
Sexual Attitudes on SDA Campuses, Circa. 1978

by Leonore Johnson

Did the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s bypass Adventist youth, particularly those attending Adventist colleges? During the 1960s, no one surveyed the sexual patterns of Adventist students. However, at the end of the following decade when the revolution peaked, I conducted a major study of Adventist sexual patterns.

In 1978, data were gathered on 511 students on two Adventist college campuses and 1,189 students on four non-Adventist college campuses, one of which is operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).¹ I examined the students' sexual values and the relationship of these values to their dating/sexual behavior. By comparing Adventist (and Mormon) students to students on secular campuses, I provided a context in which Adventist sexual conservatism/ permissiveness could be evaluated.

In my survey I asked several questions: To what extent did the norms of the greater society filter into campus life? Did campus norms find their counterpart in the personal values and individual behavior of these students? What are the consequences of violating personal values? Can religious teachings negate secular sexual movements? In essence, I envisioned Adventist and Mormon students suspended between the sexual

conservatism on their campuses and the sexual permissiveness of the greater society.

In 1978 I found that although Adventist college students were less restrictive than some might desire, they were a conservative island in a sea of permissiveness. It would be instructive if a similar survey were conducted today, more than a decade later, to see if a different picture would emerge of sexual attitudes on Adventist campuses.

To control for the secular pressures that different regions exert on campus norms, my survey examined schools within three major regions—Intermountain, Midwest, and South. Since an Adventist sample was not available in the intermountain region, the Mormon students served as a proxy. This group was selected because the Mormons are similar to Seventh-day Adventists in their restrictive attitudes toward male and female sexual interaction.²

Within the Intermountain region Mormons were compared with non-Mormon students and in the Midwest and South, Adventist students were compared with non-Adventist students. On a continuum of sexual behavior, Adventist and Mormon students were considered to be at the restrictive end and nondenominational students at the liberal end.³ Since females are socialized to be more sexually conservative, males and females are presented separately in three of the figures accompanying this essay.

To help measure their commitment to religion, students were asked about five aspects of their religiosity: ritualistic (frequency of private prayer), behavioral (frequency of evangelizing), experiential (feelings about the importance of

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religion), and ideological (beliefs about God). In addition, all students were asked about the frequency of their church attendance.

The survey addressed two major issues. First, the assumption that Christian campuses served as a block against the effects of the sexual revolution; second, the contention that negative consequences have natural origins. If the survey results showed that Adventist and Mormon students were markedly more conservative than non-Adventist and non-Mormon students of the same region, then the sheltering effect of Christian campuses would be supported. Further, if the data showed that the majority of students, regardless of

region or school, experienced negative feelings following first premarital coitus, then the natural origins of negative consequences would receive support.

Some results of the survey can be seen in the accompanying tables. In general, Adventist youth internalized religious norms and resisted regional pressures—but not in all areas.

Adventist college students revealed restrictive attitudes toward premarital coitus, cohabitation, promiscuity, homosexuality, and pornography (Figure 1). Less than 30 percent of Adventist youth approved of premarital sexual intercourse. To some this may seem like a large proportion.

Figure 1

Selected Indices of Attitudinal Conservatism (1978: SDA and Public Colleges)

Percentage of Favorable Attitudes

	SDA Colleges*			Southern Public College		
	Males (N=217)	Females (N=294)	Total (N=511)**	Total (N=318)	Males (N=137)	Females (N=181)
Sexual Attitudes						
Premarital coitus	31%	28%	29%	85%	89%	82%
Premarital petting	87	81	83	98	98	98
Premarital kissing	99	98	98	98	99	98
Cohabitation	15	10	12	61	70	53
Promiscuity						
By males	12	8	10	61	77	49
By females	10	8	9	54	59	50
Homosexuality-Legalize	8	5	7	44	35	51
Rape-Women's fault	44	27	34	26	37	18
Pornography						
No prohibition	44	30	36	74	76	72
Abortion						
Never	14	10	12	15	21	10
Anytime	3	8	6	12	11	13
Rape/Incest	63	76	70	71	68	73
Mother's/Baby's health	75	83	79	75	70	78
Nonmarital pregnancy	18	21	19	24	19	28

*Represented are data from both Adventist colleges.

**Overall sample Ns are shown in the column headings. However, unless otherwise specified, in this and subsequent tables the statistics given are based upon numbers of respondents answering the respective questions. Nonresponses to the questions in this and subsequent tables varied from 0 to 10 percent. Nonresponses tended to be at the low end.

However, compare this percentage to the 85 percent of students in public colleges who approve of premarital sexual intercourse. Of those few Adventist students who favored premarital coitus, the majority approved of it only in a committed relationship (i.e., going steady or engagement).

A large majority of students in public colleges approved of two unmarried people who are in love living together and unlimited sexual partners for males and females. By contrast, less than 13 percent of Adventist youth favored cohabitation and promiscuity. Evidence of a double standard is reflected in the case of promiscuity, particularly among males and the southern public college.

Legalizing homosexuality did not sit well with either group. But here again, Adventists were strikingly more restrictive. Not even 10 percent of Adventist youth would legalize homosexuality; whereas a large minority of the public school students favored legalizing this lifestyle.

Women are most frequently the object of pornographic literature. Thus, it is understandable why a lower proportion of females than males agreed that it is best not to legally prohibit erotic and obscene literature and pictures. Male-female differences were greatest among Adventist students. Overall, a large minority of Adventist students and an overwhelming percentage (74 percent) of non-Adventist students were against prohibiting pornography. Again, Adventist students emerged markedly more restrictive.

Adventist verbal support for conservative morality broke down with regard to petting. (I distinguished petting from kissing, and found virtually no one who felt kissing was inappropriate before marriage.) The Adventist students were liberal in both their attitudes and behavior toward petting. At least three quarters of both midwestern and southern Adventist students had experienced petting. Eighty-one percent of the female and 87 percent of the male Adventist students and 98 percent of the non-Adventist students favored premarital petting.

The data show, then, that the Adventist students had internalized important church teachings on premarital coitus, cohabitation, promiscuity, homosexuality, and pornography. The survey also made clear that they had internalized

the liberal kissing and petting norms of the society at large.

The Adventist students' attitude on abortion and rape provided further indices to liberal-conservative morality as well as the responsibility placed on women. The abortion issue seemed particularly relevant. In the year of our survey, 60,000 people demonstrated against abortion in

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Washington, D.C. While the students were keenly aware of the church's position on premarital sex, probably few knew that the General Conference had taken a position on this issue. Yet the Adventist students' position differed little from those guidelines.⁴

Adventist and non-Adventist students shared similar views on abortion. However, Adventist students were slightly more conservative. When asked if abortion is justified, approximately 85 percent or more of all students believed that abortion is warranted under certain circumstances. Males consistently showed up as more conservative, regardless of religious affiliation. Only 6 percent of the Adventist students and 12 percent of public school students agreed that abortion is warranted anytime. A large majority approved of abortion for rape, incest, and the mother's health. However, less than a quarter believed that a pregnant woman without a prospect for marriage should terminate her pregnancy. Given that the General Conference supports abortion for unwed mothers under age 15, the students were relatively more conservative (although age was not considered in my survey). Further analysis showed that regardless of school, students scoring high on the five-item religiosity scale also scored high on disapproving abortion for out-of-wedlock pregnancies.

Our society assigns women the greater responsibility for sexual morality. Thus, it was not sur-

prising that a large minority of Adventist males (44 percent) and non-Adventist males (37 percent) believed that if a woman is raped it is her own fault. Within the midwestern sample the majority of Adventist males believed rape is the woman's fault. Interestingly, the largest male-female differentials (nearly 20 percent) occurred over this question. In the southern public school, the male-female differential was similar although female students were less likely than the Adventist students to blame the victim.

Figure 2 presents the percentage of those who prefer marrying a virgin alongside those who are themselves virgins. It appears that with regard to premarital coitus, attitudes of religious students are more resistant to secularization than is behavior.

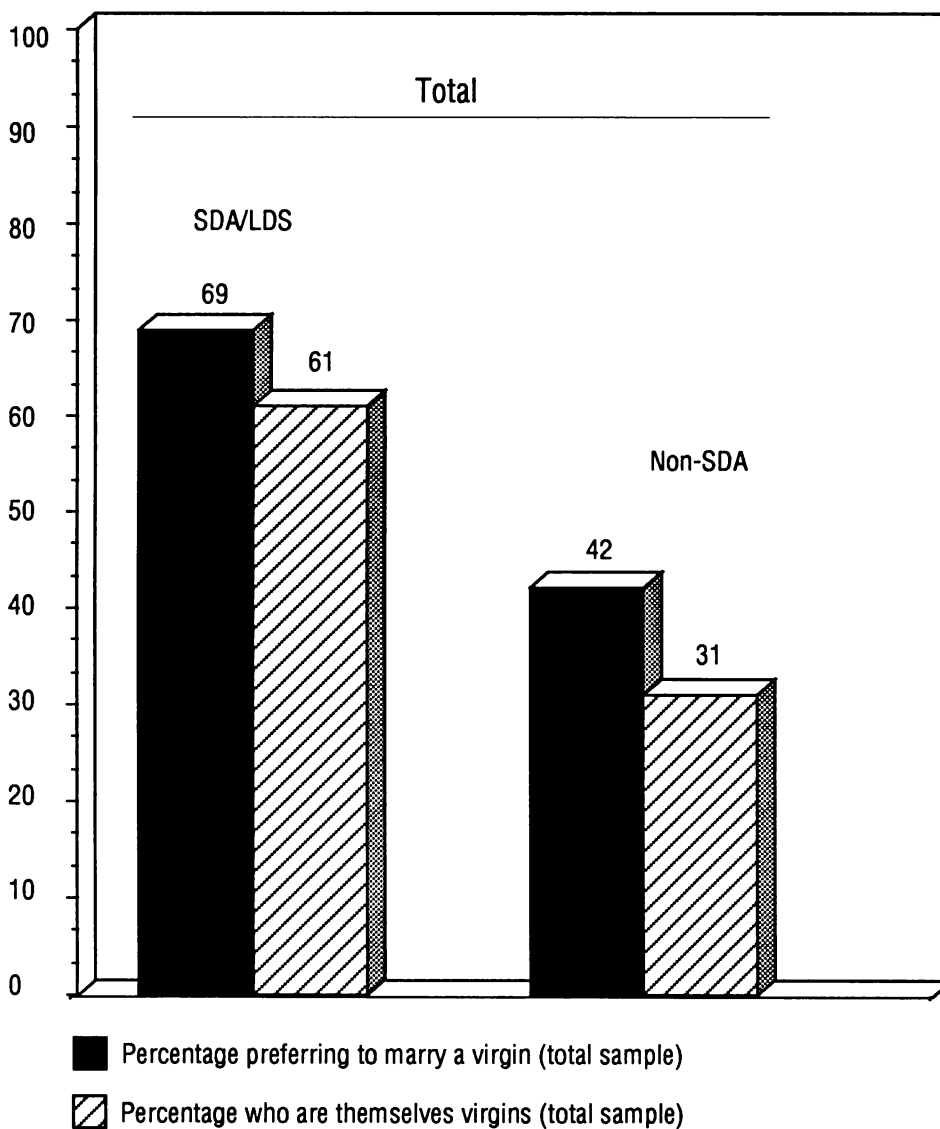
While the behavior of Adventist students appeared to run parallel to the norms of their region, religious affiliation still had a conservative effect; virginity was lowest among non-Adventist and non-Mormon students. A striking contrast in virginity rates appears when all religious students are compared with all non-denominational students (61 percent vs. 31 percent).

Actual virginity and preference for a virgin bride/groom also varied together, regardless of region or religious persuasion. In all cases actual virginity was lower than preference for marrying a virgin. Adventists and Mormons were far more likely to express their desire for a virgin mate than nondenominational students (69 vs. 42 percent). Yet, the discrepancy between their own virginity and that expected of their future mate was not markedly different from the public school students. Perhaps it is a universal tendency for human beings to be more demanding of others' behavior than of their own. This tendency toward a double standard was highest in the South and among males (gender differences are not shown in Figure 2).

Sexually experienced

Personal Virginity and Preference for Marrying a Virgin

Figure 2



males attempted to protect their interest in virgin brides. When asked about the identity of their first coital partner, 74 percent of Adventist males and 81 percent of non-Adventist males said they were uncommitted to that partner. Of the noncommittal Adventist males, exactly half had experienced coitus with a stranger. In general, the more committed the relationship the less likely the males were to engage in premarital coitus. The reverse was true of the sexually experienced females—63 percent of Adventist females and 77 percent of non-Adventist females stated their first coital partner was a steady boyfriend or their fiancé.

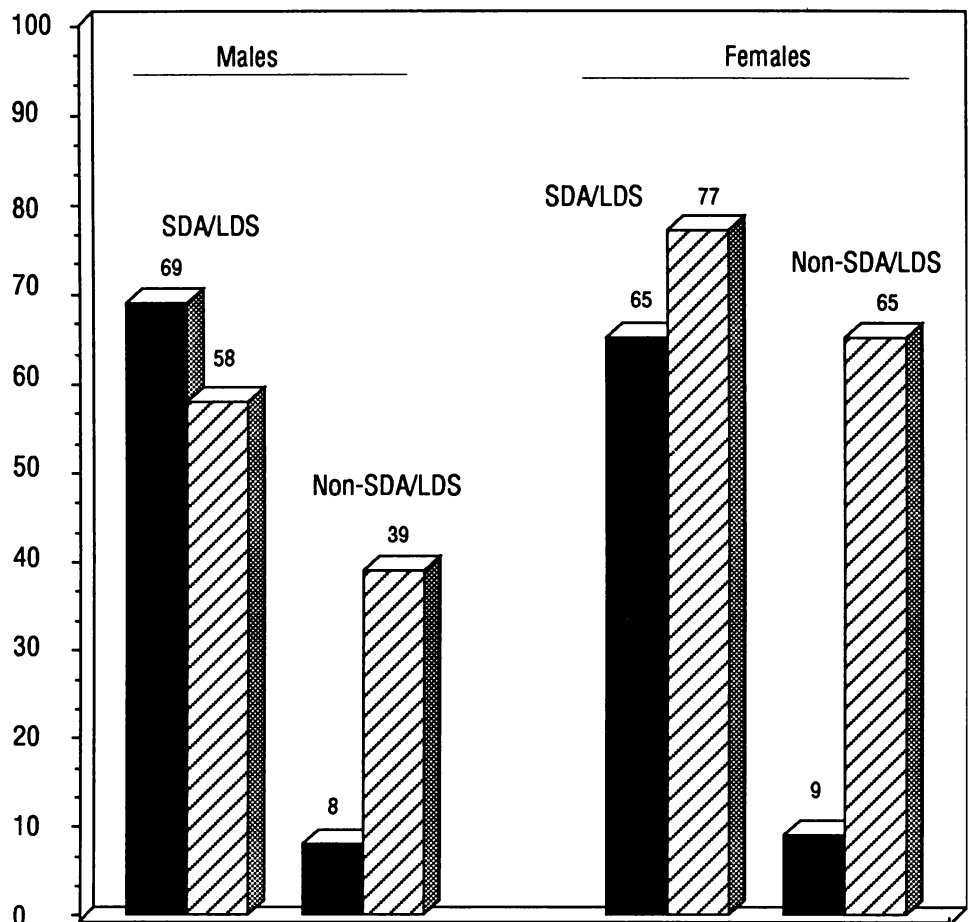
In sum, similar to non-Adventist males, Adventist male students consciously or unconsciously categorized women into those who are suitable for premarital sex and those who are not. In contrast, females, regardless of their religious affiliation, practiced permissiveness with affection.

A second measure of value-behavior discrepancy is presented in Figure 3. In this figure we see the percentage of those who favored chastity, but violated their own standard. As expected, value-behavior discrepancy diverged the most among students belonging to religious groups. In other words, Adventists and Mor-

mons, more frequently than students in public college, went against their own standards (males: 69 vs. 8 percent/females: 65 vs. 9 percent). Value-behavior discrepancy is nearly nonexistent among non-Mormon and non-Adventist students, perhaps because they have “no standards.”

Consequences of Nonmarital Coitus by Gender

Figure 3



■ Percentage of coitally experienced who disapprove of nonmarital coitus
 ▨ Percentage of negative reactions to first premarital experience*

*Percentages for the negative reactions reflect the sum of nine negative feeling responses: tenseness, remorse, guilt, disgust, fear of either others knowing, religious punishment, pregnancy, or disease. The other items included four positive or neutral feelings: happiness, relaxation, conquest, indifference (i.e., Negative/(Negative + Positive)).

Respondents were asked to check as many of these items as applied. They were also asked to circle the one that represented their strongest feelings on the day following their first premarital coital experience. The figures used to calculate percentages were total checks (rather than number of respondents), with circled items having double weight.

A number of church officials have implied that transgressing of sexual codes inevitably leads to negative feelings. In order to test the validity of their contention, the sexually experienced students were asked if they had any negative feelings after their first sexual encounter (see Figure 3). Negative feelings included guilt, disgust, remorse, tenseness, and fears of either religious punishment, pregnancy, disease, or others knowing. Marked differences in negative feelings occurred between the secular and Adventist/Mormon males. The differences between the female groups were slight. Nevertheless, as ex-

pected, the religious campuses were highest on negative consequences (males: 58 vs. 39 percent/females: 77 vs. 65 percent).

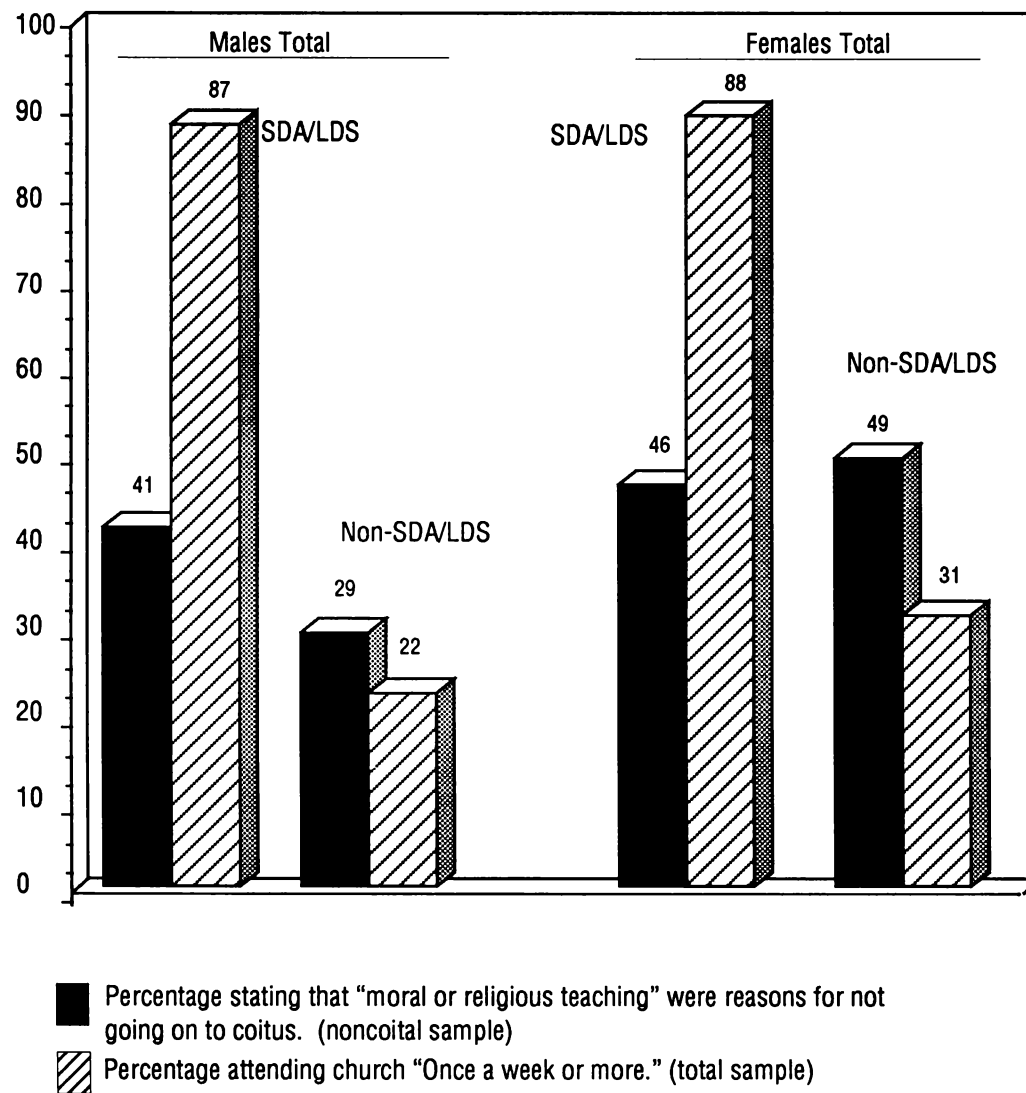
A clear pattern (consistent with earlier studies) is that a higher proportion of females than males had negative feelings following first premarital coitus. Society provides greater sexual latitude for male behavior than for that of females. Among the males, negative feelings ranged from 31 percent to 8 percent; while these feelings among females ranged from 60 percent to 84 percent. Among male students, Mormons more closely resembled the female reaction to first pre-

marital coital experience. Regardless of their gender, Mormons were most likely to experience negative feelings following their first experience of premarital sex. Apparently, the teachings of Mormonism produce more guilt and fear than those of Adventism.

It appears that negative feelings following first premarital coitus are not the natural consequences of violating God's law; but rather a function of societal normative pressures and personal values. Those most affected by negative outcomes are those who violate their own values, especially if the violation occurs in conservative regions.

The Breaking Effect of Religion

Figure 4



The noncoital group was asked to specify why they did not have sexual intercourse before marriage (see Figure 4). Adventists and Mormons were more likely than their secular counterparts to state that their behavior was controlled by religious or moral teachings. (See Figure 4).

Again, the group having the highest proportion claiming religious motivation for abstinence were the Mormons. In fact, Mormon males had the highest percentage (albeit only one percentage point over Mormon females). While breaking the law of chastity has penalties regardless of gender, the Mormon male has more to lose than both Mormon females and Adventists. Unlike Mormon females, every worthy male over age 11 is ordained to a level of priesthood and assumes official responsibilities. Unworthiness incurred through breaking the law of chastity means not merely losing church membership but an official role. The values taught by the church are reinforced through keeping the male religiously active, invested, and feeling necessary for the sacred functions of his church. It is not surprising that Mormon males more often cite religious motivation for abstaining.⁵

A second indicator of the effect of religion is

church attendance (see Figure 4). Within each region church attendance was highest among those who identify themselves as being sexually conservative. With the exception of the Mormons, church attendance was highest among females. Among the various regions, the Bible belt (South) emerged with the highest church attenders (exception, non-Adventist males).

Students in denominational schools were strikingly higher on the church attendance scale than those who were in nondenominational schools (males: 87 vs. 22 percent/females: 88 vs. 31 percent). However, this finding is distorted by the church attendance requirement of these Adventist colleges. Thus, the religiosity scale cited earlier was used to determine, among Adventist students, the relationship between degree of religiosity and level of coital approval. According to either frequency of church attendance or the religiosity scale, greater religiosity of Adventist (as well as non-Adventist southern students) in this survey did relate to both sexual attitudes and behavior.

In 1978, the more committed Adventist students were the more restrictive in their sexual values and to a lesser extent their sexual practice. Would the same be true in 1989?

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Dr. Harold T. Christensen gathered the data on the Intermountain region and the non-SDA within the Midwest. Since the raw data were not available to the present author, all comparisons made to these data are based on Christensen's 1981 report, "The Persistence of Chastity: A Built-In Resistance Within Mormon Culture to Secular Trends," *Sunstone* 7: 2 (March-April 1981).

Both Christensen's and my sample were gathered during the 1978-1979 school year. Of the 511 Adventist youth, 301 (128 male/173 females) were from a southern Adventist college and 210 (89 males/121 females) attended a mid-western Adventist college. The non-Adventist sample consisted of 313 (132 males/181 females) southern students and 545 (225 males/320 females) students from the Midwest. These students were selected from state colleges located near the Adventist schools. Concurrently, 242 (60 males/182 females) Mormons and 84 (32 males/50 females) non-Mormons were selected from a college in the inter-

mountain Mormon region. The Adventist and non-Adventist southern sample were similar in background characteristics (e.g., social class, educational goals, age). They differed on one major factor, religion and religiosity. Similar comparative background information was not available on the students from the other regions.

2. Similar to Seventh-day Adventists, the Latter-day Saints view unchastity as a sin. They invoke negative sanctions ranging from formal verbal reprimanding to expulsion from school or disfellowship from the church congregation. Mormons provide an additional incentive for conformity. Those violating the chastity law may be denied a "recommend" for entrance into one of the sacred temples, precluding the highly valued goal of "eternal marriage" and other spiritual privileges. While repentance can restore church membership in both churches, violation of the law of chastity is not taken lightly. *Ibid.*

3. It was assumed that if the regions were placed on a

restrictive-permissive sexual continuum the Intermountain culture would appear most restrictive, the Southern most permissive, and the Midwestern region would fall into the intermediate position. This assumption was based on the varying historical profile of each region. The intermountain region has been heavily influenced by the conservative sexual teachings of the Mormon church. Mormons were the first white settlers in this area. Today they represent the majority of the intermountain population. The South's relatively more liberal position is thought to result from its rural tradition of sexual permissiveness, particularly for males. In line with the English code laws, the double sexual

standard (i. e., permissiveness for males only) characterized the early colonial period and still has a great influence on contemporary sexual patterns. The South's Bible Belt reputation does not appear to weaken the tendency toward adhering to the double sexual standard. The midwestern states, commonly referred to as Middle America, do not share the South's deep rural roots; nor are they heavily influenced by a conservative religion. Thus, they warranted an intermediate position on the sexual continuum.

4. Gerald Winslow, "Adventists and Abortion: A Principled Approach," *Spectrum*, 12: 2 (1981), pp. 6-17.

5. Christensen, p. 13.