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Education Matters: Empowering Young People to Make Healthier Choices

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Spot the Difference

Religious People vs. Religious Leaders

Religious people from every tradition around the world are faced with the problem of how to live with—or argue against—religious leaders who represent a faith they hold dear, but who may not have very much in common with them.

Catholics are asked to take seriously a powerful group of celibate men who believe that “masturbation is an intrinsically and seriously disordered act,” that “each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life” and that “every genital act must be within the framework of marriage.”

Catholics are not the only religious people who are often dismayed at what is passed off in our name. Protestants, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists have all had similar experiences as they hear their clerics get it all wrong about real, everyday concerns.

Yet rank-and-file Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists and Muslims are sorely underrepresented in most important domestic and international policy spheres, and it’s most often the clerics to whom policymakers turn when considering policy changes.

We know that the Catholic church’s teachings on sex and sexuality were, more often than not, based on temporal issues and not biblical decrees. Some of the rejection of sex came from people like the apostle Paul, who was planning for the world ending any day, or from someone like Peter Lombard, a 12th century bishop who believed the Holy Spirit fled the room during marital sex. Lombard did advocate for marriage being recognized as a sacrament, but once it was, that simply made for more opportunities to control sex.

The issue of family planning was the subject of a heated debate in Catholic circles during the Vatican II conference in Rome during the 1960s. At that time, a Vatican-appointed Birth Control Commission voted overwhelmingly to recommend that there was no obstacle in church teaching preventing the church from rescinding its ban on artificial contraception. However, the pope balked, concerned that it would mean other church teachings would also be called into question. Instead, the hierarchy chose to look backwards rather than forwards, and kept the contraception ban in place.

More recently, in 1975 the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith released “Persona Humana—A Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics,” which laid out the Vatican’s response to what it saw as a “corruption of morals” that was found in the “unbridled exaltation of sex.”

Much of the repressive Catholic tradition on sex reflects the good, albeit misguided, intentions of some to devise a doctrine on sex that would bring Catholics closer to God. It also reflects the bad intentions of a few to assert control over the private lives of Catholics and non-Catholics alike. It reflects an unwillingness to change once-relevant doctrine and thought to respond to the needs and knowledge and scientific facts of our modern world.

The issue is no less important when we consider how we should educate our young people about sex and sexuality. We have come up with our own ten commandments about how young people might be best served in the discussion about sex education.

10 Ways You Can Think about Making Sex Education Work

1. Don't take religious leaders' representations of church teachings on sex and sexuality at face value—listen to religious people and see how they act.
2. Most religious traditions urge believers to follow their consciences, respect individual dignity and look after their own well-being while living harmoniously with others—all good reasons to share good information about sex.
3. Talk plainly about sex—even to clergy. There's no need to sneak it in under milder language for fear of offending them. For example, in England the Catholic Education Service, which is funded by the bishops, came out in favor of the government's Sexual and Relationship Education program and hoped parents would not exercise their right to opt out of program.
4. Children and adults can sense a hidden agenda a mile away, so focus on the values they already have, rather than trying to instill new ones. Meet people where they are, help them discern what they believe and why, and give them the best information to make their own decision.
5. Remember, most parents support some type of sex education because they want what's best for their kids.
6. Relationships are best talked about with someone you have a relationship with. We believe parents are the best place for sex information to start, but teachers can be a great help.
7. Being sensitive to religious concerns does not imply catering to the most extreme and backwards views within a religion. For example, the overwhelming majority of Catholics disagree with the hierarchy's opposition to contraception, divorce and premarital sex, and only two percent of American Catholic women use the Vatican-approved natural family planning.
8. Recognize when it is the “immoral” rather than the “moral” that is motivating religious leaders. Many Catholics recognize that a fear of losing power and moral authority over issues pertaining to sex and sexuality is what drives the hierarchy's approach to sex.
9. You may be surprised at how many people—and regions—can get behind good information. Mexico, for example, is a country that is overwhelmingly Catholic. In 2006 it adopted government-sponsored textbooks that included quality educational materials on sex and relationships. The bishops asked the government to recall the textbooks, but the decision to use a scientifically based curriculum in government-run schools was upheld.
10. Work according to families' timelines—not the clergy's. In the Catholic church, like many religious traditions, time is measured in centuries. Vatican teachings on contraception were overwhelmingly rejected once modern methods of family planning became widely available, but the hierarchy stubbornly held on to them. Families' decision-making process is much more immediate—as are concerns about sex education. If someone is stonewalling, they are probably out of touch with these needs.