

**Analysis of**  
**Margaret Sanger's "A Moral Necessity For Birth Control" ©**

By Connie J. Schlosberg

With the recent fiscal budget war in Congress almost leading to a government shutdown over Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger's 1921 speech "A Moral Necessity for Birth Control" is still an important rhetoric for the rights of women's health and well being. This paper explores Margaret Sanger and her prolific speech using the rhetorical situation developed by Lloyd Bizter. The four components to be examined are audience, occasion, speaker and speech and how it influenced women's freedom for personal choice and reproductive rights.

Margaret Sanger was dissatisfied with society's perceptions of women's health and childbirth especially after the death of her mother (who had 18 pregnancies) from tuberculosis and cervical cancer. In her speech "A Moral Necessity for Birth Control," she criticized civil and religious authorities about their stance on sexuality and contraceptives, indicating they were a means to keep women submissive to men and the insensitivities to women's concerns. She was upset with the National Council of Catholic Women, the Christian community and the Catholic Church for keeping women ignorant and suppressed from the advantages and benefits of birth control. In her speech, she demanded the Christian community reconsider their position on birth control stating that it is immoral and unethical to women.

*Audience:*

Margaret Sanger provided the voice for all women when she spoke up for women's reproductive rights especially when she noticed the disparagingly difference between affluent women and working class women. The working class women needed to have control over the size of their families if they were to escape their circumstances. Sanger advocated for birth control emphasizing its medical and public health needs. Delivered several times for the American Birth Control League (which became Planned Parenthood), she campaigned for research for birth control techniques and policies.

Sanger targeted mainstream America for support of the American Birth Control League, birth control and women's rights. She needed to explain why birth control is a moral right for women and counter any opponents using their words against them. By choosing to address their statements against birth control, Sanger could intelligently attack their position on birth control. In doing so, she effectively persuaded other women to understand their options and why it should not be considered immoral. In response to the National Council of Catholic Women's protest of the spreading of information of birth control methods, she said, "we who are trying to better the conditions of this world believe that a healthy, happy human race is more in keeping with the laws of God, than disease, misery and poverty perpetuating itself generation after generation." (Reid/Klumpp, pages 822-823).

Raised as a Catholic, Margaret Sanger knew the moral philosophy of the Catholic Church and the Christian society. She could use her pathos as a Christian to convince the public that there is a moral right for women to use birth control. The Catholic Church was "Sanger's principal nemesis" and according to Warren I. Cohen, the Church was waging war with Sanger and in 1919, bishops were distributing letters forbidding

their congregation from using any artificial means of contraception (*Profiles in Humanity: The Battle for Peace, Freedom, Equality and Human Rights*, page 63). She had to use their rhetoric against them to prove to the mainstream society that there is a value in promoting the legitimacy of birth control to women. Her audience was widespread and she wanted to present a clear message. At a time when women had just received their right to vote, she sought to add to those rights by condemning the Church for stating that birth control is unnatural. Sanger took her plight to other audiences outside of the United States seeking support for women's health rights everywhere (Cohen, page 64).

*Occasion:*

Margaret Sanger was addressing the public with a very real problem in our society at the time. The death of her mother gave her more desire to fight for women's reproductive rights. She was both deliberative and forensic in her speech because she wanted to share her wisdom and expediency of her proposal and she needed to bring her debate to the public in order to gain acceptance. A free-thinker, Sanger had to convince the public that the Catholic Church was wrong at a time when the Church had a very strong position in the morals of society. Even today the Catholic Church does not promote artificial means of birth control, but the Vatican is changing its stance on the use of condoms (Associated Press, 2010. *Vatican shifts stance on use of condoms Leaders weigh its use compared to the risk of spreading AIDS*).

She admonished the Church for alarming Catholic women that they need to question their morality, but she believed that women were smarter than what the Church thought. Sanger said "Fortunately such words carry no weight with those who can bring free and keen as well as noble minds to the consideration of the matter." (Reid/Klumpp, page

822). She furthered her case with “Religious propaganda against Birth Control is crammed with contradiction and fallacy.” (Reid/Klumpp, page 823). Sanger proved her point by stating “In my belief such a philosophy hampers the development of individual intelligence. Morality then becomes more or less successful attempt to conform to a code, instead of an attempt to bring reason and intelligence to bear upon the solution of each individual human problem.” (Reid/Klumpp, page 823).

The theme of morality is no stranger in American history. In President Ronald Reagan’s speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, he addressed his audience about the “increase in illegitimate births and abortions” and the establishment of clinics that “provide advice and birth control drugs” to underage girls (“Evil Empire” Speech, 1983). His statements would probably infuriate Sanger who spent her life fighting for those clinics. In her speech, she said “the teachings of the Church have driven sex under-ground, into secret channels, strengthened the conspiracy of silence, concentrated men’s thoughts upon the “lusts of the body,” have sown, cultivated and reaped a crop of bodily and mental diseases...” (Reid/Klumpp, page 825). Her point was that we are sweeping sex under the carpet and that is where we will go to find it.

Sanger went on to ask “how is any human expression or education possible when women and men are taught to combat and resist their natural impulses and to despise their bodily functions?” (Reid/Klumpp, page 825). Her stance was strong on the unfairness toward the working class. In her “Debate on Birth Control,” she complements her rhetoric with her beliefs that society differentiates between rich and poor when she said “On the other hand we have the group who have large families and have for generations perpetuated large families, and I know from my work among these

people that the great percentage of these people that are brought into the world in poverty and misery have been unwanted.” (Little blue book, No. 208, 1921).

*Speaker:*

Margaret Sanger spent her adult life struggling to gain women’s right to decided whether to have children or not. *LIFE* magazine announced Margaret Sanger as one of the most important Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Planned Parenthood Report, 2009). She envisioned every woman having the same basic human rights. These rights include the control of her body, decision to have children, and entitlement to sexual pleasure. Her crusade made it legal to publish and distribute information about sex and created access to birth control for the poor.

When Sanger was a child, she was ridiculed for wearing old and torn clothing. She spent her days dreaming of escaping poverty. She was supposed to get to college but had to leave because her mother was dying from tuberculosis and cancer after having 11 children and 7 miscarriages. Eventually she went back to school and became a practical nurse. Sanger’s struggle for women’s reproductive rights began when Theodore Roosevelt made the declaration that it was “race suicide” for “white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon women to use birth control (Roosevelt, 1905, 4).

While working as a visiting nurse on the Lower East Side of New York, she encountered many women willing to stand on line to pay \$5 for abortions because they had no access to birth control. She vowed that she would find a way to make a social change for women. Her campaign began when Congress passed the Comstock law which made it illegal to distribute information regarding sex and birth control calling it obscene. Her *Woman Rebel* did not contain any contraceptive information because of

the Comstock law but did so in *Family Limitation*. In her autobiography she said “I had done so in circulating Family Limitation and that would inevitably be brought up. I really wanted this, so that birth control would be defined once and for all as either obscene or not obscene.” (Sanger, 1938, page 184).

This started a lifetime war between Margaret Sanger and the government. The federal government actually warned her to stop publishing. Sanger did not back down and kept circulating *Woman Rebel*. The government seized them and refused to send them through the U.S. mail. She was arrested and threatened with 45 years in prison, but Sanger persevered because she knew every woman has the right to know. Sanger was not intimidated by the federal government or the Catholic Church. Her mission was to make her statement known and educate the public on the importance for birth control.

However, her image was tainted in the latter years. She was accused of racism by wanting to manipulate race populations. Many rumors started by anti-choice activists claimed she supported Hitler’s “human elimination programs.” The “Sanger-Hitler Equation” reports that “Sanger is accused of murdering millions through abortion, either directly as an abortionist, or as the primary force in creating a culture that devalues human life as evidenced by the rising number of abortions through the twentieth century.” (#32, Winter 2002/03). It is doubtful that she would have supported such programs. Her campaign was one of justice and freedom for women not a platform to eradicate a population. Her dedication is proof of her strength and competence for the rights of women. She was a true visionary and social progressive.

*Speech:*

Margaret Sanger started her speech with a romantic poem “Garden of Love” by William Blake. The poem has significance because he wrote about the naturalness of sexuality and how the Christian church’s preaching and rules cause the oppression of our natural desires. This was the crux of her speech. Her incorporation of other’s rhetoric and her responses to them gave her speech a lot of credence. Sanger meticulously chose statements made by Christian organizations and responded intelligently to each of them. For example, in response to the Church stating that birth control is anti-Christian, Sanger replied “In crystallizing and codifying this contradiction, the Church not only solidified its own power over men but reduced women to the most abject and prostrate slavery.” (Reid/Klumpp, page 825).

Sanger’s dialogue empowered women especially at a time when women’s rights were still new to the nation. She effectively referred to women as intellectuals and sexual – the type of verbiage they needed to hear to give them the confidence to demand their reproductive rights. Although she was argumentative toward the Church, Sanger remained professional but dogmatic in her rhetoric. She used logos to show mainstream America how ridiculous the Catholic Church’s denouncement of birth control appeared.

Her speech is organized with an introduction to the National Council of Catholic Women’s political opinion of keeping birth control information from being spread after the New York State Federation of Women’s Club which favored the dissemination. This tactic got her audience thinking. After all, in this country, freedom of speech prevails. By using their argument to begin her speech, she set up the context and used it to bounce her argument off of what the Church dictated its followers to do. She hoped it

would help her cause and change the minds of Americans. She ended with the notion that this freedom is not just for those who are listening at the moment but for their children and for generations to come.

In conclusion, Margaret Sanger's goal was to further women's rights in the right direction. Unfortunately, she did not live to see the complete fruits of her labor with the widespread use of contraceptive medication. Her courage fortified her credence and Planned Parenthood still exists today despite anti-family planning ideologies. She paved the way so that women like me have the opportunity to choose birth control as a right to explore options as a woman.



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