

# Sexuality in Africa

M A G A Z I N E

VOL 2 ISSUE 2, 2005



*Two women in Egypt pretest educational materials on Mesigyna, an injectable contraceptive. The conceptualization of women's bodies and sexuality as belonging to men, their families and society, and insufficient sexual and reproductive health services remain significant challenges in Muslim societies.*

*Photo credit: © 2000 CCP, Courtesy of Photoshare*

## **Sexuality As A Contested Domain In Muslim Societies**

Pinar Ilkkaracan

## **'Urfi Marriage in Egypt: The Issues**

## **The Church Should Play Its Role**

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Dlamini



Sexuality in Africa Magazine is published in Lagos by Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre (ARSRC) and is distributed without charge until otherwise indicated

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ISSN 0189-7667

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# Feature

## Sexuality as a Contested Domain in Muslim Societies

· By **Pinar Ilkcaracan**,  
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*A woman and her infant attend a one-day event promoting family planning and reproductive health among youth in Port Said, Egypt. "The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence." Photo credit: © 2001 William Mackie/CCP, Courtesy of Photoshare*

**Introduction**  
Sexuality and gender equality, matters that are inextricably linked, have been highly politicized issues in almost all Muslim countries. Although a general consensus on the need for modernization efforts in the technical, administrative and financial domains has been remarkably visible even among antagonistic political

actors and movements, reforms targeting gender relations and the private sphere have remained notably controversial. While the modernists have in general argued for gender equality and, to a degree, for sexual liberation, the traditionalists / Islamic conservatives have subsequently and deliberately attempted to exert their control on issues related to sexuality, struggling to preserve their interpretation of their respective society's "religious and moral values," and to maintain or in some cases regain their dominance especially in the private sphere, namely, regarding the status of women in the family and the regulation of sexual behavior.

**Sexual Behavior.**  
In the last decades, issues around sexuality and women's bodies have increasingly become sites of political contestation in Muslim societies due to the contradictory impacts of socio-economic and political developments. For instance in the Middle East and North Africa, existing space for liberal reforms, including those concerning sexuality have tightened due to factors including the rise of the Islamic religious right, increasing mass support for religious right ideologies and increased militarization and new wars. On the other hand, several other factors—such as the rise of new feminist and civil movements, globalization, the increasing influence of a global human rights discourse, and changing

socio-economic conditions affecting population patterns—have led to the emergence of new discourses, demands and patterns regarding sexual behavior pushing for change from below.

**Sexual Rights**  
Since the beginning of the 90's, a growing number of NGOs in the region have started advocating for sexual and bodily rights on issues ranging from eradication of customary practices such as honor killings<sup>1</sup> female genital mutilation (FGM) or forced virginity tests to sex education, legal recognition of women's sexual autonomy in the penal codes and the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) persons.

**Sexual Politics**  
Recently, sexual politics and customary practices such as honor crimes, virginity testing, FGM, forced marriages and stoning of adulterers have also become subjects of media, academic and political attention in the West. The post 9/11 context has contributed significantly to the erroneous portrayal of such practices as Islamic, or as resulting from the conservative culture of the 'other,' i.e., Muslim. It is strikingly paradoxical that such practices are regarded as 'Islamic' in the West, considering that they have come to the international agenda as a result



***The Vatican and conservative Muslim and Catholic states, backed by some African and Latin American countries, have continued to oppose inclusion of diverse sexual rights in UN documents***

of the successful campaigns of Muslim feminist movements, struggling to raise public consciousness that these practices are not only blatant human rights violations, but are also in contradiction with the essence of Islam.

The post 9/11 context has also increased the dilemmas faced by activists, scholars and health professionals advocating for human rights issues around sexuality in Muslim societies. Many feel that international engagement in the promotion of these rights ironically serves to exacerbate existing stereotypes both about Muslim—as suppressed, passive or unable to defend their rights—and about Muslim societies—as backward, static and having a culture that is irreconcilable with ‘Western values.’

#### **Sexuality - Contested Domain**

The notion of ‘sexual rights’ first appeared on the international agenda during preparations for the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo. Put forward by advocates from the international women’s health movement, the term was ultimately not incorporated into the final consensus document of the conference, the ICPD Program of Action; as reaching a consensus on the term “reproductive rights” proved challenging enough, however, the document did include several allusions to sexual rights.<sup>2</sup> A year later, ‘sexual rights’ became a topic of major debate at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, where an alliance of conservative Muslim and Catholic

delegations strongly objected to its use. Despite the fierce opposition of conservative forces to the inclusion of ‘sexual rights,’ a global alliance of women from all religious and cultural backgrounds succeeded in the inclusion of paragraph 96 in the Beijing Platform for Action: “The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.”

#### **Ferocious Battles**

The Vatican and conservative Muslim and Catholic states, backed by some African and Latin American countries, have continued to oppose inclusion of diverse sexual rights in UN documents since the Beijing Conference. Several subsequent UN events—the Beijing+5 conference in 2000, the UN Special Session on HIV/AIDS in 2001, the Special Session on Children in 2002, the Fifth Asian and Pacific Population Conference in 2002, the 59th and 60th Sessions of the UN Human Rights Commission held in 2003 and 2004 and the 49th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in March 2005—witnessed ferocious battles over issues of sexual rights, sex education, abortion and sexual orientation.

The leadership of conservative Muslim and Christian states with the Vatican, opposing *any* references to sexual, bodily and reproductive rights, has shifted of late, as under the current Bush government the U.S. has become a powerful champion of this perspective, particularly in its stand against abortion and sex education and its promotion of sexual

abstinence as the best form of HIV/AIDS prevention, as evidenced by US rhetoric and policy on related international development and national issues.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Sexual Orientation**

On the issue of sexual orientation, however, a majority of Muslim states remain at the forefront of opposition to any attempts to recognize sexual orientation as a UN-protected human right. At the 1995 Beijing Conference, the majority of the twenty states opposed to the inclusion of references to sexual orientation in the outcome document were Muslim, and not a single Muslim country was among the thirty-three states expressing support for their inclusion.<sup>4</sup>

In 2003 and 2004, a resolution introduced by Brazil at the 59th and 60th Sessions of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, urging states to protect and promote the human rights of all persons regardless of sexual orientation, created a storm. The first attempt to introduce the resolution in 2003 was blocked by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia Malaysia, Libya, Egypt and Bahrain, with the support of some other countries under pressure from the Vatican. Mexico and Costa Rica, which initially stood in favor, eventually bowed to pressure from Vatican to oppose the resolution. [1]

The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in a letter urged all delegates to vote against the resolution, claiming it was politically incorrect and “a direct insult to the 1.2 billion Muslims in the world.” [2] A year later in 2004, the resolution was postponed yet another year, in the face of pressure from the OIC, Arab states and the Vatican. Among Muslim countries, Middle Eastern states, particularly Iran, Egypt, Pakistan, Libya, Iraq and Sudan have taken the lead in opposing any rights related to sexual orientation.

#### **Taboos**

The taboos around sexual orientation in Middle Eastern states constitute a profound example of hypocrisy regarding sexual morale in the region, as there is widespread evidence and a collective knowledge that homosexuality has been widely



practiced in the region for centuries. Despite the relative visibility of male transvestite popular singers and artists, the 'public' silence shrouding non-heterosexual behavior remains exceptionally strong. However, whether the picture drawn by the voting patterns of Middle Eastern governments at the UN meetings is representative of the region in general is questionable. Over the last decade, despite a threatening environment and laws criminalizing homosexuality except in Turkey, Tunisia and Iraq, sexual minorities have become more and more visible.

In Turkey and Lebanon, there are several NGOs and initiatives with the publicly declared aim of working for the recognition of human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.<sup>5</sup> The effective use of the Internet by sexual minorities has contributed significantly to the creation of new informal and formal networks, information channels and opportunities for gays, lesbians and trans-gender people on both the national and regional levels, even in countries where homosexuality is criminalized. Yet, the strong threat of legal prohibitions, as well as social stigmas associated with homosexuality, continue to severely constrain advocacy in the public arena by members of the LGBT communities.

### Challenges

Taboos around sexuality; women's limited ownership of their bodies; diverse customary practices that constitute major human rights violations; the discriminatory nature of laws related to sexuality which lead to severe human rights violations; the discrepancies between law and practice; the conceptualization of women's bodies and sexuality as belonging to men, their families and society, and insufficient sexual and reproductive health services remain significant challenges in Muslim societies.<sup>6</sup> Laws, policies and practices that aim to control women's sexual autonomy and to confine sexuality within the

## ***Despite changing socio-economic factors and demographic and epidemiological patterns—including increased premarital sex among young people and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS... reforms addressing sexuality are met with various obstacles***

framework of marriage lead to several human rights violations of women, young people and sexual minorities.

Despite changing socio-economic factors and demographic and epidemiological patterns—including increased premarital sex among young people and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS—necessitating programs addressing sexual health and sex education, reforms addressing sexuality are met with various obstacles: social taboos, particularly concerning any sexual behavior outside of marriage including adolescent sexuality, non- and extra-marital or same-sex relationships; alliances between political systems and conservative religious groups; male attitudes and traditional gender constructs; legal and policy restrictions and finally the threat of stigmatization for anyone working on issues related to sexuality.

### Changing Context

Nonetheless, the '90s witnessed the emergence of new feminist and human rights movements increasingly questioning the control of women's sexuality by men and society. A solidarity network of NGOs and academicians, actively working toward promotion of sexual and bodily rights in the Middle East and North Africa, was initiated in 2001. Since then, it has expanded to include more member organizations both in the Middle East and South/Southeast Asia.<sup>7</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Honor killing is a term used for the murder of a woman suspected of having transgressed the limits on sexual behavior as

imposed by traditions, specifically engaging in a pre-marital relationship with the opposite sex or suspected extra-marital affairs.

<sup>2</sup> See Barbara Klugman, (2000) "Sexual Rights in Southern Africa: A Beijing Discourse or a Strategic Necessity?" *Health and Human Rights* 4, no. 2: 145-173; Sonia Correa (1997) "From Reproductive Health to Sexual Rights: Achievements and Future Challenges," *Reproductive Health Matters*, 5, no. 10: 107-116.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed study of Bush government's policies on sexuality, see Francoise Girard (2004) *Global Implications of U.S. Domestic and International Policies on Sexuality*, (New York: International Working Group on Sexuality and Social Policy.).

<sup>4</sup> The twenty states opposed were Algeria, Bangladesh, Belize, Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Egypt, Ghana, Guatemala, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan, Syria, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, Venezuela and Yemen. See Douglas Sanders (2003) "Human Rights and Sexual Orientation in International Law," [http://www.ai-lgbt.org/resources\\_other.htm](http://www.ai-lgbt.org/resources_other.htm), 24.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Lambda and Kaos GL in Turkey and Helem in Lebanon.

<sup>6</sup> See Liz Ercevik Amado (2004) *Sexual and Bodily Rights as Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: A Workshop Report* (Istanbul: WWHR – NEW WAYS).

<sup>7</sup> The network is coordinated by Women for Women's Human Rights – NEW WAYS. For more information on the activities of the network, see <http://www.wwhr.org>.

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## 2

## Issue in Focus

# Urfi Marriage in Egypt: The Issues

· The article is culled from the  
· entry "Urfi marriage"  
· ([www.AnsweringIslam.info/  
Index/U/urfi\\_marriage.html](http://www.AnsweringIslam.info/Index/U/urfi_marriage.html))  
· in the Index to Islam provided  
· by the website  
· [www.AnsweringIslam.info](http://www.AnsweringIslam.info)

*Urfi marriage is perhaps one of the most contentious sexuality issues that affects young people in Egypt today. This article brings the issue into perspective.*



*Group wedding party held at El Minya Stadium in Egypt last year. Undocumented 'Urfi marriages are increasingly popular among Egyptian youth. The high cost of marriage forces many young couples to wait several years before they marry. Photo credit: Omar Mohsin, Courtesy of Photoshare*

## Urfi (Secret) Marriage

Undocumented 'Urfi marriages are increasingly popular among Egyptian youth. The high cost of marriage forces many young couples to wait several years before they marry. Conservative Egyptian society forbids sex before marriage, so many young people consider the 'Urfi marriage a solution. 'Urfi marriages are conducted by a Muslim cleric in the presence of two witnesses. However, they are not officially registered and are not financially binding on the man.

If the shariah defines something, all

Muslims must follow that definition. If the shariah is silent on an issue, Muslims should follow the 'Urfi definition. [1] The 'Urfi is a marriage without an official contract. Couples repeat the words, "We got married" and pledge commitment before God. Usually a paper, stating that the two are married, is written and two witnesses sign it [2].

## Consequences

Couples married in this way often meet in secret and avoid the

expense of renting an apartment. The 'Urfi marriage can be disastrous for the wife because if the husband leaves her without granting her a divorce, she had no legal right to seek a divorce since 'Urfi marriage was considered illegal under the old status law. While her husband could remarry, the wife is in a more difficult position. If the wife remarries, she could be accused of polyandry which is punishable by seven years in prison in Egypt. The alternative course of action is for her to remain single for the rest of her life.

## Islamic Jurisprudence

There are three criteria for defining legal issues in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*):

**Shari** : Something that is clearly defined in the shariah.

**'Urfi** : Conventional or common tradition. An 'Urfi definition is acceptable to the common people without any scientific or *Shari* precision.

**Ilmi** : A definition presented by science.

Rizvi, 1994



***While the new Egyptian law recognizes the woman's right to seek divorce from an 'Urfi marriage, the law however denies her alimony and child support.***

**New Personal Status Law**

The Egyptian government did not recognize 'Urfi marriages until the year 2000 and the paper from the marriage could be used only to prove the relationship in court. A woman could not get a divorce since the government did not recognize the marriage in the first place. Under the new personal status law passed on January 29, 2000 however, divorces from 'Urfi marriages are now recognized. While the new Egyptian law recognizes the woman's right to seek divorce from an 'Urfi marriage, the law however denies her alimony and child support.

According to Madiha Al Safty , Professor of Sociology at the American University in Cairo, the 'Urfi marriage has always existed, but for different reasons:

"In the past, it was common among the widows of soldiers who had huge pensions and they did not want to lose it by officially re-marrying. Now, however, it is mostly among university students and young couples who cannot afford the high cost of marriage." [3]

**Controversial Forms**

There are also controversial, unofficial 'Urfi marriages, where a couple signs documents declaring themselves married. The couple

does not inform their families of the marriage. Many Egyptian clerics are against this type of 'Urfi marriage calling it a cover for pre-marital sex. An extreme form of 'Urfi marriage is known as *zawag al-'urfi*.

"To give prostitution an Islamic cover, some women enter into secret marriage contracts with their summer visitors. Known in Egypt as *zawag al-'urfi*, this contract is made without witnesses and typically ends in divorce by summer's end. Most of Egypt's Islamic scholars condemn this use of *zawag al-'urfi*." [4]

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2. Allam, A. (2000) Urfi delivers the goods, at half the price, *Middle East Times (International Edition)* February 18. <http://www.metimes.com/articles/normal.php?StoryID=20000218-042017-5260r> (accessed on July 13, 2005)
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4. El-Gawhary, K. (1995) Sex Tourism in Cairo in *Middle East Report 196*, Vol. 25, no. 5, September-October



# 3

# Regional Watch

## The Church, Youth and Sexuality in Kenya

By Lucy Wambui Kangara,  
Postgraduate Student and  
Teaching Assistant, University  
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A member of the clergy and an AIDS activist: "For the church to remain relevant, it has to be in touch with young people's needs and realities" Photo Credit: USAID Photo Gallery

### Introduction

In Kenya, issues of sexuality are not dealt with openly despite the increased sexualised mass media. Sexuality is shrouded in silence and secrecy and it often elicits feelings of shame and embarrassment rather than joy [1]. For decades sexuality, just like death, has been wrapped in silence. Yet, many studies in Kenya have shown that sexual activity starts during adolescence [2]. Much of this activity is risky and it is characterized by unwanted pregnancy, school dropout, unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS and reduced employment opportunities. In several studies in Kenyatta National Hospital, 53 percent of abortion seekers are under 25 years, 15.3 percent under 20 years and often are single and still

in school [3].

### Church and Sexuality in Kenya

Despite the social changes that have occurred in the lives of Kenyans, religious institutions continue to celebrate an era of chastity and sexual conservatism. In an era of sexual freedom, many religious institutions still hinder the implementation of sexuality education programmes that can guide and assist its members survive in today's global sex culture. In a world that is characterised by technological advancement and increased connectivity, people are confronted with sexuality issues on a daily basis - through television, radio, music, newspapers, magazines, advertisements, and the dress culture - making it impossible to escape the

invasion. Without adequate information about their sexuality, people face a risk of being swallowed up by a culture that does not rhyme with the doctrine they receive in religious institutions. While churches need to preserve the sanctity of marriage, such an objective can only be attained if people possess adequate knowledge of their sexuality and how to express it within a changing society.

### Challenges

Sexuality issues are seen and understood as largely private activities, subject to varying degrees of social, cultural, religious, moral and legal norms. As a pastor in Kenya puts it "we do sex; we do not talk about it. If you want me to drive people out of my church, I'll preach about it." Adolescent sexuality exists side by side with a prohibitive silence to the extent that some parents offer contraceptives and even arrange abortions for their daughters but deny these at the public level [4]. Another key challenge for all sex and sexuality research is how to generate unbiased information from the respondents. Very few people are willing to talk about sensitive and sometimes socially censured attitudes or behaviours; especially in the rural areas. Issues of sexuality are shrouded in taboos and myths. For example, boys are told that abstaining from sex will result in serious backache caused by accumulation of sperm in the backbone. In certain ethnic groups that regard fat women as beautiful, girls are made to believe that frequent sex will broaden their hips,



lighten their skin colour and make them fatter [5].

### **Rationale for the Study**

During the Inaugural meeting of the advisory council of Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre in June 2003 in Nigeria, one of the issues that was identified as a key sexuality issue for the Kenyan sub-region was, Addressing sexuality in “silenced spaces” especially young people’s access to factual and positive information about their sexuality [6]. Many social institutions in Kenya continue to embrace silence rather than open dialogue in dealing with young people’s sexuality. There has been a culture of “passing the buck” with regard to the social institutions that ought to undertake sexuality education. The family passes the responsibility to the school, the churches to the family and the school passes it back to the family. It is with this backdrop that my research investigated what Christian churches are doing to create space and a conducive environment for young people to discuss sexuality issues openly without fear or guilt.

### **Research Objectives**

The study examines the role played by Kenyan churches in supporting sexuality information dissemination and how the churches’ doctrines about sexuality influence the sexuality of young Kenyans. This study also sought to determine whether young people in Kenyan churches receive factual and positive information about sexuality.

### **Study Design**

My research employed qualitative methodology which was found to be more appropriate because the main focus of the study was to describe the ways respondents define, experience, and constitute their world of sexuality [7]. Since human interaction provides the basis for data collection, this method has been hailed as providing rich, in depth knowledge about beliefs, attitudes, values and norms related to people’s behaviour.

The study targeted Christian adolescents from Catholic, Anglican and Pentecost churches who are in and out of school in Mukinduri village in Kirinyaga district, Kenya. The study area is a rural setting. The village is located approximately 150 kilometres north of Kenya’s capital city of Nairobi. Two focus group discussions were conducted, each with eight participants. Each group consisted of four girls and four boys from different church denominations. The study used focus group discussions with the adolescents and informal interviews with some pastors. To obtain information on topics such as sexuality and religion it is important to engage with respondents’ lived experiences and perspectives as well as the feelings and perspectives of other persons [8]. In addition, two in-depth interviews were conducted with the young people and three individual interviews with the pastor/priest/church elders.

### **Findings**

#### *Positive Steps by Churches*

The United Church has developed programmes aimed at educating youth about sexuality issues. Working in collaboration with the Kenyan Alliance for the Advancement of Children’s Rights (KAACR), children have been encouraged and supported to form rights clubs facilitated by teachers. Through such clubs, the United Church and its partners have been able to organise discussions with youths about puberty, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV/AIDS<sup>1</sup>. Through drama and other enter-educate techniques, youths have been assisted to understand sexual maturation and its implications.

In 2000, the African Inland Church in Kenya (AIC) endorsed the introduction of HIV/AIDS lessons in all Kenyan primary and secondary schools. Catherine Anyona, the AIC’s HIV/AIDS project coordinator maintains that it is imperative for all religious institutions to help the youth towards eradicating the scourge. She contends that church involvement in AIDS and sexuality education constitutes a necessary step towards equipping the youth with the necessary ammunition to fight the disease. This view is also held by the Kenyan Christian Students Fellowship, that maintains that the introduction of classes on HIV/AIDS in Kenyan learning institutions

would save many Kenyan youths by encouraging them to avoid careless sexual behaviour<sup>2</sup>. Currently, Medical Assistance Programme (MAP-International) has developed a programme targeting the clergy (in Kenya and Ivory Coast). In collaboration with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and Family Health International, (FHI), MAP initiated the project – Integrated Action Against AIDS in Kenyan Churches to address the training needs of Kenyan church leaders, so as to better equip them to support the church community as they face various aspects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Conservatism*

Currently, some church denominations refuse to marry couples unless they have undergone an HIV test and have both emerged negative. This is to also reduce the work of the clergy, says the Rev. Simon Onyango of the Anglican Church, Homa Bay Cathedral in Nyanza province. He maintains that the church cannot preside over short-lived marriages only to be called upon to perform burial rites when the couples die after a few years in the union<sup>4</sup>.

The major weakness of the above initiatives is the fact that such have not been extended to the more rural areas of Kenya. The churches in the rural areas face a dilemma. On the one hand, they risk losing their congregations if they bring issues of sexuality and HIV/AIDS into the pulpit and on the other hand, if they keep quiet, the church will continue to lose its members to HIV/AIDS.

Findings from the focus group discussions showed that young people are still very conservative (especially those from the Catholic Church) in talking about sexuality issues. Being Christians, the topic was more of a no-go area for them. From the responses it was quite clear that sexuality issues were defined within the parameters of sexual relationship.

Respondent D, a boy from Pentecost Church commented that “if a girl starts a topic about “those things” I will definitely know she is loose and I will try to avoid her”. Another respondent B a Catholic indicated “if a church elder sees or knows that you are spending a lot of time with a boy, you are labelled as ‘immoral’ and others will be discouraged from associating with you. It is not easy to speak about sexual issues within the church. Where can one



start? And whom do you talk to?"

For all the participants in the FGDs, issues of sexuality are only discussed in the Church when young people are being warned about the ineffectiveness of condoms. For example, one participant, a Catholic boy said "we are told that condoms are only 70 percent safe, are best used by couples with HIV/AIDS, contraceptives should only be used by married couples for family planning and that some contraceptives cause cancer".

None of the young respondents mentioned church leaders or their parents as being the source of information about sexuality issues. Relationships between boys and girls are highly censored, as they are labelled "immoral".

On whether they can embrace sexuality discussion within the church, a girl from an Anglican Church said "as long as it is conducted by somebody from outside our Church because we will be a bit free to ask some questions".

#### *Church Elders' Views*

The widely acknowledged source of sexuality information was the magazine, television and teachers. When I asked a Pentecost elder what we should do, he said "I think we should let young people talk about these things among themselves because personally, I cannot talk about sex to young people". From the elder's response, one can see that they feel there is need to address sexuality issues but feel uncomfortable to talk about sex.

Church leaders are still battling on how to approach sexuality issues without offending their congregations. As a church elder from Pentecost Church said: "I have been an elder in this church for many years. I have brought up my children in the ways of God but I don't know where I went wrong. My first daughter decided to get married even before her fourth form results were out. My second-born is pregnant and at home. The shame is too much on me. Where did I go wrong? Can the church allow me to continue being an elder or will I just move to another church?"

When I asked him whether sexuality issues were discussed in his home, his response was: "Everyone knows about AIDS, the TV talks about it the whole day. I never thought my daughters could even think about sex because they were

born-again Christians and they were still very young and very active in Church affairs. And how can I talk about sex to my own daughters? It is not possible. I am a Christian".

#### **Silence and Denial**

While I was carrying out my research I attended two funerals for two different women whose spouses had died two years earlier. In one funeral there was absolute denial and the deaths of husband and wife were associated with witchcraft because the couple seemed to have been doing very well financially. The Catholic priest performed the rites and the lady was buried.

The second funeral was for a very close family friend and on one occasion when funeral arrangements were being discussed a member of the family of the deceased commented that "this disease is going to finish my family, what sin have we committed?" Yet during the funeral, the Anglican pastor performed the funeral rites without any reference to the cause of death. In both instances the sermons only concentrated on the virtues of the two ladies who were referred to as committed Christians whom God had called home.

Unfortunately, as the research has shown, denial and silence is not only on the part of the church leadership. The laity also live in denial. A church elder explained to me: "I have been preaching to young people about dangers of sex before marriage and HIV/AIDS and I had even started talking about AIDS in the funerals;, now come to the church, the young people have all moved to join the new churches".

#### **Conclusion**

The findings of this research indicate that sexuality within the church is still an uncomfortable topic and it is only mentioned in passing. Most adolescents who were interviewed indicated that they have many programmes within their churches, but they have never attended a sexuality discussion forum. They also indicated that most of what they know about, for example, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, STDs is mostly from school, their friends and the media.

Christian churches have done very little to create space for young people to discuss their sexuality freely. Sexuality information has been censored and we are having

young Christians in the rural areas making wrong decisions about their sexuality because influential institutions such as the churches have not taken up the responsibility to offer direction. For the church to remain relevant, it has to be in touch with young people's needs and realities and sexuality is one area young people are crying out to be helped and the church is continuing to ignore their plea on "moral" grounds. The church should create conducive environments for young people to discuss their sexuality without guilt.

#### **Notes**

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# 4

# Research Notes

## Religiosity and HIV Risk Among Adolescents in Accra: A Qualitative Analysis (Preliminary Findings from the Field)

By Katherine E. Beal, Research Affiliate, Institute for Statistical, Social, and Economic Research (ISSER), University of Ghana / doctoral candidate, Population and Reproductive Health, Harvard School of Public Health



Message in University of Ghana, Legon campus sponsored by Jeslave Gospel Communication Ministries Int./Ghana AIDS Commission. Photo credit: K. E. Beal, March 2004.

**This research study is part of a larger and on-going project that aims to contribute to the knowledge of sexual risk behaviour among youth in Ghana. Specifically, the focus is on the relationship between religion and sexual behaviours that put youth at risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.**

*“When a guy goes out with a girl and he gets to a time where he would feel like having intercourse with her, it’s his church, or his religious background that will push him back [from doing it].” – Male respondent, 18 years*

### Introduction

While sub-Saharan Africa has been the region hit hardest by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the differential rates of infection observed have been poorly understood. Adult prevalence rates of HIV range from 0.8% in Senegal to 38.8% in Swaziland. Rates have been consistently higher in Eastern and Southern Africa, as compared to West Africa, but there is still great diversity within this sub-region as well. For example, the rate in Ghana is 3.1%, while its neighbours have rates ranging from 4.1 % to 7.0%, in Togo and Cote d’Ivoire, respectively [1]. Not only are biological factors, such as male circumcision and the presence of sexually transmitted infections, given as possible reasons for these differences, but various social and cultural factors have also been postulated. Religion may well be one of these factors.

According to a worldwide study, West Africa is the most highly religious region, with 99% of people belonging to a religious denomination, 82% attending religious services regularly, 97% giving God high importance in their lives, and 95% believing

that there is a personal god or some sort of spirit or life force [2]. So, the question arises, “How does religion affect the health of West Africans?” Few studies to date have explored the impact that this religious involvement may have on the spread of HIV.

Recent studies have found that religion may indeed affect the spread of HIV in adults in Ghana. Religious affiliation was shown to have an impact on the knowledge of HIV/AIDS, but not on specific protective behaviours of women [3]. Being actively involved in one’s religious organization and worshipping at the same location for more than 20 years were both associated with reduced risk of HIV infection among blood donors [4]. We do not know if these relationships hold true for younger Ghanaians. There is some evidence to suggest that being highly religious protects young people against the risks associated with alcohol, tobacco and other drug use, suicide and sexual behaviours [5,6,7,8,9,10]. However, many of these relationships have not been tested in African contexts. This study attempts to understand what role religion plays in the risk behaviours of adolescents in Ghana.

### Research Objectives

The main question that frames this research is, “To what extent is religion shaping the sexual and reproductive lives of young people today?” Some of the questions being explored in the overall project are the following: (a) What effect does religion have on the sexual attitudes and behaviours of Ghanaian youth (with a specific focus on STI/HIV prevention)? (b) Are there differences in youth’s HIV/AIDS knowledge, attitudes, perceptions of risk, sources of information and



behaviours based on their denominational affiliations? (c) What is the relationship between religiosity and STI/HIV risk? (d) Are there gender differences in the relationship between religion and sexuality? Both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis are being used to answer these questions.

### Religiosity

Most studies that examine the effect of religion on health do not offer an explicit definition of religiosity per se, but base their measurement of religiosity on several factors, for example: denominational affiliation, importance of religion in one's life, frequency of attendance at religious services, or frequency of prayer. For the purposes of the present study, the following definition of religiosity is being used: Religiosity is a term used to describe how religious someone is and usually falls along a continuum from "not at all" to "very." People are categorized as having either "high" or "low" religiosity relative to some reference. Several studies have shown that the strength of religious practice and belief is more important than belonging to any particular religious group [11,12]. Therefore, while possible denominational differences will be explored in the analyses, we are more interested in what effect being (or not being) very religious has on the health of young people.

### Significance of Study

The data from this study will complement findings from quantitative analyses and enable us to have deeper insights into the factors that influence youth health behaviour. Recent literature reviews on the connection between religion and health have suggested that large-scale epidemiological studies could be complemented by qualitative studies on the same subject and in the same population [13,14].

In light of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, it is important to elucidate what mechanisms are acting to maintain the relatively low levels of infection that have been observed to date in Ghanaian young people.

### Theoretical Issues

It would be impossible to study youth risk behaviour without reference to the multiple influences that exert force upon young people's lives. Research on adolescent drug use and sexual activity has suggested that religion may play a key role in determining why some youth engage in these behaviours and others do not. In an attempt to provide conceptual and theoretical clarity as to the circumstances in which religion is expected to relate to health outcomes,

Wallace and Williams [15] proposed the socialization influence framework (see Figure 1 which has been adapted to the Ghanaian context by adding "work" as a secondary socialization influence).

The framework recognizes that the family plays a primary role in the early socialization of a young person and that this also has an effect on the secondary socialization influences (religion, peers, school, work). Each of these socialization influences is thought to exert influence both on the socialization mechanisms (i.e. social support, social control, and values and identity) as well as on the family itself, as shown by the bi-directional arrows in the diagram. These socialization mechanisms in turn affect the health outcomes of adolescents. What should be kept in mind about this framework is the dynamic nature of it and the fact that different factors affect each other in ways that are not necessarily linear or in one direction. For example, young peoples' behaviours may well be influenced by social control but the way that they behave may also have an effect on the social control that they experience.

### Methodology

We have conducted in-depth interviews (IDIs) with forty-eight adolescents resident in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana on the following topics: religion, dating, sexuality, and HIV prevention. By employing a qualitative approach, we have been able to probe individual issues and consequently gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms at work in the religiosity-risk behaviour relationship. The study subjects are 15-19 year olds who participated in a survey of young people in Ghana in 2004<sup>2</sup> and at the end of that interview consented to be revisited for another interview.

Since we are interested in making comparisons between different categories of religiosity and sex, every attempt was made to include subjects with "high," "medium," and "low" religiosity and an equal number of males and females.

### Preliminary Findings

Since we have just recently finished data collection and are now beginning the analyses, there are only a few preliminary observations to share at this time. First, we have found that Ghanaian young people are by and large very religious. Indeed, only 0.5% of those interviewed last year in the Greater Accra Region were categorized as having "low" religiosity. However, in terms of the measurement of religiosity, it appears that the use of one question in a structured interview survey may not always be the best indicator of one's religiosity status. Based on the in-depth interviews, we have found that some adolescents who were categorized as "high" may in fact

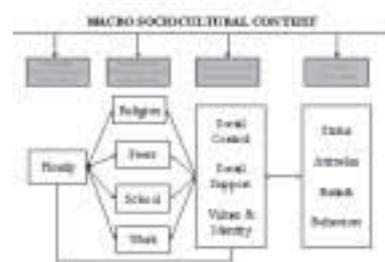


Figure 1: Socialization influence framework

be "medium" or "low" and vice versa. With the lag time of one year between interviews, it is also possible that one's religious involvement has changed over time. It is also apparent from the IDIs that being involved in religious activities has complexities that single questions on a quantitative survey may not uncover. For example, the response to the question, "How often do you attend religious services?" will not illustrate that for some adolescents while they would like to attend church services on a more regular basis they are constrained by such issues as having to work during that time.

### Religion and Choice

From initial observations, it seems that religion does influence the choices that some young people make regarding dating and sexuality. This is well illustrated by a young woman who describes herself as very religious, attending weekly services in her church and going to Bible study at least three times per week. She says that she feels different from other young people her age because of what she wears and how she talks. She claims that before she "found Jesus and took him into her heart," she was "bad." Previously, she would not have been home at the evening time that we came to her house to interview her as she would have been in a café, hanging out with friends. She had had a boyfriend for one and a half years, but when she accepted Jesus as her personal god, she knew that dating wasn't right, so she broke up with her boyfriend. He didn't understand her reasons at the time, but they still remain good friends. When asked if religion has any effect on one's sexuality, she remarked, "It will help you to control yourself."

Other young people, however, say that religion does not have such a strong influence on their lives and that they rely much more on their parents or peers when it comes to decision-making about dating and sexuality.

### Dissonance

For many young people, the relationship is not so easy to disentangle. We are finding that for several adolescents the messages that they receive from their religious leaders, which is often 'abstinence before marriage', does not resonate with their personal



# 5

# Viewpoint

## The Church Should Play Its Role



### Introduction

There has been a lot of noise in African church circles about gays and their place in the community of faith. Besides the recent noise, it is an established fact that there is a lot of silence around the question of homosexuality in the indigenous society of Africa. Equally established is the fact that, unlike in the western society, silence in Africa cannot be taken for consent. Because silence does not necessarily mean consent, many have taken it to mean hostility. Because of this silence, gays are accorded a very low status in society. This makes it still difficult to come out and declare oneself as gay in the indigenous society of Africa. Those who have braved the storm and come out have brought rejection and isolation upon themselves, to the extent of being the scorn as well as the scum of society. For this reason, African gays have been forced to live two lives that are completely separate. They are different people when they are together in private gay settings and have to be different people when they are among the non-gay public.

### Church's Role

If Christian discipleship is to be taken seriously, life cannot be separated off in parts labelled private or public. For life to be whole - to become whole - our lives must be all of a piece. I am struck by the homophone between holiness and wholeness. It strikes me as ringing true that a life lived in wholeness can be

equated to, or at least is close to becoming, a life lived in holiness. A life fragmented into aspects labelled as private and public is not whole and, therefore, can never be holy. The Latin roots of the word "religion" have to do with "binding." A church, which wants to be true to its calling will never promote fragmentation.

Not for nothing have all the world's major religious teachers stressed the need to protect and cherish the stranger, the one who is unfamiliar or different. For all too easily can that one person or group become the target for irrational fear, persecution or expulsion.

The church as an institution in the indigenous society of Africa grew out of the early efforts by missionaries to evangelise and christianise the indigenous peoples and was a means of organizing the new religionists into a community and giving them uniform goals and a sense of belonging. It was a concrete and visible expression of the identity and solidarity of the new group and it soon took upon itself most of the functions which had traditionally belonged to the family and the kinship.

An important function of the church from its very beginning was that of being an integrating force, binding together the individual Christians who, having broken away from their families and kindred, found themselves in the position of outcasts. The new basis of cohesion in the Christian group was the new concept of the spiritual bond. The church is still called to instil this sense of belonging to all its members.

### Church As Prophet

The church does seem to have, in many respects, turned the values of a people upside down from its very beginnings. This is nowhere more evident than in the life of its founder. The cross, in precise historical context a thieves' gallows, became filled with new meaning because of one man's relationship with it. From being a sign of contradiction and slander in a local context, it has emerged with a fresh significance a symbol of healing and wholeness.

If the church cannot afford to move

ahead of society, what then is its relevance? Where would the church be today, if there was no event like the Council of Jerusalem? What would the church look like, if there never was the Second Vatican Council? The problem is that the church now seems to have fallen under the sway of the dominant and ruling groups, and so has ceased to be the revolutionary ferment, the yeast in the lump of dough! The dominating trend and the general portrait of the church seems to be that of a custodian of tradition, without relating that tradition to its origins.

This is certainly the case when it comes to the question of homosexuality. The church has not lived its vocation when it comes to the issue of gays. In the case of gays, the church has rendered itself irrelevant. Many understand that this is not God speaking, but people limited by their own prejudices and worldview. Many gays realise that their relationship with God is much more fundamental than the pronouncements and utterances of external authorities. They experience their orientation as a gift from God. They are convinced that they have been created this way, and that all that God creates is good. They are able to see the positive resource that their orientation is, often experienced as sensitivity, compassion and creativity.

The church, in order to fulfil its prophetic mission: must destroy the common consciousness that seeks to maintain the status quo. It must get rid of the numbness that is common in society and propose, in word and deed, an alternative way of life. That is the prophetic role of the church and of each and every Christian: "to be the salt and light" of the world (Mt. 5:13-16). The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception which is an alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.

In its role as prophet, the church must reach beyond sexual differentiation. The church, particularly

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during the apartheid era in South Africa, often defended the rights of the poor to an equal share in the world's goods. In a similar vein the church is called upon to influence public opinion and policy in order to advocate for a comprehensive and non-discriminatory response to gay people and their needs.

### Servant of Truth

The church is called to be the servant of Truth, God's truth. The church has a responsibility to discern it, explore it and proclaim it. That truth emerges not so much from the study or library but from the struggle, suffering and crisis of living people. It is to that truth that the church is called to be servant.

A common belief is that people are all born heterosexual and become influenced or "recruited" into homosexuality. This somehow translates into a concern among the clergy and other church personnel that if they are talking about homosexuality, they may be encouraging it in their congregations and parishes. This mystification clouds the fact that talking about sexual orientation in ways that acknowledge and affirm all people will only influence the youth's self-acceptance and their comfort with others who are

similar to and / or different from themselves.

Another concern of the clergy and church personnel about breaking the silence is that to do so is seen as "imposing values" and this is not considered to be the role of the church. To presume that discussing homosexuality in church is to impose values is not to notice that when we do not talk about the subject, we are also imposing a set of values.

Another important function of the church is that of being an agency of salvation. Salvation here is not to be interpreted narrowly to mean just the winning of souls but means the quality of life found within the Christian fellowship. Worship is not merely an outward ceremony or a ritual which has no particular meaning outside of the service. The general idea is the presentation of one's whole life as an offering to God.

No doubt, the church as a social institution has exercised, and continues to exercise, a great deal of control over the lives of people. It is regarded as an embodiment of all the value systems which Christianity introduced. In this sense, it is the keeper of consciences. Its

teachings, its rules and regulations are regarded as normative by many Christians.

If homosexuality is as deeply and fundamentally integrated as studies suggest, then God cannot be left out of how the homosexual comes into being. If this orientation is viewed as part of the creation process, there should be no reason to reject anyone because of their orientation.

### The Church As Teacher

The very calling of the church places upon it the demand for pastoral care to sexual minorities. Many of those struggling with homosexuality are the youth and the teenagers. These often need assistance in searching the deeper meaning and the worth of their lives despite the psycho-social pains they are experiencing.

One of the major problems facing young gays is the need to find meaning in their experience which has value and usefulness for them.

### Conclusion

What is needed is space where everyone is not constantly confronted with disparaging attitudes that bring hopelessness. It is time to build!

## Religiosity and HIV Risk Among Adolescents in Accra: A Qualitative Analysis

cont'd from page 12

experiences. Some youth have said that while they would like to be "good" Christians or Muslims, they have life experiences that are such that they have found themselves in dating and sexual relationships and are confused about how to integrate this fact with their religious life. Whether involvement in these dating and sexual relationships is motivated by peer pressure, a search for companionship, or economic reasons, what results is a cognitive dissonance for these young people when it comes to reconciling the conflicting realities and messages in their lives. Further analyses will show how common this and other themes are for the adolescents that we have interviewed and whether there are gender differences in what we have observed.

### Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Allan G. Hill and John K. Anarfi for their guidance, support, and encouragement on this project.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The terms "youth," "adolescent," and "young people" will be used interchangeably throughout the text. It is acknowledged that different organizations use these terms differently. The generally accepted WHO definitions include the following age groups: "youth" are 12-24 year olds; "adolescents" are 12-19 year olds, and distinctions are often made between "young adolescents" (12-14 year olds) and "older adolescents" (15-19 year olds). The 20-24 year old category is often referred to as "young adults."

<sup>2</sup>The previous study was a national-

representative survey of adolescents 12-19 years old in Ghana that was conducted to address adolescents' sexual and reproductive health needs. The 2004 survey is part of a larger, five-year study of adolescent sexual and reproductive health issues called Protecting the Next Generation: Understanding HIV Risk Among Youth (PNG), which is being carried out in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Malawi and Uganda with funding by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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# Notes to Contributors

## Guidelines for Submissions

The editors welcome submissions on the thematic focus of future issues of the Magazine, as well as other areas of sexuality, sexual health and rights. Themes for upcoming 2005 issues include:

- \* Sexuality and the Media, and
- \* Sexual Violence and HIV/ AIDS

ARSRC seeks articles for submission which are objective, analytical and mirror current / contemporary issues and debates in the areas of Sexuality, Sexual Health and Rights in Africa. Articles should reflect a holistic / comprehensive approach to sexuality; taking sexuality discourse beyond health to incorporate broader issues of the expression of sexuality without guilt, fear or ill-health. While priority would be given articles that have not been

previously published, already published material may be considered depending on how relevant the subject area and focus is to ARSRC's work. However, for already published articles, full details of previous publication and where to seek permission for reprint must accompany the article.

We particularly welcome articles related to our thematic focus for the following sections :

**Region Watch:** Topical issues with a country or sub regional focus  
**Programme Feature:** best practices from programme implementers

**Research Notes:** Focus on relevant research and methodologies

**Viewpoint:** Reactions to previous magazine issues or on a subject area that a reader wishes to express

very strong views or opinion.

### Length

Feature articles : 1,000 -1,500 words

Research issues : 800-1,000 words

Opinion articles : 400-500 words

### Photos

We welcome photos with or without articles and will give appropriate credit when photo is used.

### Presentation

Please submit initially, an abstract with your name, contact address, phone number, email address and details about yourself as you would wish it to appear on the list of contributors

\*\*\*\*\*All contributors will receive a copy of the issue in which their contribution has been published.

## About Contributors to this Edition

**Busangokwakhe Dlamini** (PH.D) is a member of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and is head of the Working Party on Homophobia, Ideology and Religion in Africa (ILGA WP) since 1999. A gay activist and priest based in Pietermaritzburg, Dlamini works with marginalised black gays in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

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**Lucy Wambui Kangara** has a B.A. in Sociology and Religious Studies from Egerton University, Kenya and is currently studying towards an M.A. in Development Studies at the University of Botswana where she is also a Teaching Assistant. Ms. Kangara attended the 2004 Sexuality Leadership Development Fellowship organised by the ARSRC. This article is based on the research she conducted with the grant she received as part of the fellowship.

**Pinar Ilkcaracan**, a psychotherapist and researcher, is in private practice in Istanbul, Turkey. She is also the founder and coordinator of Women for Women's Human Rights. The group campaigned with more than 120 women's organizations across Turkey to amend the country's civil code. In 2001, they succeeded in achieving equality for women in marriage, and in 2004, they succeeded in influencing the reform of the Turkish penal code to make violence against women a crime. Pinar is the editor of *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies*, a collection of articles by women from throughout the Muslim world.



## Sexuality Resources

### Religion and Sexuality in Cross-cultural Perspective

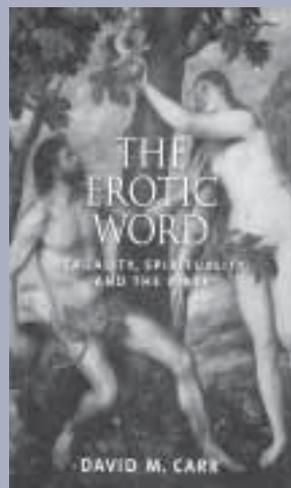
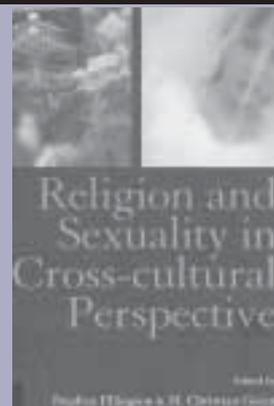
**Editors :** Stephen Ellingson and M. Christian Green

**Publisher:** Routledge, New York, 2002

**ISBN:** 0-415-94128-8 (Paperback)

Issues of sexuality and gender are hotly contested in both religious communities and national cultures around the world. In the social sciences, religious traditions are often depicted as inherently conservative or even reactionary in their commitments to powerful patriarchal and pronatalist sexual norms and gender categories.

In illuminating the practices of religious traditions in various cultures, these essays expose the diversity of religious rituals and mythologies pertaining to sexuality. In the process the contributors challenge conventional norms of what is normative in our sexual lives



### The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality and the Bible

**Author:** David M. Carr

**Publisher:** Oxford University Press, New York, 2003

**ISBN:** 0-19-515652-8 (Hardback)

Historically, the bible has been used to drive a wedge between the spirit and the body. In this provocative book, David Carr argues that it can – and should – do just the opposite. Sexuality and spirituality, Carr says, are intricately interwoven: when one is impoverished, the other is warped.

Drawing on a wide range of referents, from the ancient Israelite goddess Asherah to Mesopotamian love poems, Carr's work is organised around three "garden" texts of the Hebrew Bible: the Garden of Eden, Isaiah's vineyard garden and the lovers' garden of the Song of Songs. Gardens symbolised not only male and female sexuality but more specifically places where lovers met to make love

## LEARNING RESOURCES: WEBSITES

### 1. Women Living under Muslim laws

<http://www.wluml.org>

An international solidarity network that provides information support and a collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam. And has a wide range of publications and resources materials produced since 1985.

### 2. Safra Project

<http://www.safraproject.org/about.htm>

The Safra project conducts research and provides information on issues relating to lesbian, bisexual and transgender women who identify themselves as Muslim.

### 3. Catholics For A Free Choice

<http://www.catholicsforchoice.org>

Produces a wide range of publications dealing with all

aspects of pro-choice Catholicism, also a commitment to reproductive rights and health issues of women.

### 4. Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing

<http://www.religiousinstitute.org>

The Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing promotes the goals and vision of the religious declaration. It is an ecumenical, interfaith organization dedicated to advocating for sexual health, education and justice in faith communities and society.

### 5. Magnus Hirschfield Archive for Sexology

<http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/>

World Largest website on Human Sexuality.

## Synthesis/Additional Resources

### 1. The Really Good News: What The Bible Says About Sex

<http://www.siecus.org/religion/reli0001.html>

Taken from SEICUS Report October/November 1997.

By Debra W. Haffner, M.P.H

SEICUS past president and CEO

### 2. Annotated Bibliography: Religion, Spirituality and Sexuality

<http://www.siecus.org/pubs/biblio/bibs0008.html>

A bibliography designed to provide information to parents, educators and the general public to better understand the positive relationship between religion, sexuality and spirituality.

SEICUS Report, Volume 28, Number 4 – April/May 2000