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Get Off or Get Up and Pray: Religiosity and Women's Sexuality

The double standard that a woman can either fully enjoy her sexuality or embody the ideal religious devotee (but never both) has persisted for centuries through patriarchal influence. Christianity, one of the world's largest religions to date, is firmly rooted in theologies that affirm sex is merely a means for reproduction and argue any pleasure found within is to sin. Stereotypes such as "the whore" vs. "the pure virgin" present in the Bible create inner conflict within Christian women. Research now reflects the reality that faithful women are less comfortable within their sexuality. In this case, sexuality refers to the perception of one's sexual identity whereas religiosity is the degree to which one experiences religious feelings/beliefs.

Abbott et al. (2016) supports this hypothesis in a within-subjects design, recruiting 196 female undergraduates in a university of the Southwest of the U.S. to fill out five different questionnaires measuring their sexual self-esteem, religious commitment, level of religious fundamentalism, sexual attitudes and their perceptions of God's view of sex. Accordingly, Abbott and colleagues (2016) had five scales of measurement for each of their five hypotheses, but this paper only examines the three pertaining to the topic at hand: Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (RCI-10), Sexual Self-Esteem for Women (SSEI-W), Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale (BSAS). Within RCI-10, participants were asked to rate statements such as "I spend time growing in my faith" from 1 representing "not at all true of me" through 5 representing "totally true of me" to measure participants' religiosity. In SSEI-W, participants were asked to rate statements such as "I feel I am pretty good at sex" from 1 representing strongly disagree through 6 representing strongly agree to gauge participants' sexual self-esteem. In BSAS, participants were asked to rate statements such as "casual sex is acceptable" to ascertain participants' sexual

dispositions. Researchers then used statistical models to compute correlations (or lack thereof) between the three factors.

As predicted, religious commitment was significantly negatively correlated with sexual attitudes; religious women were more likely to perceive sex in a serious, procreational light rather than a leisurely recreational manner. This effect was observed regardless of the magnitude of one's religiosity in that highly religious women and less religious women shared similar sexual attitudes. Abbott et al. (2016) also discover that religious commitment is negatively correlated with the moral judgement subscale of the SSEI-W which means religious women are less likely to perceive their sexual behaviors as aligned to their moral standards. In addition, religious commitment was also negatively correlated with the adaptiveness subscale of the SSEI-W which displays that religious women are less likely to be pleased with the role sex plays in their lives. These results suggest that there is a dissonance between women's religious beliefs and their sexual behaviors which can create shame within one's sexuality over time.

While Abbott et al. (2016) included several markers of sexuality and religiosity in their methods, their results are not generalizable due to a relatively small sample size, conflict in values for recruited participants, and lack of range in sexual experience. Since Abbott et al.'s study was conducted among female first-year students, one would need to account for the effect created by the transition from living under parental values to developing individual values in college as well as participants' ages. Most first-year students are 18 years old which does not guarantee a wide range in sexual experience for participants to respond from within surveys.

Luckily, Davidson and colleagues (1995) improve upon these shortcomings in a similar study where questionnaires were mailed out to 868 female nurses across the U.S. They targeted nurses specifically due to their formal education in female anatomy and ability to answer

questions about their sexual experiences in more depth. The questionnaire asked questions regarding participants' age, religious denomination, number of orgasms experienced per sexual episode, perceptions of sexual response during orgasm, and reasons for avoidance of sex/masturbation. Religiosity was measured formally through church attendance as well as informally through questions that asked women to compare how religious they thought they were to others around them. It's also worthwhile to note that the relationship status of participants was varied in this study.

There were several compelling pieces of evidence from Davidson et al. (1995)'s results, but the two that illustrate their hypothesis most clearly are that a) women who attended church frequently (weekly or monthly) were less likely to have sex and/or oral sex and b) experiencing guilt with masturbation was correlated with church attendance. This linear relationship between church attendance and sex/masturbation is further verification that faithful women tend to experience more discomfort within their sexual identities.

As discussed, religiosity predicted discomfort in relation to one's sexuality in both studies: Abbott et al. (2016) showcase said dis-ease within a small group of female undergraduate students whereas Davidson et al. (1995) expand the findings to nurses, varying in age, religious denomination, and relationship status, throughout the U.S. Why is this so? The list of possible explanations ranges from religious teachings inspiring shame in fulfilling one's sexual needs to the perfect patriarchal portrayal of what a woman is (and isn't) to feeling the ever-present gaze of "Moralizing Gods" as described by McKay and Whitehouse (2015). From "waiting till marriage" to "consummating a marriage," it's no secret that there are religious teachings/practices in place which inhibit a religious woman's sexual freedom in society. If one's learned religious beliefs conflict with their sexual needs/desires, the subconscious stress of not

living in full alignment with either domain will be present. Not to mention, within certain religious texts such as the Bible, a woman's worth is tied to her virginity. Faithful women may feel hesitant to pursue their sexual desires out of fear of losing value within their community. Also, as studied in class, there is a high likelihood that faithful women are more uncomfortable within their sexuality because they feel as though there is a god watching them, policing what is "right" and "wrong" in terms of their sexual behaviors. Or most likely, a deadly dosage of all three factors provokes the post-masturbatory (or post-sex) guilt many faithful women encounter.

Although there is convincing evidence from both Abbott et al. (2016) and Davidson et al. (1995), there are many gaps to be filled in the future. The results from both studies only apply to Christian women and only involve one WEIRD society (the U.S.). Furthermore, both samples only include heterosexual women which narrows the scope of generalizability. Future studies should focus on replicating the same findings but among a) women from different cultures (preferably non-WEIRD ones), b) women from different religions and c) women with different sexual orientations. Another major downfall of aforementioned studies is the lack of applicability of results to women who are spiritual, but not religious. It would be particularly interesting to see how Abbott et al. (2016) and Davidson et al. (1995)'s results translate to those that consider themselves to believe in an entity beyond themselves, but do not subscribe to any major identifiable religion. Further research within this domain is imperative not only to solidify existing claims, but to shape sexual education imparted to young girls in religious settings. Changing religious narratives to be inclusive of the multidimensionality of women increases equality between men and women in religious settings, but most importantly, outside of religious settings as well.

References

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