



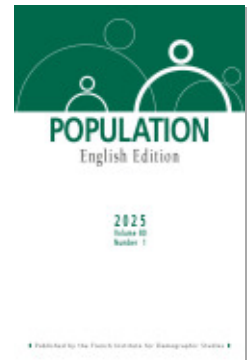
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Au commencement était le couple. Sexualité, amour et religion chez les jeunes by Marion Maudet (review)

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Marion Maudet. 2024. *Au commencement était le couple. Sexualité, amour et religion chez les jeunes* [In the beginning was the couple: Young people and sexuality, love, and religion]. PUF. 272 pages.

Marion Maudet's book, based on her PhD thesis in sociology, explores the interactions between sexuality and religion in a predominantly heterosexual population. Through the analysis of a series of quantitative surveys as well as 25 interviews with Catholics and Muslims, she sheds light on believers' sexual trajectories and ordinary experiences of sexuality. Maudet shows that far from representing two contradictory spheres, sexuality and religion are not simply juxtaposed, but in constant interrelation. Along the way, she explores how practices have been structured by the privatization and individualization of religious and sexual norms, and how, through continuous bricolage, the two spheres adjust to one another.

In the first chapter, Maudet surveys how the religious regulation of sexuality has changed since the 1960s. To do this, she combines an analysis of religious doctrines on sexuality and their interpretations with an examination of statistical data on the evolving behaviours of believers. She shows, first, that while Catholic and Muslim institutions have produced discourses that converge to some extent—restricting sexuality to the heterosexual, conjugal, and procreative—the interpretation and legitimacy of those discourses vary. The minority position of Islam in France, in both numerical and symbolic terms, has prevented the formation of discourse that is coherent and recognized, even among Muslims (pp. 51–52). In contrast, the long-dominant position of the Catholic Church in French society has allowed it to continue to assert an 'everyday authority over the intimate sphere' (p. 46). The second part of the chapter, devoted exclusively to Catholics, is based on surveys conducted in different historical contexts (the 1970s, 1990s, and 2000s). Here, Maudet shows that while believers' attitudes have continued to be structured by a distinctive normative core, their sexual practices have converged with those of non-religious individuals (with the exception of women's age at sexual debut, which is later among Catholics) (p. 64). Furthermore, that normative core has been 'reconfigured' (p. 67): the condemnation of non-procreative sexuality has been progressively abandoned in favour of an emphasis on fidelity and on experiences of sexuality within the married, heterosexual couple.

In the second chapter, Maudet examines the construction of religious masculinities and femininities. She shows that there are few differences in religious femininity between Muslim and Catholic women, with both favouring sexuality within marriage. However, norms of modesty among Muslim women 'constitute...a religious demand that limits discourse on sexuality' (p. 84), whereas Catholic norms in the context value sexuality as both activity and discourse, exclusively within the married couple. The modes of sexual initiation also vary between the two groups. Some Catholic women have sexual experiences before marriage (which they go on to denigrate); the more

intense control exercised over Muslim women's sexuality, in contrast, strongly limits their experience of sexuality in youth. Among Muslim women participants aged 18–35, nearly a third had not yet had sexual intercourse (vs. 6% of Catholic women and 4% of non-religious women). Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of Muslim women considered their first sexual partner their current or future spouse (vs. 27% of Catholic women) (p. 85). However, while most young Muslim women view the married couple as the only possible horizon for intimate relationships, some distance themselves from it to some extent, delaying cohabitation and marriage, particularly in contexts of upward mobility. On the male side, Catholic men tend to express an ethic of moderation, whereas Muslim men tend to value a degree of sexual experimentation. Among upper-class Catholics, 'sexual self-control may constitute a means of distinction...from other men, from the working classes, but also from "left-wing" Catholics' (p. 105). In this spirit, some distance themselves from their desires, choosing to no longer carry condoms with them in order to avoid temptation. Among Muslim men, recreational and non-marital experiences of sexuality are perceived as a strategy to compensate for racial and geographical stigma. Their adoption of a masculinity focused on responsibility tends to come later, after a long transition towards adulthood, marked by a precarity of status.

In the third chapter, Maudet analyses the dynamics of homogamy. Religious homogamy is the norm, regardless of faith. But the importance of religion as a criterion for choosing a spouse varies depending on gender and class. Men see marrying a woman of the same religion above all as a way to guarantee their status as a respectable husband and father, on the basis of the morality of their spouse (p. 119). For women, homogamy is driven by logics of both religion and class, particularly for upper-class Catholics (p. 123). For women in this last group, religion operates as a form of covert class selection, ensuring social reproduction. Finally, the chapter raises two points concerning situations of religious heterogamy. First, among Muslims, such unions are more common in the upper classes, whereas among Catholics they are seen mainly in the middle class, as the Catholic bourgeoisie remains socially closed (p. 136). Secondly, women are more likely than men to use marriage to legitimate their deviation from the norm of homogamy (p. 134). The failure to propose an explanation for the higher levels of homogamy among Muslims highlighted by the statistical analyses (p. 118) is a regrettable omission.

In the fourth chapter, Maudet proposes to set aside the purely repressive vision of the relationship between religion and sexuality, exploring practices through which the religious is eroticized (p. 149). Catholics' relationship to sexuality is strongly anchored in discourses of confession and of confiding in one's partner. They treat talking about sexuality as an integral part of their sexual practices, in particular to manage needs or desires. Catholics distance themselves from the carnal dimension of sexuality, reflecting a rejection of its

autonomization. For them, sexuality is ‘made’ by talking about it, and thereby constructing a Catholic marriage. Maudet writes that ‘it is the sharing [of sexuality] within the couple...that gives [it] its meaning’ (p. 158). In this context, certain religious practices, such as shared prayer in the marital bed, favour a ‘strong intimacy’ that supports the expression of an acceptable form of sexuality (p. 168). The chapter presents little information on scripts and meanings of sexuality among Muslims. The requirement of a discursive articulation of sexuality is less present, although some of the Muslim respondents spoke of the strong links between sexuality and religion. One, for example, said that ‘giving in to the call of sexual desire is partly compensated by the fact of maintaining the fast’ (p. 155). More broadly, although they view the married couple as the context for a legitimate sexuality, the ways in which conjugality, as an idea or a moral value, influences their sexual scripts remains uncertain (pp. 161–162).

The final chapter focuses on the opinions of believers with regard to heteronormativity. Having highlighted the differentiation of the attitudes of believers and the non-religious, in particular among men (p. 180), Maudet explores the heterogeneity of positions among believers. To do this, she uses an agglomerative hierarchical clustering procedure with data from all individuals aged 18–35, selecting variables concerning their relationships to sexuality, the norm of equality, homosexuality, and procreation. This allows her to identify three groups (p. 188): one associated with an ‘intransigent heteronormativity’ (p. 194); another, contrasting group with a ‘distanced heteronormativity’ (p. 200); and finally, in between the two, a group with a ‘selective heteronormativity’ (p. 206). Committed Catholics and Muslims are over-represented among the intransigently heteronormative, whereas ‘indifferent’ Catholics tend to be selectively heteronormative (p. 189). The qualitative interviews shed light on the meaning of these different relationships to heteronormativity and the combined importance of racialization and class in the formation of these attitudes. However, the chapter’s theoretical ambition, to construct a space of heteronormativity (p. 185), is only partly realized. The clustering analysis and the resulting division into three groups yields not so much a multidimensional space as a single scale of heteronormativity.

Maudet offers a stimulating analysis of the links between sexuality and religion, without neglecting the combined effect of other social factors on sexual behaviour. Among both Catholics and Muslims, religion reinforces the commitment to inscribing sexuality in the marital relationship, and the morality of the couple depends predominantly on that of the woman. Among Muslims, sexuality is oriented predominantly towards the construction of a respectable social status, whereas among Catholics it is aimed at maintaining a coherent and distinctive identity and lifestyle. However, the apparently less marked tendency among Muslims to inscribe their practices in a coherent lifestyle may be an effect of the study, which offers little information on their

experiences of sexuality. Conscious of the dated character of some of the statistical surveys that she draws on, Maudet calls for ongoing research to understand how recent political mobilizations (the *Manif pour tous* movement against same-sex marriage, the #MeToo moment, the increasing visibility of sexual violence in the Church) have been reconfiguring the links between religion and sexuality.

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