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Claire Greslé-Favier, *“Raising Sexually Pure Kids”*: *Sexual Abstinence, Conservative Christians and American Politics* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi Press, 2009, \$93.00). Pp. vii + 276. ISBN 978 90 420 2678 0.

For those who live outside the United States, the promotion of abstinence as the preferred means of sex education for young people – and the subsequent rise in teen pregnancies – may seem hard to comprehend. As Claire Greslé-Favier points out in her study *“Raising Sexually Pure Kids”*, most American public schools teach abstinence as the most effective form of birth control and protection from sexually transmitted diseases. In many schools, abstinence from sexual activity is taught as the *only* method of protection from HIV, STDs and pregnancy. Until Barack Obama became the President of the United States, the federal government itself openly supported “abstinence-only” programmes and repeated claims originating from the Christian Right that sex before marriage is a cause of teen depression, suicide and social decay. How can it be that the United States, a country with easy access to many forms of birth control and sexually transmitted disease prevention methods, has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the industrialized world? Why were abstinence programmes funded by the Bush administration when they clearly did not work? Why were the opinions of relatively marginal pundits on the Christian Right about the dangers of premarital sex and the rewards of abstinence “pledges” for teens circulated so freely in American society in the early years of the twenty-first century despite the lack of any credible evidence to support their claims? In this book on the politics and rhetoric of abstinence teaching within some circles of conservative Christianity, Greslé-Favier looks at the reasons why conservative Christians made abstinence such an important part of their political lobbying from the 1980s onward, and attempts to explain how these teachings became part of government policy and funding initiatives until George W. Bush left office. In the process, Greslé-Favier argues that it is vital to understand what religious conservatives think about abstinence since they have had such an impact on what Americans think about social issues. If it is true that nations manage threats from beyond their borders by attempting to achieve social purity within them, then abstinence is worth examining as a political issue. But attempts to socially control young people’s bodies by threats, scare tactics and promises simply do not work. Just as Prohibition helped to increase the power of the modern Mafia and the war on drugs did almost nothing to prevent the spread of hard drug use in the United States, so abstinence education seems at best a pipe dream of the Christian Right, and at worst a campaign to deprive American youth and their families of the information they should get to help them make choices about their bodies and lives.

Greslé-Favier attempts to provide a clear picture of what she calls conservative Christian ideas about abstinence before she deals in detail with selected examples of pro-abstinence discourse in the United States. Her examples are limited, but instructive: she plows through the work of Tim and Beverly LaHaye, fundamentalist Christian public intellectuals and activists who have tirelessly campaigned in favour of abstinence; the publications of Meg Meeker, a conservative Christian doctor; and attempts by the conservative Heritage Foundation and Rebecca Hagelin to convince

the American public of the virtues of returning to the values of the idealized nuclear family from decades past. After bravely soldiering through material which anyone but a fundamentalist Protestant would find distasteful, Greslé-Favier discusses how various programmes were created by the government to fund abstinence education. But Greslé-Favier is not able to prove why the government responded in this way because George W. Bush never publicly stated the reasons. She concludes that the Bush administration focussed on abstinence education as a way to enforce traditional hierarchies and social control by drawing on discourses of moral panic regarding American youth (236). In this, they were aided by those conservative Protestants who saw themselves as the bulwark against American social decline in their protection of young people from ideas which run contrary to their own values. These conclusions are well substantiated with meticulous research but they are hardly earth-shattering. It is clear to anyone who reads or listens to the opinions of right-wing Christian pundits that their ideas about abstinence are connected to their doctrine and political beliefs, and it is also clear that the Bush administration supported programmes like abstinence-only education because many political conservatives in that administration were also social conservatives. Other theorists, historians, sociologists and theologians have covered much of the same ground. However, Greslé-Favier's contention that it is worthwhile to look at the mobilization of abstinence sex education and moral panics about sex in the United States is convincing, whether or not the calls for the teaching of abstinence in America go the way of temperance activism from an earlier time.

*University of Alberta*

JULIE RAK