



Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics

R. Marie Griffith

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From an esteemed scholar of American religion and sexuality, a sweeping account of the century of religious conflict that produced our culture wars

Gay marriage, transgender rights, birth control--sex is at the heart of many of the most divisive political issues of our age. The origins of these conflicts, historian R. Marie Griffith argues, lie in sharp disagreements that emerged among American Christians a century ago. From the 1920s onward, a once-solid Christian consensus regarding gender roles and sexual morality began to crumble, as liberal Protestants sparred with fundamentalists and Catholics over questions of obscenity, sex education, and abortion. Both those who advocated for greater openness in sexual matters and those who resisted new sexual norms turned to politics to pursue their moral visions for the nation. *Moral Combat* is a history of how the Christian consensus on sex unraveled, and how this unraveling has made our political battles over sex so ferocious and so intractable.

Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics Details

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Author : R. Marie Griffith

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From Reader Review Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics for online ebook

David Pulliam says

Overall I found Griffiths portrayal of evangelical theology regarding sex disappointing. Certainly enjoyed the first couple chapters that start in the early 1900s regarding women's rights, censure and segregation but the thesis begins to fall apart when she enters the 60s. At points she does not give evidence for some large claims. It's not that large claims are bad but I would've liked to see more evidence.

Also she did not do a lot of work and digging through conservative views on sex except for two or three political conservative figures.

Lastly I do not think she gets at the core of why evangelicals are obsessed with keeping sexuality within the bounds of marriage. This is really important in understanding evangelicals, that it goes back to a hermeneutic of scripture, a specific way of thinking about culture and important assumptions about how the world works. She doesn't get into any of that while spends quite a bit of time discussing the views of both the secular and Christian Left.

Dusty Deming says

I learned a lot about the history of sex and gender issues in the U.S. and in politics. It is particularly pertinent today. I would recommend this because of the historical perspective it provides. It illuminates the religious agenda, which is our culture of traditional male dominance/ female subservience. Although I am old, I see things now through a different lens.

Bradley says

Griffith, an American religion and sexuality scholar, identifies key issues within gender and sexual identity politics during the 20th century while analyzing the support and opposition from both liberal and conservative American Christians. Topics discussed include issues that have been hotly debated for decades including birth control access, same-sex marriage legalization, and broadening sexual harassment policies. Though the majority of Americans support progressive and inclusive stances on these issues, the country has increasingly become more divided with respect to our government, religious, and cultural institutions. Griffith presents the key points driving arguments for and against these policies while also highlighting cultural and religious hypocrisies inherent within those arguments based on partisan politics. Griffith also breaks down religious principles and attempts to figure out why and how members of the same denominations can come to diametrically opposed attitudes. The overall theme of the book concerns sex and gender issues that are both supported by the majority a legitimized by our institutions, but continue to divide the American people further and further.

For progressive or liberal-minded people, these issues are no brainers. Griffith traces the development of sex and gender politics throughout the 20th century chronological beginning with Margaret Sanger's advocacy for access to birth control and ending with the Supreme Court's ruling that banning same-sex marriage in

unconstitutional. In between, essays cover issues such as obscenity laws in literature and film, interracial marriage, Kinsey's sexuality reports, abortion access, and sexual harassment in the workplace.

Griffith ties all these issues together and presents opposition against them as attacks on women and civil rights. And she's absolutely correct. In her breakdown of the conservative argument against each of these topics, Griffith pays special attention to how gender and political identity politics plays into the framing of conservative arguments. And therein lies the hypocrisy. In the chapter of miscegenation and interracial marriage, laws and society were led to believe that African American men lusted after white women in an effort to violate their purity and promote the "mongrelization" of the human race. However, black women deemed as property could be subjected to sexual assaults by their white owners and there was no issue.

Let's examine a more recent example of sexual and gender hypocrisy. When Clarence Thomas was going to the confirmation process to become a Supreme Court Justice, Anita Hill went public with claims of sexual harassment that went as far back as 1981 when she was employed by Thomas. Liberals and women's organizations defended Hill while conservatives and Christian organization lambasted her. Hill was humiliated on national television as she testified during the confirmation hearings and her character was slandered without evidence. A few years later, when Paula Jones accused President Bill Clinton of harassment, these staunch anti-feminist critics of Hill were completely changed their tune. Instead of attacking Jones like they did with Hill, they instead supported her legal case against Clinton. They were quick to attack a woman who had a sexual harassment claim against a conservative Supreme Court pick, but were quick to defend a woman who had a sexual harassment claim against a Democratic president.

Griffith ends her book briefly touching on sex and gender issues that have come up in recent years and under the Trump presidency. In 2018, we are now more divided then ever and wasting time and energy on issues that have been covered for decades. However, under a Trump presidency, the liberating freedoms and civil rights granted to all sexual and gender identities is at risk now more than ever.

Meredith says

EXCELLENT commentary on how the Christian Church has constantly fractured over sex and sexual issues. Where liberal religious people will consistently fight for expansion of various rights such as voting for women, birth control access and same-sex marriage; the conservative religious faction is consistently fighting against the same rights with a fanatical obsession to control the sex lives of other people. It is impossible to ever see how this divide will be repaired.

Chris Jaffe says

It's a good overview about how America's Christian community had a consensus on sexual relations gradually erode over the last 100 years or so, eventually fragmenting entirely. Like I said, it's a good overview, but it read like a series of parts rather than a cohesive whole.

The first big battle was over birth control. After Christian groups initially strongly opposed it, Margaret Sanger was able to win over support from some Christian groups. From there, debates began over whether/not D.H. Lawrence's novels were artistic or just dirty books. The Hays Code debate over Hollywood

films came about. Catholics and conservative Protestants generally sided against other Protestants. Segregation and interracial sex were big issues by the mid-century that split Christian communities. The Kinsey Report created plenty of controversy with some accepted it and others reigniting their desires to control female sexuality. Sex ed was a big controversy by the 1960s, as the religious right first started to emerge.

The most interesting part of the book was on abortion. In the 19th century, it was rarely punished. One medical group in that period estimated that a fifth of all pregnancies resulted in abortions. It wasn't even considered a real issue until "the quickening" came - when the woman first felt the fetus move in her womb. Laws were first passed at the state level against it in the late 19th century. Post-WWII, opponents of abortion compared it to the Nazis, and that message resonated. *Roe v. Wade* itself backfired in terms of public support for abortion.

Feminism rose up, to the horror of conservative Christians. (Around here, Griffith calls Henry Hyde a US Senator. Nope, he was always in the House). Sexual harassment's emergence further split the religious community. Some saw it as woman acting out of turn, and others really didn't. Note: there is a nice part on the evolution of sexual harassment laws on page 258-261. It came out of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. More accurately, it's an interpretation of that act. People first argued that harassment violated that part of the law in the mid-1970s and won some appellate court decisions about it later in the decade. In 1986, the Supreme Court ruled 9-0 along those lines. Gay rights and marriage makes the final divisive issue along sexual lines dividing the religious community.

A quick coda argues that conservative Christians voted for Trump not because of his crass and demeaning view towards women, but because of it.

There are some really good moments and the book is OK, but it's more a series of chapters than a connected narrative. Also, Griffith tends to look at these issues isolated from all others. Sometimes these Christians are conservative not because of sexual matters but because of other things, like race or just overall cultural issues. Just because people say they're acting out of religious values -- that can be a dodge rather than the truth.

Yvonne says

This helps me answer the question WHAT IS HAPPENING?

J. says

I was raised in fairly conservative protestant surroundings, but had come to suspect much of the premises of this book were true. It's nice--and quite surprising--to learn many of the details. So I enjoyed reading the book, but I was regularly left wondering *why* these arguments were happening. The author does a good job of looking at the people and historical events, but I was more drawn to the theology and philosophical underpinnings of the people involved, and this book doesn't particularly address that. I don't think I can fault a book for being something it isn't supposed to be, but this one left me with wide, unanswered theological, ethical, and philosophical questions.

Heather Farmer says

A long but fascinating and worthy read that traces the origin of our current religious and cultural divide in sexual politics through the decades of the 20th and 21st centuries. The Epilogue brings it all home.

Gary Moreau says

Anyone browsing the title of this book is likely to be misinformed and, equally likely, as a result, to pass it over. That's the problem with morality and sexuality today, particularly when they appear in the same title with "Christians." Unless you have been living under a rock, it's a sure bet you aren't neutral on the topic.

But that's precisely why you should read this book.

This is a book of history written by a very capable and articulate historian. It is not a partisan manifesto. Even after reading the book I would be hard-pressed to define the author's actual politics with any specificity. There is an occasional whiff here and there, particularly in the epilogue, but that is to be expected of any book written by an actual person. The author is, on balance, admirably successful in maintaining the political objectivity of the professional historian. (Although she would likely point out that those who hold the most extreme views on both sides of these issues are unlikely to agree with that assessment.)

The goal of an historian is to both present the facts and figures and to put them in context so that we might ultimately rise above them in the interest of true understanding. And while you will surely find some of the characters in this drama to be offensive and off-putting, I think it would be difficult to really contribute to the public dialogue today without an understanding of who they were and the influence they had in their time. Self-awareness, after all, is the necessary first step toward any attempt to change the world.

What is most amazing about this book and the topics it covers, from birth control to abortion and same sex marriage, is how much energy and effort has gone into our very public debates, to put it mildly, about sex over such a relatively short span of human history. To think that less than a century ago we were actively debating whether or not heterosexual marital sex for purposes other than procreation was moral or not, is really quite mind boggling when you think about it.

And that, it appears, is precisely why Griffith is interested in the topic. What she documents in incredible detail, without being dry, is a division among both Christians and Americans at large, which is beyond profoundly deep. It is a division that is almost inexplicable in any rational scientific or theological terms. While I can't imagine any historian giving it a better effort, I'm not convinced Griffith herself believes that she has been entirely successful, in the end, in unraveling the full breadth and depth of the forces behind the facts. The history is just that bizarre.

I honestly can't imagine an historian taking on a more challenging range of topics. And she is obviously astute enough to know that the target audience for a balanced, objective recounting of this history may ultimately prove to be small in numbers. She took on what might well prove to be a thankless job, nonetheless, both because I think she is just naturally fascinated with the subject matter and because it is a

page of history that someone really has to write.

And that it is exactly why it is not a thankless read. Far from it. I found the book to be well worth my time and effort. It didn't change my politics, but as a white, heterosexual, sexagenarian, non-Christian male, I learned a lot, particularly about events that took place within my own lifetime and that I should have been paying more attention to at the time.

The writing is very accessible and easy to get through, but it is not a quick read. There is an awful lot of material here. And while the prose flows smoothly, there is enough attention paid to references and authentication to satisfy, I suspect, the most discerning academic. It does not, moreover, limit itself to the female perspective. This is a social, political, and religious history that all of us, whatever our gender, sexual identity, or religious affiliation, played a role in, as Griffith so aptly points out.

I normally reserve a five star rating for books that are truly transformative for me. I'm not sure that any history quite rises to that level for me, but the topic surely does. As a member of society and the father of two daughters I can't think of a more relevant or important topic at the moment.

My only disappointment in the book is that in the epilogue, where she discusses the 2016 election, she seems to lose a little of what had been up until that point an ardent and irrepressible optimism that things always seem to work out in the end. She was hardly alone, however, in being knocked back on her heels by the election, if indeed she was, but she seems to have ultimately held her grip. She closes with, "Maybe we will get there one day [...reckoning, engaging, and willfully empathizing with others in our common humanity, so as to rouse a fractured nation to build a bearable peace.], but not without first committing to a full and thorough reckoning of precisely how and why our divisions got so deep."

And in that spirit, I dearly hope that you if you have taken the time to read this review, you will take the time to read this very important and engaging book.

And, no, I don't know the author and have never encountered any of her prior work. I will, however, look for her in the future.

Lily says

"John Danforth was born in St. Louis, Missouri. He is the grandson of William H. Danforth, founder of Purina Mills. His father was the CEO of its successor, Ralston Purina. Danforth's brother, Dr. William Henry Danforth, is former chancellor of Washington University in St. Louis.

"Danforth was elected in 1968 at the age of 32 to be Missouri Attorney General. On his staff of assistant attorneys general were Kit Bond, John Ashcroft, and Clarence Thomas. In 1972 Danforth's colleague Bond was elected Missouri Governor at the age of 33, and Danforth was re-elected Attorney General. The two were viewed as young Republican wunderkinds in a traditionally Democratic state."

"As an ordained Episcopal priest, Danforth officiated the funeral services of former president Ronald Reagan on June 11, 2004 at the Washington National Cathedral He did the same for Washington Post executive Katharine Graham in 2001, also at the National Cathedral.... Wikipedia 1/29/18

"R. Marie Griffith is the Director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington

University in St. Louis, where she also serves as the John C. Danforth Professor of Humanities. She has written extensively about religion in U.S. history and in the present. She focuses particularly on issues of gender and sexuality, matters that have grown ever more divisive in American society and politics in recent years. She has taught at Northwestern, Princeton, and Harvard, Universities and has published in both scholarly and popular venues. She is committed to civil discourse across political and religious lines, and she intends her writing to be accessible to a wide array of readers...”

Why does it not surprise me that this deeply thoughtful, carefully wrought historical chronicle of moral issues relating to sexuality and riving the Christian church should come from a scholar ensconced in a university of the United States Midwest? Perhaps because my own path from growing up the Midwest to living almost half my life now in the Northeast, I know the arc of these passions in my bones, even though my heart and my head have had their own far odyssey.

I jumped into the middle of the book, not particularly expecting to read the whole thing, but interested mostly in the later issues of the 1960’s and beyond. As another reviewer on Amazon (here, too?) has put it so well, “The writing is very accessible and easy to get through, but it is not a quick read. There is an awful lot of material here. And while the prose flows smoothly, there is enough attention paid to references and authentication to satisfy, I suspect, the most discerning academic.”

I found myself returning to the earlier chapters. Now my library copy is overdue and must be taken back for its hold request. I may well obtain a hard copy myself to share and to have available as a reference and even to read again, in whole or in part.

Ms. Griffith opens the historic chronicle in a place that surprised me, the fight for woman’s suffrage (Introduction). She identifies many individuals, such as Anthony Comstock, “a Civil War veteran for the Union side and a pious Protestant with strong ties to the YMCA,” individuals whose names may have been lost to most us, pointing out the pivotal roles they played in stifling or forwarding the debates and the socially and legally permitted actions. (The Comstock Law of 1873 stipulated imprisonment and steep fines for distributing any article whatever, for the prevention of conception, or...” Postal workers were now censors.) By starting with the early twentieth century, Ms. Griffith makes us aware of how much has transpired in the space of a century.

One of her chapters deals with censorship – especially focusing on D. H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot (originally from Kansas – relevant?), James Joyce, Theodore Dreiser, Henry Miller and even John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. But also with the censorship of movies.

Another is titled “Segregation and Race Mixing in the Early Civil Rights Era.” It is followed by chapters on Kinsey, sex education, abortion, sexual harassment (Anita Hill, Paula Jones), and finally LGBT rights.

In general, the book feels balanced and thorough. I even spent some time among the well written notes. A few quibbles: Although fairly extensive discussion exists of several Catholic leaders and their positions on issues like contraception and abortion, little is here about the extent or impact of abuses. Especially since writers like Lawrence and Joyce were introduced, a few comparisons with parallel developments in Europe could have provided perspective. Views from non-Christian faiths, most noticeably Jewish, were virtually non-existent; could have been useful even with the Christian focus. And, last, for here, some statistics on demographics, especially on immigration, shifting religious affiliations, and urban growth felt wanted at places.

Imho, a book worthy of a few hours of one’s time. Not likely to change one’s views, but rather to remind one

that much exists to recall, to learn, and to understand.

Amy says

When a person, idea, or social change comes along and threatens those in power, a fissure is inevitable. *Moral Combat* is a brief history, barely scratching the surface of each of the topics it covers (each chapter could easily be several books in its own right), but it's an important look at the radical and ever growing political divide our country is facing. It is not an easy book to read; it covers some incredibly touchy subjects that one doesn't usually discuss because it tends to lead to angry arguments rather than productive discourse. Regardless, the history is fascinating (if infuriating) and a worthwhile read.

Disclaimer: this is not a non-partisan review. What follows is long, graphic, and probably a little derisive. But I've come to the conclusion that part of why liberals are losing so many of these progressive battles is because we are too willing to "play nice" and are not as aggressive as we need to be. As I'm writing this review Bermuda has just become the first country to repeal gay marriage. Conservatives would have you believe that there is a slippery slope where if you give someone X rights, then pretty soon everyone will be entering into plural marriage with houseplants and their Roomba. But the real problem is that we'll gain rights, become complacent, and our rights get rolled back in a vicious power grab we never saw coming.

Religion is power. It uses the idea of a loving god as a carrot and a vengeful god as a stick to keep the populace in line with its patriarchal and racist view points. Moralistic ideals are defined and enforced because that's what the scriptures say and that's what god wants (as interpreted by man...). It justifies slavery, lynching, and burning witches: the speech writer for Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo, a Sunday school teacher at First Christian Church in Jackson, MS by the name of Archibald Stimson Coody IV, defended lynching black men in 1944 under the guise of the safety of white women. After going into great detail of four lynchings (hangings and the burning of a live man chained up in a public square), Coody concluded, "Was it any worse than burning a witch?" This reviewer would argue THAT BOTH ARE VERY FUCKING WRONG!!! Justifying the lynching of one group of marginalized people by comparing it to the burning of a different group of marginalized people is not a valid argument. Ever.

Sex is power. Women bear the brunt of the child bearing and rearing burdens, and men have used that to their advantage to keep them submissive, often with religious shaming, but also with economic manipulation and rape. Poor single mothers who have given birth out of wedlock are sinful, but equally sinful is the abortion that would keep them from being blamed and shamed into poverty in the first place - placing them in an unwinnable situation. This book talks a bit about the rape of black female slaves by white men (to produce even more slaves, as the children born of these rapes were deemed slaves), but it doesn't even touch spousal rape (marital rape exceptions still existed in some states in 1993(!) and even today some states treat rape within a marriage differently than rape between non-married individuals).

Hand in hand religion and sex walked; sex was for procreation within a man-woman marriage, along color lines, with a wife obeying her husband, and the husband dominating the household. Abortion and birth control were ****hand waving**** available, but they weren't really discussed and white men were happy. Then along comes the "radical" notion that women should be able to control what happens to their own bodies. And vote! And birth control and abortion should be readily available and maybe even to... gasp... unmarried ladies. And anti-miscegenation laws should be repealed. And same sex-marriages should be allowed.

Then... all hell broke loose. Demons took over the country! Literal lava flowed through the streets! Dogs

started to speak Russian!

Oh wait. That last part didn't actually happen. There was however a bunch of hysterical religious rhetoric from people (primarily cis white men) who couldn't handle the thought of losing their power to women, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community. (Let's not let us white women off the hook either though; we've been complicit here too, because the same white patriarchy that tramples on the back of minorities bolsters us up as well, maybe not as high as that of the menfolk, but we're still benefiting.)

Ranting and tongue-in-cheek snark aside, along with the increasing divide between the right and left, this book highlighted some things that I didn't actually expect. I was under the incorrect impression that the fetal personhood movement was a relatively new phenomenon, but it actually started just 8 days after the passage of *Roe v. Wade*. I also never knew conservatives made regular claims that sexual freedom would lead to one becoming a communist. They really did use the Red Scare for everything back then, didn't they? I did already know about the (self) censorship of movies, but a little bit of extra research beyond of the book led me to other groups (like the Comics Code Authority). Thinking outside of the box here, I have to wonder how much of this anti-sex censorship is why our entertainment today is so ridiculously violent, while simultaneously being still so incredibly prudish. Anyone else recall the flap over the movie *Blue Valentine* and the man-on-woman oral sex scene that gave it an initial NC-17 rating in 2010? Although, maybe this is a bad example, seeing as how it's a Weinstein production...

I digress.

If you are a liberal, the look back at the manipulation of our politics and laws is certain to make you outraged. The sheer levels of hypocrisy and backhanded actions of the religious extremists on the right is appalling and disgusting. I say let this rage drive a newfound level of activism - take a page from the conservative playbook and keep fighting for progress, and vote. For the love of all that is important, VOTE!!! The only way to stop these abuses of power and to keep gaining rights for the marginalized is to keep the people who are abusing the power out of those powerful positions in the first place.

If you are a conservative, well, I'm not sure you'll understand why the liberals are so unwilling to continue to be subjected to your religious dogma. Maybe you'll read this book and have a light bulb moment when you realize that the rhetoric and scare tactics being used against transgendered persons today (they'll rape and kill little girls in the bathrooms) are the same as the ones that were used against black men during Jim Crow (they'll rape and kill little white women in the streets), and see just how preposterous it is. Or maybe you will still think those things are actually happening (they aren't) and the light bulb moment won't happen.

To conclude what is by far my longest review on Goodreads by far, I don't see us coming together any time soon. So for now, I suppose I keep fighting and encouraging others to do the same.

Side Note: This is not generally the type of book that would make my "Five Star Bar" because I found it a bit kludgy to read at times (this is due to all of the quotes and sources, it makes for a lot of mental task switching, at least for me), I'm not anxious to read it again, and because of its breadth over depth on the subject at hand. That said, given that I wrote a 1200 word treatise as my review, and when I'm done here I'm going to use the little recommend feature to pop this off to several people, it clearly evoked an emotional response and I feel like that I'm justified in bumping it from 4 to 5.

Molly Sutter says

A great overview about the culture wars. Down with the patriarchy!!

Katharine Thomas says

Bam! What a well researched and explosive book bringing the willing reader to open his/her mind to having a much better understanding why we are so crazily divided in politics and opinions in American today. This read may surprise.

Fraser Sherman says

This is a look at how Christianity, as the title declares, became increasingly divided as Christian laity and leaders dealt with such threats to tradition (and particularly the patriarchal tradition that men were the bosses) as abortion, birth control, obscenity, gay rights, and the once terrifying threat of "race mixing." I'm not sure if my lack of enthusiasm is because I'm familiar with a lot of this material or that Griffith gets very inside baseball — if there's a big conference on birth control (say) she lists every religious figure of note who was there, even if it doesn't really add anything.

Katie B. says

If you read one book this year - this needs to be it.

If you read only 1 non-fiction book this year - this needs to be it.

Basically, read this book. It is timely and important. More history than revelatory it still grants much needed perspective on issues that keep popping up in our politics. Moral Combat offers a historical survey of the rise of the Christian Right and how that impacted our socio-cultural views and regulations regarding sexuality, pregnancy, birth control, abortion, LGBTQ issues, and sexual harassment. If you're already well versed in the historical aspects before the 1960s (Like, if you've read The birth of the Pill, etc,...), then you can jump right in at Chapter 5 for a modern survey of the topics.

There has been some criticism of the last chapter which talks about our views on sex in politics in the last couple of years. While it is still too early to see which direction our political history will go right now (as I write this Cecile Richards has announced she will step down as the president of Planned Parenthood, and the Nassar trial has closed with a pleasing 175 year sentence) I was expecting a bit more..optimism?...from Griffith. We shall see.
