

When I left high school behind, I found myself asking other people what kind of sex education they had received from their parents. I did this more than once, and until now I've had some difficulty articulating exactly why I bothered asking such a weird and personal question. Part of the reason was idle curiosity - I wanted to know how my limited experience with having my body explained to me stacked up to those of my friends. The other part of the reason was because it was such a personal question. Sex education (or rather, the lack thereof) was a big part of my own personal development, and more than once I wondered if my life would have been easier if I'd had it sooner.

I'm far from the only one to think about this kind of question. To this day, the United States has yet to come to a consensus on exactly what form "the talk" ought to take. While a majority of both Democrats and Republicans agree that sex education in school is important, they tend to argue over what teenagers should be taught. Growing up in New York, I got to watch part of this argument unfold in the form of a Last Week Tonight episode. I listened to John Oliver make fun of abstinence-only speakers like Pam Stenzel, and I laughed at her and the people who agreed with her backwards ideology, just like I was supposed to.

I didn't laugh, however, at the people in Mrs. Stenzel's audience. They were being shouted at about the horrors of sexually-transmitted diseases and about how their virginities, once lost, would never come back. And while Mrs. Stenzel never explicitly said so, these same people were being taught that the act of sex itself would forever render them impure and unworthy of real affection. It seemed horrible that anyone should be written off as a pariah for something that I considered inconsequential at best - as long as no one was getting hurt, would God really care who had sex with who?

That line of thought made perfect sense to me, a 20-year-old Chinese agnostic from New York who never really gave that much thought to either the Bible or the local church. What I'd failed to consider was that Pam Stenzel's talk probably made perfect sense to somebody else, like the countless evangelical Christians in the U.S. who consider marriage a sacred institution and for whom premarital sex constitutes a sin. For me to laugh at Pam Stenzel was also to ignore the great ideological divide between myself and the people who thought to put her on stage, and to ignore the fact that that divide was actively harming countless teenagers across the United States.

This, I think, is the reason that the arguments over sex education persist even in the face of conclusive data. Countless studies link Mrs. Stenzel's type of sex education to increased rates of teen pregnancy, STDs, and HIV/AIDS. All of those could be fixed with greater access to information and technology that have been around for years, and programs for providing that information are already in place. But comprehensive sex education, by definition, enables teenagers to safely have sex, and asking its opponents to allow that would be going against a faith that gives structure to their entire lives. Teenagers need sex education regardless of their parents' faith, but ignoring that faith entirely to give it to them is only going to alienate a sizable chunk of the population.

Coming to that realization forced me to rethink the role that organized religion was playing in the conflict. I wasn't very religious growing up, but meeting and talking to Christians was more than enough to show me just how much faith and the church meant to them. Having the knowledge that they would always be loved and supported both by a benevolent God and His followers had helped them get through some of the lowest points of their lives. Even if I didn't agree with every part of their ideology, I couldn't just ignore how their faith had ultimately made them healthier and happier people. Knowing what I did, I couldn't really blame anyone for being afraid of a challenge to their faith, especially when such a fear isn't entirely unjustified - God's existence and the merits of keeping faith in him are questioned every day.

I don't believe that comprehensive sex education constitutes such a challenge to Christianity, but I do think that the way it's been presented needs work. Its supporters need to demonstrate that education does not come at the expense of established values and institutions. Furthermore, they need to establish an open and respectful dialog with their opponents so that this issue and others can be discussed rationally. As entertaining as John Oliver can be, his portrayal of certain issues can definitely come off as dismissive - the last thing a conversation needs if it hopes to be productive.

When that has been done and parents understand that their beliefs are not under siege, perhaps then American parents on both sides of the debate can come together and decide how best to talk to their kids about sex. For the sake of today's teenagers and those that will follow them, I hope that that day comes soon.