

## **The Sexualization of Religion**

In the USA, religious debates about sexual education, abortion and homosexuality are still heated-up and contentious today. Most of these debates emerged during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and individual religious communities established different positions. These debates also led to a polarization within the American society, and caused internal crises within the churches, as exemplified by the United Methodist Church, which is the main representative of the so-called Mainline-Protestantism in the USA. The study argues that during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century sexuality became increasingly important in religious contexts and that attitudes towards sexual education, gender roles, abortion and homosexuality divided different religious confessions and religious interest groups.

This rise in significance caused theological processes of reinterpretation. Between 1950 and 1990, the Methodist Church changed religious concepts of marriage, family, gender, sexual education, reproduction and homosexuality. In this manner, the church again succeeded in legitimizing a gender system based on two complementary sexes by using both theological and secular strategies and arguments. Main protagonists were the church as an institution, influential theologians and their interdisciplinary networks as well as female religious experts. This book reconstructs and unveils these transformations of religious knowledge and points out the consequences for religious communities.

Contrary to historical research on marriage and family on the one hand and theological works on the other, this study intertwines theological and historical research. It is based on a wide repertory of sources, including church doctrines and theological discourses, religious guidebooks, family magazines as well as letters to the editor. Thus, the study shows that religious experts did not only react to social change or reject “progress”, but also actively initiated, influenced, and shaped democratizing and liberalizing processes. Additionally, the book takes the reaction of conservative and evangelical groups to liberal Protestantism into account. This helps to demonstrate how people who were irritated and concerned by democratization and pluralization, used newly established democratic mechanisms within church politics for their personal goals. Conservatives tried to reverse liberalization processes by interpreting the canon of values and behavioral options again more restrictedly.

**Chapter 1: New Religious Concepts of Order in Post-War Years.** The first chapter emphasizes the 1950s as a key moment for religious reorganization. It also demonstrates the importance of interdisciplinary networks theologians and religious experts initiated together with experts from Psychology and Social Sciences. Within these networks’ experts referred to social transformation processes from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and transformed them into new religious concepts of sexuality, marriage and family. In doing so, an elaborate theological reinterpretation of sexuality and gender relationships within families took place. Sexuality was now no longer considered as sin, but as a sign to fulfil the will of a loving God. In addition, the new sexual ethic democratized marriage and family relations that were to be characterized by complementarity and equality. Both reinterpretations were inscribed into the creation order. Hereupon community work intensified the regulation of (white) intimate relationships, as proven by articles in Methodist family magazines concerning the family council, family conferences organized by the Methodist Church, as well as by materials for marriage counselling. However, the democratization of gender relations also led to new disputes in the debates about working mothers.

**Chapter 2: Sexual Education: Sexuality, Production of Knowledge and Gender.** The history of sexual education in the USA is complicated and ridden with conflicts. Contentious issues often revolve around questions about responsibility the question of responsibility, content and financing. This chapter analyzes how the Methodist Church designed educational programs already on the basis of the new sexual ethic in the 1950s. This enabled the emergence of a comprehensive sexual education which later on served as a model for the foundation of the *Sex Information and Education Council of the United States* (SIECUS) in 1964. These religious programs intended to educate children and parents, providing and disseminating “scientific” knowledge about sexuality as well as conveying the new religious ideas about sexuality, marriage and family, e.g. through columns such as *Teens Ask*. Secondly, the analysis of the 1960s shows that paradoxically with the help of social constructivist approaches a naturalization of gender ideals by religious sexual education material took place. Hereby, social and religious experts tried to counter so called “gender uncertainties.”

**Chapter 3: Reproduction: Love Doctrine, Exclusion and Distinction.** Also, with regard to contraception and abortion, the Methodists were decisive social players. They addressed both topics in their clerical jurisdiction long before the *Supreme Court*, who legalized contraception in 1965 and abortion up to the end of the first trimester of pregnancy in 1973. Already in 1956, the Methodist Church signaled in their *Doctrines and Discipline* that family planning was in alignment with God’s will – however, with the decisive focus that the white middle class family was always defined as the ideal. The emergence of situation ethics in the 1960s also enabled the Methodist Church to rethink their position on dealing with abortions, so that the church, under certain conditions, agreed to abortion officially in their church doctrines already in 1972 (unofficially in 1970). Yet, the paradoxes of liberalization politics became apparent once again: The Methodist Church did not want to allow women to have full freedom of decision, because femininity was to remain oriented towards family. The chapter, therefore, also reveals how processes of religious decision making maintained and perpetuated social and cultural differences: for instance, concerning white and black reproduction, catholic and protestant sexual ethics as well as men and women.

**Chapter 4: Homosexuality: The Question of Participation, New Protagonists, New Conflicts.** Finally, the debates about homosexuality led to a decisive conflict within the church. This chapter describes how new protagonists entered the discussion in order to either enable homosexuals to participate in community life, ordination and marriage or to prevent them from doing so, as was the case with the newly constituted conservative group *Good News* within the Methodist Church. Sexual ethics unfolded a new ambivalence regarding homosexuality as from the 1960s onwards. On one hand progressive tendencies within the Methodist Church wanted to further strengthen pluralization and, for this purpose, tried to intertwine the new sexual ethic with homosexuality. On the other hand, conservative Methodists used the complementarity of man and woman provided by sexual ethics as well as in creation theology in order to argue against integration and equality of homosexuals. To implement their objectives, members of *Good News* followed different strategies. Especially with regard to male homosexuality they re-established a link between sin and sexuality. They changed political rules within clerical decision-making processes, applied pressure and promoted conservative delegates, in order to change voting ratios on the general conferences that took place every four years. In 1972, these actions led to the incompatibility clause in the church doctrines which is still applicable today. This was followed by the prohibition of ordination for homosexuals (1984) and of homosexual marriages (1996).

The study thus demonstrates that sexuality and religion as well as their entanglement are essential historic and social phenomena in US-American modern history. They often constituted the basis for different protagonists to negotiate the desired future and societal ideals on the one hand. On the other hand, they were also used to draw and perpetuate new demarcation lines. This becomes clear by means of the Methodist Church, although it liberalized and democratized the way how sexuality was handled. Because in the very moment when women and homosexuals claimed the universally described norms of modern age such as self-fulfillment, equality, liberty or self-determination, such values were devaluated in the religious discourse about sexuality or presented as a problem for family, church and society. In view of a society that granted more rights to women, black people and homosexuals, male white church representatives finally insisted on ruling on the determination of masculinity (at least) by means of evaluating homosexuality. In doing so, they approved heteronormativity as an important value for the Church and modern society in the USA until today. Finally, religious discourses about sexuality in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century contributed to the persistence of two essential premises of modern age: The binary gender system and heteronormativity.