

Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation
BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Kristy L. Slominski

Teaching Moral Sex: A History of Religion and Sex Education in the United States

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 376 pp.

Set against the backdrop of increasing respect for scientific expertise and public schools' gradual secularization, Kristy L. Slominski's well-researched book explores the imprint of religious values upon sex education policy from the 1870s to the present. Slominski draws upon minutes from annual meetings, journals published by the United States' most prominent sex education organizations, religious education periodicals, and speeches by key figures to highlight the rich legacy of mainline Protestant denominations' involvement in sex education. She then asks: What obscured this influence from public knowledge, and how did the widespread assumption that Christians opposed sex education take root?

Slominski knows that many readers will not take for granted her contention that sex education was grounded in liberal Christian theology and activity. The first three chapters therefore explain how the theological convictions that divine will is gradually revealed, that scripture is a historical text that should be adapted to the modern world, and that Christians must support social progress spurred some Christians' entry into the field. Liberal Christians hoped to harness science to improve morality, public health, and family life. Scientists and physicians, Slominski notes, might have viewed themselves as leading the sex education movement from the time of the American Social Hygiene Association's (ASHA) creation in 1913, but these scientists also knew that they needed religious endorsement to create a "moral exemption" (3) for rules against sexually explicit materials. This endorsement made possible early sex education programs offered by military chaplains and the YMCA.

It is in these early chapters that Slominski makes one of her most important contributions: a rich description of Unitarian minister Anna Garlin Spencer's career with the ASHA. Other historians of sex education have undervalued Spencer's influence relative to that of social hygiene advocate Prince A. Morrow. But by placing Spencer and Morrow within the same organizational frame, Slominski asks readers to interpret Morrow's criticisms of "religious" interference in social hygiene more generously. Morrow and fellow scientists did not lump people like Spencer, to whom they listened, in with the "religious" people they identified as such. Indeed, when griping about religion, early social hygienists mostly meant the conservative Protestants who understood painful, untreated disease as a just punishment for sexual dalliance,

and insisted that “biblical authority trumped academic expertise on all topics” (69). Slominski’s exploration of Spencer’s role in the ASHA therefore illuminates a historiographic issue: the language of primary sources might have crept into, and potentially distorted, the story about religious opposition to sex education that historians have thus far told.

The last two chapters explore the common origins of comprehensive sex education and abstinence-only education in the mid-century phenomenon of family life education, the dominant mid-century form of sex education that had originally been cultivated by Spencer. By virtue of upholding the “normative ideal of the American family as a heterosexual marriage with children” (123), and then welcoming liberal Catholics and Jews to the coalition advancing family life education, Spencer and then SIECUS (Sex Information and Education Council of the United States) removed obstacles to sex education in public schools and won endorsements from mainline Protestant religious organizations. Yet, as family life education advocates widened their coalition in the 1950s and 1960s, points of contention emerged: contraception, inter-faith marriage, and the possibility of unity among religious denominations.

And if relationships among family life education advocates were under strain, then the differences of theology between liberal Protestants and their conservative Christian counterparts were outright explosive; the question of whether the Bible’s teachings should be adapted for the modern era, or whether they were timeless, was an unbridgeable divide. Liberal Christians continued to embrace a form of sex education that incorporated scientific findings, and added to this tradition new ideas grounded in situational ethics. Conservative Christians, in turn, held fast to family life education’s emphasis on the “restriction of sexuality to a monogamous heterosexual family, the desire to regulate sexual morality, and emphasis upon women’s association with childbearing and the domestic sphere,” and insisted that any departure from Biblical instruction was inherently irreligious (127). They proved to be as adept as liberal Christians at wielding discourses of morality, health, and family, which provided them with an entry point for abstinence-only education even when public schools insisted upon secular materials. Ultimately, conservative Christians challenged whether Protestants embracing situational ethics were “religious” at all. Their claim that they were the only real Christians involved in sex education was, in turn, picked up by scholars who repeated this interpretation as fact. Notes Slominski, “The prevailing narrative that conservative Christians have been the only Christians active in sex education debates ... reproduces and reinforces the partisan claim of conservative Protestants that they represent true Christianity and that liberal Protestantism is heretical” (217). Liberal Christians were erased from the narrative.

Telling this story as a series of organizational histories is a practical approach to what might otherwise become an unbounded narrative. However, one consequence of Slominski’s decision is that conservative voices are under-represented in the archival sources she shares with the reader, at least in comparison to the rich archives she identifies as partial to liberal Christianity. Relying upon the history of organizations also makes for occasionally choppy reading; narrative threads often re-start with trips back to World War I, and the interplay between comprehensive sex education

organizations and abstinence-only education might have been better illuminated with a chronological structure.

Read alongside Adam Laats' *Creationism USA* and R. Marie Griffith's *Moral Combat*, Slominski's *Teaching Moral Sex* points to a new trend: the intellectual history of religion, sex, and public schooling. These texts powerfully make the case that organized religion is less of an antagonist to scientific authority than it is a lens into the broader deliberation about American public norms. What I most prize in Slominski's work is the delicate way that she identifies the most pertinent theological concepts for a historian of education.

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University Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in Canada

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021. 424 pp.

University Women is a valuable contribution to the history of university education in English-speaking Canada from the late nineteenth century through to the 1920s. MacDonald traces the fight of women to gain entrance to Canadian universities and to be taken seriously inside and outside of their classrooms. This is not a linear narrative of progress — while women increased their presence at Canadian universities at the turn of the century, by the 1920s, as their numbers grew, they were increasingly shunted off to programs deemed to be more appropriate for women, such as home economics.

MacDonald includes a remarkably wide range of institutions, including the University of Toronto and its many affiliated colleges; McGill; Western; Mount Allison; Dalhousie; and the University of Manitoba. Despite the title, which suggests that this is a history of women in higher education throughout the country, the book only discusses English-language universities. The universities west of Manitoba also receive little attention, perhaps because some of these universities, such as the University of Saskatchewan and the University of British Columbia, were co-educational from the very beginning.

The book covers the history of women pioneers at these institutions, including some who are well-known such as Augusta Stowe-Gullen, Clara Brett, and Jennie Trout, and others who are lesser known (at least to me), such as Eliza Balmer, who mounted an intensive campaign for women to be admitted to University College, University of Toronto. MacDonald also pays close attention to the opponents of women's co-education including Daniel Wilson of University College, Goldwin Smith, and historian George Wrong.

MacDonald points out that the institutions with Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian ties were the first to accept women: Anglican and Catholic institutions were more