

## ON BIRTH CONTROL\*

ON both sides of the Atlantic birth control has become the subject of much interest, and is discussed by politicians, social reformers, and religious leaders. A book advocating it has had an immense circulation, and has been followed by a book attacking it. Very recently a report has been issued by a special committee appointed by the National Council of Public Morals in England. The history of the enquiry goes back to 1918 when with official recognition this National Council of Public Morals established the National Birth-rate Commission. This commission had as president the Bishop of Winchester, and consisted of men and women in various walks including clergymen, physicians, and social workers. Among those who gave evidence before it were Lord Dawson of Penn, the Bishop of Guildford, Mr. Harold Cox, and Lady Barrett. The committee explained that it dealt solely with the ethics of birth control within the married state; and that a Christian outlook was assumed, which meant that life was lived with a background of Eternity;

that the formation of character concerns our future as well as our present existence; that self gratification is not the true purpose of life, and that the family is a Divine institution. The committee thought that each couple should look forward to a family of four or five children at the least, but it expressed sympathy for persons in straightened circumstances who resort to contraceptive methods in fear of grave difficulties in bringing up a family of even moderate size. The report deprecated the exaggerated notion of some parents who assumed that a public school and a university education were necessary for every child. The committee recognized the serious drawbacks to parentage arising from the high cost of living and the inadequacy of housing. The main conclusions of the committee are stated as follows:

1. The comparatively modern practice of conception control, and in particular the artificial methods, call for fuller investigation from the medical, economic and religious standpoints.
2. The use of contraceptives is a

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symptom of the artificial character of our civilization whereby for large numbers a normal married life is difficult and in some cases all but impossible.

3. In numerous cases control of conception, apart from the question of the methods, is medically necessary and economically advisable, but all the circumstances should be weighed in the light of the best available scientific and ethical counsel.
4. While there are persons approaching the matter from the highest motives in whose judgment the use of contraceptives is justifiable, the practice opens the door to grave social perils, and a serious responsibility lies on married people who adopt it.
5. Our knowledge is not such as to justify either the advocacy or the condemnation of these means on the ground of alleged dangers of overpopulation; but within the British Empire the time is ripe for a campaign of empire-settlement and redistribution of population.
6. The weightiest argument for birth control is found in the economic circumstances (wages, inadequate housing and the like) of many.
7. The capacities for self-control, especially in young persons, are often underrated, and their training in this respect, as also in the ideals of married life, is a primary duty.

While on the subject of birth control it may be interesting to some of our readers

to note the legal opinion given by Sir Travers Humphreys in answer to the question asked by the Council of the British Medical Association as to whether the operation for the sterilization of those who were mental defectives, either children or adults, performed by a surgeon for the purpose of preventing the procreation of degenerate or mentally abnormal offspring, would be legally admissible, Sir Travers Humphreys stated that he was of the opinion that any medical man who performed such an operation would, in the present state of law, be acting illegally and without any legal justification, except it could be shown that the operation was necessary to the health or well being of the patient. The legal risks, if such an operation were performed, would attach equally to all the persons concerned; that is, to the doctor, who performed it and to the parent or guardian who sanctioned it. An indictment for the offence of unlawfully wounding (Offences against the Person Act) might be taken against the surgeon, and an action for damages might be brought by the defective, through his or her next friend, in the same way as actions are now brought by infants. The only means at the present sanctioned by law for preventing the propagation of the unfit, consists in the segregation of such persons in licensed institutions. It may be added that at the meeting of Council at which the above opinion was read, Dr. Fothergill stated that Lord Riddell in a recent paper before the Medico-legal Society had put forward an opinion in some respects contrary to that expressed by Sir Travers Humphreys.