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## 'Dare to be Different': How Religious Groups Frame and Enact Appropriate Sexuality and Gender Norms among Young Adults

Rhys Williams

Loyola University Chicago, [rwilliams7@luc.edu](mailto:rwilliams7@luc.edu)

Courtney Ann Irby

R. Stephen Warner

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*'Dare to be Different': How Religious Groups Frame and Enact Appropriate Sexuality and Gender Norms among Young Adults*

Rhys H. Williams, Courtney Ann Irby, R. Stephen Warner<sup>i</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** The sexual lives of religious youth and young adults have been an increasing topic of interest since the rise of abstinence-only education and attendant programs in many religious institutions. But while we know a lot about individual level rates of sexual behavior, far less is known about how religious organizations shape and mediate sexuality. We draw on data from observations with youth and young adult ministries and interviews with religious young adults and adult leaders from Muslim, Hindu, and Protestant Christian groups in order to examine how religious adults in positions of organizational authority work to manage the gender and sexual developments in the transition to adulthood among their youth. We find three distinct organizational styles across the various religious traditions: avoidance through gender segregation; self-restraint supplemented with peer surveillance; and a classed disengagement. In each of these organizational responses, gender and sexuality represent something that must be explained and controlled in the process of cultivating the proper adult religious disposition.

## INTRODUCTION

While religious groups have long had a vested interest in moralizing and structuring the sexual lives of their members, the debates on sex education during the 1990s, and the salience of what were called “culture wars” issues about gender, sexuality, and family brought the connection between religion and young adult sexuality to the foreground – in both religious communities and for scholars. Focusing predominately on abstinence messages and programs, a wealth of social science research has since studied the intersection of sexuality, religion, and young adults by examining the religious influence of ‘abstinence only’ messaging on the sexual lives of youth and young adults. For the most part, this body of work has approached these issues by *either* analyzing the individual sexual practices of religious young adults (Adamczyk 2009; Barkan 2006; Beck, Cole and Hammond 1991; Burdette and Hill 2009; Hull et al. 2011; Jensen and Holman 1990; Lefkowitz et al. 2004; Rostosky, Regnerus and Wright 2003; Uecker 2008;

Woodruff 1985) *or* by evaluating the rhetoric on sex and religion among movements such as True Love Waits (Gardner 2011; Hendershot 2004; Jones 2012).

An extensive body of quantitative research has sought to specify why religion appears to often decrease the rates of sexual activity among young adults and adolescents. While this research often finds that religion reduces the number of sexual partners of young adults (Burdette and Hill 2009; Lefkowitz et al. 2004; Uecker 2008; Woodruff 1985) and affects when they start having intercourse (Beck, Cole, and Hammond 1991; Hull et al. 2011), the strength, and even the presence, of the statistical relationship often depends on how religion is operationalized. For instance, with the exception of sectarian groups such as the Latter-Day Saints, religious tradition often has little impact (Beck, Cole and Hammond 1991; Holman and Harding 1996; Uecker 2008). Additionally, while religious attendance generally tends to be negatively associated with sexual activity, the findings are mixed. Perhaps not surprisingly, religious affiliation and attendance have little independent impact on behavior; rather, research tends to indicate that religious salience is most predictive.

A smaller stream of scholarship has sought to move away from analyzing the rates of sexual activity among young adults and, more broadly, challenges the binary categories of “abstinent” and “sexually active” (Gardner 2011). One strand of this research has qualitatively examined how religious young adults strive to live chaste lifestyles by focusing on their daily experiences negotiating tensions of gender, sexuality, and faith (Diefendorf 2015; Irby 2013; O’Brien 2017; Wilkins 2008; Mir 2009; Yip and Page 2013). In doing so, these scholars have documented the multitude of ways that religious youth actively renegotiate their sexuality within secular contexts, which often produces greater variation than the more narrow moral mandates about sex and relationships. A second strand of this research has tried to complicate

understandings of the context and social categories of young adults' faith and sexuality by examining the surrounding rhetorical context. By studying abstinence groups, such as True Love Waits or The Silver Ring Thing, scholars have discovered that while religious groups promote abstinence they also use sex to sell young adults on living an abstinent lifestyle (Gardner 2011; Hendershot 2004).

Together this research reveals insights into the cultural logics about sexuality that young adults face and the actions that they take. The current literature, however, is limited due to little empirical examination into the *mechanisms* that mediate the rhetoric and how those mechanisms shape young adults' actions. More specifically, we show that research into the religious communities and organizations that young adults inhabit can provide insight into how young adults learn about sexual morality from religious authorities, and the religious context for their sexual actions. How do local religious communities mediate, contest, and reshape broader cultural messages about sexuality? Additionally, how do local religious communities shape young adults' sexual actions through processes such as social control, social support, and accountability? Moreover, how are the constructions of 'proper' displays of masculinity and femininity articulated through messages about sexuality? To approach these questions, we examine three organizational styles that emerged in our study of youth ministry programs: *avoidance; self-restraint and peer surveillance; and disengagement.*

## DATA AND METHODS

Our data come from interviews, ethnographic observations with religious organizations, and ethnographic observations with families, all gathered within a large Midwestern metropolitan area. The research project's overall purpose was to explore how important, and in

what ways, religious institutions help formulate youth and young adults' senses of who they are, what they believe, and the languages they use to articulate those connections; we are interested in the intersection of organization and identity, and the role of organizations in the lived reality of religious transmission. The present paper uses data gathered from organizations and families representing Muslim and Hindu groups, and White and Latino Protestant Churches. Due to our interest in the dynamics of organizational involvement, we purposefully studied young people and some families who were involved with religious organizations and religious organizations that had vibrant youth involvement. Our goal was to examine some of the organizational and familial dynamics in which young people are involved, and how that affects the ways they develop the religious and public identities they come to claim.

Specifically, we focus here on two sources of data. First, we conducted institutional ethnographic work through multiple site visits with religious organizations. We attended worship services, classes, and youth activities at Hindu, Muslim, and Protestant Christian organizations that cater to or seemed to attract youth. For the most part, this meant congregations and their youth programs, but it also included some organizations that reached across individual congregations to offer programming for youth and young adults in our larger metropolitan, or smaller regional, areas. We located these sites in two phases; first we canvassed with the help of graduate assistants and undergraduate interns for a wide variety of organizations that we or our student assistants had heard about.<sup>ii</sup> After finding some institutions that particularly seemed to fit our needs in terms of their vibrant youth activities and membership, we chose a sample for extended study. As a result, we intensively researched eight particularly vibrant organizations/congregations by doing multiple visits and individual interviews with their youth ministry leadership. These sites included one African American Protestant church, two

Evangelical Protestant congregations that were multi-ethnic, one white moderate/mainline Protestant church, one Muslim *masjid*, one regional youth organization sponsored by a national Islamic group, one Hindu temple, and one Hindu group that held regional meetings that included youth and young adults.

Our second source of data for this paper comes from ethnographic observations on families regarding their religious involvements. We spent entire days, usually on the most religiously significant day of the week (e.g., Sundays for Christians) with families, participating with them in their religious involvements, but also sharing meals and informal relaxing time. Understanding how the key “religious” day is organized, at both the congregation and the home, was designed to help us get a clearer sense of how religious faith is transmitted to children, but it also complemented our ethnographic observations about the ways in which youth and young adults were incorporated into, and in turn used, the organization. We contacted the families through references from the religious leaders at their main place of worship. In total, there were twelve families from six different religious congregations – two African American Protestant families, two white Protestant families from a moderate non-denominational suburban church, four families from two different multi-ethnic (White, Black, Latinx) Evangelical Protestant churches,<sup>iii</sup> two Muslim families from a suburban *masjid*, and two Hindu families from a temple that sought specifically to educate families in Hindu traditions (beyond just functioning as a site for the performance of rituals). All the families had youth under-18 living at home. Our experiences with these families allowed us to examine the direct connection between family practices and religious organizations.

Taken altogether our data show the important role that religious institutions play in helping to formulate young adults’ senses of who they are, what they believe, and the languages

they use to articulate those connections. These data may not allow us to make sweeping generalizations about religious institutions and their attempts at organizing young people's sexuality; rather, we report on the patterns we observed that cross religious traditions as well as some similarities and differences existing within traditions. While we did not set out to research how congregations teach about sexuality, the topic inductively emerged as we were in the field, examining how religious institutions work to organize ideas, cultural logics, and practices so that youth become religious adults. In paying attention to those processes about many different aspects of life, we noticed many of their efforts were about sex. We developed our typology here from watching these varied institutions in action and considering how teachings reflected the particular religious traditions, as well as the racial-ethnic and class positions of each organization. Rather than offer a set of ideal types that can be generalized to all youth ministry in each specific religious tradition, the following analysis draws on our observations to frame inductively when sex and attendant notions of appropriate gender behaviors emerged as salient within organizational practices. Toward this end, we employ an interpretation presentation approach (Lofland, et al. 2006:184) to showcase the three organizational styles because "this alternation makes the relationship between the data and analysis more evident and conveys ways in which they form a whole."

## DATA ANALYSIS

While religion likely has always played a role in regulating sexuality (Ellingson 2002), the topic of young adult sexuality has recently created significant anxieties for many religious groups (Page and Shipley 2016). From the perspective of many religious communities, young adults have become increasingly sexualized or at the very least are exposed to a more sexualized

culture (Regnerus 2007). Furthermore, the recognition that young people marry and form families at a later age means that many religious organizations feel compelled to monitor their youth and young adults – to socialize and prepare them over this more protracted period of youth and adolescence. Nonetheless, explicit and direct encounters with sexuality and gender were not uniform among the eight religious institutions where we observed. In analyzing the talks, programming, and informal interactions between leaders and youth, we identified three organizational styles that emerged: *avoidance*, *self-reliance* and *peer surveillance*, and *disengagement*. Thus, this paper demonstrates how the process of becoming a religious young adult is infused with particular messages and institutional practices about sex and gender, as well as modelled by the adult religious leadership.

### *Prescribing Avoidance*

Faced with what they view as a slackening of sexual norms and values, conservative religious groups often promote avoidance as a strategy for their members. While many religious leaders instruct unmarried, young adults to avoid all sexual activity (i.e., abstinence), some extend this message to include prohibitions against dating and to limit interactions with people of a different gender (Irby 2013; Mir 2009; O'Brien 2017). The Muslim groups we observed most explicitly called for avoidance for their young adults and employed organizational strategies to enact this ideal. Within their religious organizations they sought to create gender-segregated classes and activities that would ideally also minimize cross-gender interaction among the unmarried adolescents. In an effort to extend this behavior outside the mosque, teachings also included directives for how young men and women should embody modesty. While both men and women were advised to dress modestly, men were further advised to approach women with



downcast eyes and to avoid overly personal inquiries. In the following ethnographic vignettes, we explore how calls for avoidance were grounded in gendered constructions of the challenges and promises of sexuality for young adults.

One summer, a religious- and gender-mixed group from our research team conducted participant observation at the annual summer camp/conference of an organization that specifically organized and ran programming for high-school-age youth. This particular summer conference brought together youth from Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan, many of them from small towns where they might be members of the only Muslim family, with youth from Chicago, Milwaukee, and other places with significant Muslim populations. The male authors and a male undergraduate intern attended a workshop for the young men (ages 14 to 18, some of them already bearded) focused on the conference theme, “Dare To Be Different.” It stressed the particular responsibility of these young Muslim men to practice and stand up for the ideals of sexual modesty and complete abstinence from sexual activity. A theme in the young men’s workshop, which varied in its explicitness, was the threat posed to men’s honor by women’s sexuality.

One speaker referred to the story told in the Qur’an (S. 12, section 3) of the coming of age in Egypt of the Prophet Youssef (the Biblical Joseph), whose host’s very attractive wife attempts to seduce him. Although sorely tempted, Youssef is mindful of Allah’s invisible presence and refuses her advances. He thus passes the test that proves him suitable to become a leader of his people. The speaker admonished the gathered young men that he did not mean that men should studiously avoid women: “Don’t just stare at the floor all the time at school so that you walk into a wall” —“We’re Muslims, not airheads”— but that instead they should conscientiously tell themselves to look away when confronted by temptation. Sexual energy is

not itself ungodly, but it should be saved for the time to be spent with one's wife, "that one relationship that you enter with someone who has saved herself for marriage just as we save ourselves for marriage." She is the person with whom we will eventually enter paradise.

While the men's workshop presupposed that the key issue was young women serving as a source of temptation, the young women's workshop (attended by a female research assistant and three undergraduate interns) focused more on the standards of non-Muslim society that might be a lure and a source of temptation. For the women, it was not so much that they either resented or guiltily enjoyed boys touching them, but that they felt constrained to fit into the culture of their high school peer group. Without negating the idea that the approaches of boys could be problematic, leaders located the real problem in the standards of a society that condone touching and hugging across gender lines. But many young women articulated that their most difficult challenge was to wear *hijab* when they were one of the very few Muslim girls in their suburban or small town high schools. (For most of them, *hijab* meant a head scarf covering hair, neck, ears.) In a context where the young women felt the need to fit in, the call to 'dare to be different' centered less on the boys in school than on more generalized social pressures (see Williams and Vashi 2007). In both cases, there was recognition that the advice for the young men and women had to be practical within a secular context and within settings where they are surrounded by non-Muslims.

After the gender-segregated session, the next workshop involved both young men and women, but they were evenly divided into separate seating sections. The theme directly addressed "Gender Relations," although sexuality permeated the discussions. The main speaker, whom we call MD, was a recently graduated medical doctor doing his residency at a local hospital and who was at least a decade older than most of the young people in the audience. One

of the teenage speakers from the first session, whom we call TS, assisted him. MD stipulated that sexual attraction per se is not unIslamic. Indeed, in the right context (marriage) it can be seen as worship. But before marriage, men and women must regard each other as brothers and sisters who can interact civilly and professionally and who ought to care about one another's well-being but ought not otherwise get too close. What is needed is to balance modesty with a "brotherly" love for each other. Sitting separately is good, but we should not be separate in our hearts. Rather, it is important to know how to interact with a sister at the mall, in the school, in public.

Similar to recent evangelical efforts to use "sex" to sell abstinence (Gardner 2011), Muslim leaders used a sex-positive rhetoric that constructed it as a reward for the faithful in marriage. As such, marriage tended to be presupposed as nearly inevitable and as a goal for "good" religious men and women in all the sessions (see also, Irby 2014; Yip and Page 2013). Within this context, heterosexual marriage is not only assumed but is often portrayed as the natural goal of becoming an adult and of a life well lived. In the attempt to move away from negative understandings of sex, the efficacy of sex and its ability to be good becomes dependent upon context (heterosexual marriage).

Continuing, MD explained that Muslims have values distinct from "American society" on gender relations and non-Muslims, that even otherwise nice people you know and like may have the wrong values in respect to gender—totally *haram* (forbidden). He acknowledged that some Muslims go to extremes in their treatment of women, but generally Islam has healthy practices in regard to gender relations: above all, modesty; lowering the gaze, having most friends of the same gender, respecting but not really sharing private thoughts with members of the other gender. MD said at one point, "you don't really need to be tight with a sister," implicitly assuming the male problematic. Recognizing that we are human and have human desires, he

went on, Islam recognizes proper limits on our gender relations, whether with Muslim or non-Muslim women (again seemingly unconsciously privileging the male perspective).

In order to illustrate proper and improper gender relations, MD enlisted his assistant TS to playact some scenarios of gender relations, in what was clearly planned to be the highlight of the workshop. MD played “Joe Muslim,” and TS played a girl, who, depending on whether or not he was wearing his kufi was either a Muslim sister (“Fatima”) or a non-Muslim fellow student (“Christine”). In the first scenario, Joe and Christine have just taken an exam, and she greets him out in the hall after the exam, excitedly asking how he did on the exam, putting her hand on his arm and giving him a hug, and then inviting him to go out for coffee. How should he deal with this? Use body language to keep respectful distance and politely refuse her offer.

One of the high school girls in the audience objected here that it isn’t always Christine who makes such overtures; sometimes Joe Muslim makes such overtures to non-Muslim women. After acknowledging such a possibility, MD went back to his point that Muslim men are often the hapless objects of such overtures (alluding, perhaps, to the story of Prophet Youssef, but ignoring for the time being the bid for a bit of gender equality in the discussion). The next scenario had Fatima greeting Joe after the exam, and he ignores her, rushing along with his face to the floor. Appearing to hit a resonant chord, this occasioned laughter from both the men and women. This approach too, MD explained, is un-Islamic. In the next scenario, Joe is shown treating Fatima properly; he is polite, reciprocates her question about how he did on the exam, and asks about her family. In this scenario, Joe occasionally looks at Fatima, but mostly he looks a bit past her and sometimes looks down, consistently averting his gaze but trying not to be rude; and, of course, he avoids touching her and avoids making any gestures about going out for coffee. Above all, he does not “stare” at her, by which MD meant looking her steadily in the eye.

MD said that the same approach should be used with a non-Muslim woman: be polite. “After all, Christine is a potential Muslim.” The general rule is to avoid close proximity with the other gender, avoid one-on-one isolation, being alone in the same room together, and avoid personal questions. (Several times, MD illustrated the inappropriate personal question with “what’s your favorite color?”)

The same woman who had objected that Christine isn’t always the aggressor then asked for an illustration of how sisters should deal with men, and it took a bit of time for MD and TS to arrange a new scenario. Eventually, MD played the non-Muslim man who approached Fatima (mispronouncing her name as fa-TEEM-a) with the same kind of approach with which “Christine” had approached “Joe.” Played by TS, “Fatima” deflects his overtures, and when he asks her to go out for coffee, she counters by inviting him to the Muslim club meeting. After the scenario, MD said that such an invitation is an excellent idea, and even if you don’t have a Muslim club in your school you can invite someone to the nearest Islamic center.

The themes at the youth conference surfaced in other settings oriented toward young Muslims as well. For example, at an all-night, and all-male *qiyam* (a night-time gathering in which prayer, reading the Qur’an, and religious meditations are shared), we heard a long theological disquisition on the need for purity, suspecting but not knowing that sexual temptation was the unspoken issue. Another time, at a picnic sponsored by the Muslim Student Association of a university in the metropolitan area, we heard an elder say that when a man and a woman are alone together there is always another party present, namely *shatan* (Satan). Thus, at the youth conference, we heard explicit teachings that no doubt summarize what these boys, and to a lesser but significant extent, the girls have been hearing and behavior they have seen modeled all their lives.

In sum, these Muslim youth were admonished to adhere to more modest standards in their cross-gender interactions than what they perceive to pertain in the surrounding society. They were being urged to “dare to be different.” However, the warnings reflected gendered constructions of sexuality that imagine distinct struggles for young Muslim men and women. The boys were told, and often acted, as if the presence of girls, especially Muslim girls, was the greatest challenge to their proper Islamic deportment. Comparatively, the girls expressed that the greater challenge is their desire to fit in with their non-Muslim peers, both young women as well as young men.

Interestingly, other Muslim leaders we encountered worried that these motivations for purity, combined with the temptations that may be in fact exacerbated by the very lessons about and motivations for purity, may actually serve to drive Muslim boys and girls apart. One result might be that less “pious” Muslim men may find it easier to interact with (and then possibly to marry) non-Muslim women. Thus, some more liberal Muslim institutions encourage boys and girls to sit together in supervised youth group activities in the hope that such experiences will bond both boys and girls to their Muslim peers (see also, Hathout, Osman, and Hathout 1989).

### *Self-Restraint and Peer-Surveillance*

Given that contemporary religious youth, even those involved with religious institutions, spend significant time away from their parents and congregations, religious adults often seek to develop their internal moral character to ensure they make the “right” decision. This is particularly true when they anticipate youth may find themselves surrounded only, or primarily, by their peers, such as when they go away to college. In these situations, youth may feel that they are, or perhaps will become, part of a religious minority (Bryant 2006; Irby 2013; Mir 2009;

Wilkins 2008) which can increase the salience of the call to ‘dare to be different.’ For Muslims in the United States, their status as religious minorities is apparent both numerically and culturally. The leaders in the sites we observed were acutely aware of this in trying to guide their youth and sought to help their young adults avoid the situations where their outsider status might put them in temptation’s path. In comparison, at the Evangelical Protestant churches we observed they also communicated a sense of outsider status, based less on demography or even cultural minority status, but rather because of their religious teachings that the youth should be “in” the world but not “of” it (see also, Bryant 2006). For two of the evangelical churches we studied this sense that the secular world would threaten youth’s moral and religious standing differentially manifested in their efforts to cultivate an ethic of self-restraint within their youth, which they buttressed by encouraging them to monitor one another. While Evangelical Protestants certainly do not have the minority status of either Muslims or Hindus, the organizational leaders we spoke to, and the programming we observed, clearly communicated that Evangelical young people would be out in a world that would threaten their moral and religious standing.

To accomplish the development of self-restraint, and the sense of responsibility to engage in peer surveillance, evangelical adolescents were encouraged to participate and become actively involved in the mixed-gender youth ministry programs in their churches. In the two cases we highlight here, the youth ministry leadership was only slightly older than the youth themselves, and that appears to have been an intentional plan to provide youth with leaders who could help model the appropriate behavior and choices in this and the upcoming life stage. As Gardner (2011) has noted about purity movements among Evangelical Protestants, their efforts often rely on tropes of sexualized culture to sell the ‘right’ choice as cool to youth. In the following

ethnographic vignettes, we explore how the Evangelical youth ministry programs selectively embraced and reinscribed elements of what is perceived as a sexualized youth culture in an effort to make it the young people's own choice to be sexually chaste – and encourage their friends to do the same.

Urban Faith Church is a multi-ethnic, multi-racial urban Evangelical Protestant church, with a significant Latinx membership, including in the pastoral leadership (although the senior pastor is African American). Likewise, City Baptist Church's thriving youth program is multi-ethnic (White, Black, and Latinx, primarily Puerto Rican), even though the adult church membership and senior pastors are predominately White.<sup>iv</sup> As with other youth ministry programs, both churches' employ fairly young youth ministers (men) who showcase their marital status by having their wives working with them in the youth group (either paid or unpaid).

Urban Faith extensively used Christianized popular music (e.g., a romantic song about “the two of us” reimagined to be about the believer and Jesus) to encourage the youth to view cultural objects through the church's “God lens” rather than through a secular, often sexualized, perspective. Or, as Bobby Ramirez, the popular youth pastor, explained, “Jesus is the lover of your soul.” In his work with the youth, he sought to gain the ear and respect of the youth by keeping up with and incorporating elements of ‘their culture’ into activities (e.g., breakdancing) and offering leadership roles to youth. While always under his eye, youth often planned and executed their own programming. Ramirez used the authority and caché he gained from this type of leadership strategy to promote sexual propriety and demarcate particular lifestyle choices as appropriate or not.

In particular, Ramirez discouraged “dating,” which we understood as unsupervised social meetings between boys and girls. He insisted that girls remain virgins until married and



admonished the boys not to be “players.” It was assumed that dating could not end in marriage at such a young age, and thus was considered a dangerous distraction from the important tasks of finishing high school, perhaps being employed, and setting oneself up for a successful transition into adult responsibilities. In fact, one girl at Urban Faith had been excluded from participating in the youth group’s overseas mission trip because of violation of the non-dating standards (although it was not clear whether her boyfriend was a member of the group and what, if any, sanction was applied to him).

This position was consistent with a loose anti-dating movement at this time (Irby 2013) found in many evangelical communities. In her review of evangelical self-help relationship books, Irby (2013) notes that many authors instead promoted a model of “courtship” as a means to distinguish premarital relationship practices from the perceived more sexualized practices in secular culture. Challenging youth to replace the “selfish” practices of dating with efforts that foreground the pursuit of (heterosexual) marriage, the courtship literature contended that premarital relationships should only occur when people can envision marrying the other person and that the young people’s families should be involved in the process.

Given the tendency to privilege the role of the father in this process, Ramirez’s concern about single mothers’ ability to assert authority over their kids, but especially sons, takes on a new meaning (see also Armitage and Dugan 2006). Raising boys to be responsible for marriage and family was key to maintaining viable families in this formulation. Ramirez did not mind that some such young men called him “Daddy,” and he in turn acted out the role by assuming authority over them.

Ramirez also enlisted the help of adults in the congregation to offer one-on-one mentoring to the young people, to give them support and attention. During the youth group’s

alternative Halloween celebration, we spoke with one such leader, whom we call Mike. A White man in his late 40s, his own children grown up or in college, Mike and his wife serve the church's youth program as leaders and chaperones. Mike himself is at the church three or four nights a week. We observed him reach out to touch, greet, and sometimes hug the youth as they arrived, as he spoke to us about ways he tries to counsel them. He said that he takes the boys on fishing trips and invites one or another girl to dinner at his home from time to time. He tries to notice when a couple are dating, and he might take the boy or the girl aside to admonish them that their conduct should be above reproach. He assured us that the kids, particularly those without their own fathers, remember the attention paid to them, and he regards his role in reaching out to them as part of his role as youth leader, even though it is not part of the youth group activity, as such.

The significance of marriage as an ideal and desired state also emerged in other ways throughout our fieldwork. We accompanied Ramirez to monthly meetings of a city-wide group of evangelical youth, and we noticed that the youth leaders from city churches that served ethno-racial minority communities were, despite their relative youth, always married men whose wives were visibly involved as volunteers in the youth groups were present. We suspect that this may be an intentional strategy to place the young male leaders as off-limits to the participants in the groups, as well as act to try to restrain any reckless behavior by the young male pastors. In another manner, however, it reinforced the evangelical emphasis on marriage that tends to integrally tie adulthood and religious maturity to marital status (Irby 2014).

City Baptist Church more directly engaged sex in their youth group than did Urban Faith Church, devoting significant and explicit attention to the topic. The middle school/high school youth group at City Baptist stood out for its racial diversity (roughly equal numbers of Latino/as,

Blacks, and Whites), its gender balance (nearly as many boys as girls), its abundance of singing and dancing talent, its openness to frank personal disclosure, its attention to serious doctrinal teaching, and its highly physical, alternately playful and heartfelt, occasionally flirtatious, member participation. As such, the organizational style differed from the Muslim programs, despite the leadership at each employing a similar a sex-positive abstinence rhetoric that delineated marriage as the only legitimate place to express sexual desires. As the youth pastor said in one sermon to the group, “Sex is like fire. It’s great when it’s in the fireplace but becomes destructive outside.”

During our visits at City Baptist’s youth group we witnessed frank discussions about sexuality coupled with explicit efforts to monitor the behavior. For example, on one early visit we witnessed the wife of a volunteer youth leader testify about her struggles with sexuality. She had been raised Christian but slid into “sexual sins” in high school. Contrite over this behavior, she recommitted her life to Jesus and began “witnessing” about the changes in her life. One of the people to whom she told her story was her high school best friend, whom she subsequently married (and next to whom she was sitting). On yet another occasion we observed a woman youth leader who presided over a girls-only discussion of sex where the young girls felt comfortable enough to discuss their sexual desires. One such girl described how she often feels “horny” and doesn’t care that much about guys emotionally. As such, she inquired, “Is it wrong to just want a boyfriend for the sex part?” While we could tell there was a general consensus in the group that did not approve of what she suggested, it also appeared that she had touched a nerve among others. At the very least, this indicated that she perceived the group as a place where she could articulate such thoughts.

Despite the sense that sexuality could, and perhaps even should be, openly discussed (and monitored) in youth group, it was also clear that it was not a place to act upon these impulses. On another visit, we witnessed a stern lecture to the high school group from the youth pastor on “PC” – physical contact – after walking in on an incident among the junior high students. One day he had entered the youth room to find some junior high kids with their arms around each other. Although that may not be out of place at times, he also mentioned that he saw some of them touching each other’s “butts.” This was totally out of line. Thus, he made it clear that he did not want to see that among either the high school or the junior high kids. “I cannot control what you do at home but I can control what you do in the youth group. If I see anyone touching someone else’s butt I will kick his or her butt out of the youth group.”

The leader also tried to enlist the high school group in his attempt to monitor this behavior by asking that if they saw junior high kids “hanging on each other” or touching each other inappropriately they should say something to the kids involved. From the “oohs” and “aahs” we heard, those present appeared to agree. Talks such as this one transmitted to the evangelical youth the idea that they were not only responsible for monitoring themselves by cultivating self-restraint but that they must work to help out their peers (and juniors) in this process (see also Diefendorf 2015 for a discussion of evangelical accountability networks).

City Baptist’s more explicit attention on sexuality may emerge in part from their involvement in the “True Love Waits” sexual abstinence program. A central dimension of this program involved the single people in the church making the following public pledge:

“Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to be sexually abstinent from this day until the day I enter a biblical marriage relationship.”

To conclude the final event in this campaign, the youth group enacted a Jerry Springer-style skit dramatizing troubles that sexual activity can bring into the lives of youth. The performers were intentionally chosen, with especially trusted members of the core of the youth group playing “couples” who told the TV reality show “host” about their “sexual activity.” In one case, a girl had become pregnant and she and her boyfriend were not ready to be parents, but they were Catholic and could not have an abortion (which seemingly needed no translation among the youth at this Baptist church). In another case, a girl was secretly cheating on her boyfriend with another guy, whom the host invited on stage to provoke a simulated fist fight. The “show” was brought to an emotionally compelling end by a message from another of the youth group’s core members about the virtues of abstinence before marriage. At the close of the speech, virtually everyone sitting in the youth section came forward to sign the pledge.

In sum, at both Evangelical Protestant youth groups there was a mix of expression, repression, and the undeniable attraction of approved interactions with attractive peers in mixed-gender settings. Within the context of the religious community, the leadership was careful to employ adult supervision and espoused strong abstinence messages. Yet, there was also a recognition of the lure of sex and, in our view, a tactical attempt to appropriate elements of youth culture to convince adolescents to restrain themselves when they were not in the church and to enlist them in “helping” their peers do the same through mechanisms of monitoring and peer-pressure. Like the Muslim groups, the evangelicals stressed abstinence before marriage while encouraging the idea of sexual fulfillment as appropriate within marriage. Importantly, however, the evangelicals’ tactics of telling young adults to avoid sex (abstinence) while in cross-gender settings and group activities were distinct from the style of separation and avoidance we witnessed in the Muslim groups.

### *'Classed' Disengagement*

While religious groups have often been presented as key proponents of abstinence, we found evidence that concerns about youth sexuality may not always be their primary motivating concern. During our observations at a youth program for Hindu youth in the area and at an upper-middle class Protestant church, we noticed that the leaders were more concerned with educating both their boys and girls in ethical decision-making. Compared with the previous groups that exhibited considerable concern and anxiety about the (gendered) sexuality of their young adults, the leaders in these programs appeared to worry about sex primarily as it may relate to issues of upward educational and social mobility. In other words, worry about sexuality manifested in a concern that their youth should focus more on their studies and future professions. In the following ethnographic vignettes, we explore how moral lessons being taught in religious group settings were disengaged from explicit concern with sexuality and instead were used to inculcate into young adults more universalized ethical principles. These principles, while focused on ethical treatment of others, and some of the temptations of acting improperly/immorally, did not focus on sexuality and its 'dangers.' We saw in this a 'classed' worldview in which assumptions about education, material resources, and life-style provided some protections from life-risks, and young people were assumed to have the capacities to navigate much of the terrain themselves.

Situated in an inner-ring suburb, Grace Church is a "mainline" Protestant congregation that served a relatively privileged population with a membership that the pastor estimated to be ninety-five percent White. As a non-denominational church that was marked by general approval of evangelical social values, the congregational culture was situated somewhere between

“mainline” and “evangelical.” Non-denominational churches are much more common among evangelicals. Yet, Grace Church also belonged to a Reformed Protestant tradition and its organizational style, including worship practices, programs, and constituency, more closely resembled mainline congregations. In our view, the church presupposed not only affluence, but also education. Messages at Grace Church were consistently, and often abstractly, theological. The church leadership seemed most concerned that the members have a thorough understanding of what they perceived to be the necessary theological beliefs, and constructed age and educationally appropriate programming towards this end. In particular, they taught members that their salvation came through faith, not works. Echoing these teachings the youth programming combined a focus on theology with intentional efforts to keep their younger congregants interested, involved, and committed to the faith. In particular, they sought to accomplish these goals at a time when youth began to make educational and career decisions for their lives.

By and large, it appeared to us that the regulation of youth sexuality was seen as a parental issue. We never observed the explicit sex-focused programming that we have recounted in the Evangelical churches or at Muslim youth events. Given the prevailing upper-middle class norms that emphasized family privacy and eschewed public surveillance and confession, we did not expect explicit attention on sexual matters and did not see it. In fact, the messages presented by youth leaders at Grace Church rarely prohibited or promoted any specific behaviors. Instead, they sought to teach principles that could be applied throughout one’s life, including to matters of sex and sexuality. For example, one lesson used “Pringles potato chips” in a fairly clumsy analogy that did not seem to resonate with the kids. One young man’s mother quickly discerned the lesson on the drive home, and said to her son: “The theme of the class was ‘sin.’ Just as when you eat one potato chip you want another, when you sin you don’t want to stop with just one.”

The mother might have wished that the youth leader had gone on to give examples of such sins, perhaps involving drugs or sex, but she did not elaborate at that time and the son did not respond with any elaboration of his own. The group presumably sought to impart a message that might be one that the son himself would remember later in his life when he reflected on something that made him uneasy. But they left as much room for inferences from the youth involved as they did for us as observers. In general, we sensed that Grace Church assumed that their constituent families had the educational and material resources to provide their children with the moral compass, good sense, and deep-seated psychological security they would need to stay out of the sexual trouble that they, and that the church, found unacceptable. What exactly that trouble was, or the behaviors that led to it, remained unarticulated in our observations.

Likewise, the Hindu institutions we observed often had a similar class profile with constituents who had high educational attainment, professional or managerial occupations, and relatively comfortable circumstances. As with their mainline Protestant counterparts, they seemed less focused on dangers of youth sexuality than the Muslim or Evangelical institutions. Notwithstanding the “no-dating” rule that one of our Hindu families mandated for their children – a rule that the 14-year-old daughter felt was invidiously applied in a classic double-standard pattern – the Hindus we met and the institutions they were part of did not appear as committed to resisting social standards in secular culture. Indeed, they conceptualized the dilemmas posed by the larger society quite differently, leading subsequently to different responses. For example, one Hindu youth group we visited at a local temple had the look of the Mainline Protestant youth groups we have seen: a mixed-gender, casually dressed gathering of young upper-middle-class teenagers, who, under the leadership of post-college youth leaders, discussed ethical issues (in school and dating) in the light of scriptures and religious teachings, in this case, Hindu. On one



occasion, the scriptural text, which had been assigned as homework, was a chapter of an English translation of the Hindu epic, the Ramayana, where the hero, Rama, attracts the attention of the widow Surpanakha, who is described by the poet as pot-bellied and cross-eyed, a very ugly woman. Rama refuses her advances, explaining that he is married, and is on a mission to rescue his beautiful wife, Sita, from an abductor. Surpanakha is outraged. The youth group leaders had prepared several issues for the teenagers to discuss, one of which was “How do you deal with an ugly person who asks you out? What if it’s a disabled individual at school? How about someone boring, dorky, and generally socially inept?”

These questions, which presupposed both that the youth were privileged enough not to be ugly, disabled, or dorky, but also that being “asked out” itself is not problematic, were radically different from those confronted by the youth at other venues. “Dating” here seemed inevitable and an accepted practice when done ethically. Indeed, even the implied adultery in the story was not the focus of the leadership’s first set of questions. Compared to the Muslim or Evangelical groups we discussed above, dating itself is not a nexus of larger issues of gender and sexuality. Instead, the Hindu group leaders were using the Ramayana (a valuable icon of Hindu culture) to help young people develop their discretionary moral sense. Not incidentally, the group also intended to promote solidarity among Hindu youth of both genders, who are typically very thinly spread across their suburban high schools. As such, youth programming for these young Hindus allowed them to participate in a group where they were often of a similar age, race, religion, and social status as their peers. In doing so, it likely served a social dimension of connectedness for adolescents who in many other locales may feel like an outsider. Additionally, it helped many young adults learn more about their religion, something many of them knew relatively little about. The knowledge they gained from this process hopefully allowed them to represent

themselves differently (and maybe with more pride) to non-Indians and non-Hindus. Of course, participation also allowed them to spend time away from their parents, while also pleasing their parents by going to the temple, and to potentially even meet someone who may become a spouse (again, everything we saw in the programming assumed heterosexual marriage).

More than unwanted pregnancy or spiritual transgression, our Hindu families seemed most concerned that their youth obtain the best education and subsequently make appropriate marital matches. Marriage, particularly “good” marriages, was clearly assumed as necessary for a successful adult life, and even for religious maturity. Unlike the more rhetorical connections made among family and religious life among evangelicals and Muslims (see Irby 2014), within Hinduism the issue of marriage and family becomes particularly salient religiously since many if not most religious practices are conducted with one’s family at a home altar. However, in this case marriage seems to be as much a class project as it is a gender or sexual project. Good marital matches assure that the young people, particularly young women, maintain their reputations, but such maintenance was not seen as requiring stringent surveillance as much as the development of an attuned internal moral compass and clear knowledge about future plans and prospects.

The Hindu youth, on the other hand, often had ambivalent responses to their parents’ ambitions for them. During an observation at a week-long summer camp held at a lake-side resort a short drive from the city, the high-school and college-age young people often had opportunities to put on plays and skits. In doing so, they regularly presented humorous reenactments about their parents’ occupational and educational ambitions for them, often portraying the parents as too materialistic, too concerned with social status, and too attentive to the “cultural” dimensions of Indian and Hindu society and not concerned enough with the

spiritual. Indeed, the young people often presented themselves as more concerned with Hinduism's spiritual and religious messages, and less tied specifically to their parents' version of Indian culture. For these young adults, their attempts to be "counter-cultural" focused more on money-and-status materialism and its pervasiveness in the culture and among their parents, and not on concerns with secular culture as sexualized. This was reinforced during some sessions with religious leaders (often gurus from India), where the fundamental lessons were about communicating abstracted ethical principles – not about rigid systems of 'thou shalt nots.'

In sum, at both Grace Church and among Hindus, the religious leadership emphasized concerns about the moral and educational/professional development of their youth. In some ways their attempts to develop an internal moral code that emphasized personal responsibility resembled Evangelical Protestants, however, they rarely oriented this towards the topic of gender or sexuality, nor did the logic employ legalistic accounting of forbidden behaviors. Further, their approach also lacked the evangelical emphasis on peer surveillance. For the young people at Grace Church or in the Hindu programs we observed, their own internal codes, along with their and their parents' concerns with educational and professional achievement, needed to be the necessary resources.

## CONCLUSION

Religious leaders from a variety of traditions worked with youth in an attempt to mold them on their journey to adulthood. In this process, concerns about developing moral and spiritual character often, but not always, intersected with anxieties about sexuality and gender. In particular, we observed three organizational styles that characterized the explicit lessons taught and the programming practices: 1) *avoidance* – a strict, legalistic, abstinence approach that

involves strict sex segregation and consistent adult monitoring; 2) *self-restraint and peer surveillance* – an abstinence message that reappropriates elements of youth culture to enlist adolescents in monitoring themselves and others; and 3) *disengagement* – a largely laissez-faire approach that treats the development of abstract ethical systems, and a situational ethics format, as the resources that can provide youth with the material with which they will construct an internal moral gyroscope.

While we structured our analysis of these three styles largely by religious tradition, we caution against over-identifying any of these approaches with a particular faith. On the one hand, religious beliefs about gender within Islam or a theology of personal responsibility among evangelicals may orient them towards avoidance and self-restraint/peer surveillance respectively. However, no faith tradition is monolithic and religious communities and their members interpret and negotiate local conditions and constraints. Future research should continue to investigate how youth ministries mediate their theologies and particular congregational cultures within the emplaced demographics and challenges of adolescents.

For example, additional dimensions of difference emerged that, in our case, sometimes overlapped with religious tradition. For both the Muslims and Hindus we observed, their experiences as a religious minority in the United States affected their conversations with adolescents about what to do, how to act, and what to avoid. In both cases, this produced concerns and anxieties that influenced their organizational programming. However, the Muslim and Hindu groups we observed interpreted this outsider status in different ways. Whereas Muslim leaders largely identified as a *religious* minority living in a cultural context that challenged some core values (such as gender segregation), Hindu adults we spoke with often articulated their minority status more along *racial-ethnic* lines. Their concerns about the

dominant culture centered less on its religiosity and more often considered the challenges of upward mobility for their children.

Additionally, gender also emerged as a key, but multi-faceted, difference across these organizational styles. Unlike much of the literature that has focused on how religious groups conceptualize men and women as having different needs and traits (see, for example, Irby 2014), our analysis draws attention to other ways gender can (or fails to) organize religious teachings. While Muslim leaders clearly constructed men and women as different from one another, the salience of avoidance emerged more from their concerns with secular culture and the desire to be counter-cultural than it did from any theory of complementarity. In contrast, the Hindu and Mainline Protestant adults rarely gendered their religious instruction for young adults by delineating different concerns or challenges. Instead, it appeared that both sons and daughters were expected to do well in school and their future professions. The challenges in life were treated, at least in manifest programming, as the same for young men and women.

Despite the variations in how these religious groups addressed sexuality with their young adults, they also operated from shared assumptions. For the most part the program leaders – and many participants – treated their approach and message as part of an effort to be “counter-cultural.” In some cases this explicitly implicated sexuality – conceptualizing the dominant surrounding society as morally decayed and sexualized which represented a threat to the pursuit of purity that had to be resisted (see, for example, Williams and Vashi 2007). In other cases this could implicitly involve sexuality – such as the concerns about cultural materialism and the level of insufficient moral character. By valorizing the distinctiveness of their group, their religious teachings, and their worldviews and actions, youth leaders engaged in a religious project to

simultaneously keep their youth in the fold while helping them to navigate the world successfully.

In another way, however, they shared a common vantage point with mainstream culture by operating from a heteronormative framework. Discussions about the challenges and experiences of adolescent sexuality presumed that all the girls and boys would be heterosexual. Furthermore, religious leaders and parents consistently talked as if marriage was a given and natural goal for their youth's futures. In the process of guiding their adolescents on the journey to adulthood, there existed a presumption that this process would culminate in marriage (and a family). In other words, adolescent sexuality must be controlled and monitored until such a time that these young people have matured and committed to a marriage where they can freely enjoy sex. A lifetime of singleness, or at least a protracted period of time, went largely unacknowledged or addressed. In a period of delayed age of first marriage, there is some indication that religious communities are leaving their youth feeling unprepared for how to live a chaste life into their twenties (Diefendorf 2015; Irby 2013). Future research should extend beyond the age of youth and young adults to examine how religious communities construct and organize gendered sexuality across the life course.

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<sup>i</sup> Corresponding author: Rhys H. Williams, Department of Sociology, Loyola University Chicago, 1032 W. Sheridan Rd. Chicago, IL 60660, [rwilliams7@luc.edu](mailto:rwilliams7@luc.edu).  
Courtney Ann Irby, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Illinois Wesleyan University, 1312 Park Street, Bloomington, IL 61701, [cirby@iwu.edu](mailto:cirby@iwu.edu).  
R. Stephen Warner, Department of Sociology, University of Illinois-Chicago, 4112 Behavioral Sciences Building 1007 West Harrison Street (MC 312), Chicago, Illinois 60607-7140, [rswarner@uic.edu](mailto:rswarner@uic.edu).

<sup>ii</sup> During this phase of the research eight graduate student research assistants worked on the data collection: Janet S. Armitage, Affaf Baig, Sayida Baste, Mary Jean Cravens, Rhonda E. Dugan, Korie Edwards, Jennifer Janis, and Jon Stamm. Of these eight, two were African American, one an Arab Muslim, one a South Asian Muslim, and four Euro-American. Fifteen undergraduate interns also participated in these site visits: Rooman Ahad, Shannon Andrysiak Rabi, Melaniece Bardley, Mary Calderon, Oscar Edmond, Kurt Griesch, Eman Hassaballa Aly, Daniel Kovacs, Angee Meen, James (Tre) Morris, Farid Muhammad, Kimberly Richards, Joaquin Rodgers, Tamara Rose, Gira Vashi. The interns were thus comprised of five African Americans, an Asian American, an Arab and an Indian Muslim, an Indian Hindu, a Jew, an Hispanic Catholic, and four Euro-Americans who were at least nominally Christian.

<sup>iii</sup> We note that in our sample multi-ethnic, multi-racial churches are over-represented compared to Protestant congregations in the United States as a whole. Because we are interested in the ways in which religious organizations help shape identity and form religious adults, we do not consider that a problem. Both of these churches had thriving youth programs that even attracted some young people whose parents were not church members and who crossed neighborhood lines to get there (see Williams and Warner 2003).

<sup>iv</sup> All personal and organizational names used here are pseudonyms.