



# Taught to be Ashamed: Sexual Shame, Faith, and Moral Incongruence in Men's Psychosexual Development

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## Abstract

This literature review synthesizes interdisciplinary research examining how conservative religious ideologies influence male sexual development through the mechanism of sexual shame. Using a biopsychosocial and intersectional framework, it explores how moral teachings about purity and gender roles contribute to internalized shame that may manifest as hypersexuality, hyposexuality, or relational distress. Drawing from psychology, sexuality studies, and theology, the review reveals that religion-based sexual shame is not merely an individual experience but one reinforced by broader cultural and institutional structures. It fills a critical gap in existing research by centering the influence on heterosexual men—a population rarely included in studies of sexual socialization. By integrating psychological, sociological, and theological perspectives, this paper reframes sexual distress as a biopsychosocial phenomenon rooted in moral incongruence, bridging theory and practice to suggest new directions for empirical and therapeutic research.

**Keywords** Sexual shame · Male sexuality · Hypersexuality · Hyposexuality · Religious trauma · Moral incongruence · Sexual stigma

## Introduction

Religious ideologies have long shaped cultural and individual understandings of sexuality. Within conservative Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions, sexual behavior is framed through moral codes that link purity and self-control to spiritual worth. These teachings play a powerful role in how individuals learn to regulate desire, intimacy, and gendered behavior. Despite decades of research on the intersection of

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religion and sexuality, most studies have primarily focused on the impact to women and LGBTQ+ populations, leaving a significant gap in understanding how religious moral systems influence the psychosexual development of men.

The purpose of this literature review is to synthesize interdisciplinary research examining how conservative religious ideologies shape male sexual development through the mechanism of sexual shame. Using a biopsychosocial and intersectional lens, the paper explores how moral teachings about purity, gender hierarchy, and sexual restraint contribute to internalized shame and relational conflict. By analyzing findings across Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, this work highlights the shared moral frameworks that regulate male sexuality and reinforce patriarchal power, heteronormativity, and other factors contributing to moral incongruence.

Adolescence represents a particularly formative period for the internalization of these beliefs. During this stage, developing sexual awareness often collides with messages that equate sexual thoughts or behaviors with sin. For many men raised within conservative faith traditions, this dissonance establishes enduring patterns of secrecy, guilt, and repression that extend into adult sexual expression and relationships. Understanding how these early religious experiences shape adult psychosexual outcomes provides an important foundation for both critical sexuality scholarship and clinical practice.

This analysis contributes to critical sexuality studies by integrating psychology, sociology, and theology to explain how moral systems become internalized as shame rather than self-regulation. It further reframes sexual distress as a biopsychosocial phenomenon rooted in moral incongruence rather than individual pathology, bridging theoretical and clinical domains to inform future empirical and therapeutic work. Building on existing work in religious psychology and critical sexuality studies, this analysis contributes new insight by focusing specifically on heterosexual men, a population largely overlooked in prior research.

## **Literature Search and Methodological Approach**

To identify relevant literature, academic databases including PsycINFO, PubMed, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were searched using combinations of keywords such as “religion”, “sexual shame”, “moral incongruence”, “Christianity”, “Judaism”, “Islam”, “masculinity”, “hypersexuality”, and “hyposexuality”. Inclusion criteria limited results to peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books published between 2000 and 2025, written in English, and addressing the intersection of religious belief, sexuality, and men’s psychosexual development. Studies focused exclusively on female samples or lacking discussion of religious influence were excluded except where helpful to understand healthy psychosexual development for adolescents. Seventy-three sources meeting these criteria were analyzed thematically across the three faith traditions. Through iterative review, five dominant themes emerged: patriarchal dominance, hetero- and mono-normativity, purity culture and sexual policing, the pathologizing of healthy sexual desire, and enforcement of rigid gender norms. These themes provide the structure for the analysis that follows.

## Theoretical Framework

Sexuality is not an isolated psychological phenomenon, but a socially embedded experience shaped by cultural, religious, and institutional systems that define and regulate moral behavior. This study draws on four interrelated theoretical frameworks: sexual stigma theory, moral incongruence, the biopsychosocial model, and critical sexuality studies, to interpret how conservative religious ideologies contribute to male sexual shame and dysfunction. Each framework provides a unique lens for understanding how moral codes become embodied as internalized regulation of sexual behavior and identity.

### Sexual Stigma and the Construction of Shame

Gregory Herek's (2007) theory of *sexual stigma* provides the conceptual foundation for understanding how shame functions as a socially constructed emotion rooted in moral judgment. Herek defined sexual stigma as the negative regard and inferior status assigned to non-conforming sexual behaviors, identities, and desires within a given culture. Although this framework has primarily been applied to LGBTQ+ populations, it also illuminates how men internalize sexual shame when religious moral teachings define sexual expression outside marital reproduction as impure or sinful. As Herek noted, stigma "creates a hierarchy of sexual worth" (p. 914), embedding moral regulation within social institutions such as religion and family.

Within conservative Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, sexual stigma becomes codified through doctrines that equate virtue with abstinence, obedience, and self-control. These systems do not simply police external behavior; they produce internalized shame that transforms moral prohibitions into personal identity narratives, or what Foucault (1978) described as the "confessional production of sexuality" where one's sexuality is regulated through self-surveillance. Thus, *sexual shame* can be defined as the internalized emotional manifestation of stigma when moral regulation becomes self-surveillance.

### Moral Incongruence

A second concept, *moral incongruence*, explains the psychological conflict that arises when personal behavior or desire violates internalized moral values. Grubbs et al. (2015, 2019) conceptualize moral incongruence as a form of cognitive dissonance amplified by religious absolutism. For example, in men raised within purity-based systems, natural sexual thoughts or behaviors (e.g., masturbation or pornography use) often trigger guilt and self-condemnation, even when these behaviors are developmentally normative.

This framework is particularly useful for interpreting the tension between religious moral ideals and healthy biological drives. Lefevor et al. (2022) found that sexual minority Latter-day Saints with strong religious commitment experienced higher levels of internalized homonegativity (negative attitudes and self-directed stigma toward one's own same-sex attraction) along with greater psychological distress, demonstrating how rigid moral codes can undermine sexual integration. Similarly,

Barnes (2024) observed that Black gay and bisexual men navigating non-affirming churches often reconciled faith and sexuality through cycles of guilt, repentance, and secrecy, classic symptoms of moral incongruence. Applied to heterosexual men, these mechanisms reveal how moral conflict can foster patterns of hyper- or hypo-sexual adaptation as attempts to manage feelings of shame.

### **Biopsychosocial Model**

The *biopsychosocial model* provides a holistic framework for understanding sexual shame as a product of interacting biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors (Engel, 1977). From this perspective, religious moral codes function as social determinants that shape psychological development and, in turn, biological expression. Sexual inhibition, anxiety, and arousal difficulties cannot be understood solely as physiological dysfunctions but must be contextualized within the moral narratives individuals internalize about sex and the body.

This model allows for the integration of findings across disciplines, including neuroscience, developmental psychology, and cultural studies, demonstrating that shame is both embodied and relational. When moral prohibitions are learned early in life, they influence neurobiological pathways related to pleasure, threat, and attachment. Over time, these learned associations can condition arousal with guilt or fear, reinforcing maladaptive sexual responses (Nimbi et al., 2020).

### **Critical Sexuality Studies and Intersectionality**

Finally, this work is situated within *critical sexuality studies*, which interrogates the power relations that define sexual norms and identities (Plummer, 2019; Fahs & McClelland, 2016). From this perspective, sexuality is understood not as a fixed biological fact but as a socially constructed domain regulated through intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, class, and religion. *Intersectionality theory* (Crenshaw, 1989) deepens this lens by showing how overlapping systems of oppression shape individual experience.

Critical sexuality scholars argue that systems of sexual regulation, including religious purity frameworks, reproduce patriarchal and heteronormative power structures by positioning male control of sexuality as morally or divinely sanctioned (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Biale, 2023). Within these frameworks, shame functions as a disciplinary mechanism that maintains moral order and gender hierarchy. This analysis therefore approaches sexual shame not merely as an intrapsychic emotion but as a sociopolitical construct embedded within broader structures of power.

### **Positive Nature of Religion**

It is important to clarify that the purpose of this literature review is not to critique religion or faith itself but to examine how specific moral interpretations within conservative religious systems may contribute, often unintentionally, to sexual shame and conflict. Religion plays a vital and often positive role in many people's lives, offering meaning, guidance, and social connection. Numerous studies demonstrate

that religious engagement can promote psychological resilience, well-being, and pro-social behavior when paired with compassion, inclusion, and self-acceptance (Koenig, 2018).

This analysis therefore engages not with religious belief or spirituality as such, but with rigid moral interpretations that equate sexual desire with sin and moral worth with restraint or conformity. These teachings, while often well-intentioned, can inadvertently foster internalized shame and inhibit authentic relational connection. Many faith communities are actively working to reinterpret sacred texts through inclusive and compassionate frameworks that affirm sexuality as part of human wholeness and spiritual life (Ali, 2016; Biale, 2023; Klein, 2020).

By acknowledging both the psychological benefits of faith and the potential harms of moral rigidity, this review seeks to foster understanding rather than judgment. The intent is to illuminate where religious moral systems may unintentionally create suffering and to support the development of approaches, both theological and therapeutic, that reconcile spirituality with healthy psychosexual development.

Together, these frameworks provide the theoretical foundation for analyzing how conservative religious systems shape men's psychosexual development. The following section applies these lenses to thematically synthesized findings across Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

## Findings and Analysis

The reviewed literature reveals a consistent pattern: conservative ideology is *associated with* the development of sexual shame among men through moral teachings that construct desire as sinful, promote rigid gender roles, and regulate sexual expression. Through the literature, five interrelated themes emerged which are present across Christianity, Judaism, and Islam that illustrate how conservative religious ideologies impact male sexuality: (1) the divine right of patriarchy, (2) hetero- and mononormativity, (3) purity culture and sexual policing, (4) the moralization of desire, and (5) the enforcement of rigid gender roles. Each theme reflects a system of moral control that binds sexuality to spiritual virtue and locates sexual transgression within personal failure and shame.

### The Divine Right of Patriarchy

Across conservative Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions, patriarchy positions men above women in both spiritual status and domestic authority. In conservative Christianity, this hierarchy is anchored in *Ephesians* 5:22–23: “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church,” resulting in proclamations such as the Southern Baptist Convention’s (1998) *Baptist Faith and Message* (Article XVIII: *The Family*), which states that “a wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband ... as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ”. Such passages sacralize male dominance and female submission as divine order, embed-

ding gender hierarchy into moral identity and intimate relationships (Burke & Hudec, 2015; Real, 2022).

Recent analyses show that patriarchal hierarchy operates beyond theology, shaping the sexual and relational expectations of men and women. Rodríguez-García-de-Cortázar et al. (2025) observed that hegemonic masculinity constructs heterosexual relations as sites of power in which male dominance is normalized and legitimated—a dynamic that persists even in non-religious settings. Within Christianity, these ideals are spiritualized: male leadership and restraint become markers of holiness, while female obedience signifies moral virtue. This fusion of religion and gender hierarchy reinforces Herek's (2007) argument that sexual stigma functions as an institutional mechanism sustaining systems of dominance and inferiority.

Parallel logics appear in Judaism and Islam. In Orthodox Judaism, *halakhic* interpretations organize family life through gendered obligations tied to modesty, fertility, and household authority, positioning men as custodians of family continuity and spiritual leadership (Biale, 2023; Fonrobert, 2002). Empirical work with adult Jewish males shows that when sexual behavior conflicts with internalized religious standards, men raised in Orthodox settings report heightened “spiritual struggles” and distress, regardless of current religiosity. This suggests that early exposure to patriarchal moral regimes leaves enduring emotional residues that intensify shame when perceived moral failures occur (Rosmarin & Pirutinsky, 2019).

In Islamic contexts, patriarchal authority is similarly maintained through interpretive traditions surrounding *qawāma* (male guardianship) and *haya* (modesty). Öztürk (2023) argues that patriarchal readings of these Qur'anic concepts have historically conflated moral guidance with gender hierarchy, creating a theological patriarchy that mirrors, rather than originates from, cultural structures of male privilege. Ali (2016) adds that these interpretations position men as moral overseers of women's conduct, linking piety to the regulation of sexuality and domestic obedience. Together, these analyses underscore that patriarchal dominance is a socially constructed moral system justified through religious reasoning rather than an immutable divine command.

Psychologically, the internalization of patriarchal norms has destructive consequences for both genders. Gupta et al. (2023) reviews evidence that patriarchal socialization restricts men's emotional expression and equates dominance with self-worth, fostering shame, relational detachment, and aggression when that dominance is challenged. For some men, the expectation of control produces a sense of entitlement over women's bodies and, at times, coercive behavior; for others, awareness of patriarchy's harm evokes guilt and disidentification from sexuality, resulting in moral incongruence and self-alienation (Grubbs et al., 2019; Downie, 2022). In both trajectories, faith-based patriarchy binds moral value to gendered power and conditions men to measure spiritual adequacy through mastery—whether over others or over themselves.

Taken together, the cross-faith evidence demonstrates that patriarchal headship is not peripheral but central to conservative sexual ethics. By presenting male authority as sacred duty, these systems reproduce the emotional economy of dominance and shame that underlies moral incongruence and internalized sexual stigma in men.

## Hetero- and Mono-normativity

Across conservative Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions, sexual relationships are defined through a singular model of virtue: heterosexual, monogamous marriage. Desire, intimacy, and relational fulfillment are deemed legitimate only when aligned with this moral framework. Within conservative Christianity, this belief is expressed through doctrines that equate marriage with divine order and heterosexuality as a natural truth. The Southern Baptist Convention (1998) declares marriage “the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime” (Article XVIII: The Family, para. 2), explicitly rejecting same-sex and non-marital unions. Evangelical literature reinforces this exclusivity, casting deviations as moral failures or evidence of rebellion against God’s design (Burke & Hudec, 2015; Grubbs et al., 2019). As Herek (2007) notes, such theologies sustain a hierarchy of sexual worth that legitimates only heterosexual, reproductive coupling.

These moral systems effectively disown individuals whose identities or relationships do not conform to sanctioned norms. Research across Christian denominations shows that LGBTQ+ individuals raised in conservative religious contexts frequently experience profound internalized stigma, identity conflict, and social isolation. Lefevor et al. (2022) found that sexual minority Latter-day Saints reporting high religious commitment experienced significantly greater psychological distress, driven by moral incongruence between one’s authentic identity and a desire for belonging within one’s faith-based community, a pattern consistent with findings by Brandshaw, Dehlin, and Galliher (2022) showing that both men and women within the LDS Church experience complex negotiations between sexual identity and religious loyalty. Similarly, Barnes (2024) documented how Black gay and bisexual men navigating non-affirming churches reconciled conflicting identities through secrecy, compartmentalization, and guilt, describing faith communities as both “sources of belonging and rejection.” Downie (2022) argues that this tension constitutes a form of *religious trauma*, wherein moral teachings about sexuality become sources of toxic shame rather than spiritual guidance.

Empirical research suggests that heteronormative ideology functions not only as a moral framework but also as an affective system that sustains social hierarchy. Ray and Parkhill (2020) found that for heterosexual men sexual disgust mediates the relationship between heteronormativity and hostility toward gay men, indicating that emotional reactions to perceived sexual “deviance” help maintain dominance and reinforce group boundaries. This mechanism mirrors the moral logic within conservative religious contexts, where non-heterosexual relationships are framed as threats to spiritual and social order.

Parallel heteronormative beliefs govern Orthodox Judaism and Islam. In Judaism, halakhic law defines sexual intimacy as permissible only within heterosexual marriage, linking procreation to God’s will and therefore excluding queer relationships from communal legitimacy (Biale, 2023). Jewish men who deviate from this norm face both theological condemnation and community isolation, reinforcing the association of masculinity with marital reproduction (Rosmarin & Pirutinsky, 2019). In Islam, patriarchal interpretations of *nikah* (marriage) similarly establish heterosexual union as the sole legitimate venue for sexual relations. Öztürk (2023) and Ali (2016)

both emphasize that this framework constructs a moral binary of *halal* (permitted) versus *haram* (forbidden) that equates sexual purity with heteronormative compliance. Individuals whose desires or life choices fall outside these norms risk moral exclusion and, in many communities, physical violence.

The consequences of these belief systems for identity formation are profound. During adolescence, when individuals are developing sexual self-understanding, exposure to rigid heteronormative teachings can instill chronic fear and self-doubt. Studies across religious contexts demonstrate that such messages increase the risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidality among sexual minority youth, while also constraining heterosexual men's emotional development by equating nontraditional expressions of affection or vulnerability with weakness or sin (Herek, 2007; Gupta, 2023). For many men, the result is a performative masculinity that prizes social acceptance over authenticity, producing the same moral incongruence and relational detachment observed in other patriarchal systems (Real, 2022; Fahs & McClelland, 2016).

Across faiths, the elevation of heterosexual monogamy functions as both a spiritual ideal and a social discipline tool. It regulates not only who one may love, but how love itself is expressed and valued. Those who cannot, or choose not to, conform are positioned outside the boundaries of moral legitimacy, their experiences recast as temptation, pathology, or rebellion. The persistence of this ideology across Christianity, Judaism, and Islam underscores the enduring reach of hetero- and mononormativity as a moral order that defines belonging through conformity and generates shame through exclusion.

## Purity Culture and Sexual Policing

Purity culture represents one of the most visible and enduring mechanisms of sexual regulation across conservative faith traditions. Rooted in abstinence-only morality and the idealization of virginity, purity culture defines sexual restraint not simply as prudence but as proof of spiritual integrity. Within Christianity, this ideology emerged most prominently in the late twentieth-century Evangelical movement through public rituals and curricula that sought to “protect” youth from sexual sin. Campaigns such as *True Love Waits* and purity-pledge ceremonies tied moral worth to abstinence, urging young people to “guard their hearts” and maintain sexual purity until marriage (Klein, 2020; Valenti, 2009; Burke & Hudec, 2015; Rosenbaum & Weathersbee, 2013). Male sexuality was cast as potentially dangerous and in need of control, while women were taught that their bodies were sites of temptation and moral risk. As one Evangelical curriculum stated, “sexual purity is not only an act of obedience but an act of worship,” collapsing physical restraint and divine devotion into a single moral identity (Gardner, 2011).

Sociological and psychological analyses show that these teachings foster shame-based self-regulation rather than healthy sexual ethics. Natarajan (2022) describes purity culture as “a colonial and gendered form of moral governance” that reinforces racialized respectability and heteronormativity, burdening women and men with impossible standards of control. Downie (2022) similarly identifies purity instruction as a form of *moral trauma*, where religious adherence is maintained through fear of



contamination rather than internal moral reasoning. For men, this framework often produces conflicting imperatives—be sexually restrained yet assertive, pure yet dominant—creating cognitive dissonance that mirrors the mechanism of moral incongruence (Grubbs et al., 2019). Over time, these internal contradictions can contribute to cycles of secrecy, guilt, and compulsivity in adult sexual expression (Bancroft & Vukadinovic, 2004; Efrati et al., 2021; Gordon, 2018).

Jewish and Islamic traditions contain analogous systems of purity-based sexual governance. In Orthodox Judaism, the laws of *taharat ha-mishpacha* (family purity) delineate periods of abstinence surrounding menstruation and emphasize modesty (*tzniut*) as moral duty. Fonrobert (2002) notes that these practices construct moral identity through bodily separation and ritual control, positioning sexual activity within a framework of sanctified obedience. Similarly, Islamic teachings on *haya* (modesty) and *zina* (sexual transgression) function as both spiritual and social boundaries. Ali (2016) explains that these concepts not only prohibit premarital and extra-marital sex but also cultivate collective vigilance, where communities participate in regulating women's behavior and men's desires. In both traditions, sexual morality is maintained through surveillance and restraint, transforming faith into a mechanism of bodily discipline.

The psychological consequences of such systems are well documented. Research on religious shame and compulsive sexual behavior shows that excessive moral control paradoxically heightens preoccupation with forbidden acts and amplifies guilt when transgressions occur (Grubbs et al., 2019; Rosmarin & Pirutinsky, 2019). Karaga et al. (2016) observe that within religious populations, hypersexuality and hyposexuality frequently arise from attempts to reconcile natural sexual impulses with prohibitive moral teachings, reflecting the same cycles of repression and relapse found in addiction frameworks. These dynamics illustrate how purity culture transforms sexuality into a moral proving ground rather than an aspect of human intimacy, perpetuating an emotional climate where shame becomes synonymous with faithfulness.

Across Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, purity culture operates as a moral technology that polices sexual behavior through fear, surveillance, and internalized shame. It reinforces patriarchal and heteronormative hierarchies by defining virtue through abstinence and obedience, situating sexuality within a system of control rather than connection. For men, this model produces ongoing conflict between embodied desire and spiritual ideals, an internal struggle that underlies the development of moral incongruence, resulting in personal and relational disconnection.

## The Moralization of Desire

Within conservative religious frameworks, healthy sexual desire is often portrayed as inherently corrupt, a temptation of the flesh that must be restrained to preserve moral and spiritual purity. Rather than being understood as a natural aspect of being human, desire becomes moralized and surveilled, positioned as evidence of one's sinful nature or of weak faith. Christian theology, particularly within Evangelical and Catholic traditions, teaches that even sexual fantasy constitutes sin if it occurs outside marital or procreative contexts. As stated in *Matthew* 5:28, "anyone who looks at a

woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” This doctrine of “impure thoughts” collapses the distinction between thought and action, fostering an internalized vigilance in which the mind itself becomes a moral battlefield (Burke & Hudec, 2015). Over time, this conflation produces habitual self-surveillance, guilt, and an enduring sense that sexual desire itself is dangerous.

Empirical studies confirm the emotional toll of such teachings. Gordon et al. (2018) found that men raised in conservative religious households often reported intense shame following masturbation or sexual fantasy, interpreting these experiences as moral failure rather than healthy sexual exploration. Grubbs et al. (2019) similarly demonstrated that the distress arising when one’s behavior violates internalized moral values predicts higher levels of sexual guilt and anxiety regardless of the type of sexual activity. Efrati et al. (2021) linked compulsive sexual behavior to early maladaptive schemas rooted in religious socialization, showing that when normal erotic expression is paired with guilt or secrecy, it becomes a site of emotional conflict. Collectively, these findings highlight that repressing sexual thoughts and fantasies paradoxically increases preoccupation and shame, contributing to cycles of repression, indulgence, and remorse.

Conservative Christianity is not alone in framing sexual desire within moral boundaries that render it suspect or spiritually hazardous. In Orthodox Judaism, rabbinic commentaries on *zera levatala* (the “wasting of seed”) interpret masturbation as a violation of divine intent, invoking the story of Onan (*Genesis* 38:9–10) as moral precedent. These teachings tie male ejaculation to procreation and covenantal duty, casting non-procreative acts as desecration (Biale, 2023; Fonrobert, 2002). Rosmarin and Pirutinsky (2019) found that Jewish men raised in Orthodox environments exhibited stronger links between sexual behavior and spiritual distress, even among those who had left the faith, suggesting that early exposure to purity-based prohibitions creates enduring moral incongruence in which ordinary sexual expression becomes a source of guilt and self-reproach. In Islam, parallel prohibitions appear in moral discourses surrounding *zina* (illicit sexual activity) and *haya* (modesty). Ali (2016) explains that desire outside marital union is treated not as morally neutral but as a spiritual trial that must be overcome through discipline and prayer. Öztürk (2023) adds that patriarchal interpretations of *zina* and *haya* link bodily pleasure to weakness, maintaining a system where moral virtue is proven through self-restraint.

The psychological and relational consequences of these teachings are profound. Men who internalize the belief that desire itself is sinful often struggle to differentiate between healthy sexual expression and moral transgression. Research indicates that such individuals are more likely to experience sexual avoidance, erectile difficulties, or anxiety during intimacy (Nimbi et al., 2020; Gordon, 2018). Others cope by oscillating between repression and compulsive behavior, mirroring addiction-like cycles described in hypersexuality research (Bancroft & Vukadinovic, 2004; Karaga et al., 2016). In both cases, the inability to integrate desire within a positive moral framework leads to self-alienation and emotional disconnection from partners.

Across Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the moralization of sexual desire transforms a basic human impulse into a locus of fear and self-reproach. By defining erotic thoughts, fantasy, and pleasure as spiritually contaminating, these systems sustain cycles of guilt that distort authentic erotic expression. Controlling one’s desire

becomes a test of faithfulness, one that few can pass without shame. The policing of thought itself extends religious control into the most private realms of consciousness, sustaining self-criticism due to moral incongruence.

### The Enforcement of Rigid Gender Norms

Across conservative religious traditions, gender is treated not as a spectrum of human experience but as a divinely ordained binary. Male and female are positioned as complementary opposites whose roles, behaviors, and appearances are prescribed by sacred texts and cultural tradition. This biological essentialism forms the foundation of religious social order: men are cast as leaders and protectors, while women are defined by submission, modesty, and nurturing behaviors (Burke & Hudec, 2015; Real, 2022). Deviations from this framework, whether in gender identity, expression, behavior, or even emotional disposition, are often framed as rejection of divine design. While the most visible harm is experienced by trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming individuals, who may face overt exclusion or pressure to conform (Herek, 2007; Gupta et al., 2023), the same rigid system also disciplines those who otherwise fit within traditional binaries but express traits, desires, or roles that fall outside cultural expectations. Men who display emotional vulnerability or women who assert authority can likewise be subject to scrutiny or moral judgment, illustrating that the harm arises not from difference itself but from the rigidity of the belief system.

This rigidity conflicts with what we know from contemporary research on human diversity. Studies in developmental psychology, neuroscience, and biology have demonstrated that gender expression and identity exist along a continuum rather than as fixed opposites (Jordan-Young, 2010; Fausto-Sterling, 2019). Natural variation in gender-related traits, such as empathy, aggression, and nurturing, appears across all populations and contributes to social adaptability and resilience (Eliot, 2010). From an evolutionary perspective, diversity within sex and gender expression provides populations with broader behavioral repertoires that enhance cooperation, caregiving, and survival. Thus, when religious systems impose rigid gender boundaries, they not only constrain psychological authenticity but also deny a fundamental principle of nature: that diversity is essential to the health and continuity of life.

In conservative Christianity, teachings on gender roles draw heavily from scriptural literalism. The Book of *Genesis* is frequently cited to affirm the belief that “male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27), implying that gender is biologically fixed and divinely mandated. Evangelical and Catholic doctrines further assert that authentic masculinity and femininity are expressed through distinct callings, men as spiritual leaders and women as caregivers. When individuals transgress these boundaries, they are often labeled disordered or sinful. For example, the Vatican’s *Letter to the Bishops on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World* (Holy See, 2004) warns against “the obscuring of the natural difference between man and woman”, reflecting a theological commitment to binary complementarity. Such teachings institutionalize gender conformity as a moral imperative, equating faithfulness with adherence to traditional gender roles.

Judaism and Islam express similar gender essentialism through legal and cultural codes that prescribe behavior, appearance, and dress. In Orthodox Judaism, *halakhic* law enforces clear gender divisions in public worship, religious duty, and clothing. The prohibition against *begeg ishah* (cross-dressing or adopting the appearance of the opposite sex) serves as a symbolic boundary preserving what is seen as divine order (Biale, 2023). Irshai (2019) demonstrates how even Reform Jewish debates over transgender inclusion remain shaped by *halakhic* reasoning that assumes the naturalness of male–female distinction. In Islam, gender segregation (*ikhtilat*) and modesty codes reinforce binary roles through both legal and social mechanisms. Öztürk (2023) argues that patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an have historically transformed gender difference into gender hierarchy, legitimizing exclusion of those who do not fit binary norms. The result, across faiths, is a moral architecture in which conformity to binary gender identity is both spiritually rewarded and socially enforced.

These doctrines have profound psychological and relational consequences. For cisgender men, rigid gender expectations often produce emotional suppression, shame, and relational disconnection as the ‘cost of traditional masculinity’ (Real, 2022). For cisgender women, similar rigidity may result in self-silencing, dependency, and limited autonomy. For gender-diverse individuals, the harm is more overt: rejection, isolation, and internalized stigma. Studies of religious transgender individuals show that messages equating gender diversity with sin foster identity fragmentation and elevated risk of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Gupta et al., 2023; Herek, 2007). This review of patriarchy and mental health underscores that such systems damage psychological development by restricting authenticity and promoting self-alienation. The moral incongruence experienced by trans and nonbinary people in faith contexts reflects a fundamental conflict between embodied identity and imposed moral categories, a dissonance that mirrors the broader sexual shame mechanisms observed throughout these traditions.

Across Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, rigid gender norms operate as a blueprint for maintaining spiritual and social order. By defining righteousness through conformity to binary gender and heteronormative roles, these traditions transform gender itself into a site of moral discipline. Those who cannot, or choose not to, conform, whether because of identity, expression, temperament, or conviction, are marginalized not only socially but existentially, denied full participation in spiritual belonging. This enforcement of gender conformity perpetuates the emotional economy of shame and self-surveillance that sustains patriarchal and heteronormative power, completing the cycle of moral incongruence that binds sexuality, identity, and faith.

## Synthesis of Findings

Across Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the literature reveals five interconnected mechanisms through which conservative religious ideologies shape male sexuality: patriarchal dominance, hetero- and mono-normativity, purity culture and sexual policing, the moralization of desire, and rigid gender norms. Together, these systems establish moral hierarchies that equate holiness with control and conformity, positioning sexual desire and gender variance as threats to spiritual integrity. What unites

these doctrines is not simply their content but their structure, each imposes moral order through surveillance of the body and suppression of difference.

Within the biopsychosocial framework, these mechanisms illustrate how social ideologies are internalized into psychological and physiological processes. Moral incongruence arises when individuals experience conflict between their natural sexual or emotional impulses and the moral standards they have been taught to uphold. Over time, these unresolved conflicts become embodied as shame, anxiety, and disconnection in relationships. The research reviewed here suggests that religious systems emphasizing purity and control may unintentionally transform spiritual values into self-punitive schemas that regulate not only behavior but identity itself.

Importantly, this synthesis also situates sexual shame within a broader evolutionary and developmental context. Human variation, in sexual expression, desire, temperament, and gender, is not an aberration but a natural product of biological diversity (Jordan-Young, 2010; Fausto-Sterling, 2019; Eliot, 2010). Diversity within gender and sexuality promotes social adaptability, cooperation, and the flourishing of human relationships. When moral systems suppress these natural differences, they not only constrain personal authenticity but also disrupt the evolutionary principle that diversity sustains the health and resilience of populations. In this sense, moral rigidity represents both a social and biological dissonance, one that can erode individual well-being and relational harmony.

Thus, the intersection of moral incongruence, internalized sexual stigma, and restrictive gender ideology provides a powerful lens for understanding how religious moral systems can shape male psychosexual development. Rather than fostering genuine virtue or relational integrity, these systems risk creating conditions where fear, guilt, and shame replace empathy, self-acceptance, and love—the very values that most faith traditions aspire to cultivate.

## Discussion

The findings of this review suggest that conservative religious ideologies, while varied across Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, share structural features that shape men's psychosexual development in ways that can result in internalized conflict and shame. When sexuality, desire, and gender are moralized as reflections of spiritual worth, they become sources of anxiety rather than authentic self-expression. The following discussion applies the theoretical frameworks introduced earlier to interpret how these moral systems interact with developmental, cultural, and psychological processes to influence male sexual well-being.

### Moral Incongruence and Internalized Sexual Stigma

The interaction of sexual stigma theory (Herek, 2007) and the concept of moral incongruence (Grubbs et al., 2019) provides a model for understanding how conservative teachings can foster internalized sexual shame. While the evidence does not support a causal relationship between religious belief and sexual shame, religious doctrines construct a moral hierarchy in which purity, restraint, and heteronormativ-

ity are markers of virtue, while sexual desire and nonconformity signify moral weakness. When men inevitably experience desires or identify in ways that contradict these ideals, a dissonance emerges between their embodied reality and internalized moral codes. This conflict, moral incongruence, produces guilt, secrecy, and anxiety that can persist even after individuals disengage from their faith communities.

Because shame functions both as an emotion and as a moral regulator, its power lies in its ability to shape identity. Men socialized within purity-based systems learn to police their own thoughts and fantasies, equating moral worth with self-control and suppression. This dynamic aligns with the biopsychosocial model's emphasis on how social structures become internalized as biological and psychological processes: over time, shame becomes embodied as tension, inhibition, and avoidance in sexual and relational contexts (Efrati et al., 2021; Gordon, 2018). These mechanisms demonstrate how moral systems can transform into psychological patterns, where the avoidance of sin becomes indistinguishable from the avoidance of intimacy. These internalized moral hierarchies are further complicated by the intersecting influences of race, culture, and community norms, particularly in faith traditions shaped by histories of oppression and social control. Together, these frameworks illustrate how moral systems external to oneself become embodied internally as emotional regulation strategies.

### **Race, Respectability, and LGBTQ + Identity Conflict**

Intersectionality illuminates how religious sexual stigma operates differently across social locations, particularly at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Within the Black Christian Church, respectability has historically functioned as both a survival strategy and a moral code, a means of countering white supremacist narratives that depicted Black men and women as sexually deviant, primitive, and morally inferior. During and after slavery, white Christian colonial ideology pathologized Black sexuality, framing it as uncontrolled and animalistic to justify racial domination and sexual violence (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). In response, Black religious and social institutions promoted ideals of moral restraint, heterosexual family structure, and disciplined behavior as evidence of dignity and humanity. These respectability norms, though rooted in resistance to oppression, also became mechanisms of internal regulation that policed non-normative gender and sexual expression within Black communities.

As a result, the Black Church holds a dual role: it is both a sanctuary of resilience and a site of moral surveillance. Barnes (2024) found that Black gay and bisexual men in non-affirming churches described navigating deep tension between faith, race, and sexuality. Their desire to uphold respectability and community belonging often required the concealment of sexual identity, producing cycles of secrecy, guilt, and shame. The moral imperative to “represent the race” through upright behavior translates into an internalized demand to suppress any expression deemed deviant by dominant religious norms. In this context, respectability becomes a form of moral capital, one that offers protection from societal prejudice while reinforcing patriarchal and heteronormative hierarchies within the community itself.

Similar intersectional conflicts emerge among LGBTQ+ individuals in other conservative faith traditions. Lefevor et al. (2022) found that sexual minority Latter-day Saints with high religious commitment experienced greater psychological distress, driven by moral incongruence between faith and sexual identity. Downie (2022) describes this conflict as a form of *religious trauma*, wherein spiritual belonging becomes contingent upon the denial of authentic desire. Across traditions, individuals who embody marginalized identities must navigate dual systems of oppression: the external judgment of dominant culture and the internalized moral policing of their own communities. From the perspective of critical sexuality studies (Plummer, 2019), this dynamic reflects how religious and racialized power structures intertwine to maintain social order, defining moral virtue through conformity while punishing divergence as both sin and social betrayal.

### The Formative Impact of Adolescence

Adolescence represents the developmental period when religious moral instruction and emerging sexuality most directly intersect. During this stage, moral and sexual identities coalesce into enduring schemas that shape adult psychosexual functioning. Due to neurodevelopmental sensitivity (e.g., prefrontal-limbic maturation), adolescence is a critical window for identity formation, social learning, and moral development, when individuals are particularly responsive to environmental and cultural influence (Steinberg, 2017). As Ott (2010) notes, the development of sexual health in adolescent boys is a normative developmental task involving curiosity, readiness, and the integration of sexual feelings into identity and relationships. Rostosky et al. (2004) similarly emphasize that adolescence is the period when religiosity exerts its strongest influence on sexual behavior, not only through parental and institutional control but also through the internalization of moral beliefs about purity and sin. Although religious involvement is often associated with delayed sexual debut, Rostosky and colleagues found that this delay reflects mechanisms of social regulation rather than the cultivation of healthy sexual self-understanding.

When this natural exploration unfolds in the context of conservative religious moral codes, curiosity becomes framed as temptation and sexual desire as moral danger. Messages equating sexual thoughts with sin or framing purity as spiritual currency can therefore create enduring associations between desire and guilt. For boys, this developmental conflict is intensified by patriarchal expectations to demonstrate control, strength, and leadership while suppressing vulnerability and emotional intimacy. The resulting cognitive dissonance between curiosity and moral restraint often produces confusion, guilt, and self-reproach during formative sexual experiences, inhibiting the ability to integrate sexuality as a healthy aspect of selfhood.

Ott's (2010) developmental framework highlights that adolescent boys' early relationships are often characterized by a genuine desire for closeness and intimacy, motivations that contrast sharply with cultural and religious narratives depicting male sexuality as aggressive or morally suspect. When desire is consistently moralized as sinful, these early experiences of affection and relational exploration are distorted, generating anxiety around both sexual and emotional expression. Rostosky et al. (2004) further argue that such moral conditioning reinforces gendered double stan-



dards: while young men are expected to control “impure” urges, they are simultaneously socialized to view self-restraint as a measure of masculine worth.

Within the biopsychosocial model, these internalized conflicts are not merely cognitive but embodied. Shame-based vigilance conditions physiological responses to arousal and intimacy, producing avoidance or compulsivity as adaptive mechanisms for managing distress (Efrati et al., 2021; Gordon, 2018). Thus, adolescence functions as a crucible in which religious moral systems are internalized and psychologized. The combination of moral surveillance, patriarchal gender roles, and emerging sexual awareness solidifies into enduring patterns of thought and behavior. For some men, this manifests in rigid perfectionism and self-denial; for others, in secrecy and shame-driven rebellion. Over time, these internalized schemas restrict emotional expression, sexual spontaneity, and relational intimacy, establishing the foundation for adult behaviors in the future.

### **Sexual Adaptations and Relational Challenges for Men**

The long-term outcomes of these developmental processes vary but tend to follow predictable patterns of adaptation to unresolved moral incongruence. For some men, the pressure to suppress sexual desire leads to *hyposexuality*, characterized by low libido, emotional disengagement, or anxiety surrounding intimacy. Others experience compensatory *hypersexuality*, where compulsive behaviors emerge as attempts to reclaim autonomy over repressed desires (Bancroft & Vukadinovic, 2004; Karaga et al., 2016). Both patterns reflect efforts to manage shame rather than express authentic sexuality. They also align with Gordon’s (2018) findings that male sexual shame correlates with relational dissatisfaction, avoidance of vulnerability, and diminished emotional intimacy.

Relationally, patriarchal and heteronormative scripts compound these difficulties. Men socialized to maintain control and dominance often struggle to engage in mutuality and emotional transparency with their partners, key components of a healthy relationship (Real, 2022). When shame and fear of inadequacy co-exist, relationships become structured around performance and withdrawal, rather than emotional intimacy. These outcomes show that religious sexual stigma inflicts costs far beyond individual distress, undermining the very relational virtues of love, empathy, and communion that faith traditions claim to protect.

Collectively, these findings reveal that the moral regulation of male sexuality through religious ideology produces a spectrum of adaptive and maladaptive responses shaped by shame, identity conflict, and developmental conditioning. Understanding these dynamics through biopsychosocial and intersectional frameworks allows for more compassionate, evidence-informed interventions. The next section outlines therapeutic approaches that address moral incongruence and restore integration between desire, identity, and relational authenticity.



## Recommendations

The findings of this review underscore that sexual shame in men raised within conservative religious traditions is a biopsychosocial phenomenon sustained by internalized moral incongruence, negative self-schemas, and relational disconnection. Effective treatment therefore requires interventions that address the emotional, cognitive, and relational dimensions of shame simultaneously. Three evidence-informed modalities, Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC), Coherence Therapy (CT), and Relational Life Therapy (RLT), offer complementary pathways for promoting healing, integration, and authentic intimacy.

### Mindful Self-Compassion: Interrupting the Shame Cycle

Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) offers an evidence-based framework for addressing the shame and moral incongruence that often underlie sexual distress in men. Developed by Neff and Germer (2018), MSC cultivates three interrelated components: mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness, that counteract the self-critical patterns associated with shame. Rather than attempting to suppress or avoid painful emotions, MSC teaches individuals to meet suffering with awareness and empathy, reducing defensive avoidance and promoting emotional integration.

Empirical evidence supports the efficacy of self-compassion interventions in improving psychosocial outcomes across diverse populations. A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials found that self-compassion training significantly reduced symptoms of anxiety, depression, and self-criticism while enhancing emotional well-being and relationship satisfaction (Ferrari et al., 2019). Within the context of male sexual shame, self-compassion serves as a corrective emotional experience that disrupts cycles of self-condemnation and avoidance, patterns frequently reinforced by religiously moralized guilt.

Research specifically examining self-compassion in hypersexual men highlights its relevance to this population. In a sample of 172 men assessed for hypersexual disorder, Reid et al. (2014) found that self-compassion partially mediated the relationship between shame, rumination, and hypersexual behavior. Men who scored higher on self-compassion reported lower levels of shame-based rumination and less compulsive sexual activity. These findings suggest that cultivating self-compassion enables men to reinterpret their sexual struggles through a lens of acceptance and accountability rather than moral failure. By fostering nonjudgmental awareness and self-soothing capacities, MSC may alleviate the emotional intensity of moral incongruence and reduce reliance on maladaptive coping behaviors such as compulsive sex or withdrawal.

From a biopsychosocial perspective, MSC functions as a bridge between spirituality and psychological healing. Its emphasis on mindfulness and common humanity resonates with the moral and relational values embedded within many faith traditions, providing an accessible therapeutic model for religious clients. By reframing self-judgment as an opportunity for compassionate understanding, MSC restores connection to self and others, transforming shame into empathy, and moral striving into self-acceptance.

## Coherence Therapy: Revising Core Beliefs Through Memory Reconsolidation

While MSC focuses on the emotional healing of shame, Coherence Therapy (CT) targets the *implicit beliefs* and *emotional learnings* that sustain moral incongruence. Developed by Bruce Ecker and colleagues, CT is grounded in the neuroscience of memory reconsolidation, the brain's natural capacity to update and transform emotional memory. The therapist guides the client in uncovering the deeper, often unconscious, meanings attached to their shame (e.g., "I must control desire to be worthy", "If I am sexual, I am unlovable"). These beliefs are then juxtaposed with contradictory experiences or emotional truths that the client consciously recognizes (e.g., "My sexuality has also been a source of love and connection"). When these conflicting emotional learnings are held in awareness simultaneously, the neural circuits encoding the old schema destabilize and rewrite (Ecker et al., 2012).

Applied to religious sexual shame, CT allows men to revise entrenched moral narratives at their emotional origin. Rather than attempting to suppress unwanted thoughts or impulses, clients are helped to recognize how those impulses once served them in coherent ways (i.e. protecting them from rejection, punishment, or moral failure). This experiential discovery transforms shame from a fixed identity into an adaptive learning that can now be released. Over time, clients report reduced compulsive or avoidant sexual behavior and greater integration between desire, values, and self-acceptance.

## Relational Life Therapy: Restoring Connection and Equity

Relational Life Therapy (RLT), developed by Terry Real, is a systemic and feminist-informed approach that seeks to restore authentic connection by addressing the relational and cultural dynamics that sustain disconnection. Rather than pathologizing individual behavior, RLT conceptualizes relational distress as a symptom of larger systems of patriarchy, power imbalance, and emotional disempowerment (Real, 2022). The model integrates psychoeducation, therapist use of self, and direct yet compassionate confrontation to help clients recognize how gendered socialization, particularly the conditioning of men toward control and emotional detachment, undermines intimacy. Through structured dialogues and relational mindfulness, partners learn to move beyond defensive posturing and cultivate mutual empathy, accountability, and repair.

RLT aligns with emerging therapeutic paradigms that explicitly challenge patriarchal norms within couple relationships. Knudson-Martin (2015) describes this work as "undoing gendered power," emphasizing that therapy must not only foster emotional expression but also address the cultural ideologies that privilege dominance over reciprocity. Sustainable intimacy requires the active deconstruction of relational inequality, a process that invites men to reclaim vulnerability as a relational strength. By reframing authority as mutual influence rather than control, these approaches move couples toward equity-based connection that fosters psychological safety and empathy.

The principles of RLT also resonate with Gottman and Silver's (2015) longitudinal findings that mutual respect, repair attempts, and shared power are among the

strongest predictors of marital satisfaction. Healthy relationships depend not on the absence of conflict but on the capacity for repair, attunement, and emotional responsiveness. Within RLT, this repair process is relationally radical as it involves dismantling defensive adaptations rooted in patriarchal scripts and replacing them with relational competence, humility, and emotional courage.

From a biopsychosocial perspective, RLT addresses the interpersonal manifestations of moral incongruence and internalized shame by creating a therapeutic space where authenticity and accountability coexist. Men socialized to equate vulnerability with weakness learn to experience emotional exposure as a form of integrity rather than deficiency. Through this process, clients reconstruct their sense of self-worth not through dominance or withdrawal but through empathy, responsibility, and relational agency. RLT thus serves as both a therapeutic intervention and a form of social healing, bridging individual transformation with the broader cultural project of undoing patriarchal conditioning and restoring relational equality.

### **Integrative Application**

These three modalities, while distinct, are mutually reinforcing. Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) provides the emotional foundation of safety and self-acceptance; Coherence Therapy (CT) facilitates the cognitive and neural transformation of maladaptive beliefs; and Relational Life Therapy (RLT) restores relational equity and connection. Together, they address the full spectrum of mechanisms implicated in sexual shame: emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal. For clinicians, integrating these approaches offers a comprehensive model for helping men reconcile sexuality and spirituality, replacing moral incongruence with self-understanding and authentic relational engagement.

Although empirical research specifically examining CT and RLT in populations experiencing religiously based sexual shame remains limited, the theoretical mechanisms underlying both approaches are well supported by broader evidence on memory reconsolidation, attachment repair, and relational equity. Future studies are needed to evaluate their efficacy in this context; however, their alignment with the biopsychosocial model of shame and attachment offers a promising framework for both clinical intervention and further empirical inquiry.

### **Conclusion**

This review has synthesized interdisciplinary research examining how conservative religious ideologies shape male psychosexual development through the mechanisms of moral incongruence, sexual stigma, and patriarchal socialization. Across Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, teachings about purity, gender, and desire converge to form moral systems that define spiritual worth through control and conformity. For many men, these doctrines create internalized conflict between embodied sexuality and moral identity, producing shame, relational disconnection, and maladaptive patterns such as hypersexuality, hyposexuality, or emotional avoidance. By applying biopsychosocial and intersectional frameworks, this paper demonstrates that reli-

giously based sexual shame is not an individual pathology but a socially conditioned and psychologically embedded phenomenon.

Clinically, the integration of Mindful Self-Compassion, Coherence Therapy, and Relational Life Therapy offers promising avenues for helping men heal from sexual shame by addressing its emotional, cognitive, and relational dimensions. Together, these approaches provide a foundation for therapeutic models that restore connection to self and others while promoting self-acceptance and relational authenticity.

Despite these insights, several limitations of this review should be acknowledged. As a literature synthesis, this work relies on existing studies, many of which are cross-sectional, gendered, or limited to Western and Christian contexts. Empirical research examining non-Christian faith traditions, particularly within Judaism and Islam, remains underdeveloped. Likewise, most available studies focus on women or LGBTQ+ individuals, leaving heterosexual men's experiences of sexual shame comparatively underexplored. The complexity of moral incongruence as a construct also warrants further operationalization to distinguish between adaptive moral reflection and maladaptive internalized shame.

Future research should pursue both qualitative and quantitative studies that deepen understanding of how religious moral systems shape sexual identity development in men. Longitudinal designs could clarify developmental pathways from adolescence to adulthood, identifying protective factors that mitigate the effects of shame. Clinical research is particularly needed to evaluate the efficacy of interventions such as Mindful Self-Compassion, Coherence Therapy, and Relational Life Therapy for reducing sexual shame and improving relational outcomes. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, such studies can contribute to an evidence-based model of sexual healing that honors both psychological integrity and spiritual meaning.

In sum, this review demonstrates that conservative religious ideologies contained within Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, shape male psychosexual development in ways that are associated with moral incongruence, internalized sexual stigma, and relational disconnection. Yet religion itself is not inherently harmful. As Koenig (2018) observes, faith and spirituality often serve as sources of meaning, resilience, and post-traumatic growth, offering individuals frameworks for belonging and hope. Recognizing this duality is essential: moral systems can provide ethical grounding and community cohesion while also perpetuating shame and inequality when rigidly applied. The challenge for scholars and clinicians is to discern how these systems can preserve their spiritual and social value without constraining healthy sexual and relational development. Future research should continue to explore these distinctions, developing integrative, evidence-based models that honor the psychological and communal benefits of faith while addressing its potential to harm through moral rigidity or exclusion.

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**Conflict of interest** The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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