

Margaret Sanger: No Gods, No Masters

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SYNOPSIS

Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, is considered a “great hero” of that organization because of her ardent pursuit of women’s health and equality issues, especially as represented by a woman’s right to control her own fertility. From the pro-choice perspective, she was a feminist advocate for underprivileged women who sought to offer them an alternative to abortion by providing a more humane method of escaping their desperate circumstances: birth control. Conversely, prolife advocates point out the negative causes to which her work contributed, namely the abortion, eugenics, and population control movements.

Both of these perspectives are incomplete, however, if they do not address ideas that went far deeper than a superficial benevolence for the plight of poor women. Sanger believed in a humanist progressivism that saw birth control as desirable in an enlightened society because it rendered infanticide invisible. Her worldview was conceived in bizarre and difficult family circumstances and fostered in the associations she formed with some of the most influential Darwinists of the twentieth century. Her extramarital love affair with H. G. Wells served to complete her direct ideological connection with Darwin himself. Sanger embraced social evolution as the driving force in the world, and followed its tenets to their logical conclusions. Though her views were once considered radical, they have become mainstream and gone global. This may be her most enduring legacy.

Among traditional, pro-life Christians, Margaret (Higgins) Sanger’s (1879–1966) name is synonymous with an objectionable brand of sexual libertinism that has led to a free-for-all in birth control methods, unrestricted abortion, and a general indifference toward issues of human sexuality and the value of human life. While each of these connections is valid, they seem to

vanish for her more liberal supporters in light of the positive contributions they perceive her to have made for improving women's health and reproductive rights. The difference in interpretation of her work lies in how we ground our ethics.

Margaret Sanger adhered to a *consequentialism* in which the *outcomes* of personal and societal choices trumped all other considerations. There are several philosophical variations of this ethical view but, in general, they each focus on achieving desired results as opposed to the moral status of an act itself or the agent who performs it. Margaret Sanger's bent toward a consequentialist ethic began early in her life and is evident in every project in which she later became involved.

AN EXISTENTIAL ETHIC

When she was nineteen years old, Sanger watched her mother suffer and die of tuberculosis. The pain of that experience was forever seared into Sanger's psyche, and the circumstances leading up to it set the trajectory of her own life mission. Sanger's mother experienced eighteen pregnancies before her death, only eleven of which went full term (Margaret was the sixth).¹ The stressful life her mother led no doubt weakened her ability to cope with the physical and emotional strain her body endured. In Sanger's mind, this provided existential justification both for her insistence that no woman should have to endure a life like her mother's, and for her determination to forge a society that would never tolerate the same kind of conditions for anyone else.

Sanger's father, Michael Higgins, was a Civil War veteran and "freethinking" socialist who barely eked out a living chiseling headstones for local cemeteries. Described as "a talker, not a doer," Higgins made up for his financial shortcomings by involving himself in a string of radical causes based on his leftist political convictions. He revered the Socialist Party organizer, Eugene V. Debs, and promoted a utopian brand of Debs's ideology that included vehement opposition not only toward the economic establishment, but also toward the Catholic Church hierarchy he perceived as its ally.²

Margaret later described her father's radicalism as "the spring from which [she] drank"³ and often referred to his example as her model for reform. This was not the only impression Sanger's father made on her, however. In one of her early autobiographical writings, Sanger related an abnormal sensual experience she recalled having with him when she was only nine

years old. Margaret, sick with typhoid and barely coherent, awoke to find him pressed against her in bed. She described a sense of falling that accompanied the episode and labeled it as her first “sex awakening.”⁴

Michael Higgins’ extremism was not just political. Several days after the death of her four-year-old brother, Henry, Margaret accompanied her father on a late-night mission to the cemetery where Henry had been buried. There Higgins dug up the boy’s corpse, formed a plaster of Paris form of his head and shoulders, and used the mold to create a bust of Henry for presentation to his wife. Years later, Margaret shared the remorse she felt at finding a lock of human hair in the plaster mold.⁵

The psychological ramifications of these and other experiences are apparent in the attitudes Sanger later displayed toward men. “She would eventually learn to satisfy her own erotic strivings and court the seductions of men, but she would never allow herself to be defined by them. She would fall in love and marry twice, yet never be beholden to these relationships. She would, indeed, maintain a goal of empowering women to live independent, self-fulfilled lives as her social mission.”⁶

GIRL MEETS WORLD

Sanger’s life experiences did nothing but reinforce her youthful predispositions. After her mother’s death, Sanger returned to work as a nurse in the slums of New York City’s Lower East Side. She was repeatedly disgusted by the health and family conditions she observed there. In 1912, she was particularly struck by the plight of one poor young woman who had pleaded with her to find a way to prevent becoming pregnant, but who later died from a failed, self-induced abortion. Her later compilation of this and other stories into an anthology, *Motherhood in Bondage*, led Sanger to dedicate herself to “seek out the root of evil, to do something to change the destiny of mothers whose miseries were as vast as the skies.” She became determined that “birth control,” a term she personally coined, was the only way to combat what she believed to be a moral issue.⁷

In 1915, Sanger’s five-year-old daughter, Peggy, died of pneumonia. For years afterward she was haunted by dreams of infant girls and believed that she sometimes saw and spoke to Peggy through occult rituals. Peggy’s death was the trigger for Sanger’s journey into *Rosicrucianism*, a fashionable, cultic spiritualism that explored “the mystical principles underlying individual

religious and philosophical beliefs”⁸ through meditative practices intended to connect the individual to the “god within.”⁹

This Gnostic spirituality cultivated the notion that “religion” was an experience-based, privatized system divorced from the “real” world, thereby relegating it to nothing but a personal preference. This, combined with the anti-theism she inherited from her youth, left Sanger with no objective anchor for her moral positions and thus led her to seek secular solutions in her crusade for birth control.

Sanger was one of many who believed that the Darwinian process of continuous change and adaptation was an engine of societal progress that could be directed toward majestic ends by “enlightened” state planners. This “progressive” ideology relied on a combination of faith in the scientific efficiency of Social Darwinism and an adherence to a pragmatic philosophy that championed desirable outcomes over moral reasoning. Progressives believed in a strategic combination of education, organization, and legislation as the means to initiate societal reform. Sanger simply applied progressivism to the project of managing human reproduction.

MANAGING AN “EVOLVING” SOCIETY

During the second decade of the twentieth century, Sanger fell under the influence of several radical progressive thinkers. These included Emma Goldman, a feminist political anarchist; Havelock Ellis, a renowned British sex psychologist;¹⁰ and author H. G. Wells, one of the most influential progressives of the twentieth century.¹¹ Each of these mentors shared a devotion to Darwinism based on their common belief that “it offered secular answers to the problem of evil and death.”¹² This mindset fit perfectly with Sanger’s inspiration for reform.

In 1920, while still married to her first husband, William Sanger, Margaret began an extramarital affair with H. G. Wells. Wells was a student of Thomas Henry Huxley, Charles Darwin’s notorious “bulldog.” Early on Wells’s writing, notoriously exemplified in *War of the Worlds*, projected the prospect of racial dominance as displayed in the Martians whose technological advancement was the result of their superior intellectual evolution.¹³ Later, as he focused more on the idyllic promises of Social Darwinism, his novels became more utopian. Aldous Huxley’s haunting dystopia, *Brave New World*, was actually inspired by, and written as a parody of, Wells’s 1923 novel, *Men Like Gods*. Wells’s ties to the eugenics movement and his expectation that

progressives should become “enlightened Nazis” clearly follow from these ideas.¹⁴ Sanger’s connection with Wells and the extent of their mutual influence cannot be overestimated. Wells later described her as “the greatest woman in the world; the movement she started will grow to be, a hundred years from now, the most influential of all time in controlling man’s destiny on earth.”¹⁵

Political Panacea

Sanger first gave her movement credibility with the launch of the magazine *Woman Rebel* in 1914. This publication promoted an ideology from which Sanger intended to push her progressive agenda. In its first issue she explained that she chose the title “because [she] believed that woman is enslaved by the world machine, by sex conventions, by motherhood and its present necessary childrearing, by wage-slavery, by middle-class morality, by customs, laws and superstitions,”¹⁶ all of which she yearned to upend.

On the magazine’s masthead, Sanger added the slogan, “No Gods, No Masters,” a phrase she co-opted from the rallying cry of the anarchic socialist labor group, *International Workers of the World*. The slogan became her personal and political manifesto. Though she later disassociated herself from the socialist movement in favor of an alliance with political progressives, she did so not because her philosophy had changed, but because it became strategically impractical to be connected with radical socialist causes.¹⁷

It should also be noted that this confidence in the competency of human planners to perfect society is a politically bipartisan inclination. Though we tend to equate contemporary progressivism with the left, many have also embraced it from the right. In fact, her staunch antitheism led Sanger to reject a Democratic Party she believed to be too beholden to the Catholic Church.¹⁸ She transferred her personal political alliances to, and thereby first associated the organizations that combined to form *Planned Parenthood* with, the Republican Party.¹⁹

THE EVOLUTION OF BIRTH CONTROL

Understanding the worldview Sanger embraced and applying it to the existential issues that had motivated her from her youth, the solutions she offered were the logical outgrowths of her ethical philosophy. Sanger melded her compassion for her mother’s circumstances with her father’s mindset toward reform to construct a project she saw as a clear moral imperative for society. This motivation was evident in her reflection on a poor family whose plight may have in some respects reminded her of her own: “Out of this family of eleven children only two are now

of any use to society.... The father has become a hopeless drunkard, of whom the mother and children live in terror....All of our problems are the result of overbreeding among the working class, and if morality is to mean anything at all to us, we must regard all the changes which tend toward the uplift and survival of the human race as moral....Knowledge of birth control is essentially moral.”²⁰

Though born of compassion, Sanger’s moral outrage was focused squarely on those who did not share her consequentialist ethic. In this instance, her discontent with the plight of the downtrodden was not directed at the drunkard father, or even toward a neighborly lack of charity for the family; her ire was reserved solely for the notion that any family should have to deal with these kinds of circumstances. It was the *consequences* Sanger wanted to eliminate. Thus, the distinctiveness of Sanger’s idea of the morality of birth control lay not in the method, but in her perception that society should evolve toward a more enlightened view of its power to eliminate similar family situations.

Sanger saw her updated adaptation of birth control as a reflection of humanity’s historical progress. On her view, primitive women worldwide had practiced infanticide as a way to express their “instinctual” desire for power. Because that desire could not be quelled, improving civilizations instituted the more advanced method of abortion, a practice that Sanger believed would allow “a woman [to fulfill] her ‘highest duty’ by invoking her choice to use ‘the surgeon’s instruments’ rather than sacrificing all that was ‘highest and holiest in her—her aspiration to freedom.’” In its final stage of progress, society would embrace contraception as the most highly evolved form of birth control.²¹

The “evolution” of killing the unborn became a methodological advancement achieved by simply moving the practice farther up the birth canal. Invisibility encouraged acceptability.

A PRO-LIFE INCLINATION?

Some defenders of Sanger have claimed that she should not be held liable for the modern pro-abortion stance of her offspring, Planned Parenthood, because her contraceptive ideas were actually *opposed* to abortion. To be fair, there is evidence that Sanger saw abortion as being morally repugnant.

When she opened the first birth control clinic in America in 1916, she explained to each group who visited “what contraception was; that abortion was the wrong way—*no matter how early it*

was performed it was taking life; that contraception was the better way...*because life had not yet begun*" (emphasis added).²² She even pronounced that "the hundreds of thousands of abortions performed in America each year [were] a disgrace to civilization" (emphasis added).²³

Though Sanger's opposition to abortion seemed obvious, the context of this last statement reveals the *reason* she held to it—a detail her defenders often fail to acknowledge. In the very next sentence Sanger wrote, "In plain, everyday language, in an abortion there is always a very serious risk to the health and often to the life *of the patient*" (emphasis added).²⁴ The patient, of course, is the woman obtaining the abortion.

In light of her philosophical motivations, it is apparent that even though she did seem to harbor moral difficulties with abortion itself, Sanger's consequentialism led her toward solutions that effectively trumped those moral misgivings. If she mentioned the unborn at all, it was usually in reference to the consequences the baby would face if it happened to *survive* an abortion attempt. Sanger reserved her real hostility in the abortion debate for those "who would combat abortion and at the same time assail contraceptive measures...[they] may be likened to the person who would fight contagious disease and forbid disinfection" (emphasis added).²⁵

GOING GLOBAL

Later, Sanger expanded the same thought process she believed would eliminate difficult family circumstances to include society at large. As early as 1918, she had affirmed her belief that birth control's "general, though prudent, practice must lead to a higher individuality and ultimately to a cleaner race."²⁶

A "cleaner" race? The echoes of the societal "enhancement" she saw in Darwinian selective methods reverberated in the ideas that led Sanger eventually to embrace the eugenics and population control movements. Wayne House has offered an excellent synopsis of her involvement in these areas in an earlier issue of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL.²⁷ To that I can only add the observation that these commitments were nothing but the logical extension of the progressivism to which she devoted her life's work.

Sanger's "enlightened" view came through loud and clear in one solution she presented for the improvement of society in 1926, wherein Americans would "set a sensible example to the world by offering a bonus or a yearly pension to all obviously unfit parents who allow themselves to be sterilized by harmless, scientific means. In this way the moron and the diseased would have no posterity to inherit their unhappy condition...Ask the government to *first* take off the burdens of

the insane and feeble-minded from your backs. Sterilization for these is the remedy” (emphasis in original).²⁸

Margaret Sanger did not originate the philosophies that led her to become infamous; she simply applied them to reproduction. Today *Planned Parenthood* boasts that it has taken Sanger’s ideology global. Though it would be difficult to make a direct connection between them and any nation’s specific governmental policies, the same ideas she championed can be seen in the forced abortions that have stemmed from China’s “one-child” policies, in sex-selective abortion policies in China, India, and Korea, and in the plunging birth rates of both Europe and the Far East.

The Results of Sanger’s Reproductive Mindset

It is sadly ironic to compare Sanger’s lofty ideals with their actual results. She began as an advocate for poor women’s “aspiration to freedom” and later extrapolated that outlook to society in general. One hundred years later, Sanger’s outlook is deeply entrenched in the culture, and her consequentialist view of birth control has gone mainstream and global.

Today in the U.S., more than eighty percent of women of childbearing age have utilized “the pill,” while half of all pregnancies remain unplanned.²⁹ This misplaced reliance on the pill’s effectiveness, combined with an uncritical acceptance of Sanger’s consequentialism, has contributed to a widespread propensity to disregard a proper moral foundation for sexual relationships. The unintended consequence is that 40.6 percent of births occur outside of marriage. Among the poorer classes, that ratio is a mind-boggling seventy-two percent, while “the upward trend in non-marital childbearing seen in the United States is matched in most developed countries, with levels at least doubling or tripling and in some cases increasing many multiples between 1980 and the mid-2000s.”³⁰

Sanger defended infanticide in China more than eighty years ago as a simple reversion to an earlier stage in the “evolution” of birth control. She deplored the arrogance of “meddling” Christian missionaries who aimed to stop the Chinese practice of drowning their children because she believed it would only lead to food shortages.³¹ Today the abhorrent sex-selective abortion practices and “one child” policies of India and China *purposefully target women* and the number of baby girls being eliminated is *higher* among the more prosperous sectors of those countries.³²

Where Sanger feared unsustainable population growth as the greatest threat to the world's future, an adherence to her mindset has triggered a demographic emergency brought on by *imploding* population numbers. In Germany and Britain, the philosophical nurseries for her ideas, reproductive freedom has “evolved” into reproductive suicide. Birth rates on the continent are well below replacement level. As political commentator Mark Steyn has put it, “for a continent of ‘family friendly’ policies, Europe is remarkably short of families.”³³

SANGER AND THE CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN

History has shown us that Sanger’s “No Gods, No Masters” manifesto is more than a clever slogan. For her philosophical descendants, and for the societies that have effectively embraced Sanger’s consequentialism, the effect has been to disregard the intrinsic value of human life by focusing on eliminating the unpleasant realities that go with living that life. The resultant body count, the cultural apathy toward the significance of that body count, and the absence of the social benefits Sanger envisioned may be her most enduring legacy.

A century after Sanger began her contraceptive crusade, the merits of various birth control methods are still up for debate among fair-minded Christians, but the lines pro-lifers must draw are clear. First, the scientific fact that life begins at conception rules out any abortifacient contraceptive that, by definition, operates after that point. Second, and more insidiously, pro-lifers cannot allow themselves to be coaxed into debating these issues on Margaret Sanger’s terms.

When pro-life Christians attempt to defend their viewpoint with arguments such as, “Abortion may have killed the person who would find the cure for cancer,” they have just stepped directly into the mire of Sanger’s consequentialism. On those shifting grounds, one can effectively rationalize any “choice” by focusing on the consequences of the choice, whether desirable or undesirable, while failing to identify why some choices are simply, and unequivocally, wrong.

Abortion and abortifacient birth control are immoral because they take the lives of unborn human beings without justification. Though she let the power of her personal experience and the false promises of a manmade utopia suppress this obvious truth, it seems that even Margaret Sanger knew that much.

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NOTES:

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