



Commentary

## Role of religion in the expression of sexuality

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**Date of Submission :** 21 October 2021

**Date of Acceptance :** 02 December 2021

**Keywords:** Religion, Law, Culture, Sexuality, Disability

### Introduction

This article was originally developed to discuss the role of religion in the expression of sexuality. However, through the literature review, it became evident that religion and sexuality do not exist in a vacuum. One cannot ignore inter-sectionality in the discussion of the influence of religion on sexuality. Therefore, this article will attempt to provide a global or meta-perspective on the multiple types of intersections that one needs to consider when discussing the relationship between religion and sexuality. It is the intention of the article to expand or broaden the lens that we use to discuss this topic. An additional aim of this article is to highlight global perspectives on religion and sexuality.

It is important to first provide a definition or lack of definition to/of the terms that will be used throughout the paper. Starting with religion, this paper will understand religion in

multiple ways. First, it can be thought of as a faith-based practice that is followed by a culture or group of persons. Second, it can be broadened to include spirituality. Finally, religion will also be utilized, at times, to refer to the religious influence over a culture even if individuals within the culture do not observe the religion. Sexuality will be utilized to define sexual orientation, sexual expression, and sexual activity. The remainder of the article will be subdivided thematically to highlight specific themes and intersections that have been highlighted in recent publications.

### Religion, culture and sexuality

Recent literature has highlighted the role of culture as it relates to religion and sexuality. Anarfi & Owusu (2010) discuss the influence of culture, religion, and sexuality in Ghana. The authors highlight the intersections that impact sexuality in this culture. "It is greatly influenced by the broader social structure of any society, including religion, the state, and the general established society with its norms and prescriptions of what is acceptable or otherwise" (Anarfi & Owusu, 2010). Further, they provide an additional understanding that morality is central to discussions of sexuality in Ghana. "In many African settings sexual matters are looked at from the angle of morality. This puts religion in the very

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**How to cite the article:** Cooper, M., (2021). Role of religion in the expression of sexuality. *Indian Journal of Health Sexuality and Culture* 7 (2), 57–59.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6063140>

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centre of all discourses related to sexual behavior” (Anarfi & Owusu, 2010). Another article discussed sexual minorities in urban India. This article suggested that “Indian culture has numerous relevant social categories that shape gender and sexuality, such as religion and caste, among others” (Bowling et al., 2019).

Other articles discuss ways in which individuals navigate religion and culture. Tuthill (2016) researched religiosity and sexuality amongst Hispanic lesbian mothers. The mothers in this study were selective in the beliefs they followed in order to maintain a relatively healthy view of themselves with regard to their sexual identity. “By rejecting certain beliefs regarding sexual immorality, Catholic adherents are able to pacify religious tension between their sexual and religious identity” (Tuthill, 2016).

When referring to sexual minorities, some cultures lack the neutral or positive language to refer to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and the larger community (LGBTQ+). Ramzi Salti captures this in his book “He suddenly realized that he was looking for a word with neither a religious undertone nor a pejorative meaning... After all, how difficult can it be to come up with a word that is based on some pleasant-sounding three-letter verb?” (Salti, 1994).

### **Religion, law and sexuality**

Another factor that intersects with religion and sexuality is the law. In the United States, there has been an ongoing struggle between human rights and the freedom to exercise religious beliefs. “Over the last several years, it has become impossible to ignore a series of pointed conflicts between two asserted rights, each described by their proponents as ‘human rights’: the free exercise of religion and the right to sexual expression under

particular conditions” (Alvaré, 2015). Alvaré’s work highlights a complex discussion that has passionate arguments on both sides.

In Egypt, we find that the laws regarding LGBTQ+ individuals have shifted across time, being more restrictive in recent years. This has resulted in the act of entrapment of LGBTQ+ individuals and has effectively created an environment where individuals are forced to live in secrecy. This was captured in Whitaker’s 2006 book. He writes “It’s very lonely. There used to be a cruising area in heliopolis, coffee shops, and night clubs, but they have all gone now. Most of the people I knew have either left the country or created a very close-knit underground community” (Whitaker, 2006).

### **Religion, age and sexuality**

Some research has focused on age and its impact on religion and sexuality. A study that focused on sexual and gender minority youth (SGMY) found that religious beliefs can lead to bullying of these youth. These authors also highlighted that religion plays a different role for the persons being bullied that can be either protective or detrimental (Mc Cormick & Krieger, 2020).

On the other end of the age spectrum, older individuals also experience an interaction between religion and sexuality. Older sexual minority adults may experience significant life changes that impact their sexual presentation. This could include, for some, moving in with family or moving to an assisted living facility. One study revealed that older sexual minority adults manage religion and sexuality by changing to a religion that had more positive views on sexual minorities (Escher et al., 2019). Aguilar (2017) specifically addresses older individuals in nursing homes and reminds us that these are sexual beings, and with a growing population of older individuals, this

will continue to be an important area of continued scholarship (Aguilar, 2017).

### Religion, disabilities and sexuality

An under-researched area is that of sexuality amongst individuals with disabilities. Hays differentiates between developmental, intellectual, cognitive, sensory, physical, and psychiatric disabilities (Hays, 2016). One study, through narrative analysis, found a range of impacts that religion has on sexuality amongst individuals with intellectual disabilities. "...religion, both of disabled people themselves and the social actors around them, can shape the attitudes and experiences of people with intellectual disabilities regarding sexuality and sexual expression" (Martino, 2020). This quote highlights not only the impact on an individual with intellectual disabilities but also highlights the impact on the individuals around them. This could include family, service providers, social service agencies, etc.

### Conclusion

A comprehensive review of the literature is beyond the scope of this article. However, this article has attempted to shine a light on the many ways that religion and the expression of sexuality are impacted by intersecting identities and socio-cultural factors. Individuals, cultures, and societies are complex. As researchers, academics, service providers, and clinicians, we need to be able to recognize these complexities in order to best understand the experience of the persons that we are researching or serving.

**Acknowledgements:** None

**Conflict of interest:** None

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