



Research Paper

HIV/AIDS: “In God we believe, in condoms we trust” an exposition of the role of Faith, Sex, and Ethics among Tertiary Education Students in Lagos Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

In every community all over the world volunteers discuss HIV/AIDS transmission and its prevention. At the end of 2007, there were about 33 million people living with HIV/AIDS: 2.7 million people were estimated to have acquired the HIV that year. Although the epidemic has stabilized, it remains a leading challenge for global health. Many people believed that condom is the best method of protection against HIV/AIDS while some believe that if you trust in God you will not have the disease in any form. In the light of these opinions, this paper has showcased the opinion of the university Students on the use of condom as a protection against HIV/AIDS. The study was a survey that sought to identify the role of condom in protecting HIV/AIDS. Nine months ago, I waited anxiously in the Education Hall as the clock approached the start time for our first student panel discussion on faith and sexual ethics, and the hall remained quiet as a few audience members passed the time in their chairs. That was the beginning of “In God we believe, in condoms we trust”. In the light of this, I aspired not to establish the religious "rights" and "wrongs" on the issue of faith, sex and ethics (though that is a valuable pursuit in ethics), but rather to explore and analyze the methods of ethical discernment employed consciously and unconsciously by students as they encounter sexual ethics topics in their lives and communities. With so many other interesting events on our campus, would anyone show up to hear their peers-not experts or intellectuals-discuss religion and sex freely? To my surprise, the quiet crowd eventually grew to nearly two hundred and fifty students, many of whom squatted on the floor or squeezed in along the walls around the cramped room in order to participate in "Homosexuality and Religion," the first panel's title and theme. , the phenomenally popular student discussion series I had the privilege of facilitating through University Student Research Fellowship at the West African Christian university Center for Applied Ethics this year. In conjunction with over 50 one-on-one interviews I conducted among the student body, the series aimed to explore the complex ways in which students' religious affiliations inform (or do not inform) their views on issues in sexual ethics, including premarital sex, use of condom, birth control, abortion, dating, and homosexuality. In identifying the methodological trends in ethical discernment through the discussion series, students were challenged to mindfully consider their own methods of ethical discernment and invited to critically assess their own sexual ethics and those of their peers. This study also highlighted the theoretical issues, trends in student ethical strategies, faith and student views and strategies analysis.

Key words: HIV/AIDS, Sex, Faith, Ethics and Education.

INTRODUCTION

Students at the tertiary education level in Nigeria were the main focus of this study. In the same vein the role of religion-that is, religious community and leaders, sacred texts, interior spiritual experience, and religious understandings of conscience and reason-in students' methods of ethical discernment cannot be left behind in the use of our questionnaire. Which aspects of religion influence sexual decision-making? How relevant is faith to students' ethical discernment around sex and sexuality?

In identifying the methodological trends in ethical discernment through the discussion series, students were challenged to mindfully consider their own methods of ethical discernment and invited to critically assess their own sexual ethics and those of their peers. The crowds at the discussions remained large throughout the series, consistently

affirming one very notable fact: In a college culture that often portrays sex and sexuality as casual and capriciously pleasure-driven, Santa Clara students possess a compelling desire to engage these issues seriously within ethical and religious contexts.

How, as students, friends, parents, and educators, do we enable the thoughtful student discernment that SCU students seek? In this report I seek to address this question as I share the insights I gained about the role of religion in students' sexual ethics through this project. In addition to introducing my observations, I will propose some of my own ideas about encouraging effective, intentional ethical discernment in sexual ethics among university of Lagos students and elsewhere.

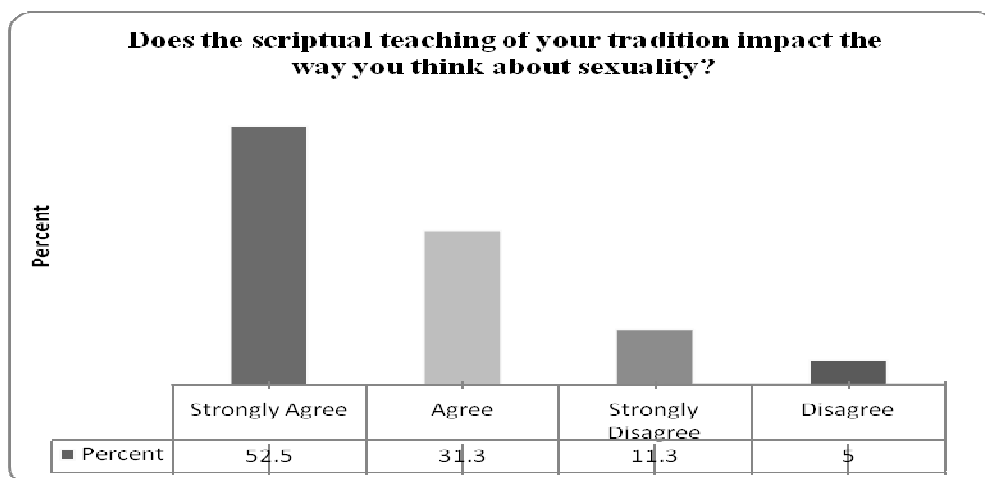
METHODOLOGY

Over the course of the school year, there were five, one-hour student discussion panels. With the exception of the final panel, each focused on a particular issue within sexual ethics-homosexuality, premarital sex, interfaith dating, or abortion-featuring two student panelists who shared ten-minute statements about the topic at hand after a brief ten-minute introduction of the topic that I provided as the discussion facilitator. I began the second half-hour of the discussions with a question or two for the panelists, and then opened the meeting for questions and comments from the floor. I provided these students with three or four questionnaires to guide their panel statements, and asked them to focus on the "why" of their ethical discernment as well as the "what" of their ethical positions. For instance, the questions that guided the panel included:

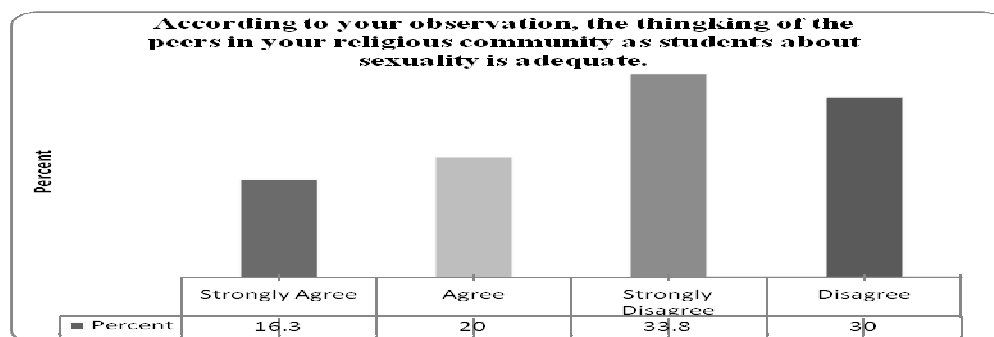
1. How do your conscience, religious experiences, and personal convictions contribute to your ethical position?



2. Do the scriptural teachings of your tradition impact the way you think about sexuality?



3. According to your observation, the thinking of the peers in your religious community as student about sexuality is adequate.



Of several key features that led to the popularity and success of the series, it was the exemplary student panelists that made the largest impact, in my mind. Students' abilities to articulate the complexities of their religious ethical discernment eloquently, as well as their willingness to offer candid, humble reflections, created an environment where all opinions were welcome (though not without the possibility of sincere interrogation from others). Along with an ability and willingness to articulate one's ethical discernment, I looked for panelists of diverse religious backgrounds (i.e., of different faith traditions, denominations, or ideological leanings), with differing tendencies in ethical discernment (which I will elaborate as the report continues), and ultimately, different ethical stances regarding the issue at hand. By bringing together different students in a single discussion, we invited audience members to consider how students of every ethical stance and approach can mindfully discern and converse about sexual ethics. In order to highlight the perspectives of the panelists, I sought to maintain an objective position throughout the discussion in order to create an environment where all perspectives and insights could be voiced in a respectful, and thus productive, manner.

In conjunction with these panels, I conducted over 30 voluntary, one-on-one interviews among students of a variety of religious affiliations. I invited students to participate in these interviews through pre-established clubs, organizations, and departments on campus, such as Campus Ministry and the Religious Studies Department. While all interviews were tape recorded, anonymity was ensured in all public materials drawing on the interviews. Although all interviews were guided by a set of eleven open-ended questions, I occasionally veered from this list for the sake of clarification, and never without permission from the interviewee. As in the panel discussions, I encountered interest and genuine concern for the ethical issues at hand, along with a number of insightful observations regarding student tendencies in sexual ethics.

TRENDS IN STUDENTS ETHICAL STRATEGIES

During interview questions like "If a friend told you he/she was considering whether or not to begin engaging in premarital sex with a significant other, what would you tell him/her? And, consider this: If a friend of the same religious background as your own told you he/she was considering whether or not to begin engaging in premarital sex with a significant other, what would you tell him/her? Is religious affiliation a factor in conversation about sexual-decision making between friends? When I asked students questions like these in my interviews, there was not a uniform answer. Rather, students' answers illustrated three main trends in the way that religion does (or does not) influence sexual ethics. More often than not, students did not directly name the role of religion in their sexual ethics. They simply responded to a hypothetical situation regarding sex or sexuality, demonstrating a method that I later labelled in my analysis.

A number of students claimed their faith played no part in their views on sexual ethics. I label this approach with the statement, "*Faith doesn't inform my views.*" This is not to say that religion did not have some part in their ethical discernment subconsciously; rather, it was not mentioned, or was even outwardly rejected, as an influence in the discernment they demonstrated with their responses. Others' drew direct correlation between the official teaching, texts, and rituals of their tradition and their views on sexual ethics. I label this approach, "*Faith directly informs my views.*" Finally, many provided answers that demonstrated indirect religious influence on their sexual decision-making, referring to the influence of religious components that did not outwardly address sexual ethics, but were deemed relevant by the student nonetheless. This final approach is labeled, "*Faith indirectly informs my views.*"

"FAITH DOESN'T INFORM OUR VIEWS"

Some students with religious backgrounds indicated that their faith has very little to no influence on their ethical discernment surrounding sex and sexuality. Many of these students voluntarily stated that religion plays no part in their

decision-making; others simply left religion out of their responses to my questions. Interestingly, this method was not confined to non-practicing religious students. Even some practicing religious students demonstrated this mentality. There were two recurring explanations provided by students who said that faith did not inform their views about sexual ethics, or on a particular issue of sexual ethics. First, some students said their religious tradition has little to say on the topic. This reasoning was common among Jewish and Buddhist students who were not aware of any official teaching or collective religious beliefs that concerned the ethical issue at hand. This is not to say that these teachings, rituals, or beliefs do not exist. Simply that the students were unaware of them. Some of these students liked the fact that their religion did not speak explicitly about sexual issues because it allowed them freedom to form their own views. Second, others said faith does not inform their sexual ethics because they simply disagree with religion's teachings on the matter. This mentality was common among Catholic students when asked about birth control. Many Catholic interviewees literally laughed at the idea of considering birth control to be an ethical issue at all, not to mention one that religion should concern itself with in a major way.

"FAITH DIRECTLY INFORMS OUR VIEWS"

Some students, especially Protestant students, directly cited official religious scripture, doctrine, and dogma when addressing a given sexual issue. For instance, students in this grouping might cite a Bible verse where Jesus directly speaks to an issue like adultery, or a papal encyclical addressing sexual intercourse. Once again, I identified two trends in the reasoning these students employed in directly appropriating the teachings of their religious tradition in sexual decision-making. One Protestant male I spoke with said, "Truth is Truth-it's not relative," voicing the first common explanation for this mentality. Students like this young man literally applied religious teachings because they believed absolute and literal religious teachings reflect the absolute nature of their God. For them, the most reliable ways to find these stable truths are resources like texts and communal tradition. Often, they also expressed a desire to situate themselves in contrast to moral relativism. Another common explanation for this mentality rested in the assumption that if one is truly religious, he/she will do what the religion prescribes. In this case, religious identity is delineated by one's obedience to faith teaching, so the only way to ensure the religious nature of one's ethics is to apply the tradition's teachings or beliefs literally.

"FAITH INDIRECTLY INFORMS MY VIEWS"

When explaining their views on sexual ethics, many students cited doctrines, faith teachings, and religious themes that do not explicitly or literally address sexual ethics. Among these students, teachings on everything from prayer to the afterlife were appropriated to give religious explanations for sexual decision-making.

When many students employed this approach, they explained that their faith is an influential aspect of their lives, yet the direct religious teaching of their tradition is too removed from the complexities of lived experience to be applied literally. This explanation was strikingly common among Catholic students when addressing homosexuality. Rather than citing papal teaching or biblical passages concerning the issue, Catholic students frequently referred to themes like human dignity and the goodness of all God's creation to justify a religious pro-homosexuality stance. This approach was also common among Buddhist, Jewish, and Hindu students seeking to integrate religion in their sexual ethics in cases where they identified "no direct religious teaching" within their tradition. Since they were not aware of an official religious teaching on a given issue, they surmised their own religiously-based explanations. Although it may be implicit already, it should be noted that a single student may employ numerous strategies for a single ethical issue. For instance, many students justified their positions against premarital sex with a combination of doctrinal and biblical assertions, religious themes indirectly relevant to the issue, as well as "non-Christian" reasoning. In addition, a single student often appealed to different strategies for different issues under the umbrella of sexual ethics. A typical Catholic student tended to appeal approvingly to the Church's official teaching on premarital sex, explain that religion has nothing to do with the birth control issue, then cite the goodness of all God's creations to support the moral permissibility of homosexuality.

ANALYZING OUR STRATEGIES

Each of these strategies has its strengths and weaknesses. Those in the "Faith does not inform my views" category frequently said it enabled more freedom to consider other important factors in ethical discernment. Religion was not making an obvious claim on their opinions, so it did not obstruct them from other relevant nonreligious factors. At the same time, however, these students lacked a thorough integration of faith in this aspect of their lives. Many expressed a desire to do this, yet did not know how. In other words, this nonreligious strategy was often a last resort rather than a wilful choice. Those who cited religious teachings, beliefs, and scriptures "directly" related to sexual ethics often held what they deemed to be very stable, communal positions. They found comfort in the seemingly objective nature of their opinions. Yet other students found them removed from, even irrelevant to, the lived complexities of shifting human

experience. In their own accounts, students in this category frequently struggled to explain their positions in light of lived realities, discounting the complexities that arose when integrating textual or doctrinal teaching into life. "I think lesbians and gays are sinners, but once we find Christ, He has the power to change us for the better," explained one male Protestant, explaining the Bible's teachings against homosexuality and one's ability to abandon that sexual orientation with Christ. Many students stated things like this, then struggled to address the unsuccessful efforts of homosexuals to "change for the better."

Those whose religious affiliations informed their views "indirectly" demonstrated an ability to reconcile various ethical factors while maintaining their religious identity. Critics, however, charged that this approach leads to moral relativism, an infinite number of ethical possibilities within a given tradition, which can ultimately lead to an overall disintegration of communal religious identity. Many of these students expressed unrest or self-consciousness about their approach, describing their religious affiliations with modifiers like "sort of Catholic" or "a progressive Jew," since their indirect religious references often justified untraditional views on sexual ethics (untraditional within their respective tradition, that is),

When I directly asked students about the degree to which religion informed their sexual ethics, students of all backgrounds and opinions were comfortable enough to answer with labels like "very little," or "somewhat," or "a lot." Among them, however, students commonly illustrated discomfort or confusion with this admission. Others confidently responded, only to demonstrate a very different approach than the one they initially identified. First year students were often eager to talk to me about their personal sexual ethics, yet they frequently revealed a lack of self-awareness about their ethical discernment as our conversations progressed. We are making complex decisions about sexual ethics, but often without a conscious awareness of how we have chosen to go about doing it. This reality became a particular concern as the strengths and weaknesses of each ethical strategy surfaced. Unconsciously, students are sacrificing the strengths of some strategies for the sake of another's appeal. Yet, if students are largely unaware of the particular approach they bring to ethical discernment, how can they make truly informed decisions between one approach and another? While commonly critical of the ethics of their opponents, most students did not outwardly acknowledge the weaknesses of their own approaches.

CONCLUSIONS

In most conversation about sexual ethics in mainstream culture, particularly the college culture, participants focus one's position for or against a given practice or belief. SCU students affirmed this trend, saying that they often know (or can sense) whether their peers were for or against a given issue based on casual conversation, but they rarely engage in direct conversation about the complexities of these ethical decisions. Since they rarely talk about the complexities of why they believe what they do, it is easy to patronize those with different perspectives and/or make ethical decisions about sex with little to no self-examination in relation to alternative possibilities.

After a year of listening to students talk about sexual decision-making, I could easily attempt to establish which methods for sexual ethical discernment are most effective, more religious, or more likely to result in the "proper" ethical opinions. Such an attempt, however, would be contradictory to one of the major lessons I take away from my project. Rather than simply asking students to argue about ethical issues in a way that is separated from the complexities of their lived experiences and multi-faceted influences, students found it helpful to think about why they believe what they believe, and how numerous influences inform that stance. Most had a sense of what their religious traditions officially taught or believed—that was not the obstacle to productive ethical discernment. The component that most effectively spurred a well thought-out ethical position was the experience of voicing one's own ethical reasoning and engaging the discernment and opinions of others.

Thus, if one wants to know how, as students, friends, parents, and educators, we can enable the thoughtful student discernment that SCU students seek; we should not simply ask how we can persuade students to think one way or the other about a given issue. Rather, before the "right" and "wrong" of sex is addressed, we should consider how to create an environment where thoughtful ethical discernment can occur. Do we acknowledge that moral decision-making about sex and sexuality is complex? How can we create a space where students of all backgrounds can consider the difficulties of integrating moral teaching and lived experience? What are the obstacles that prevent students from thoughtfully grappling with their sexual ethics, individually and with friends? What can we do to overcome those obstacles in this community? Once students had the space for intellectual, personal, spiritual conversation about sexual ethics, they grappled with very challenging, thoughtful arguments for and against various traditions. Students want to think critically about sex; they just want an opportunity to do it honestly, personally, and with a concern for "right" and "wrong" that does not patronize others or oversimplify the issues. Although condoms play an important part in HIV/AIDS prevention, there are other approaches. Dr Kevin De Cock tells us more, *"Condoms are an important component of a comprehensive prevention programme but only one component of what today we refer to as combination prevention. And, I think other factors that are important are reducing numbers of sex partners, abstinence is an important strategy for certain age groups, and for those who choose it, some choose that method of protection"*.

But there are additional prevention approaches: testing and counseling so that one knows one's HIV status and that of one's regular sex partner. The control of other sexually transmitted infections, particularly in high risk groups such as sex workers and men who have sex with men, is important. In heterosexual epidemics, male circumcision protects against the acquisition of HIV in men in those who are circumcised. Among the other prevention methods are a number of new technologies that are coming along. Panlilio opines that Microbicides are compounds used by women, applied in the vagina, usually prior to sex and such products are now being studied and actually the first successful result has just been achieved. And then antiretroviral drugs themselves have preventive benefit, either in HIV infected people taking the drugs, lowering the amount of virus so that they become less infectious themselves or use of drugs by HIV negative people taking it before they are exposed. Use of antiretroviral drugs and microbicides for prevention of HIV is now being studied, so they are not yet recommended by WHO. But these are emerging areas to watch.

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