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Islam and Biblical Principles of Abstinence: A Sociological Perspective

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Abstract: Abstinence has become a prominent subject of discourse within Nigerian churches and Islamic communities, particularly as a moral ethic directed at young people during the premarital stage of life. However, opinions remain divided regarding its practicability, largely due to the influence of cultural imperialism. Before the introduction of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, sexual abstinence prior to marriage was a widely accepted norm across many indigenous cultures. Traditional societies strongly upheld chastity before marriage, but these values have gradually eroded across ethnic groups, largely as a result of rising marriage age and changing social conditions. With the advent of Islam and Christianity, new religious moral frameworks were introduced, often dismissing several indigenous practices as “heathen.” Nonetheless, both religions strongly emphasise moral discipline and uphold abstinence as a fundamental virtue. This study adopts a qualitative research approach, chosen in view of the sensitivity and controversial nature of sexuality-related issues, which could potentially generate legal or institutional challenges for certain religious denominations. The paper examines abstinence from sociological perspectives, alongside Islamic and Biblical principles, and explores the consequences of premarital sexual practices. Within this framework, the study juxtaposes religious teachings on abstinence with contemporary social realities. It concludes that responsibility for abstinence education should not rest solely on religious leaders; rather, parents must play a central role in guiding their children through ethical sexual decision-making and engaging them in open, value-based discussions on sex education.

Keywords: Abstinence, Islam, Christianity, Sex, Society

Introduction

Islamic law (Shari’ah) and the Bible contain numerous ethical injunctions that shape the behaviour, values, and moral outlook of Muslims and Christians alike. Ethics, as a field within moral philosophy, relies on human reasoning as the basis for evaluating conduct. Put simply, ethics concerns the ability to differentiate between right and wrong. As explained by Velasquez et al. (2010), ethics consists of well-established principles that define appropriate human actions in relation to rights, duties, social welfare, justice, and moral virtues. It also involves a continuous process of reflecting on moral beliefs and behaviours, with the aim of ensuring that both individuals and social institutions adhere to standards that are rational, justifiable, and ethically sound.

Among the ethical considerations in Islam and Christianity is that of abstinence. Since sex is an affair meant for married couples, other terms like trial marriage, which according to Oyeneye (1999), is common among students in higher institutions of learning and middle-class clerical workers in Nigeria. Trial marriage is based on a contract of some sort and, during the period of the association, the boy and girl have the opportunity of closely observing each other to know if they are compatible and whether they will be able to live together as husband and wife if and when they eventually get married. The type of marriage is not yet sanctioned in Nigeria at moment. Trial marriage is one of the sharp practices where students in non-residential institutions live and copulate as married couples.

Abstinence is a virtue if upheld has innumerable benefits, especially at this moment in time when sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unwanted pregnancies, recourse to abortion, etc are prevalent. Islam and Biblical principle of abstinence is a clarion call to both youth and unmarried persons who act under the guise of youthful exuberance or escapades so as to explore and exploit them before settling down for marriage.

It is worthy of note that copulation is a marital obligation for the purpose of satisfying sexual urge(s) and procreation and of which the youth should not dabble into for whatever reasons, gains, or pleasurable instincts.

Sociological Perspectives of Abstinence

Sociology is a field that studies myriads of social problems/issues. The term “abstinence” is a perceived ideology/ethic that emphasises that the unmarried youth, teenagers and adolescents should shun pre-marital sex and other unethical practices capable of leading to copulation before marriage. The Yoruba people of South West, Nigeria have an age-long custom that affirmed that a lady should be a virgin when she would be deflowered by her husband. The Yoruba word “baale mi” a woman calls her husband translates to “the man to whom I lost my virginity.” As affirmed by Orubuloye (1991); and Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey, most Nigerian cultures have customs that require sexual abstinence prior to marriage.

However, these customs have all but vanished in all ethnic groups as a result of the rising marriage age. With the coming of the missionaries and advent of colonialism, the latter was adjudged to have immense benefits to Nigerians as a whole in

terms of governance, education, health, to mention but a few. However, cultural imperialism crept into our country, Nigeria and left an indelible imprint in virtually all facets of life.

Nigerians embraced cultural imperialism due to being associated with 'modernity.' Modernity, afterwards, led to sacrificing Islamic and Biblical ethics which coincidentally appears in the Yoruba people's culture that pre-marital sex is inimical to the mind, body and soul. Twelker (2019) claims that when premarital sex is prohibited, it doesn't assist determine what activities are suitable at different stages of closeness. Oral sex (and most other forms of sexual expression) becomes acceptable, at least in later stages of intimacy, as a result of young people exploring the boundaries of the prohibition rule in every way possible.

The National Policy on the Health and Development of Adolescents and Young People in Nigeria (2007) identifies abstinence-only programmes as a central strategy for addressing youth sexual health concerns. In contrast, findings from scholarly studies conducted in both developed and developing countries indicate that abstinence-only interventions have limited effectiveness in curbing the transmission of HIV/AIDS and, consequently, do not significantly promote sustained abstinent behaviour (Underhill & Montgomery, 2007; O'Reilly et al., 2006).

The strong ideological inclination of the organisations creating abstinence-only programs, according to Kay and Jackson (2008), frequently causes them to use limited strategies and homophobic sentiments to spread scientifically false and misleading information about abortion, STIs, and contraceptives in order to reinforce gender stereotypes. Negative contraception is especially concerning and risky for these illiterate kids since the programs' anti-condom messaging may actually deter them from engaging in safe sexual behaviour.

In light of the aforementioned, it is predicted that both male and female students will be taught abstinence-only programs. However, women suffer greatly when they are denied access to fundamental knowledge about sexuality and contraception. As the latter are susceptible to sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancies, and increased rate of being out of school, etc (Kay & Jackson, 2008). In Nigeria, efforts to promote condom use have persistently encountered a range of religious, logistical, social, and economic challenges (Isiugo-Abanihe & Oyediran, 2004; Adedimeji et al., 2007; Araoye & Fakeye, 1998). Consequently, the effective development of comprehensive sexuality interventions for young people requires a careful examination of the factors and social contexts that undermine the acceptance and practice of abstinence (Oladepo & Fayemi, 2011).

The following are factors inimical to the practicability of abstinence by Nigerian youth:

- i. Role of parents and government: the home is the first point of call in socialisation but many parents shy

away from discussing sex education with their children. Some termed it as stooping so low and others found it abominable. For example, when sex education was initially incorporated into the secondary school curriculum, the former Minister of Education, Mallam Adamu Adamu, subsequently instructed the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) to remove it from the Basic Education Curriculum (BEC), citing Nigeria's strong religious character as justification (The Guardian Newspapers, 2022). He further maintained that matters relating to sex education should be handled by parents and religious authorities rather than by teachers within the school system. The proponent of transfer of duty from government to parents fails to realise that there are diverse parental-groupings – single parent, foster parent, etc. which can significantly affect the sex life of youth in Nigeria.

- ii. Peer group: these are people who are same age or in same social class with each other or one another. When the parents fail to carry out their duty of adequately explaining the gains of abstinence, the onerous task will be transferred to the peer group who have no other thing to share other than half-truths, distorted facts and self-centred ideologies which would denigrate abstinence as being alien to modernity.
- iii. Lack of autonomy: most parents are of the habits that their wards should thread their paths and/or tailor their lifestyles to certain persons. Parents don't help their children to think more abstractly. the failure to ensure that views are firmly grounded in broad, ideologically significant concepts (Twelker, 2019).

Islam and Biblical Principles on Abstinence

Religiosity constitutes a fundamental dimension of religion, reflecting the extent of an individual's religious commitment, belief, and level of engagement (Somefun, 2019). It may also be understood as the expression of personal faith, spirituality, and reverence towards a divine being (Gallagher & Tierney, 2013). Within this framework, Christian ethics provides a moral system through which actions are evaluated as right or wrong. Oghehi (2017) describes Christian ethics as a branch of religious ethics that aligns human conduct with accepted moral standards, thereby playing a significant role in moral formation. Similarly, Iwe (2003) conceptualises Christian ethics as a branch of moral theology that relies on divine revelation and supernatural guidance in assessing human behaviour. The Bible, according to Ogbuehi (2017), serves as the primary authority through which Christians assess the moral acceptability of their actions.

Alexander (2007) further posits that Christian ethics views individuals as morally responsible for their thoughts and

actions and capable of choosing good through their relationship with Christ. Beyond mere religious observance, Christian ethics emphasises the practical application of faith in daily life. In line with biblical standards, actions that deviate from scriptural injunctions are considered morally unacceptable and therefore not good (Ogbuehi, 2017). Numerous biblical passages explicitly address ethical conduct and uphold abstinence in particular. For the purpose of this study, references are drawn from the Easy-to-Read Version of the Bible. Notably, Genesis 24:16 underscore the value placed on virginity, describing it as a prized virtue.

She was very pretty. She was a virgin; she had never slept with a man. She went down to the well and filled her jar.

Leviticus 21 verses 13-14:

The high priest must marry a woman who is a virgin. The high priest must not marry a woman who has had sexual relations with another man. The high priest must not marry a prostitute, a divorced woman, or a widow. The high priest must marry a virgin from his own people.

Luke 1 verses 26-27:

During Elizabeth's sixth month of pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to a virgin that lived in Nazareth, a town in Galilee. The girl was engaged to marry a man named Joseph from the family of David. Her name was Mary.

Deuteronomy 22 verses 13-17:

A man might marry a girl and have sexual relations with her. Then he might decide that he does not like her. He might lie and say, I married this woman, but found she was not a virgin. By saying this against her, people might think bad things about her. If this happens, the girl's father and mother must bring the proof that the girl was a virgin to the town elders (leaders) at the meeting place of the town. The girl's father must say to the leaders, 'I gave my daughter to this man to be his wife, but now he does not want her. This man has told lies against my daughter. He said, "I did not find the proof that your daughter is a virgin." But here is the proof that my daughter was a virgin. Then they should show the cloth to the town leaders.

The scriptures above emphasise that virginity is highly Biblical owing to the reports in the Holy Bible. There is, however, a sanction for being deflowered before marriage as evident in Deuteronomy 22:15-17 as cited above. Furthermore, the Holy Bible affirms that the word virgin signifies being unmarried (Tracy, 2008). This is further buttressed in the following passage. Zachariah 9 verse 17 states that:

Everything will be good and beautiful! There will be a wonderful crop, but it will not be just food and wine. It will be all the young men and women!

Premarital sex is prohibited, according to several New Testament verses. Paul addresses the Corinthians' recommendation that a married man should refrain from having sex with his wife in 1st Corinthians 7:1-5. Paul responds that each man should have sex with his own wife due to immoralities (porneia), and that the husband and wife should satisfy each other's sexual needs in order to avoid sexual temptations. Paul contends that marriage is the only God-ordained solution to sexual demands; hence there is no moral basis for premarital sex. Biblical verses from both the Old and New Testaments so indicate that God gives sex in marriage as a gift, while also condemning extramarital sex.

Islamic teachings hereby place significant emphasis on abstinence as a moral, spiritual, and social safeguard, particularly in relation to sexual conduct. This emphasis is grounded in the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, and the broader objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*). The Qur'an explicitly instructs believers to exercise chastity and "guard their private parts" except within lawful marital relations.

Those who guard their chastity, except with their wives or those 'bondwomen' in their possession, for then they are free from blame, but whoever seeks beyond that are the transgressors (Qur'an 23:5-7)

It further condemns fornication (*zinā*) as a grave violation, describing it as an immoral path associated with social harm and moral decay.

Do not go near adultery. It is truly a shameful deed and an evil way (Qur'an 17:32)

Within this framework, abstinence before marriage is not merely a recommended ethical behaviour but a religious obligation, forming part of the Islamic moral order intended to preserve lineage, dignity, and social harmony. The Prophetic tradition supports this doctrinal emphasis. The Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) said:

O young men, whoever among you can afford it, let him get married, for it is more effective in lowering the gaze and guarding one's chastity. And whoever cannot afford it should fast, for it will be a shield for him (Khan, 1997, Hadith 3398).

This spiritual discipline aligns with the Islamic ethic of *ḥabs al-naḥs* (restraining the self), which is considered fundamental to the cultivation of piety and moral consciousness (Faris,

1997). Abstinence thus functions both as a mechanism for preventing moral transgression and as a form of training that strengthens spiritual resolve and reinforces personal accountability.

Within marriage, Islamic law generally does not encourage sustained abstinence except under specific legitimate circumstances, such as menstruation. “They ask you ‘O Prophet’ about menstruation. Say, “Beware of its harm! So keep away, and do not have intercourse with your wives during their monthly cycles until they are purified. When they purify themselves, then you may approach them in the manner specified by Allah. Surely Allah loves those who always turn to Him in repentance and those who purify themselves (Qur’an 2:222)”, fasting during the days of Ramadan, and *i’tikāf* (spiritual retreat). These exceptions demonstrate that abstinence is regulated, not prohibited, within marital relations. Classical jurists—including Mālik, al-Shāfi‘ī, and Ibn Qudāmah—maintain that prolonged abstinence which results in harm or denial of conjugal rights contradicts Islamic marital ethics (Ibn Qudāmah, 2004). Marriage in Islam is conceptualised as a contractual relationship grounded in mutual rights, companionship, and emotional tranquillity, and hence both spouses are entitled to sexual fulfilment as part of their marital welfare.

On a broader level, Islamic scholars highlight abstinence as an integral component of the *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*, particularly in relation to the preservation of lineage (*hifẓ al-nasl*), morality (*hifẓ al-‘ird*), and public welfare (*maṣlahah*) (Ibn ‘Ashūr, 2006; Kamali, 2008). Abstinence safeguards society against the destabilising effects of sexual misconduct, including broken families, emotional distress, and social disorder. From this perspective, abstinence is not solely a personal religious virtue but a collective ethical mechanism that promotes disciplined behaviour, protects vulnerable members of society, and contributes to a morally stable social environment.

Furthermore, contemporary Islamic scholarship emphasises that abstinence extends beyond sexual restraint to include controlling the gaze, limiting exposure to immoral influences, and cultivating modesty (*hayā’*) as a holistic moral posture (Rahman, 1982). This comprehensive approach underscores the Islamic view that morality is interior and behavioural, requiring a harmony between intention, conduct, and self-discipline. The broader spiritual goal is the development of a believer who is ethically conscious, socially responsible, and spiritually attuned to divine expectations.

Theoretical Framework

The Social Control Perspective was adopted in this study. To explain delinquency, the hypothesis was developed in the 1960s (Hirschi & Stark, 1969). Additionally, according to

Hirsh and Stark (1969), there are relationships within societal institutions like the family, church, and mosque that prevent people from engaging in unconventional behaviours by promoting abstinence from certain youth-oriented practices like premarital sex and offering role models for healthy behaviours. Family members' social contacts aid in the unmarried youth's absorption of moral values such as abstinence. According to this hypothesis, juvenile sexual conduct may ultimately be influenced by encounters with religious leaders and instructions (Somefun, 2019).

Methodology

This paper adopted qualitative research format. Relevant textbooks, scholarly articles in reputable journals, periodicals and internet sources were used to source for information on the topic under discussion. The sensitivity of the topic which hinged on sexuality and abstinence could bring about lawsuit against the researcher(s) owing to how detrimental it may be to report on ethical issues in Churches. The aforementioned reason prompted the qualitative research style, thereby, drawing inferences from previous research efforts.

Benefits of Abstinence to Christians and Muslims

- i. Abstinence enables the adherent of Islam and Christians to obey the divine commands of God, who prohibits *zina* (fornication and adultery). By refraining from unlawful sexual relations, it strengthens God-consciousness, attains spiritual purification, and earns moral integrity.
- ii. It allows individuals to maintain personal and marital well-being, as sexual activity represents the most intimate form of human connection. The exposure might be concealed or physical. While concealed exposure might encourage the acquisition of many STDs, physical exposure causes shyness. However, a young person who abstains before getting married does not have to deal with illnesses acquired via sexual activity, mistrust, marital infidelity, and other issues later in life.
- iii. It fosters respect and dignity: pre-marital sex is capable of weakening respect and results in cases of infidelity. Conversely, sex in marriage is the best and safest due to the level of commitment involved. A virgin at the time of marriage enjoys respect and dignity from her husband, husband’s family and wife’s family of orientation. It is also a talk with pride to the family of procreation.
- iv. Averts unplanned pregnancy: abstinence before marriage helps guarantee against unplanned pregnancy. There is an aphorism which states that one should “be in the right place; at the right time; and with the right person.” Having the above cited aphorism as a guide will inadvertently guide against unplanned pregnancy. Tracy (2008) concisely

explains that God prohibits sex outside of marriage to protect individuals and society from harm.

- v. It prevents the acquisition of sexually transmitted illnesses (STIs): There are several STIs, including hepatitis B, gonorrhoea, syphilis, staphylococcus, chlamydia, HIV/AIDS, genital herpes, and human papillomavirus (HPV). While some are incurable, others may be cured. According to Probert (2023), there were over 1.9 million HIV/AIDS-positive Nigerians in 2021, and the nation had 51,000 AIDS-related deaths and 74,000 new infections during that year. Forty percent of HIV/AIDS cases in Nigeria occur in people between the ages of 15 and 24. About 90% of HIV infections in Sub-Saharan Africa occur via sexual contact, making it the most common way for the virus to spread (De Kock, Ekpini & Gnaore, 1994). This is significant since young people and single people make up over 40% of HIV/AIDS casualties in Nigeria. Premarital sex should be avoided at all costs in order to prevent sexually transmitted illnesses and diseases.

Conclusion

This paper has been able to take a crystal look into the sociological perspectives of abstinence, Islam and Biblical principles on abstinence, theoretical framework, methodology and benefits of abstinence. Irrespective of how it sounds strange to Muslim and Christian believers in the modern days and age, pre-marital sex is morally wrong and God abhors it. Sex is actually created to be enjoyed by married couples and it is always for the good of the youth to desist from pre-marital sex as it puts them in high risk. The task of teaching abstinence should not be left to Islamic and Church leaders alone, as parents also have the onerous task of sensitising their wards about sexual ethical decision making strategies and discussing sex education with them. The school should either not be left out in the drive towards abstinence, but teachers and counsellors should discuss with students in love and not through force, coercion or threats.

Abstinence self-efficacy, as articulated by Kaljee et al. (2007), refers to an individual's perceived confidence in their ability to uphold abstinent behaviour and resist sexual temptation. Individuals who demonstrate a high level of abstinence self-efficacy are more inclined to postpone sexual involvement compared to those with lower levels of confidence in this regard (Ashley, Cort & Ramirez, 2013). Consequently, while religious leaders, parents, and educational institutions have a responsibility to discourage premarital sexual practices, it is equally important for young people—whether as students, congregants, or children—to internalise and apply the values and benefits associated with abstinence.

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