

The many feminisms and sexual ethics

By [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#)

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In her essay in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, “First Things First,” Kirsten Holst Petersen writes about her experience attending a conference in Mainz on “The Role of Women in Africa.” She recalls the young German feminists discussing the “radical feminist solution” and debating their relationships with their mothers. Should they return to their mothers and radicalize them so that they could object to their fathers or should they leave them in ignorance? By contrast, the African women in the room shared “how inexplicably close they felt to their mothers/daughters” and how this resulted in mutuality around issues like this. This radical division within feminist experience leads Petersen to question the idea of biologically-inscribed universal sisterhood.

After I reread this article I realized this is often the sensation (although to a much lesser degree) I get when engaging Catholic feminists on issues of sexual ethics, specifically around procreation. I’ve seen this gap in the Catholic experience/educational milieu, if not religious identity, of the women who run the excellent WIT blog. One good example is the piece Katie wrote on [Natural Family Planning](#).

When I thought about responding to this post I wasn’t sure where to begin, the divide felt so wide. The reasons women in my circles (young Duke religion/divinity grads in their mid-20s), including myself, chose to engage Natural Family Planning was that the practice felt like a radical break from the culture of procreation from which we emerged. Our educated evangelical Protestantism provided very little narrative on procreative ethics. We got irreconcilable snapshots we had to reconcile: don’t have sex until your married, but don’t get married until you’ve

established a career; don't you dare get pregnant because we will never forgive you but babies are a blessing; abortion is absolutely wrong but we actually want children who look just like their parents (and feel free to keep hundreds of your embryos on ice); wait as long as you can to have children and then are no limits to what you can do to produce the children you want. Sexual ethics as a strange mix of commodification, fetishism with self-production, capitalist ambition/Protestant work ethic, unreserved use of reproductive technologies tethered by conservative social ethics. Can you see why we were confused, and angry? (If you'd like a documented history of this phenomenon see Amy Laura Hall's [*Conceiving Parenthood: American Protestantism and the Spirit of Reproduction.*](#))

Let me be clear, I don't think anyone I know wishes we had *Humane Vitae* clawing at our heels as we navigate these waters. *HV* largely does not make sense to me for many of the reasons Katie points out in her post. I'm also aware that I am not bound to consistency nor do we have to navigate a sense of moral and ethical failure that comes with questioning or abandoning NFP. I've had a few friends who negotiated horrific pregnancies back to back, or who struggled with debilitating post-partum depression, whose bodies desperately needed a break. Others navigate prescription-regulated medical conditions and those medications would imperil the life of a fetus. While I am often weary of the failure in my tradition to be able to say anything about sexual ethics I can appreciate the freedom to say "we tried this and it isn't working" or "we need to rethink this in light of these experiences."

But the ability to engage NFP did feel like a way to give the finger to every one of those horrifying YAZ commercials that colonized our understanding of procreative ethics, personhood and self-fulfillment. On the positive side I think many of us encountered the idea of hospitality in a new and radical way. So while it is important for me to drop in on WIT to remember that there's no golden ticket that's going to get us out of complexities of procreation and birth control, and that the ticket offered by the magisterium comes at much too high a price, I do wish there were more Protestant voices who attest to the ways in which NFP provides opportunities to confront our experience of a toxic

non-tradition.

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