

Bodies in Service: the Culture of Chastity in Evangelical Christianity

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The contemporary fixation on female chastity and virginity within religious landscapes is a historically situated and politically motivated social reality. Within contemporary Evangelical Christianity, a denomination of Protestant Christianity in North America, the purity culture movement inscribes particular gendered values of sexuality on female bodies. Basing these prescriptive ideals and moral guidelines from biblical texts, the purity culture movement affirms traditional, monogamous, and heteronormative family values. Historically, religious and political leaders subversively present female virginity as a means of political activism to reinstate innocence and national stability in North America. The presence of virgin consciousness, where one perceives and positions one's sexuality as central to individual and collective Christian faith, is a gendered ethic that constructs female bodies and sexualities as submissive, vulnerable, and passive. Within this religious landscape, women are not trusted with their bodies, desires, and experiences. Purity balls and chastity pledges are situated in a gendered landscape that disembodies female sexual agency by insisting a woman's body is not her own but rather the property of God, protected by her father who will then pass this right onto her husband. Participation in these practices, whether in obligation within an oppressive institution or as a subversive act of body autonomy, affirms female faith, identity, and belonging within the Evangelical community.

The Evangelical church in North America is a large, multifaceted denomination of Protestant Christianity. While the Bible is Evangelicalism's foundational text, there is

a wide spectrum of interpretation, doctrinal principles, theological orientations, and ritual diversity within the institution. Doctrine and ritual practice focus on the *Gospels*, four New Testament biblical texts which outline the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As historian David Bebbington outlines, central religious beliefs and practices include forms of repentance, conversion, salvation, forgiveness of worldly sins, and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ (5-8). In contrast to other denominations such as Catholicism, Evangelicalism does not have a traditional hierarchal leadership and doctrine. Instead, as journalist Ann Stankorb highlights, ideas and practices are spread through influential pastors, megachurches, and Christian pop culture outlets where individual choices and behaviour modification are evidence of repentance, salvation, and validation of spiritual maturity (2019). Individuals are active in larger community ritual practices such as prayer, communion, baptism, Biblical study, conversion of nonbelievers, and church attendance. Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is evidenced by individual choices within the larger social and religious institution.

In North America, Evangelical Protestantism is historically situated within discourses of political activism and national stability. Postwar America, as critical religious studies academic Sara Moslener discusses, brought the intersections of religion, politics, and morality to the forefront of public discourse where “politicians, religious leaders, and academics framed problems of sexual deviance and juvenile delinquency as national security issues” (“Nuclear Bomb” 254). In response, Evangelical Protestantism committed itself to “strict moral guidelines primarily for individual,

spiritual, and psychological benefit” to combat the nation’s moral failures to follow Biblical values (255). The 1960s was a period of cultural shift where body politics, reproductive rights, and diverse sexualities were brought into the public awareness.

The notion of female body autonomy and reproductive choice became public focus as the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the female contraceptive pill, formal sexual education became available in public schools, and the building discourse leading to the 1973 reproductive rights case of *Roe vs. Wade* (Irvine 19). In parallel to these developments were the realities of a postwar fundamentalism, a period of sexual revolution, and threats of communism and nuclear war. As sociologist Janice Irvine discusses, the politically conservative Moral Majority perceived these matters as a crisis of female virginity and evidence of increasing moral decline that contributed to America’s loss of innocence and, therefore, national instability (33). During the Cold War, Torrey Johnson, a prominent religious leader, stated that in light of such moral decline and sexual promiscuity, “America is sunk [...] we are headed either for definite turning to God or the greatest calamity to ever strike the human race” (quoted in Moslener “Nuclear Bomb” 256). By causally connecting immorality and national instability within an impending apocalyptic narrative, Protestant Evangelicalism positioned female chastity as the means for America’s salvation.

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I pledge allegiance to the Flag and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all. I pledge allegiance to the Christian flag and the Saviour for whose kingdom it stands; one brotherhood uniting all mankind in service and love. I pledge allegiance to the Bible, God’s Holy Word, I will make it lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path and will hide its words in my heart that I might not sin against God.

I learned these words in elementary school, spoke them at the start of each morning, too young to know what words like nation and allegiance and liberty meant. Never mind that I was in rural Canada, so far in distance from this Republic and that red white spangled banner.

Stepping into that classroom opened a new world alongside uniforms and silent marches down the hallway. We memorized history next to Bible verses. It was practice, they told us, something that we would need and rely on, something that would bring us success and happiness. It was our Christian duty and so together we would proclaim, “I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against You, O Lord” (Psalm 119:11 NIV).

Words like this were proudly displayed throughout the school before I would ever question their presence much less their prevalence and power. Scripture and allegiance found their way into recess where boys would hurl dodgeballs and girls would cower and giggle, all of those words ordering our movements. We never thought to question it. Questions even then, young as we were, marked you with suspicion. It was so natural and innocent to believe the world was as simple as indivisible liberty and justice for all.

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In the late 20th century, moral codes based on chastity were employed by Evangelical religious leaders in an effort to “regain cultural respectability, political influence, and intellectual veracity of their theological tradition” (Moslener, “Nuclear Bomb” 255). Such moral practices rely on separatist and absolute binaries that maintain the boundaries between sacred and secular individuals and spaces. This develops a framework that distinguishes those who are saved by following Biblical values and those who were promiscuous outside of the religious community (261). Historically, religious leaders such as Billy Graham, a central icon in the revival of evangelicalism in America, capitalized on concepts such as sexual promiscuity in order to mobilize Evangelical conversion campaigns and build religious support. Through patriotic rhetoric, Graham

conflated postwar themes of militarism, nationalism, heroism, and heteronormative masculinity with eternal salvation, often describing the Christian life as a spiritual battle where the evils of sexual immorality and risk loomed everywhere (Moslener, *Virgin Nation* 12). Within Evangelical Christianity, sexual immorality and promiscuity includes sexual acts outside of heterosexual, monogamous, procreative, and reproductive Christian marriage. In response to divergences from heteronormative sexuality, evangelical leaders determined that “a civilization comprised of individuals who were sexually disordered and those who tolerated sexual disorder . . . [are] ill equipped to fight off military invasion, internal revolution, and economic competition” (Moslener, “Nuclear Bomb” 258). As psychologist Breanne Fahs emphasizes, this rhetoric was particularly active in the midst of the HIV/AIDS crisis as diverse expressions of sexuality gained increasing cultural awareness and political visibility (123). Evangelical leaders believed the only way to economically secure and politically stabilize America was by preparing adolescents, protecting traditional values, and resisting sexual deviance. In such a climate, chastity and abstinence became a means of erotic warfare that encompassed political activism, national stability, and the ultimate protection for Western civilization.

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Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, glorify God with your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20 NIV translation)

I was in grade seven the first time my skirt was measured. That week my older sister had come home mortified when a teacher told her to leave class because the shape of her “twins” were visible beneath her shirt. From then on, she wore a heavy cardigan. I still feel the heat down my back if my skirt inches up past my knee cap.

We knew what was expected. We signed a pledge of community standards at the start of each school year. What grew underneath the pledge was more complicated. One button undone was permissible depending on the teacher. Two buttons warranted a demerit marked on the board for the class to see. It all came down to choices. The list of deviances included unnatural hair color, nail polish, more than three necklaces, pierced ears, a colored tank top, a bra strap, too much padding, too little padding. You decide how you present yourself. More serious were infractions like an exposed shoulder, hint of curve, the shadow of cleavage, a defined collarbone. In this system you innocently began with merit. It was removed at the mere suggestion that your body was beyond neutrality. Lest you cause your brother to stumble.

I learned early that my body was not my own.

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In Evangelical Christianity, virgin consciousness constructs a culture of purity. Jennifer Miller proposes that virgin consciousness is a “mode of perceiving one’s sexuality at the service of Christianity as both counter to and superior to secular heterosexuality” (3). Sexual exceptionalism defines purity culture where individual sexual acts within the religious community are compared to secular, heteronormative sexualities. Traditional Biblical sexual values include refraining from any sexual activity outside of a strictly monogamous, heterosexual, and reproductive marriage (Fahs 123). Adherence to these codes of conduct not only affirm one’s faith and eternal salvation, they also are believed to ensure relationship stability and sexual satisfaction (Miller, 3). As Moslener emphasizes, such a preoccupation with sexual purity and virgin consciousness relies on religious modes of fear based in separatist and absolute binaries that maintain boundaries between sacred and secular individuals and spaces (“Nuclear Bomb” 261). Within purity culture, individuals are distinguished between those who are chaste in their adherence to interpreted biblical values and those who are act outside of

such prescriptive categories, who are promiscuous in their interpretations of sexuality. Additionally, Evangelical Christianity relies on forms religious accommodation in order to convert individuals and expand religious relevance. For example, religious accommodation positions sexual chastity as an individual choice and proactive investment in personal wellbeing and self-care. By engaging the two frameworks of fear and accommodation, purity culture constructs a moral economy where assurances of “emotional, sexual, and marital fulfillment [are] provided in exchange for bodily control and spiritual obedience” (261).

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But among you, as is proper among the saints, there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed [...] For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure, or greedy person, has any inheritance or place in the kingdom of Christ and of God. (Ephesians 5:3-5, NIV translation)

On that first day of Sex Education, we laughed through the newness, discomfort, and curiosity of terms like “sex” and “vagina” and “orgasm.”

“I am so glad this is your reaction,” the teacher reverently said over our giggles and eye rolling, “Because it means you are still pure.”

Abstinence was the only effective form of contraception and marriage was the only thing that would save us from disease and eternal damnation.

The boys bragged that they got diagrams. Anatomically accurate, they told us. We got comics explaining the virtues of a hymen and the evils of tampons. Your most precious gift gone for the sake of convenience.

Questions were not permitted. A list, however, was provided:

A piece of chewed gum.

A rose with no petals, just a single stem with thorns.

A stretched hair elastic.

An unwrapped present, tape stuck to crumpled paper.

A broken plate.

Two pieces of paper glued and ripped apart. Over and over again. Nothing left.

Who would ever choose you, the teacher asked, once you’ve been used?

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Purity culture uses individual pledges and public rites of passage in order to maintain female chastity. These pledges can be formal contracts or personal commitments which can involve large social gatherings or “purity balls”. Commonly, a ring accompanies a purity pledge as an outward and public symbol of this commitment to Jesus Christ where the ring is worn until the individual marries or is removed when they become sexually active. For females, a purity pledge involves her father or male figure as a protective stand in who will safeguard and guide her spiritual and sexual maturity until her wedding day when he will then pass this protective right onto her husband (Manning 88). As both a repressive and generative practice that constructs female social identity, Fahs determines that girls only have the vocabulary of purity to discuss their sexual desires and experiences, concepts that are vaguely defined and framed as something dirty and wrong (134). Within these practices women’s bodies are situated as sexual commerce where male figureheads regulate, control, and protect the discourse of, access to, and expression of female sexualities (118). This limits autonomy and self-actualization as females are not trusted with their own desires, experiences, and bodies.

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“I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and

*became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.”
(1 Timothy 2:9-15 NIV translation)*

“Respecting the guidelines honours the community. It’s not about rules, it’s about relationship. This is the call of Christ – your life in service. Christ in you, the hope and glory. Amen.”

There were hallways women weren’t allowed to walk down. Leadership was too much for a woman to hold. Women shared, harmonized, hoping one day to receive love. The men were granted respect and space. They prayed and ate first. In their presence, we ceded authority.

We did their laundry and cleaned their bathrooms, scrubbing on our hands and knees.

Between the pauses, I heard, “You are responsible for someone else’s sin, some else’s salvation in the way you are present here. Your choices, your clothes, your body determines their behavior.”

My body in service.

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Purity culture is situated within a gendered landscape where women are not trusted with their bodies, desires, and sexual experiences.

Fahs determines this ideology is grounded in the gender essentialist belief that men are inherently cerebral and logical while women are of the body which is perceived as dirty, of lower status, and less rational (135). By creating this distinct divide between femininity and masculinity, Fahs suggests that “girls are thought to not want sex, while boys are thought to have an essential sexual appetite that girls must resist” (120). This is a gendered ethic where a woman’s body and sexuality are exclusively framed in terms of passivity, vulnerability, and need of protection. Female sexual agency is disembodied within this system as a woman’s body is not her own but rather the property of God and protected by a male authority figure such as her father who will then pass this right onto

her husband (133). This fixation on purity positions women at “war with ourselves, our own bodies, our own sexualities [...] all under the strict commandment of the church” (Linda Klein quoted in Stankorb). Emily Joy describes how within such a dynamic “you’re taught to distrust your own mind and heart. You can’t sell a system as ridiculous and oppressive as purity culture unless you get people to doubt themselves fundamentally” (quoted in Stankorb). Heather Hendershot discusses if “a body that can only be controlled or cured by a spiritual commitment to chastity [then] fundamentalist chastity discourse may inadvertently encourage boys to be sexually violent and girls to see submission to sexual violence as natural” (92). This creates a relational dynamic where women are conditioned and expected to submit, remain passive, and disconnected from their own bodies and sexualities.

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“Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.”

(Titus 5:4-5 NIV translation)

I sat in the corner pew. Eyes on my back have always made me break out in a cold sweat, watching every move. A new engagement was announced. The women whispered “look how she lights up, practically glowing. It’s like we can finally see her when she stands by him. Finally, what a thing to behold.”

“Children are God’s greatest gift,” he says from the raised pulpit, “And do not fall for the lie that contraception is anything but you willfully taking God’s plan into your hands. Denying the truth will only bring grief and strife. It is when her arms and womb are empty that her heart is empty. Let us never forget this is a woman’s most blessed role, her true fulfillment is found in service to the Lord. Let us pray.”

My best friend was dating the man she believed she would marry. Between biology homework and basket-ball practice she whispered, “If marriage isn’t on the table in six months, he’ll never marry you. He’s making a fool out of you. Can you imagine that shame? I would rather die.” She didn’t marry that man. Four years later I stood beside

her as she signed a marriage certificate, trading one man's name for another, a baby in less than year.

I can still hear the words, "What a shame no one has snatched you up yet." It's a compliment I tell myself. My twenty years of singleness labeled me as incorrectly female. I have what is termed a belligerent spirit. Obstinate. Disobedient. Deceived. Unrepentant. No amount of travel or education or distance could ease that shame. I would always be in the back pew of this world, my cross to bear.

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Maintaining sexual purity is an act of obedience that affirms and demonstrates an individual's faith within Evangelical Christian community. The rhetoric within purity culture, religious scholar Elizabeth Gish suggests, frames sexuality in terms of risk avoidance where any sexual act, from experiencing sexual desire to holding hands to penetrative intercourse, is spiritually, psychically, relationally, and psychologically dangerous (8). There is particular emphasis on causal associations that premarital sex results in increased rates of cancer, sexually transmitted infection and disease, mental illness, unplanned pregnancy, and unfulfilling and traumatic sexual experiences (7). Any sexual desire or contact is not only a violation of individual wellbeing but also an act against God's will and disruption in the social order of the faith community. Such rhetoric and practices lead to stigma, decreased access to accurate sexual education, health care, and fewer opportunities to explore healthy sexual relationships (7). Organizations like True Love Waits and books like Joshua Harris' *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* are iconic within purity culture for proselytizing the merits of abstinence sexual intimacy where heterosexual marriage is presented as the only avenue for safe sexual experiences. In reflecting on her past experience within the purity culture movement, Lyvonne Picou says "we were supposed to kiss dating good-bye, but I kissed

sexuality good-bye” (quoted in Stankorb). Marital bliss, Gish discusses, acts as a counterweight that frames marriage as a prize to be earned for adhering to sexual chastity (15). This approach obscures the nuanced and dynamic realities of safe, healthy, and consensual sexual experiences by reducing sex and sexualities to abstract, romanticized, and monolithic promises of an eventual heterosexual marriage.

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“So, in Christ Jesus you are all children through faith, or all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26-28 NIV translation).

Our spaces are bathroom stalls, quiet rooms behind closed doors, the sink where we scrub dishes and peel potatoes. This is where first kisses, unwanted advances, second kisses, missed periods, whispered phone calls, miscarriages, skirt lengths, tampons, and hushed abortions catch up with us.

No one tells you about the nausea or the cold sweat or lump in your throat, how vigilance sinks into you, how shame will never let go, how silence lodges in your body. If desire is a darkness, it has always been here. Knee to navel. What we feel but cannot name. Where in the body do we begin?

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As a religious institution, Evangelical Christianity provides women with defined gender roles, predictable expectations, and meaningful community practices. In the midst of cultural shifts and ambiguity regarding gender, a reliance on male authority positions patriarchal structures as trustworthy, familiar, and comfortable. The focus on marriage and family values establishes an order and sequence for females, offering varying levels of security and fulfillment. For parents, purity culture rites of passages provide a protective mechanism for their daughters and a potential space to discuss and

negotiate sexual experiences. By investing in their daughters' sexual futures through such purity rituals, Jimmie Manning discusses, parents experience levels of cognitive dissonance with the opportunity to reflect on and even absolve their own sexual regrets (100). While father figures play a central role in regulating female sexuality, sons are absent from such discussions, expectations, and rituals, resulting in segmented and gendered discourses of sexuality (100). These gendered practices, Manning notes, are guided by "beliefs – whether factual, intuitive, or experience-oriented – [that] come into discursive interplay with values for purity pledge families, symbolically constructing a foundation for their sex education" (102). The challenge here is to renegotiate vulnerability not as an innate female characteristic but rather a product of larger theological and cultural structures that disembody and discount the sexuality of women. A holistic and equitable understanding of the gendered dynamics within purity culture requires that female perspectives and lived experiences are first recognized, represented, and trusted.

Within contemporary Evangelical Christianity, the purity culture movement inscribes gendered values of sexuality on female bodies. This movement highlights historical and political dynamics that position and assume biblical moral guidelines as common and expected values of North American society. Religious leaders situate practices within purity culture, such as chastity pledges and purity balls, as a form of individual and collective activism to reinstate national stability, innocence, and moral values in North America. This gendered ethic constructs female bodies and sexualities as submissive, vulnerable, and passive which disembodies women from their sexual

agency and autonomy. Further, the distrust of female bodies, desires, and experiences, in combination with the sexual harm rhetoric, results in shame, decreased access to accurate sexual education and health care services, few spaces to mediate and explore healthy sexual relationships, and body alienation. Purity culture, whether women participate out of obligation or as a form of activism and autonomy, provides defined gender roles, predictable expectations, and meaningful community practices. Gish states there is responsibility now to “create spaces that highlight the full humanity of adolescent girls, valuable in and of themselves – not as objects of gifts – and whose active participation in their own subject formation and development is not only important and welcome but also essential” (22). The pervasive and engrained nature of purity culture challenges the reimagination of sexual ethics as well as the humanization of women as complex, competent, and sexual individuals.

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