

# **"I'm Going to do Things Differently": The Impact of Religious Sexuality Education on Future Church Leaders**

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**Summary:** This qualitative study asked professional women in the religious sphere about their experiences of sexuality education in the Christian contexts of their youth, and how they believe those teachings about sexuality affect their lives today. Narratives referenced the spiritual and emotional violence participants felt had been inflicted upon them by religious communities, and they connected their sexuality education to later issues in romantic relationships. However, participants noted the idea of “sex being sacred” as a value they wish to carry forward as professionals in the religious world.

## **I. Research Questions**

- How do female professionals in the area of Religious Studies recall their experiences of sexuality education, especially in their religious/church context?
- How do they believe their sexuality education impacts their adult lives, if at all?

## **II. Sample**

- Josephine:** 50+, white, raised Roman Catholic, identifies as Roman Catholic, divorced
- Andi:** 31-35, white, raised Southern Baptist with Episcopalian influence, identifies as non-theist, in a heterosexual relationship at time of interview
- Phoebe:** 26-30, white, raised Presbyterian and Baptist, identifies as Christian with Buddhist/Judaist leanings, divorced, in a heterosexual relationship at time of interview

## **III. Methodology**

- Interviews from 45-90 minutes guiding participants through questions about church background, what they were taught about sexuality and how, what they appreciated or would have changed about those experiences, and how that experience impacted the way they would live as a religious professional
- Interviews coded and analyzed using phenomenological qualitative standard practices (descriptive, initial coding followed by pattern/theme coding)

## **IV. Findings**

Participants recalled their educational experiences largely negatively (themes listed with corresponding quotes)

### **A. Guilt and Pressure from Religious Community**

“I think the guilt piece was something that was difficult to sort through because I think one of the things that goes along with that kind of message is a lot of guilt if you do make a mistake... And I think it's problematic in the sense that then people just hide. And hiding isn't good for anybody either.” –Phoebe

“I was never given that permission, you know? To be human. In that regard. "You have to fulfill this, these expectations.” And these are big and important questions, having to do with sexuality. So if you made the wrong choice...it's a bad choice. It has huge ramifications.” -Josephine

### B. Negative impact on Romantic Relationships

“I ended up marrying a guy that I dated in that [conservative Evangelical] church setting. And we got married really young. And there was a lot of pressure to not be physical. And to, if you were going to date, have it be someone who you were definitely going to marry.” –Phoebe

“I finally told [my boyfriend], “I want to do this [have sex] with you.” And he said to me, "How can you put me before God?" And that \*\*\*\*ed me up!” -Andi

“It was a very good thing that my first partner, sexual partner, was an atheist. Because he allowed me to not feel bad about myself.” -Andi

### C. One Positive Point: Sexuality as Sacred

“I appreciate seeing sexuality and human relationships as sacred. I really do appreciate that...Maybe in balance, it would have been more helpful.” –Josephine

You know...I wish [my Sunday school teacher] had just left it as "Know that it's a sacred thing." That was important to learn, I loved that! It is sacred, don't just give up this sacred thing, not just virginity, but all of yourself.” –Andi

“I like the message of not just sleeping around, and you know, I wouldn't say, well they should have just said "Hand out condoms! Go experiment!” –Phoebe

## V. **Implications For Discussion**

-Churches/religious communities should be aware that addressing sexuality as sacred does not counteract negativity in other aspects of sexuality education

-Churches/religious communities may need to find ways to evaluate their sexuality education that include the perceptions of the students

-Emergent theme from recent interview in a related study: Participant indicated that she was glad she was taught “nothing” about sexuality because what would have been taught (by the Roman Catholic Church) would have been harmful and negative

## VI. **Related Sources**

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