

They seem reasonably tolerant in Tunisia of other religions, especially Judaism

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They seem reasonably tolerant here of other religions, especially Judaism surprisingly enough. There is a large synagogue next to the school where we study. I've heard that there are as many as 23,000 Jews in Tunisia, although that seems way high. I have not met one person yet whom I knew was a Jew. Perhaps they keep quiet or to themselves. There are Catholic, Anglican, French Reform, and Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches here, which are almost exclusively for non-Tunisians from what I've seen. (There is still a large French community, many of them teachers, and perhaps 1,000 Americans.) There is heavy social pressure against a Tunisian joining any non-Islamic sect. Even though many here are not practicing Moslems, especially among the young people, they nearly all claim to be Moslems. They have a tendency to "enjoy their youth," then turn to prayer and reading the Koran later on when they are married or, if funds permit, after they make a pilgrimage to Mecca (via Tunis Air nowadays).

Islam prohibits sexual relations outside of marriage quite strongly. In the smaller villages there are spiritual rites to protect the virginity of the women in the family until marriage, and many women even in the capital are still veiled. (Bourguiba has called for Tunisian women to unveil themselves and that brought quite an uproar. On the other hand, he has said that he is Moslem and that Tunisia is a Moslem country.) In fact, however, here in the capital young people make the rounds. "A body has needs," and "We don't follow the Koran to that extreme," are common excuses.