ‘gravest need’ faced by England.⁶²

Returning to the 1930 Lambeth Conference, there the report and resolutions on birth control that Woods presented to the conference were met with staunch opposition over several days of general discussion. One prominent line of attack was that Christian tradition should not be lightly discarded.⁶³ Woods’s detractors were ready to agree that sexual intercourse was a kind of sacrament. Where some disagreed, in line with the historic position of the Church, was in thinking the sex act was separable from its ‘primary’ purpose of procreation. Woods’s proposals also received criticism on the grounds that permitting an alternative to abstinence undermined the dependence of Christians on God’s grace to meet life’s difficult challenges. Building on this notion, detractors of birth control maintained that abstinence and birth control could not be morally equated, even if both practices were pursued with the same goal in mind. Instead, abstinence represented a ‘higher’, or more Christlike, path. Rigorous debate ensued, with Woods and his allies responding with many of the same arguments that Woods had previously put forth in favour of the qualified use of birth control. The objections of critics led to several revisions of Resolution 15 (as well as of the report and several other resolutions) by Woods and fellow subcommittee members.⁶⁴

In a frank expression of dissatisfaction with his anti-birth control colleagues, the Australian bishop of Armidale, John Moyes, asserted that contraception represented a ‘battle-ground’ on which the bishops needed to push back against the ‘worldwide’ moral revolt against Christianity. Moyes noted that the immoral use of birth control represented only one expression of this revolt, and indicated that the conference needed to stake out a more open stance on contraception to protect higher-ordered moral teachings.⁶⁵ By the time Moyes delivered his remarks, critics of Resolution 15 recognised that they held a losing hand. After the dissenting bishops brokered an agreement for tallies to be published with the text of the resolution, the conference approved Resolution 15 by a vote of 193 to 67.⁶⁶ The final wording of the statement read as follows:

⁶² Woods, *The faith and witness of the Church*, 27.

⁶³ Proceedings, Lambeth Conference 1930, MS 147.

⁶⁴ Ibid. MSS 147–9. Some bishops who advocated for this view were willing to concede that while abstinence represented a ‘higher path’, the use of birth control was still permissible in certain instances.

⁶⁵ Ibid. MS 149.

⁶⁶ Resolution 15 was the final resolution by the subcommittee on marriage and sex to be approved by conference delegates.

Where there is clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, the method must be decided on Christian principles. The primary and obvious method is complete abstinence from intercourse (as far as may be necessary) in a life of discipline and self-control lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless in those cases where there is such a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, and where there is a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence, the Conference agrees that other methods may be used, provided that this is done in the light of the same Christian principles. The Conference records its strong condemnation of the use of any methods of conception control from motives of selfishness, luxury, or mere convenience.⁶⁷

The Conference also adopted several other resolutions relating to birth control. These included Resolution 14, which stressed the ‘duty of parenthood’ and the ‘benefit of the family ... as a vital contribution to the nation’s welfare’. After Resolution 15, the three following resolutions condemned, in order, abortion as an alternative to contraceptives, neo-Malthusian economic propaganda and the use of birth control by unmarried couples.⁶⁸

Following the 1930 Lambeth Conference, Woods, Lang and Temple redirected their efforts towards enshrining Resolution 15 as the recognised position of the Church. The immediate problem faced by the trio was that, while the passing of Resolution 15 marked a historic occasion, no conference resolution was binding on any province within the Communion. Furthermore, not even the archbishop of Canterbury had the power to unilaterally enshrine the resolution as the official position of the Church. Under the structures of church governance at the time, Lang, Temple and Woods would probably have been expected to seek a joint resolution by the Convocations of Canterbury and York in favour of birth control. Facing opposition in church newspapers and periodicals from rank-and-file clergy – as well as from various bishops, deans and other influential figures, amongst whom were included many theologically conservative Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals, the three men instead chose to pursue the less direct path of suppressing opposition to the resolution.⁶⁹ With their success, Resolution 15 became the *de facto* position of the Church, making it the first major Christian denomination in Europe or North America to explicitly condone the use of birth control.

The claim that the passing of Resolution 15 was not inevitable is supported by the continued opposition to birth control from the Roman Catholic

⁶⁷ *Lambeth Conference 1930*, 44.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 43–4. Resolution 18 also called for restrictions on the sale of birth control.

⁶⁹ Bishops’ meetings, minutes, 23 Oct. 1930, MS 8. See also Cordelia Moyses, *A history of the Mothers’ Union: women, Anglicanism, and globalisation, 1876–2008*, London 2009, 128.

Church, which included the issuing of a papal encyclical that condemned contraception following the conference.⁷⁰ Furthermore, many Anglican clergymen, along with the leadership of organisations like the Mothers' Union, disagreed with the passing of Resolution 15. The Lower House of the Convocation of Canterbury even went as far as to issue a report condemning the resolution.⁷¹ Additionally, Lang and other high-ranking Church leaders indicated that the majority of bishops began the 1930 conference with a bias against birth control.⁷²

Certainly, Resolution 15's ambiguous wording contributed to the vote in favour of birth control, as did the support offered by Lang before and during the conference. Yet the most decisive factor in the shift in the Church's position on birth control was the tireless advocacy of Woods. He can be identified as the proximate cause of the passing of Resolution 15, as well as a key factor in the subsequent sanctioning of the resolution by the Church. Both in the lead-up to, as well as during, the conference, Woods skilfully threaded the needle between antagonistic colleagues and various visions for how the Church might best direct men and women into the new 'epoch' inaugurated by contraceptives.

Woods's goal of increasing birthrates amongst the middle and upper classes is central to understanding his decision to take up the mantle as the foremost advocate of birth control within the Church. At the 1930 conference, Woods made clear that he found the discussion of matters relating to sexual intercourse to be in poor taste, and he expressed the hope that conference delegates would never again have to address the topic of birth control. While he firmly held that birth control was morally permissible in certain instances, it was the supposed eugenic and imperial perils relating to the decline in fertility amongst the middle and upper classes that provided him with the impetus to overcome his prudery and champion the qualified use of birth control.

The vote of the other 192 bishops in favour of birth control does not imply that those men all shared the same eugenic convictions as Woods. However, as was the case with Woods, conference records indicate a widespread distaste for any discussion involving birth control – with many bishops prefacing their remarks with an apology for having to address the matter. Woods was able to convince self-conscious delegates to stake out a clear position in favour of birth control by warning of the encroachment of the teachings of

⁷⁰ Pope Pius XI responded to the 1930 Lambeth Conference with the encyclical *Casti connubii*. The encyclical prohibited the use of all forms of birth control by the married and unmarried.

⁷¹ *The chronicle of Convocation: being a record of the proceedings of the Convocation of Canterbury in the sessions of Jan. 21 and 22, 1931*, London 1931, 64–71.

⁷² For example, see *The chronicle of Convocation: being a record of the proceedings of the Convocation of Canterbury in the sessions of Nov. 13, 1930*, London 1930, 154.

the new morality. Put another way, he convinced many of his peers to set aside their qualms relating to the public discussion of sexual matters in order to help the women and men under their care avoid what were considered to be flagrantly immoral practices, including the refusal to rear children. And most notably, Resolution 14, the report of the subcommittee on marriage and sex, and the encyclical letter approved by conference delegates (a document that outlined the main teachings of the conference) are all rightly read as supporting Woods's desire to increase birthrates in the English-speaking world. Therefore, the proceedings and documents of the 1930 conference demonstrate that a bishop present at the conference did not necessarily need to adhere to eugenic dogma in order to agree with Woods that large, Christian families were a benefit to the home, nation, empire and Church.

The passing of Resolution 15 did little to augment the moral authority of the Church or to increase birthrates. However, it did serve to help normalise the use of birth control. By 1939, 52 per cent of respondents to a British Institute poll would indicate they were 'in favour of birth control'. For those under the age of 30, that number rose to 64 per cent.⁷³ Furthermore, the acceptance of Resolution 15 by the Church placed pressure on other Christian denominations across the Anglican Communion (and beyond) to stake out a definitive stance on contraception. In the years after the conference, multiple denominations, including the Episcopal Church in the United States and the Methodist Conference of Great Britain, sanctioned the use of birth control.⁷⁴ Opposition to birth control within the Church continued to decline amongst senior Church leadership following the Second World War, thanks in part to the beliefs that contraceptives protected the health of women and shielded families from economic hardship. By the time of the 1958 Lambeth Conference, most delegates were ready to heartily endorse the notion of 'family planning'.⁷⁵

⁷³ Poll data cited in Richard Soloway, *Demography and degeneration: eugenics and the declining birthrate in twentieth-century Britain*, 2nd edn, Chapel Hill, NC 1995, 270–1.

⁷⁴ Notare, 'A revolution in Christian morals', 539; Cheuk, 'Contraception within marriage', 84, 101.

⁷⁵ *The Lambeth Conference 1958: the encyclical letter from the bishops, together with the resolutions and reports*, London 1958, 1.57.