Chapter 3
The Organic System: Biology, Religion and the Family Orientation

This chapter is devoted to the biological base of the family in general and sexuality in particular. Sexuality is to be seen especially linked to the organic system and is, in part, the link to the reproduction of families and, indeed, societies. In spite of what Laumann, Michael, Gagnon, and Michaels (1994a) aver, the research linking sexuality to biology is well founded.

The focus here is to outline this organic system as part of the Neo-Functionalist theory of the link between religion and the family. As will become clear in the following chapter, there are substantial linkages to other systems as well as the many dimensions of religion.

As is well known in family studies, marital quality has been well researched (Glenn, 1990; Spanier and Lewis, 1980). Less frequently has religion and marital quality had the same. This has changed recently with several studies devoted to the linkage (see Albrecht, 1979; Bahr & Chadwick, 1985; Booth, Johnson, Branahan, & Sica, 1995; Ellison, 1991; Glenn & Supancic, 1984; Pollner, 1989; Wilson & Filsinger, 1986). A common consensus is that there is a weak link between marital quality and religion. Is it also true that there is a weak link between religion and sexuality? This is the primary theme of this chapter.

The chapter will move on several fronts. First of all, a rationale will be presented that lays the basis of why there should be expected to be a linkage between religion and sexuality in human experience. Secondly, an extended history of the linkage in the Western world will further lay the ground work for a reason for the connection. Then, within that historical review, empirical research will be outlined to see what kind of questions have been asked and what we currently know about the connection.

The Basic Rationale of the Link Between Religion and Sexuality

A variety of authors of religious studies present an historical outline of pre-historical, historical and universal religions. An important figure is Joseph Campbell who has dedicated much of his scholarship to mythology. In his study of primitive and occidental religions, he presents four functions of religion, one of which is...
sociological that includes social support, social control and socialization. Campbell (1964, 1987) focuses on the family, with inherent sexuality overtones, as the key socialization function of myth.

He outlines how important are “rites of passage” for the integration of the individual into the social group. Religion is a vital mechanism for this integration. The puberty rites of passages that carry with them many sexual themes, are important rituals that link the child with both the family to the social group. Thus, in this way, family, sexuality, and religion are connected substantially in most primitive religions.

A second source in religious studies comes from a comparative religion scholar, Parrinder (1980). In this text, he outlines the various ways religions view human sexuality. To accent the importance of investigating the linkage between religion and sexuality, he writes:

The meeting of the great religious traditions of the world may bring help as well as challenge. It is sometimes asked what we can learn from another religion, and one factor is the understanding of sex. The ideal monogamy and love of Christianity, the world-affirmation of Judaism and Islam, the delight in sensual intercourse of classical Hinduism, the correlation of female and male in Chinese traditions, all these may contribute to new sexual ethics and tempered by each other they could mark a real advance. . . . But by study of the relations of sex with the ideals of religions, and purgation of practices degrading to individuals, new and positive appreciation of the values of sex and love may be evolved (1980:247–248).

Another source for the connection between religion and sexuality emerges from sociobiology. Reynolds and Tanner (1995) offer us some reflections on the relationship.

They start off with a provocative question framed as: how does membership of a religious group affect individuals’ chances of survival and reproduction? In response, they acknowledge that cultures (within which religions are subsumed), are largely independent of genetic causal factors. However, they are at an interface with nature and it is cultures that determine how biologically successful, in terms of survival and reproduction, human groups and individuals will be. This is where religion comes in. In terms of the social control of religion, morality is at the core of what religion means. There are many moral rules that command and prohibit, allow and disallow, enforce and give freedom to how successful humans survive and reproduce. The biological basis of religion, then, is in how well the social construction of culture contributes to the success of the human species.

The affinity of religion to the family clusters about the second most important biological need of any species (including the human), reproduction. Reynolds and Turner note that religions are very concerned about matters that are, primarily, biological—sex, reproduction, contraception, abortion, birth, and child-rearing. Successful survival of the human species is at stake. As we saw with Campbell’s outline of the sociological nature of myth, so is it with a biological basis for religions being intricately involved with the human life cycle from conception through to death.