


2017

Reproducing the Capitalist Patriarchy in the Evangelical Christian Sexual Purity Movement: A Feminist Christian's Concern and Hope

Hannah K. Griggs

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/wollstonecraftaward>

 Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Griggs, Hannah K.. "Reproducing the Capitalist Patriarchy in the Evangelical Christian Sexual Purity Movement: A Feminist Christian's Concern and Hope" (2017). *Mary Wollstonecraft Writing Award*.

<http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/wollstonecraftaward/23>

This Student Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Prizewinners at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mary Wollstonecraft Writing Award by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

Augustana College

Reproducing the Capitalist Patriarchy in the Evangelical Christian Sexual Purity Movement:
A Feminist Christian's Concern and Hope

Hannah Griggs

Dr. Jennifer Popple

Feminist Theory: WGST 304-01

Fall 2016

Long Analytical

Trying to Understand My Dad

I didn't engage in any sort of romantic or physical relationship until the summer after my senior year of high school. My first boyfriend's name was Dan. Our relationship wasn't serious—we explicitly intended to break up before college, and we never had sex of any kind. Even so, my silly romance with Dan created a strange tension between my parents and me. When we broke up, just like we'd planned, my parents were relieved, and the strange tension dissipated.

However, when I began dating Ryan during my sophomore year of college, that same strange tension resurfaced. About 3 months after we began dating, Ryan's parents invited me to celebrate New Year's Eve. Since they lived about a half hour away, they suggested I sleep over in their guest room.

When I came home the next day, my dad erupted: "That was completely inappropriate! You did not ask for my permission! As long as you live under my roof, I don't care if you're 30 years old, your boyfriend will never sleep over—not even if you're engaged!" I was shocked. My immediate reaction was to defend myself: "We didn't *do* anything, Dad! I slept in the guest room!" No one had to tell me, at least not explicitly, how I was supposed to think about sex. My dad didn't have to explain that he didn't want me sleeping over at Ryan's house because he didn't think it was appropriate for me to have sex. Somehow, I just knew. It didn't matter that I was an adult. It didn't matter that both of my parents are self-proclaimed feminists. My dad's message was clear: sex outside of marriage is wrong, and he saw it as his job to protect my virginity and sexual reputation.

To better understand my dad's response, I decided to explore the Christian sexual purity movement—particularly in its modern evangelical expression. Although I do not actively

participate in this tradition, evangelical Christianity has shaped my anxieties about sex and abstinence. I was born into the Church of God, a conservative evangelical sect. Most of my extended family practices conservative expressions of Christianity. After we moved to Iowa, we began attending St. Paul Lutheran church, where I spent formative years participating in confirmation and high school youth group. As my faith developed, changed, and was challenged, my perspective has come to align most closely with the ELCA Lutheran expression of Christianity. However, switching from the Church of God denomination to a more socially progressive sect does not negate conservative Christianity's influence on me. Although our church does not explicitly promote abstinence only education, I suspect that my dad's response is rooted in the same internal logic.

From within the context of patriarchy, as enforced by the Christian sexual purity movement, my dad's anxiety about me having sex outside of marriage makes more sense. Through a feminist lens, this essay will explore modern expressions of the conservative evangelical Christian purity movement, including Christian sex manuals, abstinence-only education programs, and purity balls. To begin, I will explain the most important facets of my own feminist theory, which draws from existentialist, socialist, and postmodern feminisms. Using this unique combination of theories, I will attempt to reconcile my deeply held Christian and feminist beliefs about sex. Finally, I will propose a solution that honors both of these important parts of my identity. I assert that the Christian purity movement Others women, reinforcing a gender binary, bending to the will of capitalist power structures, and assuming a unified human experience.

My Own Feminist Theory: Existentialist, Socialist, and Postmodern

While I value many feminist theories that I will not mention in this essay, my personal feminist theory primarily sews together the work of feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Heidi Hartmann, and Hélène Cixous. As I interpret contemporary manifestations of the purity movement, including Christian sex manuals, abstinence-only education programs, and purity balls, I will call upon existentialist, socialist, and postmodern critiques.

Existentialist Feminism. According to Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, we live in a society that treats men as subjects—the Absolute—and treats women as objects—the Other. The essence of women is always defined in relationship to men: “man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas women represents only the negative” (de Beauvoir 163). In this dichotomy, being a man is regarded as natural and being a woman is regarded as Other. Society defines men as possessing intelligence, strength, and initiative, while society defines women as emotional, delicate, and passive. Society reveres this binary as though it is a natural fact, training men (and women) to think of women as Others and allowing men to benefit from all of the privileges society gives Subjects. As Simone de Beauvoir famously writes: “One is not born, but rather becomes woman” (167). The body does not determine the nature of one’s consciousness; instead, society as a whole shapes a human being’s essence. Therefore, masculinity and femininity are not unchanging concepts, but social constructs.

Socialist Feminism. Drawing from the work of Karl Marx, socialist feminists argue that capitalism “alienates” workers from the products they produce, their sense of self, and community with others. Capitalism ensures that a woman’s sense of self is solely defined by others: “[Women’s] alienation is profoundly disturbing because women experience themselves

not as selves but as others” (Tong 99). In “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,” Heidi Hartmann, a prominent socialist feminist, explains that while capitalism is *a* central source of women’s oppression, it is not the *only* source of women’s oppression. Hartmann asserts that one must also identify patriarchy as an instrument of women’s oppression. Patriarchy organizes affairs between men, which allow them to dominate women. Therefore, feminists must recognize the role that capitalism plays in patriarchal systems. According to Hartmann, patriarchy is “[a] set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchal relations between men and solidarity among them which enable them in turn to dominate women” (Hartmann 310). Class, race, nationality, and marital status determine hierarchal relationships between men. However, regardless of other intersecting areas of oppression and privilege, men enjoy a dynamic social agreement where upper class men “give” lower class men the right to dominate women, asserting a three-part control over women’s labor, resources, and sexuality.

Postmodern Feminism(s). While de Beauvoir presents a binary opposition between Subject and Object, postmodern feminists find these categories inherently problematic. Prominent thinkers like Judith Butler and Hélène Cixous urge feminists to transcend the gender binary—and binaries in general: “Bent upon achieving unity, we human beings have excluded, ostracized, and alienated so-called abnormal, deviant, and marginal people” (Tong 208-209). In “The Laugh of the Medusa” Cixous writes that for too long, men have defined the relationship a woman should have with her own body, her own desires, her own experience: “Why don’t you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you, your body is for you, take it” (225). Challenging biological determinism and the gender binary, Cixous urges women to freely “write” or define her self. By alienating woman from her own body, patriarchy makes woman a stranger to her self: “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be

heard” (226). By repressing women’s bodies, men commandeer women’s agency, making women incomplete selves. Asking who benefits from the control of women’s bodies, Cixous calls for a new age of human interactions that rethinks gender binaries, for the truth of women’s experience is not universal but multiple. However, as we deemphasize binary categories of gender, sexuality, race, religion, nationality, and age, we must take care not to erase meaningful differences, honoring diversity in its own right. Even if humans are actors, performing societally scripted gender, we must remember that the actors cannot take off their costumes or completely separate themselves from their scripted roles as they interact with the world (Tong 208-209).

My Own Theory! Each of these theories, existentialist, socialist, and postmodern, is necessary to understand the interlocking oppressions at work in Christian sex manuals, abstinence-only education, and purity balls. From existentialist feminists, we learn that the danger of the gender binary is not that it posits differences between men and women, but that it produces a *hierarchy* of difference. From socialist feminists, we learn to think critically about the role of capitalism and patriarchy in women’s oppression. From postmodern feminists, we learn that the human experience is multiple—not universal. As a Christian, I am tempted to dismiss my concerns about the way abstinence is taught to young Christians. However, as a feminist Christian, I cannot ignore the troubling consequences of reproducing gender and sexuality binaries.

Often times, it seems that feminists lack compassion, forgetting to consider the religious beliefs and self-understanding of the people they perceive as oppressors. I know that my dad was doing his best to be a good dad¹. And I suspect that many of the people who take part in the Christian sexual purity movement also are do their best to be good people. However, while I cannot ignore the way my dad reinforced patriarchal norms, I also cannot ignore that he

¹ Side note: My dad is a super awesome dad.

understood his response as rooted in love for me. As postmodern feminists remind us, we feminists must remember that the truth is multiple.

As I approach this topic, I will assume that the people who I perceive as participating in systems of women's oppression do not *intend* to disempower women. While this is not always the case, alienating the people whose minds I hope to change will not produce the change I hope to see. As I approach this topic, my primary aim is to answer the following question, which gets to the heart of my feminist theory: Does the Christian sexual purity movement Other women, reinforcing a gender binary, bending to the will of capitalist power structures, and assuming a unified human experience? While I will ultimately answer yes to this question, I seek to balance the particular self-understandings of the people within the movement with my feminist critique.

An Existentialist Feminist's Concerns about Reproducing Gender Norms

In "What Would Jesus Do? Sexuality and Salvation in Protestant Evangelical Sex Manuals," Amy DeRogatis reports evangelical beliefs about sex and marriage based on her extensive research on popular sex manuals written by and for evangelical Christians. In order to best understand the nature of Christian prescriptions for healthy sex, she begins with a brief history of secular sex manuals in the United States for comparison. Reinforcing a standard of heterosexuality and strict gender roles, the secular sex manuals produced in the early 1900s made a couple of assumptions: first, these manuals assumed that only married couples would engage in sex, and second, while both male and female pleasure were key to "successful sex," men were charged with the responsibility to facilitate female sexual fulfillment (DeRogatis). Even while emphasizing the female experience, I assert that early twentieth century manuals nevertheless Other women. By putting men in charge of women's sexuality, the manuals prescribe female passivity, undermining female agency.

After 1945, secular definitions of “successful sex” began to change. Strengthening hierarchical gender binaries, the secular sex manuals of the mid-twentieth century began to value male pleasure over female pleasure: “‘Normal’ or ‘typical’ men are described as easily sexually stimulated and also easily emotionally wounded by a wife that will neither satisfy his urgent sexual desires nor affirm his masculinity by achieving orgasm under his ministrations” (DeRogatis 102). Nevertheless, rather than emphasizing the importance of both male and female orgasm, as earlier twentieth century manuals did, the sex manuals produced from the 1940s-1960s define successful sex as intercourse within heterosexual marriage that produces male orgasm.

The 1970s represents a shift, spearheaded by Alex Comfort’s *The Joy of Sex*, in the way that secular sex manuals discussed sex. In contrast to previous sex manuals, Comfort’s manual intended to encourage couples—married or unmarried—to move beyond the prescriptions of the past. Opting instead for “sexual discovery through personal experimentations,” Comfort encouraged couples to embrace the idea that sexual behavior need not be “different from the sexual acts people performed for erotic pleasure” (qtd. in DeRogatis 103). Comfort’s definition of sex includes multiple forms of sexual activity outside the boundaries of traditional intercourse and marriage. Nevertheless, like previous sex manuals, Comfort’s manual defined sex as between a man and a woman, condemning homosexual relationships and reinforcing gender binaries. Despite deviating from certain societal norms about gender and sexuality, in the end, Comfort’s secular manual reproduces them.

Christian Sex Manuals. Like secular sex manuals, evangelical Christian sex manuals became popular during the 1970s. These manuals define sex as a sacred act within heterosexual marriage that delights in God’s plan for human beings and creation. If performed frequently, always

striving to reach orgasm—while keeping in mind the natural differences between male and female pleasure—sex is healthy, natural, and good for Christians. For these evangelical Christians, biology produces sex differences between men and women. Of course, evangelicals assume that God creates these biological differences. According to the vast majority of evangelical Christian sex manuals, God endowed men with an aggressive, natural sex drive. Male aggression makes men strong leaders—Subjects—and gives them the ability to provide for their families: “Therefore a man’s ‘natural’ drive to satisfy his sexual needs must be constantly met and greeted with approval in order for him to have a healthy ego and preform his obligation to his family” (DeRogatis 126). Evangelicals assert, then, that God created complimentary, biological sex differences between men and women in order to fulfill His divine purpose.

In the manuals described by DeRogatis, neither men and nor women achieve spiritual completion until marriage, when the male Subject fills the metaphorical hole in the female Other’s heart, completing both of them. Sex is sacred, evangelical writers assert: “...a full glory of evangelical faith is found in the marital bed and that a proper way to express and witness to evangelical beliefs is through a mutually satisfying relationship with one’s spouse” (132). Therefore, by uniting men and women, sex—within the context of marriage—glorifies the bond between human beings and facilitates a close relationship with God. From an existentialist point of view, promoting men to Subjects and demoting women to Others not only oppresses women by preventing them from achieving full autonomy, but also fails to see the ways that society shapes masculinity and femininity. While perhaps biology plays a role in shaping differences between men and women, society constructs masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, by requiring heterosexual marriage, this distinction Others homosexuality.

Abstinence-Only Education. “Acting Out Abstinence, Acting Out Gender: Adolescent Moral Agency and Abstinence Education” by Melissa D. Browning examines the gendered character of abstinence pledges as constructed by faith-based abstinence education. Browning specifically studied an urban dance and drama team for young adults ages 14-21 which promotes abstinence until marriage. By observing the interactions between students both in their performances and in their everyday interactions with each other, Browning discovered that abstinence only education tends to encourage “gender complementarity rather than gender equality within relationships” (156). This corroborates DeRogatis’s research on evangelical Christian sex manuals, which assert that God created men and women to complement each other.

By gendering sexual relationships, the abstinence education programs Browning observed limited the agency of the actors, particularly the agency of women. Drawing from Judith Butler, Browning writes: “...the performer, set in a socially constructed existence, does not have an infinite range of choices as to what they chose to perform” (157). The performances set different expectations for men and women’s sexuality. While abstinence education encouraged both men and women to refrain from sexual intercourse until marriage, it asked men and women to refrain for different reasons. Men pledged abstinence in order to avoid AIDs and increase pleasure by “waiting,” while women pledged abstinence to protect her sexual gifts for her future husband. Harkening back to the Adam and Eve narrative², the students’ performances reinforced gender stereotypes by presenting women as seductresses who tempt male characters, causing the Subject’s demise. Furthermore, the performances reinforced the narrative that while men “give love to get sex, women give sex to get love” (152). I argue that this construction of gender posits men as Subjects who “give” and women as Others who “get.” The gendered nature

² As recorded in Genesis 1-3 of the Bible.

of abstinence education, does not merely serve to promote the sexual health of young adults, but more importantly, to implicitly reinforce gender norms that define women as Others.

Purity Balls. In “Producing High Priests and Princesses: The Father-Daughter Relationship in the Christian Sexual Purity Movement,” Elizabeth Gish asserts that the primary purpose of sexual purity rituals has less to do with prescribing when and with whom sexual intercourse should take place and more to do with prescribing relationships between men and women. As stated previously, these rituals imagine men as Subjects and women as Others. The ritual of the father-daughter purity ball has grown tremendously over the last 10-15 years. Because these events lack a centralized system of rules, scholars struggle to make overarching claims about the nature of purity balls. However, in general, purity balls include pledges, father-daughter dances, and formal wear. The father—not the daughter—pledges to protect the daughter’s sexual purity, limiting the daughter’s agency: “The pledge is about what the individual pledge-maker will do... God will use the actions of the pledge-maker ‘to influence future generations’” (Gish 6). These rituals appoint fathers as having a unique role in guarding their daughter’s sexual purity. An exchange of jewelry usually symbolizes the father’s pledge to protect his daughter. Often times, a daughter receives a heart-shaped necklace, and her father will wear a key-shaped pin on his necktie. Charging the father with the task of protecting the daughter’s purity constructs the father as active and the daughter as passive. As Randy Wilson, a prominent advocate for father-daughter purity balls stated: “‘It is a fatherhood event, not a virginity or abstinence event’” (Gish 7). Wilson expects the father to act autonomously but does not expect the daughter to act autonomously.

If the daughter refuses to obey her father, she risks her chance to receive a husband—a husband who will financially support her. As de Beauvoir writes: “To decline to be the

Other...this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by the superior caste. Man-the-sovereign will provide women-the-liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of her existence, thus she can evade both the economic and the metaphysical risk of her liberty..." (166). The daughter can avoid the responsibility of making her own decisions about her body. She can "choose" to live as an object—as a child lives—obeying her father (and later, her husband), the Subjects: "...the balls provide a context for performing and continuing the process of producing sex and gender in ways that diminish the full humanity of not only women but of all people who are woven into the kyriarchal existence" (Gish 10). Therefore, purity balls are not simply dress up games, but instead, a way to reproduce interlocking systems of oppression³.

A Socialist Feminist's Concerns about Capitalist Power Structures

Christian Sex Manuals. By reinforcing gender norms that Other women, Christian sex manuals support the capitalist patriarchy. According to DeRogatis, evangelical sex manuals state that God made men to work outside the home. She explains the implications of this construction of sex and gender: "Put bluntly, God created men and women with natural sexual desires, and those desires are related to male and female characteristics and how men and women should behave toward each other in the household, church, and society" (113). Male and female sexuality reflects and prescribes the ways in which men and women should behave in public and in private. Therefore, these manuals assert that God endows men with the qualities necessary to provide for a family, giving religious legitimacy to male control over female's access to labor,

³ Gish points out that the majority of people who participate in father-daughter purity balls are wealthy and white. Therefore, the purity ball not only reproduces patriarchy, but also capitalism and hierarchical racial dynamics.

resources, and sexuality. Ultimately, the capitalist patriarchy uses the same logic to legitimize discrimination against women in the workplace.

The capitalist patriarchy necessitates heterosexual marriage for the wellbeing of women. The Christian sex manuals present male sexuality as barely contained since God gave men a highly active libido: “Marriage allows men to channel their natural sexual energy to one appropriate woman” necessitating heterosexual marriage (DeRogatis 127). By asserting that men need marriage in order to control their sexual desire for women, I argue that Christians subtly legitimize rape culture. Furthermore, the sex manuals often encourage women to use sex as a form of “power” over men. For example, if a woman wants a new can opener or new curtains, Marabel Morgan, author of *The Total Woman*, suggests that women use sex as currency: “Wives who faithfully follow Morgan’s plan will find that their sexuality empowers them... Evangelical female sexual empowerment can be gauged materially” (DeRogatis 129). However, as a socialist feminist, I contend that the “empowerment” Morgan promises is not empowerment at all, for it reinforces a system that allows men to dominate women’s bodies and access to resources.

Abstinence-Only Education. Abstinence-only education also reinforces patriarchal capitalism by framing women’s sexuality as currency. Browning relays a skit from the dance and drama team dedicated to promoting premarital abstinence. When asked by her friend Sandy whether or not she planned to have sex with her boyfriend, “Ginny said, ‘He’s paying for everything, it’s the least I can do.’ Then Sandy began to total up how much each thing cost, and then said, ‘Is that how much you’re worth?’” (151). Sandy’s advice for Ginny reframes Ginny’s currency not in terms of her sexual ability but in terms of her chastity. By continuing to frame Ginny’s situation as a monetary exchange, Sandy affirms the patriarchal capitalist norms that cause Ginny see her body as a form of sexual currency.

Noting that abstinence-only education usually directs this message toward young women, Browning writes: “At the end of one of the performances in my fieldwork, a youth worker approached the stage and told the audience, ‘We want young people to understand that one decision, one night can even change the rest of their life’” (153). This construction elevates women’s chastity to the level of eschatological currency. In the Biblical context that prescribes abstinence until marriage, society saw women as property. Abstinence protected the woman’s dowry, and therefore, access to a husband. If a woman becomes impure, she risks her future, implying that only heterosexual marriage can provide financial security. Browning suggests: “Here we are left asking the question of what shape abstinence education might take if equality was embraced as a goal and heteronormativity was not expected” (156). In order to free abstinence-only education from the capitalist patriarchy, I assert that Christians should not frame women’s financial success in terms of her sexual purity.

Purity Balls. In a capitalist society, Subjects control the means of production—the exchange of material goods and services. Elizabeth Gish examines the ways in which sexual purity rhetoric reinforces capitalist definitions of what it means to be a Subject: “[girls] are groomed for heterosexual marriage, at which time the care for the daughter (and the authority to which she submits) is transferred to the husband” (8). Rather than allowing the girl to control her own body, men transfer authority over their daughters to other men—like her body is a commodity. Women are not complete, autonomous Subjects in the capitalist patriarchy. As the title of section 4 puts it: there is a “Special Guy-Shaped Hole in Your Heart” (Gish 7). This system encourages a father not to protect his daughter so that she will grow into a complete and autonomous adult, but instead, the capitalist patriarchy encourages a father to preserve the gift of his daughter’s sexual purity for the enjoyment of another man. Purity balls reinforce capitalist patriarchy in less

obvious ways, too. The people who participate in purity balls typically inhabit intersecting privileged identities: White, Protestant, middle class, male. Therefore, purity balls do not simply sustain patriarchy that privileges masculinity over femininity, but they also sustain a kyriarchy that involves multiple, intersecting systems of domination.

A Postmodern Feminist's Concern about Assuming a Unified Experience

Christian Sex Manuals. It is important to note the failure of secular sex manuals to provide a feminist framework for sexually active partners. Often times, the narrative promoted by my peers and the world of academia goes like this: evangelical Christians *in particular* create and enforce homophobia and taboos against sex outside of marriage. However, DeRogatis's careful research on secular sex manuals negates this narrative: "Both Alex Comfort and David Reuben describe homosexuals as immature, maladjusted deviants who need to be cured of their unhealthy obsession. 'Real' sex is between a man and a woman" (105). It is also important to note that secular norms for sexual intercourse change post WWII. During the early twentieth century, secular sex manuals emphasized the importance of female and male orgasm, but during the 1940s, secular sex manuals emphasized only male pleasure (102). My feminist critique attempts to disrupt the binary narrative where secular voices promote positive feminist messages and religious voices promote negative feminist messages. The truth is multiple.

For a minute, let's try to see taboos against premarital sex from the point of view of those who condemn it. From within the context of patriarchy, abstinence *does* protect women. Since men have material power, a women's purity until marriage gives her access to material success. While this does not truly empower women, the men who promise to protect women's purity conceivably do so from a place of love. The problem is that the people who participate in these

activities do not realize that their vow to protect the purity of their daughters perpetuates a system that ultimately disempowers their daughters.

When analyzing evangelical sex manuals, we must understand that for these Christians, sex is sacred. Evangelicals view sex, according to DeRogatis's analysis, as God's gift to human beings—the gift to delight in each other's bodies. But certainly not all sex within heterosexual Christian marriage is sacred for evangelicals. If God gives heterosexual sex as a gift to humans, sacred sex certainly cannot include sexual abuse and rape. If God gives heterosexual sex as a gift to humans, then certainly God would not give merely disappointing sex. If, even within the context of marriage, some sexual encounters are not sacred, perhaps all sexual encounters outside the context of marriage are not sacred. However, just as disappointing sex—as long performed with consent—is not profane, I argue that premarital sex is neither sacred nor profane.

Furthermore, according to DeRogatis's analysis of evangelical sex manuals, sacred sex need not be for the purpose of reproduction: sacred sex “creates a ‘one-flesh’ relationship between the two people involved. This union between husband and wife forged through sexual activity... was the basis of a Christian marriage... [t]he unitive function of sex for building a Christian marriage was well received by evangelicals who in growing numbers began accepting birth control...” (108). Perhaps, then, if sex is God's gift that allows humans to enjoy each other's bodies within marriage, evangelicals could include homosexual encounters in the realm of sacred sex—if performed with consent and in the context of monogamy. I understand that to many evangelicals, these proposals are quite radical. I do not expect evangelicals to suddenly adopt these changes, but I do hope to disrupt the narrative that only one way to have good Christian sex exists.

Abstinence-Only Education. My criticism of Christian abstinence-only education seeks not to condemn those who promote premarital abstinence, but rather, I seek to disrupt the narrative of a unified Christian experience of sacred sex. Operating within the boundaries of feminist theology and Christian ethics, Browning agrees that in general, postponing the sexual entrance of society's youngest members is morally right. However, abstinence in and of itself is no virtue. Browning asks: "Is [abstinence] being used to give young people time and space to think about love and life, or is it being used as a tool to reinforce gender roles and heteronormative assumptions about relationally?" (159). To this question, I answer that evangelical abstinence-only education both protects young bodies and minds *and* reproduces gender and sexuality norms. Therefore, a postmodern criticism determines that abstinence education has *both* the potential to empower and disempower young women.

By reinforcing gender binaries, the Christian sexual purity movement limits the agency of male and female actors: "...adolescents are asked not only to subscribe to binary understandings of male/female, masculine/feminine, and gay/straight, but are also asked to make pledges and choices about their sexual bodies within the confines of these binaries" (Browning 157). This can have severe consequences for those who do not uphold the pledge. Since "no" is the only socially acceptable answer to whether or not one plans to have premarital sex, many evangelical adolescents who *do* have sex fail to use condoms. Browning suggests that stigmatizing the use of condoms is a consequence of binary thinking, causing an increased probability that evangelical adolescents will contract an STD or unintentionally produce a child. In order to reconcile feminist beliefs and Christian practice, without compromising Christian beliefs about the religious significance of sex, I concur with Browning's suggestion that Christians must work for the "degendering" and "queering" of abstinence education (159). By releasing Christians from

the bind of binary thinking, Christian teachings about sexual ethics could increase the agency of evangelical young people.

Purity Balls. In “Producing High Priests and Princesses,” Gish warns that some feminists fall “prey to the temptation to make fun of or dismiss those who promote and take part in such religious activities” (2). If we want to build a society that challenges structures that reinforce patriarchy—such as the purity movement—we must consider the ways that these systems connect to the genuine, well-meaning beliefs of the Christians who make these spiritual commitments. In order to dismantle systems of oppression, we must take into account the self-understanding of people within the purity movement.

Kylie Miraldi describes her understanding of the father-daughter purity ball jewelry exchange where the father gives the daughter a heart-shaped necklace and the father keeps a small key. On Kylie’s wedding day, her father will give the key to her heart to her husband: “It’s a symbol of my father giving up the covering of my heart, protecting me since it means my husband is now my protector” (qtd Gish 9). While, as an existentialist feminist, I am tempted to discredit Miraldi’s experience, as a postmodern feminist, I strive to understand the multiplicity of women’s lived experiences. Miraldi sees her father’s action as a symbol of his love. From within the context of patriarchy, she feels vulnerable and she desires protection from those who have power. By participating in this purity ritual, Miraldi has some measure of agency: by promising to remain sexually abstinent, Miraldi has more power within her community and can more freely move about in her patriarchal world. Nevertheless, although perhaps both Miraldi and her father genuinely see it as empowerment, this reinforces the system that requires Miraldi’s need for male protection.

Like abstinence-only education, purity balls reinforce gender binaries, which ultimately limit the agency of women. By liberating Christians from prescriptive binary relationships, Purity Balls could be a source of agency for evangelical young people. Imagine a purity ball for both young men and women where both parents promised to guard the bodies, hearts, and minds of their children until they enter adulthood. Then, having had the time to think about life and love, young adults would be better prepared to choose whether or not to have premarital sex.

Concluding Thoughts: A Feminist Christian's Hope

Suggestions for Feminists. A few weeks ago, I was at the grocery store talking to my grandpa on the phone when, in response to one of my recent Facebook posts, he asked me: "What is a feminist?" To understand the importance of this question, you should know a little bit about my grandpa. A conservative, evangelical Christian, he had planned to vote for Ben Carson. Of course, since Ben Carson is no longer in the presidential race, he has been considering other options. Although I have not confronted him, I have noticed some of his Trump-leaning Facebook posts, and I suspect that my grandpa plans to vote for him. These attributes seem to lead to the conclusion that certainly this man would not accept feminism.

However, I love and respect my grandpa, and I know that he loves and respects me. So rather than dismissing his question, and saying something like: "Well, Grandpa, I don't think you really want to know about that," I decided to thoughtfully engage him. I started with a simple, classical liberal feminist answer, telling him that feminists believe men and women should have equal political, economic, and social rights; society should treat women as autonomous agents. "I think I'm a feminist, too!" he responded. As we continued talking about feminism, he told me about his annoyance upon hearing stories of young women complaining about getting in trouble for not following the school dress code. Instead of automatically dismissing this concern, I

engaged it. I calmly explained that I while I understood why he might be concerned about this, I think that society often sexualizes women's bodies. Why are female bodies sexualized when they wear short shorts, but when male bodies come to school in track uniforms, no one complains that their shorts are too short? At the end of our conversation, my grandpa was still a little concerned about dress code violations, but I could tell that he had taken my concerns seriously.

I am convinced that this is how change occurs. After examining the interlocking systems that oppress women, people of color, and the poor, it is easy to despair. Can I hope that change will occur? My answer is yes: change happens through personal relationships. This is what being a good feminist looks like. As we strive to disrupt systems that Other women like capitalism and patriarchy, we must not Other the women whom we hope to help by assuming that we already know their experience. This is what being a good Christian looks like, too. When asked in the gospel of Mark which is the most important of God's commandments, Jesus cites Deuteronomy and Leviticus saying that “The most important one...is this ‘...Love the Lord your God....’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mk 12:29-31). In order to truly love our neighbors, we Christians—and feminists—must deeply listen to the beliefs that shape their genuine convictions.

Suggestions for Feminist Christians. On my baptism day, my parents gave me the *Young Women of Faith Bible* with a blue leather cover and my name engraved in silver. I felt very special—like being a Christian *woman* was important. In the pages' margins, text from the editors was set off with a bright pink background. When preparing to write this essay, I remembered that Bible. Most of the commentary simply highlighted important parts of certain passages, but some of them had an obvious agenda with headings like “Sexual Purity” (864). I do not think I ever read

that specific commentary, tucked away in Song of Songs. But still, it bothered me that it was in there.

I came across commentary that I had previously underlined—a blurb that I *had* read as a young woman of faith: “Did you know Jesus had woman disciples, too?” (1284). Messages like that one empowered me as a young Christian—I was still reading that Bible when I began thinking I could become a pastor someday. These passages remind me that although Christians believe that the Bible provides sacred wisdom across the boundaries of time and place, the Bible was written in the context of patriarchy, just like those little pink blurbs in the margins of mine: “While people put more value on boys than girls in Bible times, God always valued both equally. He created both in his image,” (44). Just as the editors indigenized⁴ the verses in the *Young Women of Faith Bible* to suit the needs of young women of faith like me, Christians will continue to reinterpret God’s word and the story of Jesus. The Bible, although supremely important, is not our only access to God⁵.

Last year, I took a course called Masculinity in Christianity where we examined the ways in which Jesus displays characteristics of hegemonic Roman masculinity. This interpretation of Jesus shook the foundation of my faith. However, this is not the only interpretation of scripture. When I read the gospels, the message I see that at the heart of Christianity is social justice. Above all, Jesus advocates for society’s underdogs. Jesus declares that “[God] has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.... to set the oppressed free” (Lk 4:18). This reading of Jesus shows a different Jesus—a Jesus who calls humans to show love and compassion,

⁴ Here, I borrow from Black Liberation Theologian James Cone who writes that to “indigenize” is to “reinterpret...for its own situation” (6).

⁵ A special thanks goes to Sara Olson-Smith, one of the pastors at my home church, St. Paul Lutheran in Davenport, Iowa, for answering my 10:30-on-a-week-night phone call. Trying to balance my feminism and Christianity can be mentally exhausting—especially after reading DeRogatis’s piece. I am so thankful that I have role models like Pastor Sara to remind me that Christianity and feminism do go together.

especially to the poor and oppressed. How can I believe both of these contradicting truths about Jesus? Because Truth is multiple: Jesus is *both* human and divine, knowable and unknowable, masculine and feminine, Subject and Other, life and death. And by his celebration of the multiplicity of Truth, Jesus ultimately saves us from the binary thinking that enslaves us.

Works Cited

- Browning, Melissa D. "Acting Out Abstinence, Acting Out Gender: Adolescent Moral Agency And Abstinence Education." *Theology & Sexuality: The Journal Of The Institute For The Study Of Christianity & Sexuality* 16.2 (2010): 143-161. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 3 Nov. 2016.
- Cone, James H., and Michael Harrington. *The Black Church and Marxism: What Do They Have to Say to Each Other*. New York: Institute for Democratic Socialism, 1980. 1-13. Print.
- DeRogatis, Amy. "What Would Jesus Do? Sexuality And Salvation In Protestant Evangelical Sex Manuals, 1950S To The Present." *Church History* 74.1 (2005): 97-137. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 3 Nov. 2016.
- Gish, Elizabeth. "Producing High Priests And Princesses: The Father-Daughter Relationship In The Christian Sexual Purity Movement." *Religions* 7.3 (2016): 1-22. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 3 Nov. 2016.
- Kolmar, Wendy K., and Frances Bartkowski. "51. Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975)." *Feminist Theory: A Reader*. 4th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2013. 224-230. Print.
- Kolmar, Wendy K., and Frances Bartkowski. "37. Simone de Beauvoir, 'Introduction' and Chapter 12 from *The Second Sex* (1949)." *Feminist Theory: A Reader*. 4th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2013. 161-68. Print.

- Kolmar, Wendy K., and Frances Bartkowski. "64. Heidi Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union' (1981)." *Feminist Theory: A Reader*. 4th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2013. 307-315. Print.
- Tong, Rosemarie. *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*. 4th ed. Boulder: Westview, 2014. Print.
- Young Women of Faith Bible: N.I.V., New International Version*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zonderkidz, 2001. Print.