

## Brief Abstract – Doctoral Thesis

During the 20th century discourses on contraception, abortion, sexual education, and homosexuality became increasingly important in the United States, a country, where religion and sexuality historically stand in remarkable yet tense relation to each other. These discourses influenced the conceptualization of religious communities in their exclusiveness, the redefinition of family concepts, gender roles and relationships, the regulation of reproduction as well as the negotiation of societal norms and values. Thus, as the study argues, sexuality evolved into an essential distinctive marker between different religious communities and built a new demarcation line between liberals and conservatives within individual denominations.

However, we know little about how protestant Mainline Churches participated in these discourses on sexuality, as research so far mainly focused on evangelical religious communities in the USA. In doing so, research partly neglected to look at the discursive importance and socio-cultural influence of Mainline Churches, which defined themselves as being politically and theologically moderate or liberal and which functioned as representatives of the white middle class. The intensified involvement of Mainline Protestants can be seen as a reaction to the striking processes of liberalization, democratization, and pluralization on the one side, and conservative backlashes on the other – processes which characterize the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The study focusses on the Methodist Church as an exemplary representative of Mainline Protestantism. The Methodist Church discussed and published its concepts of sexuality, family and gender in various ways, e.g. within church doctrines, and guidebooks about marriage and adolescence, as well as in monthly family magazines. The source material provides important insights into how religious discourses about sexuality changed in Mainline-Protestantism during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and what influences they had on religious concepts of family, marriage, gender ideas and relationships.

Among other aspects, the book points out how Mainline-Protestants did not only react to social changes but also actively initiated, influenced, and shaped them. It is noticeable, however, that these changes were often paradoxical and ambivalent. For instance, Mainline-Protestants succeeded in modernizing and democratizing Christian moral concepts by means of a new sexual ethic in the 1950s, whilst holding on to certain categories (race, class, gender) to produce and maintain differences. Conservative Methodists, indeed, referred to the same discursive arguments later on in order to reverse processes of pluralization and liberalization and to interpret the Christian canon of values again more restrictedly. The study, therefore, provides a key to understanding the complex and often contradictory debates about religion and sexuality in the USA during the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century.