

Revenge of the Church Ladies

by William R. Mattox, Jr.

Sigmund Freud said they suffer from an "obsessional neurosis" accompanied by guilt, suppressed emotions and repressed sexuality.

Former Saturday Night Live comedian Dana Carvey satirized them as uptight prudes who believe sex is downright dirty.

But several major research studies show that church ladies (and the men who sleep with them) are among the most sexually satisfied people on the face of the earth.

Now, isn't that special?

Researchers at the University of Chicago seem to think so. Several years ago, when they released the results of the most "comprehensive and methodologically sound" sex survey ever conducted, they reported that religious women experience significantly higher levels of sexual satisfaction than non-religious women.

While this outcome caught some by surprise, the Chicago study was hardly the first to show a link between spirituality and sexuality. In fact, a 1940s Stanford University study, a 1970s Redbook magazine survey of 100,000 women and at least one other study from the early 1990s all found higher levels of sexual satisfaction among women who attend religious services.

Nevertheless, the common assumption continues to be that church ladies are sexually repressed, or that they're like the blissfully ignorant women of Pleasantville who think they've got it good, but have no idea what they are missing.

Yet, it is important to note that the most reputable studies on sexual satisfaction, including the University of Chicago survey, base their findings at least in part on objective measurements of sexual responsiveness (such as frequency of orgasms). In other words, most religious women are actually experiencing the "big O" far more frequently than, say, the average Cosmopolitan reader.

Interestingly, this greater sexual responsiveness does not appear to be connected to some sort of secret lovemaking technique, or to a preference among churchgoers for the "missionary" position. (Sorry, I couldn't resist.)

Saving Sex for Marriage

Instead, at least four other factors appear to be responsible for the link between spiritual commitment and sexual fulfillment. First, church ladies appear to benefit from their lack of sexual experience prior to marriage. That's right; several studies (including the

Redbook survey) show that women who engage in early sexual activity and those who have had multiple partners are less apt to express satisfaction with their sex lives than women who entered marriage with little or no sexual baggage.

Now, this does not mean that virgin brides typically experience total sexual satisfaction the first time they consummate their marriages, or that sexual baggage is impossible to unload. But it does mean that saving sex for marriage pays considerable dividends. As David Larson of the National

Institute for Healthcare Research reports, "Couples not involved before marriage and faithful during marriage appear to be more satisfied with their current sex life than those who were involved sexually before marriage."

Marital Commitment Enhances Sexual Fulfillment

Second, churchgoers appear to benefit from a commitment to marital fidelity and marital permanence. In fact, most major studies show a strong correlation between monogamous marriage and sexual satisfaction. And sex therapist Mary Ann Mayo says this connection is particularly strong for women, since "their sexual responsiveness is greatly affected by the relational context in which lovemaking takes place."

Mayo says that a mutual commitment to lifelong marriage not only makes it easier for women to "let themselves go" sexually, but it also tends to encourage constructive "pillow talk" about sex between spouses. Indeed, Redbook found that highly religious women are more likely than other women to communicate with their husbands about sex.

Lack of Sexual Anxiety

Third, church ladies typically enjoy far greater sexual freedom. A 1982 UCLA study found that sexual satisfaction is positively affected by "the absence of sexual anxiety." And part of the reason church ladies have more fun is that they don't have to worry about many of the fears commonly associated with sexual promiscuity, such as the fear of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, fear of rejection, fear of out-of-wedlock pregnancy or fear of getting caught.

Moreover, church ladies tend to be free from the guilt associated with violating one's own sexual standards -- a factor that a University of Connecticut study found to hinder sexual satisfaction among unmarried college students.

And church ladies seem to benefit from the belief that sexual pleasure is not the be-all and end-all of human existence, or even the key to a happy marriage. While sexual fulfillment certainly contributes to marital satisfaction, Mayo says that sexual enjoyment is more commonly a byproduct of a stable, happy union rather than the primary cause of it.

Several studies looking at the flip side of sexual satisfaction (sexual dysfunction) appear to bear this out. For example, a new study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found a strong correlation between marital discord and sexual dysfunction. And a 1993 study in the Journal of Sex Research found that losing one's job is more likely to trigger sexual dysfunction among unhappily married men than among happily married men.

Spiritual Commitment and Sexual Fulfillment

Finally, church ladies appear to benefit from the belief that God created sex. A 1993 research review by psychologist Timothy Kelly found that the frequency of church attendance positively affected sexual satisfaction above and beyond one's commitment to traditional sexual morality.

Similarly, the controversial 1993 Janus Report on Sexual Behavior found the nonreligious "have a tendency to focus on the more technical or physical performance aspects of sex, while the religious pay more attention to the mystical and symbolic dimensions of one's sexuality."

Put another way, churchgoers are apt to delight in the Edenesque pleasure of "being naked and not ashamed" of celebrating the "transcendent intimacy" found only in the marriage bed.

Interestingly, the Bible encourages such exultation. Not only does it contain an entire book ("The Song of Songs") that celebrates marital intimacy, but it also contains other passages that say things like, "Rejoice in the wife of your youth. May her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love" (Proverbs 5:18-19).

Now, these religious teachings are apt to come as a shock to those who believe God is a cosmic killjoy when it comes to sexuality. But if one wants to know why church ladies are having so much fun, my best guess is that their husbands are actually taking these biblical passages quite literally.

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