

The Pope and the Pill: Sex Catholicism and Women in Post-war England. By David Geiringer. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2020. 232 pp. ISBN 978-1-5261-3838-5, £80.

Both the history of sex and the history of religion in Britain during the second half of the twentieth century have been under revision in recent decades. Yet, while these developments have occurred in parallel with one another, until recently they have rarely been investigated in tandem. This is the argument of David Geiringer and the focus of his first monograph, *The Pope and the Pill*. In this text, Geiringer explores the relationship *between* sex and religion in the post-war period through the lens of Catholic women—making a conscious effort to defy the binaries of the ‘sex destroying religion’ (p. 3) narrative which, he argues, has dominated the field in recent decades. *The Pope and the Pill* firstly explores how sex was understood and medicalized across the Catholic hierarchy in the post-war period. Then, through the use of oral history, Geiringer places emphasis on the lived experiences of Catholic women as they tried to navigate their sexuality and their faith during a period of increased liberationism. Centralizing the experiential, rather than the discursive, this text provides a novel and challenging insight into the ‘recategorization in the relationship between sex and religion’ (p. 6), and offers an exciting revisionist account of the sex lives of Catholic women during this time.

Perhaps the most immediately distinctive feature of *The Pope and the Pill* is its structure. While Geiringer’s text is weighted heavily on oral testimony, it also pays careful attention to underutilized archival research. The first third comprises a methodology chapter and a chapter on the construction of Catholic sexuality through the lens of the Papal Commission on Birth Control. Here, Geiringer shows how the Catholic hierarchy was not immune to changing secular attitudes towards sex during the 1960s and that the Commission was a product of growing liberationism in spite of the outcome of *Humanae Vitae*. More significantly, the latter two-thirds are dedicated to the lives of Geiringer’s interviewees which are presented in a way that ‘mirrors the life of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s eponymous character Benjamin Button’ (p. 21). Thus, Geiringer begins with later marriage—a point in which many Catholic women experienced their own ‘sexual awakening’ (p. 75)—and, contrary to traditional historical prose, traces his interviewees’ life histories in reverse. It is argued that ‘working backwards enables a clearer picture of how Catholic women lived forwards’ (p. 22). Although leading to some repetition and minor issues in clarity at points, this structure is effective in advancing the overall arguments presented in *The Pope and the Pill* and delivers on Geiringer’s aim to present women’s experiences as ‘constitutive’ as opposed to ‘formative’ life events (p. 144).

Indeed, the beating heart of Geiringer’s work is the oral testimonies of the Catholic women themselves. Geiringer argues that rather than experiencing a decline in their religiosity, the women interviewed went through a recategorization of their faith which enabled them to exert greater agency as sexually active Catholics. Against the backdrop of these oral testimonies, Geiringer shows how the emotional aspects of marital sex were often ignored by the Catholic hierarchies

and how women's experiences were marginalized in the construction of Catholic sexuality. Consequently, Geiringer presents a revisionist narrative that, without whitewashing struggles with natural family planning or crises of faith, provides an optimistic account of the sex lives of Catholic women. Through their words, Geiringer demonstrates how his interviewees' seemingly oppositional identities, as both sexually active and religious women, reached equilibrium through experience, space, and contemplation and advocates for a greater emphasis to be placed on these highly emotional and subjective life events.

The conclusions drawn in *The Pope and the Pill* reflect Geiringer's effective oral history interviewing and rapport with his interviewees. Discussion of highly personal issues, such as masturbation and oral sex, delivers on Geiringer's commitment to 'writing sex back into sex history' (p. 17), and presents a convincing alternative account of Catholic women's sexuality and agency within, as opposed to out with, organized religion. An active acknowledgement of his own positionality is refreshing also, with frequent references to his own subjectivity as a male researcher. This is also reflected in his admission of his familial relationship to one of the key actors in his text, Professor John Marshall, whose previously unarchived papers are used extensively.

At times, Geiringer's argument lacks nuance as grand claims are made at the beginning of the text which feel unresolved by the concluding chapter. This is less an issue of the quality of evidence presented and more an issue of word choice and framing which leans closer towards thesis-style writing than academic text. Despite the undeniable distinctiveness of Geiringer's work, the extent to which his text acts as a 'corrective' (p. 67), as opposed to an extension of the available historiography, is debatable. He also advocates for 'the need to hear, not just listen to Catholic women themselves' (p. 41), yet the women included in the text are rarely given biographic context outside of the opening chapters. On one occasion, an account is included where an interviewee alludes to a sexual assault, which Geiringer admits to having never followed up on, but insists that it was not the central point of her story. This contradicts his discussion on the importance of feminist oral history and the power balance between researcher and subject, particularly in relation to gender. Some minor copy-editing issues also suggest that this text may have benefitted with further edits to avoid exaggeration and ensure a full transition from thesis to academic text.

Overall, *The Pope and the Pill* is a valuable inclusion to the history of sex and history of religion. It acts as a break from traditional interpretations of the sex lives of Catholic women and as a model for academic oral history interviewing. While there are elements of naivety present in the editing and word choice used, Geiringer nonetheless provides an optimistic and compelling revision of the relationship between sex and religion in the second half of the twentieth century, which would be of interest to historians of sex, gender, religion, and oral history alike.

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