

Sexuality and Religion in Schools

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Abstract

The scriptures of the world's religions have a great deal to say about sexual values. For sex educators, whether or not they have a religious faith, both religious and non-religious views about sexual values need to be considered; to live together in a pluralist society, all of us need to understand at least something of what it is that motivates others. Often, those with religious convictions have more conservative views about sex and sex education, though this is far from always being the case. I discuss the relationship between religion and school sex education in China (a country where religion plays a much smaller role than in many other countries), England (with a particular focus on the concerns that many Muslim parents have) and the USA (where abstinence education has been widespread for over three decades). I end by suggesting how teachers might account of religion when teaching sex education.

Key words

Sex education, sexuality education, religion, Christianity, Islam, China, England, the USA, No Outsiders, abstinence education

Religious believers need no convincing that religious values need to be taken seriously. This is both in general and perhaps with particular reference to sexual ethics and behaviour, since, for religious believers, matters of religion and sexuality sit particularly closely to one's personal identity.

Some initial clarification is needed. The term 'sexuality' can be used in one of two senses. The sense in which it is most often used, including in the field of sex education, is to mean sexual activity or the capacity for sexual feelings. In this sense, the terms 'sexuality education' and 'sex education' are near synonyms, with some countries preferring one term and some countries the other; both are broad terms encompassing pretty much anything to do with sex(uality). The minority meaning of the term 'sexuality' is 'sexual orientation', i.e., whether a person is straight, gay or otherwise. In this chapter, while I mainly use the term 'sex education' (more commonly used in the UK than 'sexuality education'), 'sexuality' is understood in its majority meaning.

While religious believers acknowledge the importance of religious values both in general and in relation to sexual matters, both agnostics and atheists might be tempted to ignore religious values. However, this would be a mistake. For a start, it is still the case that worldwide some 84% of people claim a religious affiliation (Pew Research Center 2012), a figure that is projected to increase to 87% by 2050 (Research Center 2015). Although a stated belief in God may not translate into any overt religious activity, such as communal worship, it often connects with what people feel about important issues in life, including those to do with sexuality, and occasionally manifests itself, for example in wishing to avail oneself of religious traditions at significant times in one's life.

In this chapter, I explore the intersection between sexuality and religion in schools. I look first at generic issues, and then focus on three countries: China, England and the USA.

The intersection between sexuality and religion in schools

While the scriptures of the world's religions may not have anything very direct to say about certain of today's ethical questions – such as human reproductive cloning, AI or globalisation – do have a great deal to say about sexual values, as these have existed since time immemorial. Even in those countries, such as a number in Western Europe, where the importance of religion is attenuating for most people, religious values still permeate much of society, if only for historical reasons, and need to be understood. Of course, those with a religious faith also need to understand something of secular reasoning about sexual ethics; it is still too often the case that some of those with a religious faith assume that it is religion, and religion alone, that tells us what good sexual behaviour entails (Halstead and Reiss 2003).

Few (though more in some countries than in others) would argue that those without a religious faith are incapable of acting well, but religious notions of the good can be distinctive and that is indeed often the case in respect of sexual behaviour. Many religious believers would maintain that their religion provides them with a moral compass, a guide that helps them determine what is right and what is wrong in sexual matters as well as

elsewhere. For sex educators, whether or not they have a religious faith, both religious and non-religious views about sexual values need to be considered. If we wish to live together in a pluralist society, it needs all of us to understand at least something of what it is that motivates others. Such understanding is both intrinsically respectful and instrumentally useful.

There was a time when relatively little had been written in any detail about religious values and school sex education. Even such a valuable book as Ron Morris' *Values in Sexuality Education*, published in 1994, had almost nothing on the issue beyond one telling anecdote:

My first experience with a formal lesson on sexuality was as a senior high school student in the early seventies. Our school had a special sex education class in which the school nurse would visit all grade 10 and 11 classes. She would give a presentation on male and female anatomy, ovulation, conception and contraception. I remember being quite bored by the countless facts and clinical diagrams until she did something that was extremely unusual, especially in a Catholic school. She distributed a condom for each student to examine and manipulate. Most of us seemed rather uncomfortable. Some students appeared disgusted while others just giggled. Much to my surprise the nurse looked quite comfortable with the topic and with our response to the flabby instrument.

The nurse then asked if we had any questions. I will never forget that moment. Dead silence. It was a silence which may have lasted 30 seconds but felt like more than 30 minutes! Finally one courageous student raised his hand. "Miss," he asked, "now that you have shown us all this, does this mean that we can go out and do it?" "All right," I thought, "right on, yes, what a great question!" I could sense a fever of anticipation and excitement rising throughout the class. Although others might have had a different question, I sense that we were all eager to hear her answer. For the first time, however, she seemed somewhat uncomfortable. This was her answer: "that's a really good question. But unfortunately I can't answer that. That's something you're going to have to decide for yourself. I suggest that you ask your parents when you get home." What a disappointment!

(Morris 1994, pp. xv-xvi)

Nowadays, though, there is a wealth of writing about the intersection of religion and school sex education. In the UK, what seems to have been the first major attempt among believers from a number of religious traditions to delineate a religious perspective on sex education resulted in an agreed statement by members of six major UK religions (The Islamic Academy 1991). This statement provided a critique of contemporary sex education and then went on to provide a moral framework for sex education. Some of this framework still seems relevant but other parts seem both dated and conservative. Principles included: 'Enjoins chastity and virginity before marriage and faithfulness and loyalty within marriage and prohibits extramarital sex and homosexual acts', 'Upholds the responsibilities and values of parenthood', 'Acknowledges that we owe a duty of respect and obedience to parents and have a responsibility to care for them in their old age and infirmity' and 'Affirms that the married relationship involves respect and love' (The Islamic Academy 1991, p.8).

Christian views of sex and sex education

There is a range of Christian views about sex and sex education (Figure 1). Furthermore, liberal Christians are sometimes as dismissive of conservative positions, and those who hold them, as conservative Christians are of liberal positions, and those who hold them. Christian views about matters in general derive from scripture, the teachings of the Church down the ages, the conscience of individuals informed, it is believed, by the Holy Spirit, our God-given, though imperfect, powers of reason, and the particular cultural milieu we inhabit. This catalogue alone indicates why there tends to be a diversity of Christian views about almost any important subject.



Figure 14.1 Protesters gathered inside the state capitol building on 16 May 2011 to protest against the upcoming vote by the Minnesota House of Representatives to put an anti-gay marriage amendment on the 2012 election ballot.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Protest_against_a_constitutional_amendment_banning_same_sex_marriage_\(5727671837\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Protest_against_a_constitutional_amendment_banning_same_sex_marriage_(5727671837).jpg).

Christian views about sex are well illustrated by the marriage service. In Roman Catholicism, marriage is understood as a sacrament and even in those Christian denominations where this is not the case, marriage is an important event, often solemnized in a church service. Traditionally, Christian marriage has been understood as being life-long, as occurring between a man and a woman, and as being the only relationship within which sexual intercourse is considered appropriate.

Each of these three understandings has been weakened. In some churches it is still a requirement that neither has previously been married but, increasingly, the marriage of those who have been divorced (and whose ex-spouse is still living) is permitted. Few churches presently allow the marriage of same-sex couples but the direction of travel is

mostly in that direction. Equally, while adultery (i.e., sexual activity outside of marriage by someone who is married) is still widely considered wrong, the moral condemnation by Christians of sexual activity outside of marriage when neither party is married is much attenuated in most countries compared to what it once was.

The move towards same-sex marriage is, of course, a consequence of greater acceptance of homosexuality. Those against the Christian acceptance of same-sex sexual relationships generally point to scripture and the teachings of the Church. Those who are more accepting of same-sex sexual relationships generally begin by pointing out that the issue receives relatively little attention in scripture. They then argue that some of the classic 'proof' texts have been over-interpreted. For example, while the story of Sodom in *Genesis 19* does include reference to homosexuality, the chief sin of the men of that city was their inhospitality and their various religious and social sins (*Jeremiah 23:14; Ezekiel 16:49*). This is not to conclude that homosexuality is celebrated or even condoned in this passage; rather that this *locus classicus* of the scriptural condemnation of homosexuality has been over-emphasised. After all, few commentators conclude from the near parallel account in *Judges 19* (in which a woman is raped to death) that heterosexuality is denounced. Another argument used by Christians who accept same-sex relationships is that much of the rejection of such relationships in the Jewish scriptures and in the New Testament seems to stem from the importance these scriptures attached to Jews and Christians remaining distinct from certain customs and practices of Canaanite and Graeco-Roman culture. The authors of the Jewish scriptures seem to associate homosexuality with cult-prostitution, those of the New Testament mainly with paederasty. Furthermore, it may be that the human authors of these scriptures did not envisage homosexual relationships in which two adults of the same gender freely enter into a monogamous relationship (Halstead and Reiss 2003).

Contemporary Christian views about homosexuality have been influenced by the personal testimonies of many gay and lesbian Christians (Sewapa 2020 but see Hill 2021). Both scripture and tradition place a high value on what an individual's conscience tells that person, while the Bible and Church history contain a number of accounts of people who fail to act in accordance with tradition or the injunctions of scripture, yet are subsequently blessed by God (e.g., Peter at Joppa in *Acts 10*). Listening to people's stories about themselves can be an effective way of discerning what God is saying in a situation.

Universal agreement among Christians about homosexuality currently does not exist. While many Christians in the West have become more liberal in their views about same-sex relationships, this is not true in many other parts of the world. Furthermore, even within Western countries, there can be deep divisions. The Changed Movement is one of a number of evangelical organisations within the 'ex-gay' movement that still supports so-called 'conversion therapy' programmes, claiming that 'a person can leave homosexuality behind' (Miller 2022).

Dessel et al. (2019) note that when it comes to the education of future social workers, "Christian students have particularly low self-perceived competence to work with LGBTQ clients" (p.202). They also point out the importance of intersectionality: "an African American transgender woman of Christian faith may experience racism, sexism, and

transphobia. In addition, she may experience significant stigmatization and alienation within the African American Christian community” (p.205).

In recent years, there has been a growing literature on Christianity and transgender issues (Apostolacus 2018). Once again, there are both conservative and liberal positions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Christian Bible says little or nothing that is directly applicable to transgender issues, aside from a prohibition against cross-dressing (*Deuteronomy 22:5*), with commentators often situating this in a more general set of bans in *Deuteronomy 22* against mixtures (planting two kinds of seed in one’s vineyard, v. 9; ploughing with an ox and a donkey yoked together, v. 10; wearing clothes of wool and linen woven together, v. 11).

As an indication of how rapidly views about trans issues have changed, here is an extended quotation from the second edition of Rachel Mann’s autobiography – the first edition, to which she refers in her opening sentence, having been published in 2012:

About a year after *Dazzling Darkness* was published, I was invited to speak at a university about being trans and religious. It was an occasion which brought home to me how much trans self-understanding had shifted since I’d transitioned in the early nineties. At the time I spoke, I thought I was reasonably forward-thinking, representing a leading curve in philosophical-theological thinking about what it means to be trans and a person of faith. I gave my talk to this group of young, educated and intelligent people and invited their questions. Rapidly, it became apparent that rather than being cutting-edge, I was something of a back-issue. These students were not hostile, rather they were puzzled. These young LGBT+ people, some of whom identified as trans, mostly found it curious that I thought of myself in binary terms; that I simply saw myself as a woman, rather than as, say ‘trans-feminine’ or ‘non-binary’. I think they saw my understanding of my sexuality as ‘lesbian’ as rather too defined. Why not pansexual or demisexual? While I think they appreciated my grip on how trans people ‘queer’ identity, they seemed unconvinced by my comfort at living within the social binaries that are standard in ‘cis-normative’ society. Some of them were disturbed by the way I had valued the support of psychiatrists in my experience of transition and medical and surgical reassignment. I suspect that some thought I had internalised transphobia. I sensed that many thought I had internalised a hierarchy in which trans people like me – who have lived in the shadow of the old medical category ‘transsexual’ – were at the apex. Perhaps they were right.

(Mann 2022, pp.23–4)

Islamic views of sex and sex education

Islamic scholars not infrequently argue that a clear distinction can be drawn between Islamic practices and cultural customs; for example, “Islamic practices are quite distinct from cultural customs in that those of Islam are constant, steadfast, unchangeable whilst ethnic practices vary from country to country” (Noibi 1993, p.41). This makes valid generalisations about Muslim sexual attitudes and practices difficult (Halstead 1997),

though the *Qur'an* and the authenticated *Hadith* form the basis for the religious practices and daily lives of Muslims everywhere.

The standard Islamic view is that God created sexual duality – i.e., male and female – in creation so as to maintain the on-going process of creation. Even things which come out of the earth are said in the *Qur'an* to have this duality (Ashraf 1998). Man and woman are said to have a desire for complementary love; in both men and women there is therefore a natural desire for companionship with the other sex. Accordingly, celibacy is not praised. Rather, sexual union gives a foretaste of the joys of paradise – with the pleasures of paradise sometimes being portrayed in erotic terms (Bouhdiba 1985); sexual relations between a husband and wife are recognised as one of the great signs of the blessings Allah has bestowed on humankind.

Islam takes very seriously both fornication and adultery – with the same word, *zina'*, referring to both (Noibi 1998). While there is great variation among Muslims, the general principle is that when in the presence of men other than their husbands (or close relatives), women are to avoid displaying their beauty, using strong-smelling perfume, or conducting themselves in a seductive manner. At the same time, men are not to look lustfully at women.

While there are an increasing number of Muslim gay and lesbian movements, homosexuality is generally prohibited. However, the Muslim worldview does not always distinguish between homosexuals and heterosexuals in the way that many other worldviews do. From an Islamic perspective it can be argued that here is no such thing as a homosexual orientation, just homosexual acts (Halstead and Lewicka 1998). Furthermore, surveys show that those who identify as homosexual are tolerated by many Muslims (Glas and Spierings 2021). Indeed, it may be that the increasing Western influence in the Muslim world has created a greater social stigma against homosexuality (Kligerman 2007), as a way of rejecting Western values.

To the surprise of many in the West, since the mid-1980s, the Islamic Republic of Iran has permitted, and partially subsidised, sex reassignment surgery. Initially, it was widely presumed that such surgery was being undertaken to suppress homosexuality. However, Afsaneh Najmabadi (2014) shows that the story is more complex. Although individuals who have undergone such surgery are stigmatised, the fact that the surgery is legal, permitted in a ruling by none other than the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini himself (the first supreme leader of Iran from 1979 until his death in 1989), has meant that a space has been created in which those desiring such surgery have been able to manoeuvre.

In an early publication on sex education in the UK written from a Muslim perspective, Sarwar (1987, p.7) asserted: “It is probably fair to say that the majority of Muslim parents would be happy if there was no sex education at all in schools”. There are a range of reasons for this, including the secular context within which sex education is typically taught in schools, mixed-sex classes, material on the use of contraception outside of marriage and references to masturbation (D'Oyen 1996). Tabatabaie (2015) argued that sex education for school-aged children is widely regarded by Muslims as providing vulnerable individuals with

‘dangerous knowledge’ that may awaken premature sexuality and undermine Islamic identity. Ashraah et al. argue that an appropriate Islamic sex education, should, inter alia:

- Train adolescents to respect and appreciate values related to sexual issues.
- Develop spiritual and religious satisfaction methods and explain their relationship to sexual issues.
- Present Muslim youth examples of people who were capable of restraining their sexual instincts and control them.
- Inform adolescents about the personal, social and medical effects of negative sexual practices.
- ...
- Develop chastity and purity in adolescents.
- Protect adolescents from sexual stimuli that are provided through different types of multimedia such as magazines, books, photographs, movies and websites containing pornography.
- Teach children habits of asking for permission before entering their parents room during their sleep or relaxation time.

(Ashraah et al. 2013, p.14)

Sanjakdar maintains that “Every religion has a distinctive quality and the distinctive quality of Islam is modesty” (2022, p. 193). She goes on to point out that Islam tries to bestow a religious significance on all social institutions, including that of marriage, which is viewed as a social obligation, one that underpins an orderly society.

It is important to emphasise that Islam encompasses a range of views about sex and sex education, as suggested by the statement above that there are an increasing number of Muslim gay and lesbian movements. Indeed, Islam is somewhat unusual among world religions in that there is no officially sanctioned organisation or set of religious actors who are seen as holding religious authority. When it comes to sexual practices and attitudes, there is diversity and it seems likely that this is increasing. For example, Irving (2018) undertook an ethnographic study among 18-30 year-olds in Singapore and Sydney, Australia and found a wide range of practices and beliefs with regards to how unmarried Muslims of various ethnicities, gender identities and sexual orientations positioned themselves within local Muslim community discourses of piety, shame and reputation.

China

Most cultures have a degree of social sensitivity on the topic of sex, and talking to children about sexual matters, even in a school setting, can be rare and even give rise to suspicion. This situation is often exacerbated by religious considerations, given a general tendency for those with religious convictions to have more conservative views about sex and sex education. In China, though, religion plays a much smaller role than in many other countries. Although the government officially recognises Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism and Taoism, the country is officially an atheist state. With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Marxist doctrine of atheism was used to suppress religion, which was declared to be a superstition (Wang 2022). Subsequently, under Deng Xiaoping’s

reforms, China recognised the right to freedom of religion in the Constitution of 1982. However, under Xi Jinping (President of the People’s Republic of China since 2013), there has been a shift back to atheism and less religious tolerance, with the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, in particular, being widely suppressed.

Although conventional religious faith and practice in China is relatively rare as a percentage of the population, some sort of folk religious belief is widespread; indeed, 44% of people in China who describe themselves as ‘religiously unaffiliated’ say that they have worshipped at a graveside or tomb in the last year (Pew Research Center 2012). In addition, Buddhism is widely practised and there has been a rapid growth in evangelical Protestantism in recent decades. In addition, the religious philosophy of Confucianism remains important, as it has been for 2500 years. In part due to the influence of Confucian culture, talking about sex openly has traditionally generally been avoided. In reality, though, Confucian teaching and philosophy is deployed and interpreted in different ways by the government, profit-making businesses and other entities, with the interpretations usually influenced by context and who stands to gain or lose (Ji & Reiss 2022). In Hong Kong, religion has been of particular importance for school sex education (Qu 2022), and Tang (2014a) argued that “Religion has gradually become an oppositional factor to the advancement of equal rights for LGBT individuals in Hong Kong. Rather than referring to family values, lawmakers have consistently used religious beliefs as a key factor in arguing against anti-discrimination proposals” (p. 445). It seems likely that religion does play a role in sexual attitudes and practices for some in mainland China but that the significance of this has been under-researched to date. It is worth emphasising that traditional Chinese religions are morally centred (Zhou 2013). For this reason, religion probably plays more of a role in school sex education than is generally appreciated by those for whom religion is understood to entail belief in a deity or supernatural events.

in China, as elsewhere, the development of the internet has meant that children can receive more sexual information than ever before (Leung et al. 2019). In addition, Chinese media have begun to focus on illegal sexual behaviours against children, and a growing number of people pay attention to social issues about gender equality and diversity (Wu and Dong 2019). This has made some Chinese parents and a range of organisations aware of the value of sexuality education, but such education is difficult for parents to provide at home. For one thing, most parents, for historical reasons, lack professional knowledge, let alone training, in sexuality education; for another, they are almost invariably embarrassed when talking about sex with their children because of widespread cultural hesitancy surrounding the discussion of sexual matters. For this reason, some parents and the Ministry of Education department responsible for sexuality education have for some time hoped that sexuality education would be taught as a formal course in school (Zhang et al. 2007).

In China, many have worked hard to improve the quality of sexuality education (Tang 2014b). Drawing on international good practice, sexual and reproductive health education has begun to develop on a large scale over the last couple of decades (Kuetze et al. 2021). At present, the sexuality education methods adopted in China focus mainly on school, family and community sexuality education, and sexuality education among peers (Ji & Reiss 2022). Some experts also recommend the dissemination of scientific sexual knowledge to young people through a range of media. Indeed, data from the Chinese General Social Surveys

indicate that the internet is one of the driving forces behind the beginnings of a sexual revolution in China, with greater internet usage being associated with more sexually permissive attitudes, including attitudes toward premarital sex, extramarital sex and same-sex behaviour (Liu et al. 2020). However, limited use is made of the internet for teaching sex education in schools and, at present, adolescent sex education books issued in China are of varying quality, and school-based sex education materials are rare (Ji & Reiss 2022).

Furthermore, sex education books for children in China typically use metaphors and other indirect ways to refer to the sexual organs and sexual behaviour. In China it is widely presumed that children should be kept away from sexual knowledge, as such knowledge would sully their purity and might induce them to engage in sexual intercourse. Those Chinese books about sexuality, gender and relationships that do exist typically transmit a large amount of information on human growth and development, reproductive health, health care, sexually transmitted infections (including HIV prevention), with material on a range of associated topics including menstruation, breast development, nocturnal emissions and other changes at puberty (Tang 2014b). Providing accurate anatomical and physiological knowledge can help young people understand physical changes and reduce sexual confusion caused by ignorance. However, most of the books contain no illustrations of sex organs, beyond occasional simple line drawings (Greenwood 2010). This does not help readers to develop a full understanding of their own bodies and those of others.

Information about adolescent sexual behaviour in these books is almost entirely concerned with heterosexual relationships. When same-sex relations and practices are addressed, they are generally spoken of as pathological (Tang et al. 2013). It is still the case that some books teach daughters how to 'marry a good husband', and manifest gender discrimination more generally (Liao 2013). In terms of attitudes toward adolescent sexual psychology, there are two main approaches to love relationships. One approach tries to prevent 'puppy love', portraying it as damaging and having irreversible and undesired consequences, especially with respect to academic performance and early sexual intercourse. The other approach talks about love relationships from a young person's perspective and gives advice to young people to help them develop a greater ability to communicate, to protect themselves from abuse or parenthood, and to be more self-aware in intimate relationships.

Most of the material on sexual harassment focuses on females who are sexually harassed; it is rare to state that males can also be sexually harassed (Tang 2014b). Some books discuss topics such as sexual ethics, and there are also a number of adolescent sex education books that mention issues such as child sexual abuse, sexuality education for children with intellectual disabilities, and sexual organ damage by, for example, using objects such as pencils as aids to masturbation.

Overall, sex education in China is strongly medicalised, stressing reproductive health and physiological knowledge (Peng 2012). Peng's (2012) analysis of books found that only a few of them engaged with 'gender education' and related issues, perhaps the result of the current tendency to equate gender with biological sex. After Simone de Beauvoir (1953) famously argued that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' became a core concept in second-wave feminist studies in the West (for all that the distinction is now questioned by many). However, in everyday Chinese,

there is no distinction between biological sex and gender, the term 性别, *xing bie*, being used for both. In the field of Chinese gender studies, the phrase 社会性别, *she hui xing bie*, with the literal meaning of ‘social gender’, is often used to translate the English word ‘gender’ into Chinese (Ji & Reiss 2022). However, ideas about social gender rarely appear in children’s sexuality education books because school sexuality education in China generally presumes biological determinism.

Overall, in China, heteronormative discourses largely constitute and regulate understandings of marriage, love and intimacy as witnessed through children’s experiences, school sex education, family values and gender practices.

From 2010, a set of sexual health textbooks for primary school pupils called *Cherish Lives* was produced (Liu 2010, 2016). These textbooks constitute an important programme and one that proved to be influential. They were produced under the aegis of Beijing Normal University, a national level university connected to the Ministry of Education. The programme was one of the few sex education initiatives to be implemented in primary schools, ran for a number of years and was evaluated (Liu and Su 2014). These textbooks present an ambitious attempt to provide a contemporary sex education programme for primary-aged children in China. Although there are aspects of the textbooks that can be criticised from a liberal perspective (Ji & Reiss 2022) – for example, in terms of the fairly conventional ways in which gender is signified through the style and colours of clothes and how the heterosexual family is still presented as the norm – the content generally offers a comprehensive approach to sexuality education. There is also coherence between the text and the illustrations so that the overall result poses a challenge to the traditional Chinese patriarchal gender system. The textbooks include clear information about reproductive organs and sexual behaviour, masturbation, same-sex relationships and, through discussion of the term ‘social gender’, the role of culture in influencing gender relations. The realistic illustrations, together with the use of direct language for sexual organs, break some of the prohibitions surrounding the discussion of sexual matters.

However, *Cherish Lives* proved to be controversial (Chen 2017). Although many teachers, public welfare practitioners, sex educators and others, including the children who used the materials, were positive about them (Liu and Su 2014; Chen 2017), some parents found the text and illustrations to be too graphic (Ji and Reiss 2022). In addition, there were accusations that the books blindly imitated the West and could cause psychological harm to children. The books were suddenly withdrawn by the government in 2019, without any explanation. Parental views may have been important but there may have been other factors at play too and a number of these have been suggested: perhaps the books were seen as promoting too much sexual openness; perhaps they were seen as giving too much weight to children’s rights, and thereby potentially challenging traditional authority; perhaps they were seen as reflecting what were considered to be ‘Western’ views.

England

Relationships Education and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in England was given new statutory guidance in September 2019, for implementation in September 2020

(Department for Education 2019). The guidance states that all primary schools must teach Relationships Education, that all secondary schools must teach RSE and that all state-funded schools must teach Health Education. Primary schools may also choose to teach sex education.

However, there is very little education and training to help teachers take account of religious considerations when teaching sex education. This is despite the Department for Education making it clear that the background, including religious background, of students ought to be considered when delivering RSE in schools: “It must be taught sensitively and inclusively, with respect to the backgrounds and beliefs of pupils and parents while always with the aim of providing pupils with the knowledge they need of the law” (Department for Education 2019, p.4). In my experience, after many years of working in England in this area, sensitively and inclusively responding to students’ views in a way that takes informed account of their faith is seldom evident in RSE unless the school is itself a faith school or the teacher has a religious faith. More generally, teacher education about RSE remains limited in England (Sex Education Forum 2018) and incorporating faith sensitivity into teacher education, both initial and on-going, seems to be rare.

Sell and Reiss (2022) report on a study (Sell’s doctorate) undertaken in four contrasting secondary schools in England on students’ views about religion and sex education. Three of the schools (all in inner-city areas) had high proportions of students who self-identified as religious (School A – 53% Muslim, 27% Christian, 18% Atheist and Agnostic; School B – 98% Christian, 1% Atheist and Agnostic; School C – 46% Christian, 43% Muslim, 6% Atheist and Agnostic). However, School D, a rural school, had a very different student composition: 74% Atheist and Agnostic; 19% Christian; 7% other faiths.

Unsurprisingly, a large majority of the students who were attending the three inner-city schools maintained that faith-sensitive RSE was important. Seventy percent of them totally agreed or agreed with the statement ‘I think we should learn what different religions say about relationships and sex, even if we don’t have a religion ourselves’. Ninety one percent of them totally agreed or agreed that different religions should be shown respect within RSE. Generally, students from all three inner-city schools said that faith-sensitive RSE was important for schools without a strong faith adherence amongst their students because, as three students put it:

We live in a community where we are used to the different faiths and we know something about them, but in communities where the people aren’t very religious, they wouldn’t know if they are offending another person’s religion or not.

I think that [faith-sensitive RSE] would help because it’s good to know what different religions think about this topic and you can relate it to your religion as well and find out the similarities and differences and then you can come back with an opinion of your own.

I think you shouldn’t necessarily censor anything. You should be very direct with it, but then after explaining everything you should tell people the different beliefs about it amongst religions.

Interestingly, students from School D also mostly agreed with these statements, despite most of these students not having a religious faith. Sixty one percent of them totally agreed or agreed with the statement ‘I think we should learn what different religions say about relationships and sex, even if we don’t have a religion ourselves’, compared to an average of 70% across the other three schools, and 88% of them totally agreed or agreed that different religions should be shown respect within RSE, compared to an average of 91% across the other three schools.

In recent years, much of the literature on religion and school sex education in England has focused on schools where a high proportion of the parents are Muslims. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Muslims hold a range of views about sex and sex education. Nevertheless, Sanjakdar (2022) points out that although many Muslim parents hold that sexuality education should be dealt with as part of the religious upbringing of a Muslim child, school sex education is seen by them as secular. There is also the belief that Muslim objections to aspects of school sex education often result in Muslims being blamed:

Muslim parents who are objecting to LGBT instruction in schools have been unfairly demonized by a hostile, Islamophobic media, drawing on classical Islamophobic tropes such as intolerance and backwardness, when it is simply about the right of parents to have their children educated in line with their own moral values. ... The focus on Muslim parents, when Christian and Jewish parents are also protesting, seems to be deliberately designed to fuel Islamophobia (Euro-Islam.info, 2019)¹

(Sanjakdar 2022, p.188)

A recent cause célèbre centring on Muslim parents’ unhappiness with a school’s approach to LGBT issues has been at Parkfield Community School in Birmingham. This is a predominantly Muslim primary school. Its prominence came about because in 2019, a programme called ‘No Outsiders’, designed by Andrew Moffat, the then assistant head at Parkfield, led to objections from many parents, even though the programme had been taught since 2014 and was in use at about 100 schools in England (Kotecha 2019). The No Outsiders programme (<https://no-outsiders.com/about-us>) has a vision for inclusive education. However, a parent group at the school felt that it was biased in favour of LGBT issues. There were protests outside the school, children were withdrawn from the school, countless articles appeared in local, national and even international media, there was a high court injunction, and a short, official inspection of the school took place (which confirmed its grading of ‘Outstanding’).

At the time of writing (June 2022), the situation at Parkfield School has quietened down. A new version of the programme, ‘No Outsiders for a Faith Community’, was introduced, though this didn’t satisfy all parents and led in 2019 to ‘The Parkfield Parent Group Statement’ which included the following:

¹ The reference for this, as cited in Sanjakdar (2022) is Euro-Islam.info (2019) *Religious Groups Respond to the Introduction of Relationships and Sex Education in the UK*. <http://www.euro-islam.info/2019/04/12/religious-groups-respond-to-the-introduction-of-relationships-and-sex-education-in-the-uk> but the link no longer works.

We, as parents and citizens of this great country, fully support and endorse British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths, non-faith and beliefs.

We understand and respect the Equality Act 2010 is the law. The nine protected characteristics of Age, Disability, Gender Reassignment, Marriage and Civil Partnership, Race, Religion and Belief, Sexual orientation, Pregnancy and Maternity we consider to be equal, with no characteristic considered to be greater or lesser than another.

We, the parents are extremely disheartened and saddened with the conduct of our Parkfield Community School's leadership team. We unconditionally love and care about our community school that has served the needs of our children for several generations.

We tremendously respect the dedication, commitment and hard work of every teacher, teaching assistant and lunch-time supervising staff that have committed their time and efforts in serving our children.

We unequivocally condemn the labels that have been applied to us of "bigoted and homophobic" and "homophobic extremists".

We would like to reach out once again to our LGBT community to clear up any misconceptions, build bridges and strength our bond in this diverse community by offering our apology for any actions that may have upset them as this was not our intention.

We fully recognise and respect the equality circle is a large space that can accommodate all of us without anyone impinging on each other's rights.

We the parents are part of this great city, this country and part of the fabric of our society that is bound together by love and care for our families, neighbours, friends, colleagues and our entire communities.

We respect and embrace all people, including those of different ages, cultures, ethnicities, nationalities, physical abilities, religious beliefs and sexual orientations.

(Haynes 2019)

It has been argued that "An emerging theme in this debate is that it is framed within a growing tension between educational equality, British values and Islamic values" (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2021, p.273). Mac an Ghaill and Haywood cite a passage from a Government Department publication – "There is evidence that some people in particular ethnic and faith communities have views around LGBT people that are at odds with mainstream modern British values and laws" (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2016, p. 7.28) – and identify an "assembling of progressive Left sexual politics,

Conservative traditional patriotism and Far-Right Islamophobia [that] speaks to the emergence of new mobilising (re)alignments” Mac an Ghail and Haywood 2021, p.274).

The USA

Religion intersects with sex education in a range of ways in the USA. As the sociologist Kristin Luker notes:

Although Billingsley [a pseudonym] was the epitome of a small, religious, tight-knit community in the rural South, it provided an astonishing variety of views on sex education. Deeply devout Southern Baptists as well as others who identified themselves as born-again Christians argued both sides of the issues, with some passionately in favour of full, comprehensive sex education and others equally passionately opposed.

(Luker 2006, p.21)

Despite this diversity of religious views, many of the attempts in the US to reduce the amount of school sex education or limit its scope are framed in a discourse of religion, even if the underlying reason may sometimes be more to do with political affiliation or something else. Kristy Slominski begins her book on the history of religion and sex education in the US by noting that in 2019 the well-known evangelical author and psychologist James Dobson (born in 1936 and founder of ‘Focus on the Family’, which he led from 1977 till 2010) warned Colorado families that their “deeply held Christian convictions” were under attack (Slominski 2021, p.1). Dobson’s remark was in response to a proposal bill in the state to expand public school sex education programs. Nor was Dobson a lone voice crying in the wilderness: “Letters flooded in, citizens drove to the capital to testify for or against the bill, and legislators gave emotional pleas on each side” (Slominski 2021, p.1).

Nowadays, it is conservative evangelical Christianity that is mostly heard as the religious voice in debates on school sex education. Yet it was originally religious sex educators, particularly liberal Protestant ones, who argued in favour of school sex education and founded in 1964 perhaps the most important organisation that advocates for school sex education in the US: SIECUS (the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States). Nowadays one struggles to find much about religion on its website <https://siecus.org>, but see SIECUS (2018) where one reads:

SIECUS believes that religion can play a significant role in promoting an understanding of sexuality as an intrinsic part of all humans. Faith-based institutions are in a unique position to provide sexuality education. SIECUS further believes that religious and spiritual leaders and organizations have a responsibility to affirm and support the sexual rights of all members of their communities.

In many ways, attitudes towards school sex education in the US, including those formed by religious values, have crystallised around the issues of abstinence-only sex education. Despite the fact that, as noted earlier in this chapter, the moral condemnation by Christians of sexual activity outside of marriage when neither party is married is weaker in most

countries compared to what it once was, abstinence-only sex education teaches that sexual intercourse is only acceptable within marriage. Unlike comprehensive sex education, it therefore does not spend much if any time on such topics as sexually transmitted infections or the use of contraception. In the US, funding for such education began in the 1980s and continues to this day, though successive Democrat administrations tend to cut back on it and increase funding for comprehensive programs instead.

Those, such as the Christian right, who favour abstinence programs argue for them on two grounds: that they are morally right, and that they work. The moral arguments are not, of course, amenable to straightforward empirical testing but the arguments that they work are. The consensus among sex educators is that abstinence programs often have little effect but when they do, they are more likely to lower than raise first age of sexual intercourse, to increase rather than decrease teenage pregnancy rates and to increase rather than lower sexually transmitted infections (e.g., Fox et al. 2019). These effects are reversed for comprehensive sex education programs (Stanger-Hall and Hall 2011), though the magnitude of the effects are relatively modest. Abstinence programs have also been critiqued on ethical grounds (e.g., Santelli et al. 2006), and when college students look back at their school abstinence programs, they are not very positive about them, and describe 'ideal' sex education in ways that are more in line with comprehensive sex education (Gardner 2015).

A recent US study using nationally representative data found a decrease in abstinence sex education as received by adolescents from 73% of females in 2011-15 to 67% of females in 2015-19 and from 70% to 58% of males over the same time period (Lindberg and Kantor 2022). However, in both time periods only about half of the adolescents received sex education that met the minimum standard articulated in national goals. About a half of all adolescents reported religious settings as the sources of instruction about waiting until marriage to have sex (females 56%; males 49%), but almost none received instruction about birth control in these settings (Lindberg and Kantor 2022).

Sex education never stands still. Dent and Maloney (2017) note that the overwhelming majority of people in the USA support some form of school-based sexual education. Their study examined the widespread presumption that evangelical Christians uniformly support abstinence-only sexual education by interviewing evangelical Christians in a medium-sized Texas city. The interviews:

revealed a group of evangelical Christian parents who verbalised their explicit opposition to abstinence-based sex education in schools, lamenting the sex-negative messages they believe to be associated with it. It additionally became apparent that these parents believe that their opposition to abstinence-based sexual education aligns with a silent majority of evangelical Christians.

(Dent and Maloney 2017, p.149)

Taking account of religion when teaching sex education

There is a surprisingly small literature that explores positively the intersection of religion and sex education (Rasmussen 2010; O'Sullivan, Byers, and Mitra 2019), as much of the

writing on religion and sex education frames it within a discourse of conflict. In their book *Faith, Values and Sex & Relationships Education*, Blake and Katrak (2002, p.8) maintained that:

Religious doctrines can be viewed as a means to a spiritual goal, rather than merely a restriction on what is and is not acceptable. Moral codes of conduct are derived from religious teachings. On a spiritual level, following these codes can provide members of a religion with rules to live by, and consequently, can result in a profound sense of liberation. This is often unrecognised in SRE [Sex and Relationships Education].

More than many school subjects, sex education indicates the importance of values. Much of the disagreement over what should be included in school sex education, particularly disagreement resulting from difference in religious views, is due to different parties holding views that are incommensurate. As Halstead pointed out:

An approach where a full consensus is reached on sex education after dialogue and discussion seems an impossible ideal in the present circumstances. The use of vague terminology (such as “promoting responsible sexual behaviour”) may give the appearance of a consensus, but this is not very helpful if one person’s understanding of responsibility involves wearing a condom and another’s includes not being in the same room as a member of the opposite sex without a chaperone.

(Halstead 1997, p.327)

In such circumstances, finding a way forward for teachers is difficult, especially in classes that are large and contain children with a wide diversity of views, or children from families that have a wide range of views that are strongly held. One approach is for the teacher to strive for what is generally termed ‘values clarification’, helping students to think through the implications of their beliefs. Of course, in so doing, students may shift their beliefs, as a well-conducted classroom discussion gives them an opportunity to listen to the views of others and reflect on their own and others’ beliefs.

A final point is that in some countries there is a tradition in sex education, more than in other school subjects, of holding after-school meetings where parents can come in, talk with the teachers and examine any materials that the teacher is intending to use. In my experience, these are extremely valuable. Parents are often reassured and teachers can better understand the hopes and any concerns that parents have. Even parents who choose not to avail themselves of the opportunity may be reassured that the school has provided such an opportunity.

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