

# Pentecostal Ethos and Sexuality among Youth in Greater Recife, Brazil

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## Introduction

How does one live in “this world” without sharing its values and practices, especially those related to sexual morals? This question has represented a challenge for the leaders and members of the *Assembly of God church*, considering that their identity is linked to a certain stereotype of “believer.” To continue following the old dictates or change and adapt to the “new times” – what and how much to change – is very much under debate in this context, and no consensus has been reached. Although youths do not have power to make decisions within the hierarchy that creates and changes the denomination’s norms, they do have a significant role in discussions, and in developing an understanding of the church’s current processes. Throughout this article, we will try to demonstrate the way that youth who frequent the *Assembly of God church* think about and experience sexuality.

Themes related to sexuality have strong repercussions within Evangelical groups, notably Pentecostal ones. Sex is spoken of frequently, particularly sexual morals. Beginning with personal appearance, there is significant concern with the ordinance and discipline of sexuality, which composes an important part of the ethos of the denomination. This concern, which is not recent, seems to have intensified of late, given the rapid transformation of customs with repercussions mainly among youth.

The beginning of the appearance of neo-Pentecostal churches that have a more flexible stance in relation to certain values and practices, has created an expectation of change and a reform of positions of the *Assembly of God church*, notably among better-educated and higher-income believers. On the contrary, the church’s “traditional” public (with lower income and

education), prefers a stricter assertion of the fundamentalist identity, based on the Assembly of God's doctrine of "uses and customs"<sup>1</sup>.

The current hegemony of "modern values" is undeniable in the urban-industrial West. The repercussions are found in an intensification of individual autonomy and the weakening of moral controls. This is reflected in a growing number of individuals abandoning the precepts of traditional churches in reference to contraception, homosexuality and extramarital relations, or in the acceptance that others have behavior different from what their religious community defends (BERGER, & LUCKMANN, 2004; HERVIEU LEGIER, 1990, 2005; BIRMAN, 2001, 2007; NOVAES, 2004, 2005).

Nevertheless, the modern cultural logic cannot be generalized for all social segments. This is seen in the persistence and even the rise of groups that defend standards that are contrary to the social order (DUARTE, 2005, 2006; HEIBORN, 1999, 2006). These groups and individuals, except in extreme cases, are not isolated from the influence of the predominant culture, with which they interact daily, even though they desire and struggle to be different.

Thus, on one hand, it is important to recognize impediments to an individualist ideology becoming universal, especially in terms of notions related to the sexuality of men and women. On the other hand, it is not possible to speak of tradition and modernity, individualism and holism in a stagnant manner, especially in urban-industrial contexts, except in the perspective of learning about modes of individual and group interconnection, interdependence, resistance and assertion, along an imaginary continuum between "the traditional" and "the modern" (DUARTE, 2005, MONTEIRO, 1999).

This article addresses the perspective of specific forms of thinking and living a romantic and sexual life among youth in the Assembly of God church, considering a belonging to the church as a choice for distinction, which is reflected in the way the body is seen, differentiating between sexual

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1 The Assembly of God doctrine of "uses and customs" is a set of norms concerning personal appearance and behavior, which serve to guide believers' actions in various spheres of life. Its formalization at the church's General Convention has changed over time, with its interpretation a target of internal controversies and ambiguities. Its original fundamentalist version links behavior to Biblical precepts and has prevailed with adaptations, among the less educated, lower economic classes, generally situated in congregations in the urban periphery. Meanwhile, a growing group with higher education and income, evokes a version that sees the Biblical text in relative terms as well as much of present day life styles inspired in it, while seeking, however, to safeguard the "historical Pentecostal" identity of the Assembly of God (SILVA, 2003; ALVES, 2009).

practices considered “normal” and transgressive – including normalizing the former and making “impossible” the latter. These questions are discussed, by focusing on the way in which amorous bonds are thought about and experienced, in particular, distinguishing concepts concerning virginity (of the young women) and homosexuality, which are central to the definition of this ethos.

For the purpose of analysis, we have considered the extent of sexuality less as a “natural,” “universal” or innate function, but rather in a social context, which guides the experience and the expression of desire, emotions, conduct and corporal practices. The orienting concepts are related to social representations that are deeply rooted in the form of conceiving society in a given time and place (HEILBORN, 1999, 2006; VANCE, 1995; WEEKS, 1985; GAGNON E SIMON, 1973; GAGNON, 2006; BOZON, 2004).

We use the concept of sexual rules, which requires understanding the multiple and different socializations that a person experiences. These include the place of the family, the school and access to various forms of communication, networks of friendship and neighborhood, among others (HEILBORN, 2006; GAGNON, 2006). In the case of Assembly of God youths, religion represents a distinction that cannot be seen in isolation, and which specifies the manner in which sex is thought of and experienced.

These issues were approached through field research conducted in Recife, PE, in 2006 and 2007. We conducted participative observation of rituals, ceremonies and informal and leisure moments, mainly among Assembly of God youth, and semi-structured interviews with young men and women. The 16 people interviewed, with only one exception (a young ex-follower), were active participants in their congregations. We interviewed four adults (two were former members of the church at the time). These interlocutors had a variety of profiles in relation to income and education, and came from central and peripheral neighborhoods of the metropolitan region.<sup>2</sup>

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2 The youths were between the ages of 15 and 19, considering differences between “older youths” (from 20 to 29) and “younger youths” (from 15 to 20). We thus considered, emic criteria guided by the church’s [The National Youth Council]. The adults were from 30 to 50 years old, roughly representing the “parental generation,” although none of them were actually a parent of a young interlocutor. Among them there was a heterogeneity in location, income and education, with the latter being superior to the public that frequents the church (BRASIL, 2001).

## 1. The Assembly of God Ethos and sexuality among youths

The Assembly of God, one of the first Pentecostal denominations established in Brazil<sup>3</sup> at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was founded in Pará State by two Swedish missionaries who had come from the United States after breaking off from the Baptist church in that country in a disagreement with leaders about speaking in tongues as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, repeating a general division in the United States at that time (FRESTON, 1994). For FRESTON (1994), the mentality of the Assembly of God church is characterized by its dual origin: from the perspective of the outcast culture of its Swedish founders, and that of the patriarchal and pre-industrial society of Brazil's North and Northeast from the 1930s to 1960s.

From its beginnings, the Assembly of God church frightened the Catholic and Evangelical elite because of its ability to multiply its membership and penetrate communities. Its informality reached the “common folks” who dressed in the manner of the Swedish missionaries: suits for men, long dresses for women. In these churches, the sobriety of the followers' clothing contrasted with the impetuous vocalization of the prayers in foreign tongues, “a mix of order and mystical intensity, incomprehensible to many” (MAFRA, 2001, p.30).

The Assembly of God is now Brazil's largest Evangelical church, and competes with the neo-Pentecostal churches (FRESTON, 1994; MARIANO, 1999, 2004) for followers. The conversion of people from the middle class has created pressure for change in the organization. The church structure is oligarchic and based on the work of Evangelists and pastors who have either no formal training or brief theological instruction – and on norms relative to the “use and customs” of the faithful.

The denomination, which is considered to be one of the strictest in relation to demands about the followers' appearance and behavior, is undergoing a crisis, perhaps being the denomination encountering the greatest conflict between the identity it has constructed and its redefinition. Conformity to the norms related to sexuality defended by the denomination, in turn, represents an essential indication of belonging.

For the youth inserted in this context, a peculiar configuration is created of the experience of the realm of romance and sex, without a lack of

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3 The other, founded in the previous year, is the Christian Congregation of Brazil, which although Pentecostal, presents administrative and organizational and doctrinal characteristics, that make it quite distinct from Assembly of God practices (FRESTON, 1994).

consideration for the place of social markers and institutions in which they circulate, as youth inserted in this “world,” living the vicissitudes of a given time and generation. From this perspective, sexuality is experienced in a specific form, exacerbating the meaning of fantasy and even the most subtle physical contacts. Thus, a look, a touch, a slight closeness or grazing of bodies against each other, can contain a strong erotic meaning.

The subjects with higher education tend to place the church and its precepts in contrast with individualistic and utilitarian relations and visions found in society today.<sup>4</sup> “Subjectivism” and “personal choices” stand out in accord with the dictates of the church (DUARTE, 2005).

Something positive in the church is that it does not cultivate discourse about the physical, which I find to be a plus when getting to know another person in another way. This thing about just the body is strong in society, the church speaks about the value of sentiments, affection, the relationship as a whole, for those who understand it like this. Now, for those who understand it as involving can and cannot, that’s another thing (Carmen, 26, graduate student).

In contrast, the subjects with less education and income tend to emphasize the specificity of the Assembly of God, which more than other denominations, embodies the correct model to “be a believer,” which is the point that they look for or that keeps them in this church.

Age differences also create particularities. In contrasting the “younger youths” from the “older youths,” greater tolerance is noted for the former concerning the possibilities of experimentation, and lesser sanctions for possible mistakes committed. Location is also important – whether the subject belongs to a “central” or “peripheral”<sup>5</sup> congregation, with views and possibilities for control depending on this distinction. If there is less tolerance for the “older youths,” we found, in contrast, mainly among those of higher

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4 It is interesting to observe, mainly in the statement by Carmen a criticism of the pressures from individualism that she sees as detrimental to “more human” relations; an intellectual bias that is similar to that found in the Social Sciences and in certain social spheres, in a clear incorporation, in its own way, of certain presumptions related to a critique of modernity (A la BAUMAN, 2004).

5 The central or inner-city churches are generally larger and more sumptuous temples, frequented by the middle class, and are usually the co-called “headquarter churches” of the state and situated in each sub-division of the state, in various regions. In these central churches, in contrast with the “neighborhood churches” found in the poor urban peripheries, greater flexibility tends to be observed in the demands on the members’ habits and customs.

income and education, a perspective of greater autonomy corresponding in large measure to having had the opportunity to circulate in various fields (BRANDÃO and ALTMANN, 2005).

Gender is an element that marks distinct connotations and possibilities for romantic involvement and sexual behavior (HEILBORN, 1999, 2006), shaping the way romance and sexual activity is seen and experienced. If sexual morality is shown to be central in determining what characterizes a “believer’s” way of life, feminine sexuality is the epicenter of this construction. The relative value of the transgressions, the punishments and the control exerted by the church and the family, have different connotations for a young man or a young woman.

In reference to the Pentecostals, Machado (1997a, 2005), has discussed that in practice the church’s norms overlap with traditional views attributable to a Brazilian system of gender (PARKER, 1994). These, in turn, combine with notions and forms of experiencing sexuality found in these “new times” as we demonstrate below, as we present the way in which romantic connections are thought of and the possible conflicts and implications for the young people in this context. We will begin with the practice of “*ficar*.” [This is roughly equivalent to what is known as “hooking-up.” The practice, and any differences with the English term that will be used here, will be explained below - Translators note].

### **1.1 Hooking-up among Assembly of God youth**

Hooking-up is a common practice among youths today. According to Chaves, (2001) the term *ficar* first appeared in Brazil in the 1980s and although it has a social place, its boundaries are not well marked. It is not assimilated by all and is not socially accepted or legitimated as a romantic connection. If this were to occur, it would cause the term to lose its sense of representing a kind of escape, or of being an option to a formal relationship.

This type of relationship can only find place in a society formed by individuals who think of themselves as autonomous and unique, who value spontaneity, sexual freedom and aggressiveness, inner truth, and desire. In turn, it is necessary to consider distinctions and nuances, and the way in which principles of hierarchy and relationship can also come together in the analysis of *ficar* (CHAVES, 2001, LONGHI, 2007).

Assembly of God youth speak of hooking-up with relative naturalness, attributing it to the “younger youths” or referring to something they did when they were younger or not yet converted. The interlocutors take a position against it as a form of romantic involvement, even though most recognize its practice, especially the young men.

F – Does hooking-up mean kissing, hugging, things like that? D- Normally the hooking-up that the kids comment about is to be together quickly and includes sexual relations, but the church doesn't accept this. F – In the church is it like this too? D – No, it's just kissing, hugging, staying in a hidden place, that's all. I don't accept hooking-up, I agree with dating, getting engaged and getting married. There is no commitment with hooking-up.... Kids that like to hook-up have no commitment with the church.... F – Have you ever hooked-up? D – Yes, I did with a girl and almost... it was close. (Davi, 22 years old)

The young women, more than the men, show they feel embarrassed, guilty and regret in association with hooking-up. See the following conversation in which the style and tone denote a kind of “confession.”

R – There was one time that I went on a church trip and another time was in school. F – With a boy from school? R – Yes. But it was, like, weird because it's something that we weren't going to make a commitment; it's just for the moment. F – And you were aware that it was just for the moment? R – Yes, but it was more for the adventure, so I did it, but afterwards I was sorry because when it was over it was like: time passes, then it cools off, but it's not the same thing. F – Were they both friends? R – Yes. The other wasn't really, but travelled. But this one was a friend, it got weird. F – In the case of hooking-up, would that be kisses, stuff like that? R – It's foolishness! (Rosa, 20).

This form of expression can be related to the performance demanded of the young women, who still make “mistakes” (and even if there is a relapse), must present them in a negative way to be coherent with the image expected of them, one that is appropriate for a young “believer.”<sup>6</sup> Among the young men, although more unusual, regret or hesitation is noted as in the following conversation with Davi, who hooked-up with a “non-believer young woman,” something eminently dangerous and embarrassing.

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6 Heibron (1999) also learned of this factor, not related directly to religion.

What kept you from going beyond the caresses? It's difficult to explain, but I think it was the concern for my spiritual life that warned me it wouldn't work out. I would end up making a single mother, who I would not marry or would not be interested in marrying. And then I'd have an enormous responsibility to take care of a child (Davi, 22).

The favored places for hooking-up are: on trips young people take to other churches, at school, on the way between school and the church or home, at the "gospel shows"<sup>7</sup> and at other evangelical events. As for the trips, it is important to note that interaction among various congregations is a church tradition (HOFFNAGEL, 1978; SILVA, 2003), providing an important form of socializing and leisure for its members, especially at suburban congregations where there are few of the leisure activities common to the middle class. The interchange promotes greater integration, and the creation and continuity of social networks, favoring the occurrence of romantic encounters and marriage commitments. Today it also encourages hooking-up among youths.

When the hooking-up is with someone from the local religious community, besides a probable daily embarrassment, more apprehensible for the young women, there is also a greater chance of receiving a warning or an insistence that they court more formally. This frightens mainly the younger men who say they cannot date to get married, as determined by the norms ordained by the church. If one hooks-up within a group of youngsters from the church, it is important to build a network of solidarity that they can count on to "keep secrets" (GOMES and NATIVIDADE, 2006). To permit this, relations of confidentiality and complicity among friends of the same age (in this case almost always adolescents), are seen as beneficial.

"Mixed" relationships (with non-believers, even those that are socially legitimate, such as dating or marriage), are not normally approved of within the denomination. Nevertheless, according to various studies (MACHADO, 1997a, 2005; MATOS, 2007; COUTO, 2001), the perspective of the woman who brings the family to Christ makes up part of the Pentecostal and Assembly reality and ideal. Hooking-up in school has a good chance of being associated with a "non-believer." This institution represents a kind of space of freedom from the ties of the church, as compared with the local community, the

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7 Shows of Evangelical singers or musical groups held in theaters, clubs or other leisure spaces in general, barred by leaders of the local Assembly of God churches.



Evangelical community and the family, which at times go together, particularly in the case of a youth in an Evangelical family.

Church leaders almost never encourage attendance of “gospel shows,” and try to keep young people from attending them.<sup>8</sup> Evidently many do not obey, mainly the “younger youths” and the “less committed.” In general, the interlocutors for this study said they have been to these shows and do not like what they see, mentioning that other youths from the church take advantage of these locations to “act up”: dance, jump, wear clothes considered inappropriate and hook-up. In these cases a “secret administration” strategy is utilized (GOMES and NATIVIDADE, 2006), based on the friendship and complicity formed within the church, as a way of protecting those involved.

The dynamic of the inner-city churches’ tends to have a different character from those on the periphery, where, in principle, they can participate and abstain from certain controls, which believers are subject to in a congregation that revolves around a local community with characteristics that configure popular groups and their logics of operation. (SCOTT, 2007; DUARTE, 2005, 2006; COUTO, 2001).

The leaders’ knowledge that youths hook-up seems not to create major punishment, except in more peripheral contexts (and in cases that occur or become public with supposedly “more serious” elements - or the appearance of such). In this case, a warning is given by the leader of the group (be it youths or adolescents), generally an adult woman, with the punishment being at most removal from group presentations for a short period.

Hooking-up, even among believers, can lead to “disaster,” expressed as “loss of virginity” of the young women, “unplanned” pregnancy, or “unplanned” paternity. In this question it is interesting to note the concern on the part of the young men, who seem to have a different perspective than men in society in general about reproduction. The Assembly of God men attribute responsibility for pregnancy almost exclusively to women (ARILHA, RIDENTI E MEDRADO, 1998; QUADROS, 2005). Small mistakes can be tolerated but having a child with a “non-believing young woman” could create too heavy a burden to struggle with, especially for those with strong interests in,

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8 This goes together with a perspective of control over personal life within the context of the Assembly of God, which is presently encountering a growing resistance; and is also linked to an “exclusionist” perspective and assertion of specificities in the “religious market,” corroborated by the search for social recognition.

for example, obtaining a position in church leadership or the “ministry” (official clergy of the church).

Hooking-up in the “Assembly model,” in contrast with the practice among non-believers, is something totally inadvisable which can create conflicts, ambiguities and embarrassment. In the case of the young men, our attention was drawn to “difficult moments” they pass through due to the ambiguities that involve distinct practices and conceptions (though interconnected and overlapping) about the place of men and women, considering the distinction that marks or should mark sexuality for Assembly of God youths. While Davi almost “fell into temptation,” and expressed relief that he resisted and did not “go all the way,” Breno fears the way his masculinity could be seen by worldly young women accustomed to hooking-up that involves sexual relations.

Hooking-up in the church is just kissing and out there if you just kiss the girl she will say: “He’s so slow”. Then the guy is all wrong, and then things end up happening that shouldn’t (Breno, 16 years old).

The “inclusive society” expects young men not to remain virgins and in keeping, the church is more tolerant of their exercising their sexuality than it is of the young women. Slips by the men, however, should not reach the point of harming the image of the church.<sup>9</sup>

In an apparent paradox, hooking-up in “certain conditions” – in the pattern considered tolerable for an Assembly youth – appears to work as much for the youths as for the church (although this is not explicitly admitted). In principle, they should date with marriage in mind, since dating is not to be considered experimentation. But their lack of financial conditions for marriage or because they are too young, stimulates the practice of hooking-up. Within specific patterns and contexts, this practice is capable of preventing graver consequences at a time when old repressive tactics are no longer effective. According to one adult interlocutor, “the Assembly of God is not what it used to be.” (João, 33)

This represents a growing tolerance for this type of relationship, a strategy to “reduce the damages” – as long as things stay within certain limits

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<sup>9</sup> Such situations differ from those observed in studies that find a difference in sexual behavior of Evangelical young men than that of average young men (MONTEIRO, 1999; ROHDEN, 2005; NOVAES, 2004) when compared to young women in similar conditions.

(which is not so easy to delimit in practice) - to avoid greater harm and a “suitable performance” in updating the standard.

The Assembly’s “younger youth” have incorporated the “worldly practice” of hooking-up in a clear and tolerable manner, and its characteristics and specifications can be determined in the sphere studied. If, on one hand, it represents a lesser evil, and is even seen as functional in that context, on the other hand, it can represent an initiation into inadvisable sexual practices that can open the way to deviations and possible conflicts.

Hooking-up represents a modern code of relationships, and shapes a logic that mixes the Assembly ethos with elements from the broader Brazilian ideal of sexuality. This “mixture” becomes more evident, however, in relation to dating, as will be seen below.

## **1.2 Dating among Assembly Youths**

Dating represents a legitimate form of an amorous relationship within the church as well as in society, though transformations are observed that distinguish present-day dating with that of the past, as there are between the kind of dating that is conceived and practiced in different groups (AZEVEDO, 2004; SCOTT, 2007; SCOTT, 2006, 2007; LONGHI, 2007).

“Traditional dating,” in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, always related to marriage and the choice of a mate, with strong family control over the preservation of the young women’s virginity, as affirmed by Azevedo (2004). Today, the greatest change has been the break in the link between dating and marriage, making it possible to date for the pleasure of the relationship, and with various people with or without marrying. The family also no longer exerts such a fundamental role of vigilance. However, the perspective of commitment as a standard has been kept. Dating does not necessarily lead to marriage, but the assumption, at least in theory, is that dating is a stable, monogamous and faithful bond (CHAVES; 2001).

Dating, according to the dictates of the Assembly of God church should be closer to “traditional dating,” in the view of those we interviewed, with elements that bring it closer or farther from the “ideal type.” Not evading, in turn, the impositions and circumstances in which they are found today.

Those interviewed, in general, presented a perspective that displayed a marked difference with dating in the outside world.

Their dating is a look at each other, then they say that it's a boyfriend, not that dating like so many, like those girls on the outside, that is more sensual. F – Do you think that for the majority it is like this, a more traditional dating? E – I think for most it is. Now there are some girls that are more that way, I think, I'm not sure, like dating on the outside: by the way they talk, the things they say, but there are many that you really see that it is that dating of a child (Elisa, 22).

F – Was dating these non-Evangelical girls different, was there more intimacy?

R – This one I am with now, one day I moved my hand like this, then I touched her bottom, then she looked at me like this. Then I said: it was nothing. The others weren't like this (Robério, 16 years old).

Those interviewed referred to dating experiences that do not follow the proclaimed norms or escape them in certain aspects. Thus, reportedly, in reference to friends and acquaintances belonging to the church, “things” do not work as they should. Before we approach this subject directly, let us go more deeply into what the youths perceive of how this type of relationship “should be.”

It is a commitment that should precede engagement and marriage, ideally between young men and women of the same denomination, who are both virgins, or the female youth should have this condition. There should be good feelings and are nearly always celebrations by the family and the “community of faithful.”

Although the trajectories do not rigorously follow this path, when dating, these elements should be kept in mind. Considering that one should marry as a virgin, it is advisable to take certain precautions to avoid or interrupt the path that can lead to transgression. Thus, the force of desire that can appear because of physical closeness is taken into account, as well as an “outside look,” which in certain contexts and circumstances can be erroneously interpreted.

In these moments of hugging and kissing especially at night, the atmosphere encouraged it... We stopped, talked to help each other, not to let our impulses take over in a way that we wouldn't be able to stop anymore, go too far. F – Did you feel guilty? D – Sometimes, because I realized that even though we didn't go too far, it was as if we were feeding the desire and later it could happen; and what worried me the most was that where we were walking there were some

dark places and I was afraid someone would see us. F – What do you mean? D – People that we knew, from the church, because they could think we were at the first step to the sex act because sometimes for someone who sees a hug, people think we are doing a thousand and one things (Davi, 22).

These words well represent a certain type of morality that escapes what the “inclusive society” determines, revealing conflicts and ambiguities in the perspective of a young man trying to follow this morality. He does not completely give up the affection and sex possible in dating, imposing limits on himself and his partner, which she also shares as a young Evangelical woman. The “fear of someone seeing” and the possible consequences is highlighted

It is undeniable, and seen clearly in what is said, that the youth experience difficulty staying within the limits considered appropriate in a “world” in which the majority of youths tend to follow another pattern, and see sex as “something good,” “a tasty treat.” Nevertheless, the Assembly of God youth must wait for the appropriate moment to appreciate it. This way, there is no sin or guilt, much less sanctions or harm to their image, which can be disastrous for those who are anxious to marry in a traditional white dress and veil, or to have a career in the “ministry.” Experiencing sex with the right person, in a legitimate heterosexual relationship, results in guarantees that there will be a “happy life” and a “blessed future.”

It is the duty of the evangelical young woman to “hold back” and “hold back the other” according to the traditional ideal (HEILBORN, 1999, 2006; SALÉM, 2004; BRANDÃO, 2004), resisting a “precocious surrender,” which can have a high cost for her. The focus on sexual morality, and within it on the control of feminine sexuality, establishes a peculiar situation that is revealed even more clearly when analyzing virginity (among the young women) and homosexuality, which is our next area of discussion.

## **2. Considerations on the Assembly of God *Ethos* and Virginity**

Virginity appears to be one of the central criteria of choice for dating and marriage for young men. Non-virgin young women represent a second rate option for dating in the perspective of the young believers interviewed. The young men say that they would go out with a woman, based on an observation of their behavior, an analysis of how they lost their virginity, and mainly, on the existence of a stronger sentiment: “if I fell in love”...

...Returning to the previous question: about the criteria: virginity would be a criteria, so if she had lost her virginity before the church I would think about it...I wouldn't cancel the marriage if I found out. It would depend on when she lost her virginity, the situation, if she insinuated if it was in the church, or before being converted (Breno, 16).

F – Do you think that a girl who is no longer a virgin has difficulty in finding a boyfriend in the church? W – I think that she does a bit, because the boys look more for young girls, I think because of the fact the person is a woman they say: “I wanted a younger woman.” But I think this is not right, what is important is the person's character (Wilza, 18 anos).

Scott (2007) noted that beyond condemnation from people who assume the identity of guardians of morality, pre-marital sexual relations, especially when they are discrete, do not draw attention in urban situations today. He affirms:

...there is a confirmation of continuity, and, for some, the painful construction of an idea that sex would be healthy, even expected if two people were dating (Scott, 2007, p.35).

It is clear that some young women who affirm their virginity who were interviewed, held the notion that they have significant “capital” in the “marriage market.”

J - Some men say its not important, that they would get married anyway, but I don't think so. They say that when its time to have fun they do it with the bad ones, but get married with the good ones (Jacilene, 25).

Regrets related to a condition of being a “non-virgen” were found among the interlocutors, one of whom is married with a “non-believing” man.

W – If I could go back in time, I would want to be a young woman again. I think things are easier for a young person, and when you are a woman everything changes, if I could go back, I would. F – and in the church you think it is also different? W – no, in the church I don't see a difference no, everyone treats me the same; only if I would manage a group and they would require more, because you are no longer a girl, already a woman, then you can't (Wilza, 18).

E - A woman is different, the intimacy between a husband and wife. Because I wasn't his wife, I was someone else's wife, so it was different, it wasn't meant to be with him, with his body. I would have preferred it to have been with him and not others, although I wasn't one to have been with one or another. He was the second man to see my body, I never had another. With the first, it didn't work. And with him until today, even married, when I change my clothes he sees me naked, but I feel embarrassed (Eliza, 23).

Repercussions are found in the subjectivity and self-esteem as a function of being in this context. This denotes a learning of social stigma (GOFMAN, 1988). It is possible that this inferior status would lead to pushing young women away from the church, which appears between the lines in some statements such as that of Rosa (a "virgin"):

There are many girls who are not virgins, but they go away; they know what they did, right? I can't say more, but this is true for the boys as well, F - Which is easier to discover? The boys or the girls? R -The girls who are more aggressive than the boys (Rosa, 20).

If a youth is not a virgin she can participate in the church and come to be a member, and to be "well accepted," she must have exemplary behavior. Officially, she would be isolated from some organs and youth activities. At the Sunday class, she must sit with the older women and participate in the adult "chorus." These differences of participation and status in function of virginity are seen as normal, even if they have different shadings. In general, it is thought to involve a person who has a different experience from the other youth, and that one becomes an adult by having initiated their sexual life. In a more or less explicit manner, the notion is found that her presence among them can in some way stain the purity of the other youth. The more peripheral the congregation, the greater the tendency to have discrimination and exclusion of the youth in question.

F - Is a girl who isn't a virgin discriminated against in the church? D - there is not a lot of exclusion, but it exists, and not from the young people. Even no longer being a virgin, but if one is dedicated to the family, the church..... (Davi, 22 ).

F - How do you see this issue of virginity, of control by the church, how do you feel about this? W - I think its both right and exagerated, because we as women, at times want to be part of something, they don't allow us. F- You want to

be part of something and can't? W - Yes, be part of another group, but I see myself as someone normal there (Wilza, 18).

The “non-virgin” young women, or those who converted without the church knowing about their past, nearly always represent an unknown; their presence can cause a bad feeling in the group. There is a certain sensitivity in relation to this issue, principally in the more urban churches, where one feels less comfortable in getting right to the point.

In my church, in the adolescents room there was a person who converted and I wouldn't go to the person and ask “are you a virgin? The person receives information about biblical values, a Christian life, now it is clear, where this look predominates (Carmem, 28).

The requirement in relation to chastity holds in principle for both men and women, however, there appears to be greater flexibility and tolerance for the behavior of young men. The young women don't make a point of dating or marrying men who are virgins, unlike the young men. Some of the youth, however, express a certain perception of injustice in relation to the fact that a “non virgin” man can marry without problems in the church, while a “non-virgin” woman in principle can not.

F - Do you as a woman intend to marry a virgin man? J- (Laughs).. It's hard! If I marry my boyfriend; he is not a virgin, I never thought of this, this was never a requirement for me. To be a believer yes, but a virgin, is more difficult to find (Jacilene, 25).

E -Do you think there is a difference for the girls and boys? P - There is, if he advances with a young woman, she can't marry within the church, or sit with the young women, and he can, but this is changing. The pastors are meeting in the central temple to decide why a young man is also not prohibited from getting married in the church, because if its a rule for one it is for the other (Paula, 15).

In the last statement the interlocutor mentions possible changes, which were not confirmed, in the context studied. Nevertheless, in some sites of Assembly of God pastors (in other states), recognition and questioning was expressed in relation to discrimination suffered by “non virgin” young women in the church.

In this sense, it is important to consider that there is a growing concern



in the denomination to comply with Brazilian law, which has led to the adjustment of some rites and customs. According to the interlocutors, mostly adults, the church leaders have taken care to not be sued for infringing the Constitution or other laws, which has happened in the past. This corroborates with the perspective of social recognition, which marks the denomination in the local context today, not noting significant interference in issues that involve sexuality and gender relations, such as those that concern the chastity of girls and homosexuality, which we will address later in this article.

If a young man or woman loses his or her virginity and this fact becomes public in the church, either through a confession of the event by the member to a leader or if someone makes a charge, having proved the situation, the young man or woman would be removed from the communion of the church. If the person is a “member” he or she would have to turn in their church “membership card,”<sup>10</sup> an act with strong symbolism in relation to the “separation.” After a period known as a “disciplining” – a removal from the list of church members – which lasts about three months, the person can become a member again. This norm, in general, tends to be applied only to women, upon whom concern in relation to this issue is focused.

It is often a pregnancy that reveals a “sin against chastity.” Confession, secrets and gossip, appear to be the other ways that the issue becomes known. The male and female adults interviewed revealed that in the past it was common to have a confession to leaders or even a public confession of an “error” committed. This was motivated by a sense of guilt, the result of an internal commitment, an *ethos*.

F – Have you been disciplined? R – Twice. Once because my wife became pregnant before we got married, and this is an enormous sin within the church, and we went to the minister ourselves and accepted the discipline. Until then we were living in a heaven, but afterwards, we passed to purgatory, if it exists, to not to say a hell. We were discriminated, isolated, humiliated by the members and thus underwent the discipline and we overcame this and achieved communion. It’s incredible, it appears to be magic, once you achieve reconciliation, everything that they did against you before, they wipe it all out, it all goes back to normal (Robson, 38).

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10 An identification document obtained after baptism in the waters, the ritual that confirms religious adhesion in which the faithful affirms an effective commitment to the church..

This portion of Robson's speech leads us to what Turner (1974) called the threshold phase, a ritual of distancing of the individual from the social structure, with a later return with a new status. It is a condition compared to death, invisibility or other "states" that demonstrate that, like beings at the threshold, these individuals do not have a status, none at all. In this case, it is a type of loss and recovery of status before the congregation and the church. Today, this character is attenuated, and maintains its essential meaning, as is evident in relation to virginity.

The specificities that mark the sexuality of the youth interfere with views that permeate the popular notion of Brazilian sexuality (PARKER, 1994, 2002; HEIBORN, 1999; LEAL & BOFF, 1997; among others), and are detectable, for example, in the view that men are more sexually impulsive, and for this reason need to be contained by the faithful young women. If they do not, "control themselves" and go with a girl "from the outside" they should be tolerated or forgiven by the "believers." In turn, the "honor" of the women, in this case, linked to the preservation of chastity, represents a type of epicenter of a model of religious morality.

There is a possibility to avoid or fake roles, which is related with the individual's sense and value of adhesion. In this case, nuances principally related to location (at an inner-city or peripheral church) and to the degree that gender is constructed and lived, as mentioned above, are emphasized. Transgressions have different weight depending on if they involve a young man or woman; for both, however, if they are and want to continue to be believers and enjoy the fruits or dividends of their affiliation, it is important, and even essential, to follow and defend the principles related to Christian sexuality, according to the Evangelical (Assembly of God) interpretation of the sacred Bible.

Nevertheless, there is no linearity in the perceptions and experiences, particularly because the portion of middle class people with higher schooling is growing in the Assembly of God church, which disputes faithful with other Pentecostal churches in a "religious market" and with the "world." The option for a distinction, which characterizes the male or female youth in the Assembly of God church, is not able to annul messages from other institutions in which they circulate, which tends to forge a complex and ambivalent context, which we will analyze below.

### 3. Occultations, legitimacies and illegitimacies: the perspective of homosexuality

The perspective of a “private *ethos*” is increasingly developed among the believers, even if relatively, which is linked to intimate behavior or at least to the notion that some factors related to this are beyond the control of the denomination. Principally in the “more central” contexts, among followers with higher education and or income, they do not intend, and have increasingly less opportunity or opening, to control what they do, particularly, with a partner within a relationship legitimated and “blessed by God.”

These postures reflect a greater liberty in relation to romantic and sexual experiences, in a range within molds considered to be legitimate, while deeply rooted notions persist concerning chastity for women and homosexuality. Since we begin with the supposition that there is no imposition of norms and values, observing a choice and identification with these and a choice based on the affinities of the believers, we envision a dynamic scenery in which the male and female youth believers (in their various insertions, and in a non uniform manner) tend to establish their difference by distinguishing themselves in relation to norms and practices related to sexuality: both in terms of their discourse and in daily life.

The stigmatizing perspective about homosexuality common to Brazilian society (PARKER, 1994, 2002), is exacerbated and gains specific configuration in the Pentecostal context, which has at its core a rigid sexual morality (NATIVIDADE, 2005; 2007). On the internet site of the Assembly of God church in Brazil, there is a topic dedicated to this theme, as well as to homosexual marriages. Here is one passage about “homosexuality”:

“Homosexuality” is condemned by the Bible, it is an abominable sin in the eyes of God (Lev 18.22). The bible calls this practice prostitution, *porneia*, in Greek (jd 7). The word of God says directly or indirectly that the “Sodomites and the effeminates,” a Biblical expression to designate “homosexuals,” will not inherit the kingdom of God (1Co6.9,10).

Natividade (2007) notes that among the Pentecostals, homosexuality is related to an incorporation of malign spirits or to the learning of that which is anti-natural, addictive or diseased. He denominates as moral constructivism the discourse that is based on these suppositions, and reiterate the aura of the immanent state, that express a “certain nature.” In this

sense, homosexuality is seen as something external, with its “cure” obtained through the search for sanctification, by the purification of the person. This perspective was found among the majority of the men and women interviewed, although with subtle distinctions.

F - This question of homosexuality, how does the church see this? How do you see it? E - They are discriminated, because the church does not accept it, they say that it is something evil, this thing of a man with a man and woman with a woman. If a gay person comes and he wants to accept... F - do you know someone? E - I know one gay man and “sapatão” [slang term for a lesbian similar to dike] and many people who were and are in the church, who were thieves who don't steal any more, make witness and are different (Elisa, 22).

C - Biblically, homosexual practice is a sin, it is not accepted in any church. It appears that the Episcopal had discussed this but I don't know what happened. (Carmem, 28)

Another perspective that appears in the statements of those interviewed and between the lines of a “more modern” discourse, at times mixing with the first, relates homosexuality to something anti-natural, in keeping with what Natividade (2005; 2007) also found. It is thought of in function of a logic related to moral constructivism, in terms of disease and cure. Thus, a convert with a history of homosexuality must be “treated” to seek the reconstruction of a “healthy sexuality.” According to this view, it is possible to have a transformation, given that faith in God makes anything possible. Internal questioning is found, however, (that is more or less explicit) about how and to what point the church can or is able to deal with situations that involve the conversion of homosexuals.

J- Homosexuality for the church is that the person goes against the principal dogmas of Christianity, of nature. It is in neon lights that the Bible is against it and the church abominates this type of thing. Jesus or God abominates homosexuality, he died for homosexuals as well, in the same way it's me, I can't leave here, I can't be complicit, so it's complicated, right? At least there in the church I don't know any case, but there are Evangelical churches where ex-homosexuals go and the church supports them, a church close to us converted a couple of lesbians who have lived together for a long time. What is the church

going to say? That it doesn't accept this? It says "Come as you are, but do not remain as you are. Come transform and live a new life" (Jacilene, 25).

The interlocutors mention the presence of former homosexuals in the churches or of having heard witnesses about their cure and transformation. There is also reference to those who enter and are not able to remain, or who "suffer fallbacks," which are usually blamed on the lack of effort by the person who sought the transformation. If it is important to a converted person, he makes an extra effort, considering the nature of the "life of sin" from which he is separating, as if homosexuality is a combination of an addiction and disease that is difficult to "cure" and easy to fall back to. Without transformation, it is not possible to effectively participate in the church.

F- You said there was a person who was helped by his wife...D - There was one who lived in homosexuality and later converted; he had great difficulty changing his way of speaking and gesticulating, but a bit later he met a girl, got married and she helped him in this issue with homosexuality. She told him when he spoke too "preciously" and now he is very appreciative of his wife having done this. I heard this on the radio...So God placed a person at the right time for him, or that is, he can think that he was a man enough and did not need anything, he had a critical sensibility and if someone warned him, became concerned in correcting the relics of a former life (Davi, 22).

One factor that stands out in the reading of the interviews is the association between homosexuality and "feminization"<sup>11</sup> of the men, or with the appearance of femininity, evoked mainly in speech and gestures. Thus, about the cases cited of "ex-homosexuals" it is said that some still have mannerisms that they are not able to get rid of, despite their efforts. It is mentioned that, nearly whenever they have women and children, they are integrated into the church, and they also refer to pastors and other leaders who witnessed the transformation made in their lives.

Declared homosexuals can attend services, particularly because a person cannot be prohibited from attending the temples.<sup>12</sup> They can, evidently, convert, and then come to be part of the church, eventually becoming

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11 This view is in keeping with the way that relationships between femininity, masculinity, masculinity and sexuality are organized in Brazilian culture (see PARKER, 1994).

12 The church has taken increasing care with this issue, fearing legal problems for violating constitutional rights or for discrimination.

a member, if they make clear that they have abandoned homosexuality, at times giving witness to a “cure” or regeneration; which is always referred to by those interviewed.

In this case, principally, if they are linked to a more urban temple, they can have help from specialized groups, in general, interdenominational ones, with workers or professionals linked to the church, from whom they can receive guidance and be counseled in the search for a “cure.” Friends and spouses are seen as people who can provide support, with marriage and principally the presence of children as proof of “liberation” from this condition.

“Support” of various kinds are mentioned for those who seek a transformation, but there are also complaints about prejudice and a lack of support for the homosexuals converted. At times, situations were observed – such as the case mentioned by Jacilene (above), of the lesbian couple who converted – that can be difficult and challenging for a structure that is guided by rigid norms, as is the Assembly of God.

It is always tricky to deal with this issue, which reveals ambiguity, and even contradictions at the heart of the doctrine and among the leaders. According to the dominant logic, homosexuality, as any other transgression, can be forgiven, if there is a visible transformation. It is increasingly defended that this takes time, because of a certain “psychological perspective” that permeates the church (notable among its strata in more urban regions with higher education and income). In turn, to give time to a transformation is something that does not fit in well with this doctrinaire framework.

The discriminatory or ambivalent way that they deal with homosexuality tends to lead to exclusion (in relation to the youth group, principally), facilitating deviations or the experience of a “dual life” by the part of homosexuals or “former” homosexuals who circulate or belong to the church. The adult men interviewed, more forcefully emphasize suffering that is inherent to these conditions within the church.<sup>13</sup>

S- First, if she is homosexual and it is known, she suffers, because I have people here who are homosexuals and I say, it is better to remain secret, keep hidden, because you are disdained. One day when you come here I will show you. They make friendships with people who are quite handicapped or are real sisters,

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13 The condition of conflict and psychological suffering from the experience of homosexuals in the church was well described and analyzed by Natividade (2005).

never with heteros. But it is a bit hypocritical, that stain stays with the person. Then why would you say something that you do not accept? F – These people about whom you are speaking, are they people who have already confessed? S – They have confessed and live in a situation of marginality (Sérgio, 40).

R – And if this person has a sense, and if this person has a double life, and still has the sense that God exists and is who controls life, or at least, is part of her life, she reaches a moment that she can't bear, she comes to a moment in which she will have to decide, or define herself: either remain outside or inside, one cannot have both. It's like in the Bible, you can't serve two masters. F – But do you think it would be possible if the church was more understanding? R – Yes. The church should understand the difficulties of a homosexual who has a desire to give up this life (Robson, 33).

Even among interlocutors who tend to have a “critical perspective” in relation to the various elements that constitute the believer and the church, they see it as incompatible to be homosexual and legitimately part of the church, given that in addition to the church doctrine, they say the Bible itself condemns this sexual orientation.

They live camouflaged, discretely, given that the minister discovered, disciplined, removed it completely from the church. But it exists, homosexuality, not only in the church, but anywhere you think of. The Bible is decidedly against it, and the church is more against it than the Bible, because they adhere to isolated texts and emphasize them so that the person is not like that in any circumstance, and at times it is so strong this disciplining of the homosexuals that when one is converted with good will to give up their practice, but the mannerisms remain, they even reject the mannerisms. They wind up feeling psychological pressure, are chastised directly or indirectly by the ministry, and the person feels pressured to the point of not being able to bear such pressure and winds up returning to homosexual practice, even if they don't want to. F – Does this favor a dual life? R – Yes, a dual life, if not a total regression. To return to living the previous homosexual lifestyle, of burglary, or marijuana use or something like that.

The presence of “non-declared” homosexuals in the church, occupying space, even in the leadership, is something seen as possible as mentioned above; “clandestinely or camouflaged.” It is important to recognize that the

Assembly of God is still, to a large degree, a community church. A person with a dual life knows this and takes the necessary precautions, being constantly at risk of having their secret revealed, which as affirmed by Natividade (2005) is usually a reason for great anguish for those who seek to conciliate sexuality and faith – because they nearly always face internal dilemmas.

The “discovery” about their homoerotic sexual practices can take place because of a heavy conscience, which leads to confession and a search for orientation and counseling from the leadership. According to Natividade (2005), confession would be important in an initial phase, in order to leverage the transformation; which after deviations or setbacks, no longer occurs, maintaining, at times, ties with the church to the time in which they thought they were living “separated from grace.” The awareness that carries weight does not always prevail in a context in which the experience of sexuality is increasingly thought of as something that represents complete living, living the “inner truth.” Even if, as in the case in vogue, they live with strong conflicts and ambivalence.

In the view of those interviewed, who tend to present a dogmatic (fundamentalist) perspective the transgressions – particularly, the “serious errors” – could be discovered by the people who have the gift of revelation. For them: “nothing can be hidden from the presence of God.”

Among our interlocutors (youth and adults) no one declared themselves to be homosexual or to have had homosexual experiences at any time of their life. Nevertheless, in two cases, we found people who effectively lived homosexual practices or orientation. In one case, the youth (who at the time was distanced from the Assembly of God Church), discussed her heterosexual trajectory, highlighting that there was an issue she did not want to discuss, which was related directly to the fact that she could not return to the church, although she considered herself an “‘Assemblyean` at heart.” We did not imagine at the time what this involved, until we heard gossip about an episode involving the woman and her girlfriend.

In another case, an interlocutor indicated another young man as someone who was a former member and could speak about the denomination - the initial objective of the interviews conducted with the adults - and who was also homosexual, as he had told this interlocutor, although was not an open homosexual. The interlocutor said he believed that the other person could speak



about this issue. In the interview with that person, however, he presented himself as a heterosexual, and criticized homosexuality as determined by the church discourse.

A third situation in the study involved a rumor that one of the young women interviewed had discovered that her fiancée had homosexual relationships at one time, which was seen as “a liberation on the part of the Lord.” We did not approach the issue with this person, which called to our attention the way that this person avoided speaking directly about the issue, not mentioning that she knew people with this orientation, who frequented or had been “transformed” by the church.

As suggested by the “cases” mentioned above, as well as the other perspectives presented during the development of this topic, situations that involve homosexuality, generate strong tensions and are difficult to approach in the ecclesiastic context, except, from the perspective of condemnation, “cure” and control. As Nativity affirmed (2005, p.267):

The pleasure lived in mystical experiences conflicts with the pleasure experienced in the sphere of sexuality,” in a type of competition between cosmologies that involve the person in distinct ways; seeking unique solutions in light of the dilemma between being homosexual and being “chosen by God.”

In turn, the existence of “ex-homosexuals” was found, as well as homosexuals who use mechanisms and strategies to remain within this universe; not without conflicts and ambiguities (internal and external) in relation to this issue (NATIVIDADE, 2005; 2007).

If for other “sins” – as in relation to what was discussed about virginity – there are strong sanctions, but possibilities for correction, with a chance to live a “normal” life, for homosexuality the possibility of a “cure” and “forgiveness,” is the only option considered legitimate, yet which is unlikely to take place without continued suspicion or scars that do not completely heal. It is also difficult to imagine a situation in which sexuality and faith are experienced openly.

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