

## **SEX AND THE CLERGY: AN INSIDER PERSPECTIVE ON ATTITUDES TOWARDS CELIBACY**

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### **Abstract**

Sexuality is an important part of the human experience. It can be considered a sensitive topic especially in a religious context. Manliness, on the other hand, has been emphasised by the Catholic Church for many years (van Es, 2021). One example of this is through the support of male-dominant gender hierarchies in the Church (Gerber, 2015). Men and masculinities seem to be understudied in the religious sphere and studies on gender and religion tend to centre around women (Romeo Mateo, 2021). There is literature about celibacy and loneliness, however, many of these studies are among involuntary celibates known as incels (Sparks et al., 2023). Research on the intersection of sexuality, masculinity, and religion among clergy is lacking. This is surprising, since celibacy is a notable pillar of priesthood in the Catholic Church. It is especially so in the Maltese context where the ratio of priests in the community is high compared to other secularized societies. It is therefore important to understand what part sexuality plays in the life of a celibate person, especially in the context of hegemonic masculinity. This is because priests tend to fall between two male stereotypes: the hegemonic man and the biblical man (Roger, 2019). Hence, the aim of the study is to investigate whether there is a relationship between celibacy, manhood beliefs and loneliness. A survey will be carried out among a sample of Roman Catholic priests living in Malta. Questions from three scales will be used in the questionnaire: the Commitment to Celibacy Scale (Joseph et al., 2010), the Loneliness Scale (de Jong Grieveld & Van Tilburg, 2006), and a manhood beliefs scale. The expected sample size is 150 male priests. There is an expected association between attitudes towards celibacy and manhood beliefs, as well as between attitudes towards celibacy and loneliness. However, the direction of the relationship will be determined by the results of the study.

**Keywords:** *Celibacy, manhood beliefs, loneliness, priests, attitudes.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Sexuality can be considered a sensitive topic and especially so in the religious sphere. In the Maltese Islands, mandated celibacy remains a contentious issue (Galea, 2011). Manliness, on the other hand, has been emphasised by the Catholic church for many years (van Es, 2021). Despite this emphasis, men and masculinities seem to be understudied in the religious sphere (van Es, 2021). In fact, studies on gender and religion tend to centre around women (Romeo Mateo, 2021). There seems to be a gap in research in the intersection of sexuality, masculinity, and religion with a focus on clergy. This is surprising, since celibacy is a notable pillar of priesthood. The notion of masculinity has opposing meanings in the church. On the one hand, according to the Bible Jesus treated women with respect despite living in a society which did not value women. Biblical manliness involves leading, loving, providing, and protecting (Rogers, 2019). Although up for debate, some authors postulate that there is a movement away from misogynistic views of femininity in the Church (Romeo Mateo, 2021). On the other hand, the Church has shown many instances of hegemonic masculinity in society. For example, conservative religious groups in general tend to support male-dominant gender hierarchies (Gerber, 2015).

### **1.1. The hegemonic man versus the biblical man**

Hegemonic masculinity encompasses different norms which describe a widespread ideal of what a man should be (Vernay, 2018). These norms include restricting emotionality, exhibiting dominance and toughness, avoiding femininity, displaying negative affect towards sexual minorities, and, most importantly for the current study, giving importance to sex (Levant et al., 2010). Although some values of the hegemonic man align with those of the biblical man (Rogers, 2019), there is also some distance between the two. Christianity has a history of male and heteronormative hierarchies, with sexism and

homophobia at the forefront (Nyhagen, 2020). At the same time, there are instances where stereotypically undesirable feminine traits have been marketed as desirable by the Church. For example, priests often display femininity by being nurturing, gentle, and even in the way they dress during sermons (Mínguez-Blasco, 2020). Bartkowski (2000) noted that religious men display a melange masculinity, which is at the same time strong and sensitive, and egalitarian and authority-minded. Heath (2003) observed practices in men that reaffirmed hegemonic masculinity. Gerber (2015) found that religious men reject some hegemonic norms whilst affirming others. However, all these studies were carried out on evangelical participants, who tend to advocate for traditional gender ideologies in their practice (Gerber, 2015). Roman Catholicism, the dominant religion in Malta, is scarcely researched in relation to masculinity.

## 1.2. Celibacy, loneliness, and manhood

Sexuality is considered an integral part of the human experience (Russell et al., 2020). It is also over-emphasised with regard to hegemonic masculinity. Hence, the question of the effects of celibacy on manhood is crucial to understand to ensure the wellbeing of these people. To those who do not commit to abstinence, religious celibacy can be seen as puzzling (Micheletti et al., 2022). Some argue that such a vow is a display of deep commitment to one's beliefs, which in turn aids the perpetuation of the religion because it increases the credibility of the perpetrator (Henrich, 2009). If hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form of masculinity, then one might extrapolate that in some ways it affects the Catholic church in ways which have not yet been researched. Furthermore, questions about the way priests define their own masculinity in the absence of sexuality remain unanswered. Masculine norms involve a sense of pressure toward sexual activity (Levant et al., 2007). Thus, this pressure could lead to men perceiving their virginity as embarrassing or anxiety-inducing (Boislard et al., 2016). Moreover, priests have voiced that mandatory celibacy is contributing to their loneliness and demoralisation (Weafer, 2013). Although it can have positive effects, celibacy and obedience can also have negative impacts on priests' mental health, contributing to depression and loneliness (Isacco et al., 2015). Hence, it would be interesting to determine how men who are voluntarily celibate combat this pressure, and whether these negative associations with virginity are also made by priests. An interesting suggestion by Bordisso (2011) is that the way priests experience celibacy is on a continuum, with acceptance on one end and rejection on the other. Most priests are said to fall somewhere in the middle. Hence, it would be relevant to measure the attitudes held by priests towards celibacy, sexuality, and masculinity, whilst also determining the effects these constructs might have on loneliness in priests.

## 1.3. The tripartite theory of attitudes

A common theory which can be applied to these constructs is the tripartite theory of attitudes, sometimes referred to as the ABC model (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960). Attitudes have a tripartite structure; they involve cognitive, emotional, and behavioural elements (Spooncer, 1992). The cognitive element refers to one's beliefs, the emotional element refers to one's feelings, and the behavioural element refers to the ways in which one behaves towards the concept or attitude object. Since it is believed that attitudes have a direct influence on behaviour, it might be interesting to apply this framework to the context of celibacy. Beliefs and feelings held about celibacy, sexuality, and masculinity will be examined through this study.

Based on this literature search, the below hypotheses are being proposed:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** In clergy members, there is an association between attitudes towards celibacy and traditional manhood beliefs.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** In clergy members, there is an association between attitudes towards celibacy and loneliness.

## 2. Design and methods

A quantitative approach will be used, with data being collected through anonymous online questionnaires covering four areas: (1) demographic data; (2) attitudes towards celibacy; (3) manhood beliefs; (4) loneliness. Participants will first be asked to give their age, what role they hold in the clergy, the spiritual modality that they follow, and the number of years for which they have been a clergy member. An open-ended question was added towards the end, where participants are asked to describe what loneliness feels like to them in one word.

**Commitment to celibacy scale (Joseph et al., 2010).** This scale was used to determine the attitudes of priests towards the commitment of celibacy. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Internal consistency is high, with Cronbach's alpha being .85 (Joseph et al., 2010).

**Manhood beliefs.** This scale was developed by the authors based on the four pillars of masculinity developed by David and Brannon (1976). Table 1 shows these four pillars as well as the corresponding questions which were devised. Each statement is rated on a 5-point Likert scale from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’.

Table 1. Manhood beliefs scale.

Pillar 1: No Sissy Stuff	Men should be emotionally strong in all situations
Pillar 2: The Big Wheel	Success is important for all men
Pillar 3: The Sturdy Oak	Men are self-reliant
Pillar 4: Give ‘Em Hell	I believe a man should be tough

**UCLA 3-item loneliness scale (Hughes et al., 2008).** This scale was used to measure overall levels of loneliness in the participants, rating items on a 3-point Likert scale from ‘hardly ever or never’ to ‘often’. Internal consistency for this scale is good, with Cronbach’s alpha being .72 and a strong correlation (.82) with the original long version of this scale (Hughes et al., 2008). In addition to this indirect measure of loneliness, a one-item measure of loneliness was added to questionnaire as a direct measure of loneliness, by directly asking ‘*how often do you feel lonely?*’ This is rated on a 5-point Likert scale from ‘often’ to ‘never’.

The questionnaire was piloted to ascertain that there were no confusing or misleading questions, and feedback addressed. To participate in the study, one had to be over 18 years old, male, Maltese or Gozitan, and a clergy member. The type of clergy member was not an issue, as long as the role required the individual to be celibate.

### 3. Expected results

To test the hypotheses, correlational analyses will be carried out to determine the correlations between attitudes towards celibacy and manhood beliefs, and attitudes towards celibacy and loneliness.

Based on previous studies carried out on involuntary celibates, it is expected that clergy members will score high in feelings of loneliness. However, it is unclear whether the correlation between loneliness and attitudes towards celibacy will be positive or negative. The same applies to the correlation between attitudes towards celibacy and manhood beliefs. It might be the case that higher agreement with stereotypical manhood beliefs will have a negative correlation with commitment to celibacy, since stereotypical manhood beliefs tend to correspond to higher positive attitudes towards sex.

### 4. Conclusion

This subject is particularly pertinent in the current Maltese climate, with discussions being held at the time of writing surrounding the idea of mandatory celibacy in Roman Catholic priests. The Maltese Archbishop himself has made statements challenging this mandate. With loneliness on the rise and commitment to priesthood on the decline, this study could have great impacts on the way priesthood is conceptualized in Malta. It might help mitigate deterrents to young men who wish to enter the priesthood. Further to this, the data gathered in this study might help inform decisions made about the celibacy mandate in Malta. This topic has been put on the public agenda as well as on the agenda of the Church in Malta.

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