

# Contraception today: the detachment from the Catholic morality

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## Abstract

The article discusses the correlation between religious morality, particularly from the Catholic Church, and the contraceptive methods. On the second level, it aims at checking the elements currently used in the buildup of attitude in view of contraceptive methods. From the literature review, which had as motto the report “*Preservativo: novo documento do Vaticano em perspectiva*” (Condoms: a Vatican’s new document in perspective), it was realized that the basis for current use of contraceptive methods is linked to adoption of methods based on scientific knowledge, such as condoms, birth control pills, family planning which are banned by the Catholic Church. This invariably leads to the conclusion that, in face of the individual needs, the contemporary men ends up moving away from the practices guidance based in dogmas supported by the Catholic Church.

**Key words:** Catholic church. Contraceptive methods. Abortion.

## Resumo

### Contraceção na contemporaneidade: o distanciamento da moral católica

O artigo discute a correlação entre a moral religiosa, em especial a da Igreja Católica, e os métodos contraceptivos. Em segundo plano, objetiva verificar os elementos atualmente utilizados na construção da atitude frente aos métodos contraceptivos. A partir da revisão da bibliografia, que teve como mote a reportagem intitulada “*Preservativo: novo documento do Vaticano em perspectiva*”, percebeu-se que a base para utilização de métodos contraceptivos na contemporaneidade está vinculada a adoção de métodos baseados no conhecimento científico, como preservativos, pílulas e planejamento familiar, condenados pela Igreja Católica. Isto leva, invariavelmente, a conclusão de que, frente às necessidades individuais, o homem contemporâneo acaba se distanciando das práticas norteadas com base no dogma sustentado pela Igreja Católica.

**Palavras-chave:** Igreja Católica. Métodos contraceptivos. Aborto.

## Resumen

### Anticoncepción en la contemporaneidad: el distanciamiento de la moral católica

El artículo discute la correlación entre la moral religiosa, en especial la de la Iglesia Católica, y métodos de anticoncepción. En un segundo momento, objetiva verificar los elementos actualmente utilizados en la construcción de la actitud ante los métodos de anticoncepción. A partir de la revisión de la bibliografía, que ha tenido como tema el reportaje intitulado “*Preservativo: nuevo documento del Vaticano en perspectiva*”, se ha observado que la base para utilización de métodos anticonceptivos en la contemporaneidad está vinculada a la adopción de métodos basados en el conocimiento científico, como preservativos, pastillas y planificación familiar, condenados por la Iglesia Católica. Esto conduce, invariablemente, a la conclusión de que, ante las necesidades individuales, el hombre contemporáneo acaba por distanciarse de las prácticas orientadas con base en el dogma sustentado por la Iglesia Católica.

**Palabras-clave:** Iglesia Católica. Métodos anticonceptivos. Aborto.

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On a macro level, the issue of religious morality related to contraceptive methods emerges in the discussion on sexuality and, more restrictively, on the issue of abortion. It gains body with the detachment of sexual practices in relation to morality, especially religious one<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, any discussion about the topic should involve concepts such as sexuality and abortion, which invariably refer to the issue of gender, besides religion and contraception.

At the moment, however, these concepts will not be discussed at its roots. But the attentive reader cannot do without them, so that the final understanding of the article is not compromised. It is necessary, in parallel, a detailed analysis of the nuances surrounding the theme of inter-religious respect and contraception with a view to the concepts listed above.

Over the last decades, the advance of globalization has changed the role of women in society, giving them greater political and economic participation and allowing them to become part of the labor market and to have more power on their personal life. In this context, it has been recognized the importance of family planning to the full exercise of their sexual and reproductive rights - which was reaffirmed in the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (Egypt) in 1994, and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (China) in 1995.

As of the recognition by the Ministry of Health (MoH), from the need of birth control, is developed the Family Planning Program, federal government policy that represents an achievement in the feminist movement and providing for the supply of contraceptives on the public network in reducing their prices in popular drugstores, offering services for voluntary sterilization and focused on the assisted reproduction for couples experiencing difficulties to have children. Thus, this program assists in the autonomy of women and couples, separating their sex lives from their reproductive ones<sup>2</sup>.

Whether according to economic interests or by uniquely social interests, the fact is that population control exists. Therefore, there are two major influencers: a trampled in the practice of public policies that are based on science (biological, social, economic), another modulated by religious reference, especially within Christianity.

But are there limits or territory of influence for each of these factors? Which aspects of the Christianity influences public policy development and vice versa? That is, when it comes to decision making regarding contraception, can we define and consider these factors consciously?

Faced with these questions, this article aims to verify, through brief literature review, factors relating to the Catholic teachings, doctrines and moral influencing individual's attitude related to contraception, by addressing and discussing the issue of inter-relationship between religiosity and contraceptive methods.

### Perspectives, method and goals

The breakpoint for reflection is now presented in the report entitled "Condom: new Vatican document in perspective"<sup>3</sup> - work done by Octavio Carmo, managing editor of Ecclesia Agency, the Portuguese branch of the Catholic Church news. The article is aimed to present a bibliographic review that includes contraception in contemporary times, which used bibliographic reference sites, online databases, as Bireme, Scielo and PubMed Central, in addition to the sites of MS and the National Confederation of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB) as sources.

The collected material was analyzed by authors' in the period between February 7 and June 29, 2011, extended thereafter until the end of this article in 2012. The objective was to evaluate the impact and influence that the Catholic Church's view on contraception has on the woman's attitude about human reproduction and sexuality in contemporary times. For both, Catholic Church, contraceptives, and abortion were terms used, with their translations in Portuguese, as keywords in the survey - no bibliographic source of research was dismissed.

It is not intended to exhaust the topic or even come to terms on the discussion presented, because there is much to be debated and researched. Thus, the biggest claim of this work is the need to strengthen dialogues and reflections that address the problem proposed in order to make it more digestible. Moreover, to make it noticeable at the interface of human relationships, particularly those concerning health

practices: relationships between health service providers and users.

### Historic milestone

The understanding of the interface between religion and contraceptive methods becomes capable of understanding from a retrospective, mainly on the history of religion and morality in countries that had their process of civilization and cultural and social backgrounds strongly influenced by Christian religion, especially the Catholic.

In this analysis, the fact becomes evident, especially in modern Western societies the religions have taken possession of ethics, transforming it into a moral, while they were building and determined the bastions of faith. By this process, it led their followers by dictating them rules of behavior and attitudes towards life and death, as well as to individual behavior in the first instance, but reaching the collective therefore. In Brazil, the religious domain, specifically Catholicism, is extremely striking, even in the case of secular country.

Since the beginning of the 1960s, consumption of contraceptive methods such as intrauterine device (IUD) and contraceptive pill was released. The incorporation of these methods has become reality through international policies aimed at population control. This international initiative was directly related to the aforementioned red danger perceived from communist regimes such as the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and what emerged from the then recent Cuban Revolution of 1959<sup>4</sup>.

These natalist policies target the Latin American countries, on which opinions finally were split. In Brazil, the company split into two main sectors: anti-controlling and natalist. The anti-controlling sector advocated the occupation of any territory by Brazilians, to ensure national sovereignty. This sector found support in nationalist segments of society and in various sectors of the Catholic Church, which condemned (and still condemns) contraceptive practices. Under Malthusian ethics, anti-natalist advocated the international initiative, under the claim that population growth would reflect negatively on the country's economy and development.

Thus, It is seen, that the Catholic Church while supporting the capitalist States often takes serious blow regarding its followers' sexual orientation, who become strongly influenced by health policies, which, in turn, were substantially influenced by capitalist interests. And it should be emphasized that in the period preceding the spread of the contraceptive pill, other contraception practices were used. According to Peter<sup>4</sup>, except the rhythm method (calendar method), other practices were also reprovved by the Catholic Church - which denied the acquittal of women after reports of its use in the confessionals -, thus morally controlling families.

### Political theorist PAISM landmark

More recently, and without leaving Brazil, it is worth mentioning that the issue has gained notoriety in one of the crucial moments for the national public health scenario: the struggle for implementation of universal and equal right to health. This movement culminated in the 8<sup>th</sup> National Health Conference, 1986<sup>5</sup>, and in the adoption of the 1988 Citizen Charter<sup>6</sup>. However, the Integral Assistance to Women's Health Program (PAISM)<sup>7</sup> had been implemented since 1984, which constituted a sign of health services expansion in the country.

The PAISM<sup>7</sup> engaged new approach to women's health program becoming the first to propose the integral care form to the segment, including questions relating to reproduction, which derived from its proposal related to the law regulating fertility. Its implementation creates new approach by modifying the conventional wisdom that summarized the female reproduction. Thereafter, pregnancy is not seen anymore as the duty of every woman in this historical context, but becoming a right. Thus, women won the free will to plan the propitious moment to enjoy it.

## Brazilian context and integration into the globalized world

These movements, although they take place in Brazil, did not reflect a localized action, contextualized Brazilian reality itself. Away from that, it was related to reflexes regarding health context in the world, as it can be seen in the analysis of the proposed action and guidelines of the International Conference on Population and Development<sup>8</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women<sup>9</sup>. Therewith, the matter of expansion of education efforts aimed to care for the body, sexual behavior and reproduction, especially those related to the female gender has gained space and notoriety.

## Sexual identity and religiousness between genders

The concept of gender is produced through social relations and is part of our daily routine. Culturally constructed, it functioned as a pillar upon which feminist theories initially relied to defend prospects “denaturalized” under which was given, in common sense, the association of feminine with fragility or submission - and which until now serves as justification for prejudice<sup>10</sup>.

Not gone unnoticed the idea that sex education, the construction of social and sexual identity of men and women occurs in an unequal way. Unlike men, the female sexual identity is marked by domination and with it, invariably, comes the matter of religiousness - even if in a subtle form it is inflicted on the woman that she should only have sexual relationship after marriage and to reproductive purpose. According to Silva and Mandú<sup>9</sup>, the construction of religious symbology, with their practices, rituals and icons, influences social practices, regardless of the religion in question.

Therefore, religion can be seen as a guide, a set of rules, permissions and denials which shape and dictate the socially accepted parameters and which, without exception, must be followed by men and women addicted to it. Such fact demonstrates that sexual practices were only permitted within marriage, a massified idea and impregnated by the social belief upon proposed reflections by religious who also

preached repudiation of sex and contempt for women, considering them inferior in most cases.

Many ecclesiastical documents also reveal the determination of Catholicism in preventing contraception, which can be found in the codes that regulate the behavior of the couple, presenting marriage as the only legitimate space for sexual practices. For these codes it was determined the objectives of this institution, of which the procreation of legitimate children and the protection against sexual desires as masturbation and adultery<sup>9</sup>.

## The duality of the Catholic Church Teachings

In relation to abortion, the Catholic Church takes radical stance. The discussions permeate the issue about the beginning of human life. One may wonder what the exact moment when the embryo acquires the condition of human being. The Church representatives defend the view that human life begins at conception and that abortion, therefore, would be considered a sin that matches criminal act at any stage of pregnancy.

In countries with a strong Catholic tradition, the case of Brazil, the positions that characterize the debate over abortion oscillate between the fetus's right to life and the right to reproductive autonomy of women to control their own bodies. Debora Diniz has been an important protagonist in the recent debate about the revision of the legislation on abortion in Brazil, one of the responsible for ordering the release to interrupt the pregnancy in cases of fetal anencephaly, sustained argument for the inevitability of death of the fetus. For the Catholic Church to empower women in the background is the insistence on countering the rights of the fetus to women's rights. Although the Catholic Church is intervening in the debate, discussions within the Federal Supreme Court (STF) are made from juridical and scientific assumptions<sup>11</sup>.

One must remember, however, that the position of the Catholic Church has not remained static over the centuries. It has been modified according to the different understandings about the exact moment when the soul is lodged in the body<sup>12</sup>. Based on this ideology, the encyclical *Humanae vitae*, document

formulated by Pope Paul VI that addresses the issue of transmission of life, considering that husband and wife are vital and responsible collaborators of God and it recommended then to take into account the natural rhythms immanent in the generative functions<sup>13</sup>. Thus, the encyclical considers abortion, sterilization, or any method that prevents procreation as illicit means of birth control<sup>14</sup>.

In this review, we perceived duality, if not controversial position of the Catholic Church in regard to contraceptive methods until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From that period, the Church reacted to this new view on the woman and the sexual practice by birth control and, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the reaction was embodied with the encyclical *Casti connubii*, 1930, in which Pope Pius XI said that contraception was the practice of criminal freedom<sup>15</sup>. According to the authors, John Paul II calls for a more reflective attitude, based on the biological rhythm, dialogue and responsibility of the domain itself.

Still today, the Catholic Church makes use of arguments trampled in marriage to condemn contraception. For the institution, these methods change the purposes of marriage, inducing to the adultery and leading men to disrespect their women. In 2006, the Vatican released the document 'Family and human procreation', condemning any contraceptive practice.

### Contraception in Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches

Although Brazil is, above all, a country influenced by the religious morality of Catholicism, according to Giddens, quoted by O'dwayer and Matos<sup>16</sup>, the accentuated detachment of people from religion reflects the attitude of individual autonomy against contraceptive methods, although some religious fundamentalist groups have been established to combat abortion, contraception, among others<sup>1</sup>.

This position of the Catholic Church, associated with the perspective indicated by Giddens<sup>16</sup> made possible a reaction and the emergence of other Christian groups in the Brazilian religious scene. Thus, some Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches have followed against the religious tendency in the world.

For illustrative purposes, it is worth remembering that Universal Church of the Kingdom of God announced in 1995 the creation of a Christian charitable association. For this association, health centers were created in slums in order to reduce the marginalization of those populations. The goal was achieved by distributing contraceptives and sterilization by women. In Africa, this same Church has opened temples and, as decoys, distributed food and most importantly contraceptives<sup>1</sup>.

### Final Considerations

It is seen, therefore, that there is a direct relationship between contraception and detachment of the practices guided on the basis of dogma supported by the Catholic Church, exceedingly worrying situation. In a society in which sterilization, in most cases, is considered illegal, it is noticeable the success of the action of that institution in the catechesis of believers and in purpose of influencing the attitudes of these individuals, especially in regard to contraception.

On behalf of the family, for its sake and stability, economic political and religious sectors, eventually publicly convey the idea that the family is a private institution. In accordance with Alvarenga and Schor<sup>14</sup>, unlike this it is seen that, for example, the state handles discretely growth family, making use of anti-natalist policies, particularly in the most popular layers of the population. State interference becomes more noticeable from the 1980s, in the prime of the Cold War and in the midst of discussions on public health policies that culminated Sanitary Movement of the 1970s<sup>15,16</sup>.

On the other hand, the Pentecostals and the Charismatic Catholics (renewing section of the Catholic Church) advocate chastity for the unmarried and, therefore, the condemnation to contraceptive practices. If the state interferes in what it publishes as private, Christian churches act on what they consider sacred: the family. Thus, regarding the incorporation, nothing new can be seen by the religious segments on the aspect of individual autonomy or, even, as the field of practice based on epidemiological data or public health.

Based on the foregoing, it is clear that there are basically two sets of rules that guide sexual practices and mainly, contraceptive methods, especially in countries like Brazil: one relates to the model instilled by religion which preaches chastity for the unmarried and the sexual act only with a view to procreation; another, to a number of practices trampled in a scientific knowledge and which find support in the legislation that manifests itself in specific public health programs, such as PAISM. As seen, this program has been assimilated by Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal Christian churches as well as churches which, despite maintaining conservative attitude, they adopt contraceptive methods such as condoms, to gather faithful - like the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.

Although some churches have successfully climbed in order to entice faithful by those means, there is the real tendency on the expulsion of the measures adopted by the population in relation to morality imposed by the Catholic Church in spite of any other religious attitudes of these people. The sexual attitude, including methods involving contraceptives wins individual dimension in society, further increasing the gap between the Catholic Church and how the modern human being acts in face of his body, fact which arises from the attitude often controversial, intransigent and unclear from that institution.

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## Authors' participation

All authors fully participated in data collection and preparation of the article, under the guidance of Professor Nedy Neves.