

Hating Girls

An Intersectional Survey of Misogyny

Edited by

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The Dangers of “You Are Not Your Own”

How Purity Culture Props Up Rape Culture

Tara M. Tuttle

Purity culture is the cornerstone of rape culture. Though its proponents believe it promotes protection and high regard for women, it results in objectification, fragmentation, victim-blaming, hostile and benevolent sexism, and rape apologism. Purity culture also encourages submissiveness and discourages agency among women and girls. The promotion of purity culture by Christians makes their faith communities not merely complicit in rape culture but responsible for one of its pillars. This chapter will discuss how the damaging messages circulated in purity culture serve to prop up rape culture not only by encouraging sexualization, objectification, and fragmentation, but also by fostering silence and shame surrounding both consensual sexual activity and nonconsensual sexual violence. This culture of silence and shame often discourages survivors from reporting assaults and misconduct, prevents survivors from accessing resources and support they need, and leads to the complicity of relatives, community members, and even church officials in ensuring perpetrators are shielded from responsibility for their crimes.

1 What Is Purity Culture?

The term “purity culture” may refer broadly to any set of cultural beliefs that construe sexual activity as contaminating or impure; more specifically, in this chapter it refers to a Christian social movement following and reacting to the sexual liberation movement of the 1970s and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. This movement was solidified by the development and dissemination of Christian sexual education curricula emphasizing abstinence from sexual activity and sexual thoughts. Such curricula also fail to include accurate information about contraceptives, sexually transmitted infections, LGBTQ sexualities, and abortion. The True Love Waits program founded in 1993 by Richard Ross and a team at Lifeway Christian Resources became the most prominent of these, and its messages were circulated via pledge cards, posters, t-shirts, books, Christian popular music albums, rings marking one’s commitment to remain a virgin

until marriage, and other paraphernalia in addition to the curricula adopted by numerous congregations.¹

Initially adopted by Southern Baptist churches, its scope expanded denominationally and internationally within a year as the program was embraced by other Christian groups including the Assemblies of God and the Roman Catholic Church. By the late 1990s, reports from the True Love Waits staff at Lifeway were distributed to the U.S. Surgeon General, the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, and other officials and were used to influence decisions about government-funded abstinence-only sexual education campaigns.² By 2004, BBC News reported that over 2.5 million American teens had taken a virginity pledge.³ Teens of various genders comprised these pledgers, but for girls, purity culture sometimes also included father-daughter dances called purity balls, during which they would verbalize a pledge that cast their fathers as the guardians of their chastity until their marriages to male spouses.

At no point in my research did I discover evidence of similar events involving mothers and sons as part of this purity movement. This discrepancy illustrates the way in which purity culture tilts toward the control of the bodies of women and girls. Boys and men have not been free from its messages and damaging effects, but its emphasis has been upon the repression of female sexuality. This reaffirms the male control inherent in patriarchy in positing fathers as protectors over daughters but not mothers over sons and illuminates how boys are seen as agents whereas girls are reduced to their bodies as objects. It also exemplifies how the sexuality of boys is less a source of shame and that the virginity of boys is less of a concern in purity culture; boys are subject to fewer rituals that reinforce the notion that their holiness is tied to their abstinence.

Purity culture then as I refer to it in this chapter includes the social scripts about sexual practices that targeted American teenagers in the 1990s and 2000s linking Christian belief and identity to abstinence, social scripts disseminated in abstinence-only sexual education programs, individual congregations, movements like True Love Waits with its abundance of merchandise such as purity rings and t-shirts, book and pamphlet publications, conferences, and church materials such as pledge cards and curricula, and the megaphones of the loose network of political and religious organizations called the religious

1 Lifeway Christian Resources, "True Love Waits History," *True Love Waits* (2020), https://s7d9.scene7.com/is/content/LifeWayChristianResources/True_Love_Waits_Historypdf.pdf (accessed June 23, 2020).

2 Ibid.

3 BBC News, How effective are abstinence pledges?, *BBC News* (June 29, 2004). http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/3846687.stm (Accessed 6 23, 2020).

right, which includes Focus on the Family, the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, and the Southern Baptist Convention. Purity culture extends beyond what I have named here and is not confined to practitioners of Christianity or to American contexts, but this describes what I consider the epicenter of purity culture in the United States.

2 What Is Rape Culture?

The term “rape culture” was used in the 1974 book *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women* by the New York Radical Feminists⁴ to describe an environment in which sexual assault is rampant and in which this violence is normalized, minimized, trivialized, or otherwise tacitly accepted. It is perpetuated through the objectification of bodies, typically the bodies of women and girls, largely through media representations of sexualization and violence; through indifference to this violence on the part of law enforcement, political officials, administrators of institutions exhibited by victim-blaming procedures and policies that are not trauma-informed, along with barriers to holding perpetrators responsible for their crimes; through language about sex, violence, intimacy, and bodies that is dehumanizing and the widespread acceptance of myths about how rape happens and to whom; and through the impact of members of society knowing that consequences of sexual assault are so rare for perpetrators and so high for victims that women and girls modify their behavior in daily life to address the threat of sexual violence. In a rape culture, the burden of the responsibility for sexual violence is placed on the victim; vulnerable populations are expected to modify their behaviors to avoid getting raped. Consequently, many women and girls, both cisgender and transgender, and members of LGBTQ+ populations are likely to live according to a “rape schedule,” a term coined by Dianne Herman⁵ in 1984 to name the way women and girls are likely to make choices intended to reduce the threat of sexual violence including but not limited to when they go out, which paths they take, how they dress, whether they travel alone or in groups, in which activities they engage and with whom, whether or not they consume alcohol or drugs, and

4 New York Radical Feminists, *Rape: The First Sourcebook* (New York: New American Library, 1974).

5 Dianne F. Herman, “The Rape Culture,” in *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, by Ed. Jo Freeman (Mountain View, Co: Mayfield, 1984). http://homepage.smc.edu/delpiccolo_guido/soc1/soc1readings/rape%20culture_final.pdf.

other decisions, both conscious and unconscious, affecting their activities and interactions of daily life.

3 Male Domination, Female Submission, Anti-autonomy

Women and girls inhabiting a rape culture often become accustomed to commonplace restrictions that hinder them from equal access to opportunities and experiences. While not all men are perpetrators of sexual violence, and while men and boys are also victims of sexual violence, men and boys as a group benefit from the ways in which the threat of violence restricts the full participation of women and girls in the culture. Purity culture, too, restricts what is considered acceptable from girls and women and reinforces traditional ideas about gender norms that maintain a gender binary and reinforce separate spheres of activity for men and women. Together, rape culture and purity culture reinforce the male dominance of patriarchy and women's subsequent subjugation.

Sexist interpretations of Christian beliefs are significant pillars of patriarchy, purity culture, and rape culture. Consider the following commentary from the *Men's Devotional Bible*: "*Little boys are the hope of the next generation. Little girls, too, will benefit because they'll grow up with a clear vision of the kind of men who will make godly husbands.*"⁶ Why are little girls not also the hope of the next generation? They are assumed to be absent from the group of those who would contribute to the improvement of the community, at least in the public realm. They are assumed to be mere supporters of those young boys who will become the change agents in the culture rather than change agents themselves. This reaffirms the ways in which both purity culture and rape culture reduce women to vulnerable bodies valuable only when deemed chaste, i.e., uncontaminated by sexual activity and sexual violence.

This quoted passage reminds me of a conversation I had in 2008 with young female students attending Liberty University as undergraduates. These young women explained to me the current dress code at Liberty University actually offered more flexibility for young women, in their opinion, because they were permitted to wear hooded sweatshirts while young men were not. "Why not?" I asked, unprepared for the justification. "Because the boys will be entering the workforce," one young woman explained. "They have to wear business casual every day to get ready for their jobs," another chimed in. These young women

6 *Men's Devotional Bible*, NIV (Zondervan, 1993, p. 651).

did not need to become accustomed to work dress codes because the assumption was that they would not enter the workforce like their male counterparts. They were expected to dress modestly but not professionally. I was familiar with Liberty University’s conservative positions on gender and sexuality, but the conversation was still stunning to me for the acceptance with which these bright young women pursuing their educations dismissed such obvious sexism and segregation of opportunity based on gender. They did not fail to see it; they laughed at my raised eyebrows and widened eyes. One young woman said, “I know, right?,” but they tacitly accepted the premise that they were future homemakers. The problem here is coercion, not the life path itself. We must be mindful of how poor women and women of color, groups which often overlap due to systemic racism, have been denied opportunities to be stay-at-home mothers when they might have welcomed such a privilege, but the discouragement of young women from entering the workforce means discouraging them from economic self-sufficiency and from finding meaning and purpose in professions and vocations beyond the home and church. This further establishes male domination in their communities, in their churches, and in their relationships. This inhibits their autonomy.

This is the legacy of what historian Barbara Welter calls the “Cult of True Womanhood” which promoted piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness as virtues for women and girls.⁷ Male domination and female submission are reinforced explicitly within purity culture. Purity culture teaches girls literally that their bodies are not their own. This phrasing comes from 1 Corinthians 6:19–20, which reads, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” Though this verse does not explicitly address a message about gender, this verse was re-emphasized in the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood’s 2017 “Nashville Statement,”⁸ an update and reaffirmation of the 1987 “Danvers Statement”⁹ articulating the council’s beliefs about what the Bible instructs about gender and sexuality. Called “the Nashville Statement” because it was drafted in the August 2017 Nashville gathering of the Southern Baptist Convention by their

7 Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860.” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151–74. Accessed October 4, 2020. doi:10.2307/2711179.

8 Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, “Nashville Statement” (2017), CBMW, <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/> (Accessed June 29, 2020).

9 Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, “Danvers Statement” (1988), CBMW, <https://cbmw.org/about/danvers-statement/> (Accessed June 29, 2020).

Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission,¹⁰ it states: “We are not our own. Our true identity, as male and female persons, is given by God. It is not only foolish, but hopeless, to try to make ourselves what God did not create us to be.” This statement, which opposed marriage equality, LGBQ sexualities, transgender identities, polyamory, and extramarital sexual activity, currently has over 24,000 signers, which include council members, seminary presidents, pastors, theologians, editors, and lay persons from a variety of evangelical communities and institutions.

This statement speaks of both male and female persons, but it reinforces a complementarian, binary, essentialist, transphobic, and ultimately hierarchical view of gender that not only coerces individuals into adherence to traditional expressions of gender and sexuality but also coerces women into sexual activity. Upon entering marriage (heterosexual, of course, according to the Southern Baptist Convention and other denominations that oppose marriage equality), women still are not entitled to full ownership of their bodies under purity culture at any point. Married women who decline sex with their spouses are “selfish” according to Mark and Grace Driscoll in their book, *Real Marriage*.¹¹ Mark Driscoll is an American evangelical author and former pastor of Mars Hill Church, a multi-site megachurch he co-founded. In this and other passages, the rhetoric he and his wife use reveals an understanding of women’s bodies as belonging to their male spouses and not themselves and a prioritization of male desire over female consent.

Women’s bodies are not only described as *for* men, women themselves are deemed incomplete without men in the Christian evangelical strain of purity culture. In *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman’s Soul*, John and Stasi Eldredge write, “Mary had Joseph. Esther had Mordecai. Ruth had Boaz. We will not become the women God intends us to be without the guidance, counsel, wisdom, strength, and love of good men in our lives.”¹² The insistence that women need heterosexual male partners is part of compulsory heterosexuality, a term used by Adrienne Rich to describe how heterosexuality and

10 Holly Meyer, “What is the Nashville Statement and Why Are People Talking About It?” (August 30, 2017), *The Tennessean*, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/religion/2017/08/30/what-nashville-statement-and-why-people-talking-it/616064001/> (Accessed June 30, 2020).

11 Grace Driscoll and Mark Driscoll, *Real Marriage: The Truth About Sex, Friendship, and Life Together* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 156.

12 Stasi and John Eldredge, *Captivating Revised and Updated: Unveiling the Mystery Of A Woman’s Soul* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2010), 223.

male domination are enforced within patriarchy.¹³ Wanda Swan, Director and Founder of The Swan Center for Advocacy & Research, explains, “Young girls and women are not seen as whole people deserving of holistic agency, but rather these bringers of the gift of virginity and upholders of strict hetero-normative relationship dynamics.”¹⁴ One might assume this burden is placed equally on both men and women, but in practice differences abound. “Young boys and men don’t face the same amount of scrutiny as women and girls, but there they also lack general education around consent and non-hetero-normative bodily autonomy. They are taught to value some people, women, over others, and that this value must always cater to those who have a closer proximity to the set standards of sexual purity,” Swan clarifies.¹⁵ Not only are the bodies of women and girls deemed not their own because their bodies belong to God, but their bodies are even further removed from self-possession in that they belong to fathers and then spouses. In purity culture, the specter of the future male spouse looms so large that girls are coerced into abstinence and modesty in order to retain their value for a man they may not have even yet met.

4 Objectification and Fragmentation

This thinking casts their bodies, particularly the sexualized portions of their bodies, as objects. Purity culture is a form of objectification that reduces and assesses the value of women and girls to what they do with or what is done to the sexualized portions of bodies. My students have shared with me examples of metaphors of chewed gum, rubbed peaches, tape that has lost its stickiness and other “used,” ostensibly undesirable objects to deter girls and women from engaging in sexual activity as regular parts of their religious sexual educations. This thinking promotes a fragmented and sexualized understanding of female bodies, and it deprives women and girls of autonomy in that it assigns ownership of their bodies to entities other than themselves (fathers, future spouses, and God). Laora Mastari, Bram Spruyt, and Jessy Siongers found in their research of 755 parent-child dyads that among those promoting traditional beliefs about gender “women are continuously being subordinated and

13 Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5 no. 4 (1981): 631–660.

14 Interview with Wanda Swan, Director of The Swan Center for Advocacy & Research (June 28, 2020).

15 Ibid.

gender equality is discouraged by persuading women that protection and love will be granted to them (by men) if they comply with these traditional and sexist beliefs. If not, men will have to react with hostile sexist attitudes in order to preserve the status quo.¹⁶ Girls and women who do not comply with traditional gender role expectations and purity culture face the threats of rejection and violence.

However, men are not the only ones who strive to preserve patriarchy and the rape culture and purity culture that prop it up. Men are more likely to hold positions of authority that amplify their voices, but women, too, have participated in the dehumanizing messaging of purity culture. Describing the instruction of purity messaging from adult women in the church, Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber writes, “The women who taught them were perpetuating a pernicious system of female submission and male domination. And yet, if all we girls had was this one form of currency, perhaps it was also generous and protective for older women to help us know how to make the most of it.”¹⁷ Older women perpetuate purity culture in damaging ways, as Bolz-Weber notes, but their motivations for doing so may be that they wish to help younger women and girls retain their value in a culture that already devalues them.

This means girls in purity culture are taught they are responsible for keeping their value by keeping themselves “pure,” not only by remaining untouched in sexual ways but also by maintaining the appearance of purity through modesty. Popular Christian authors Hayley DiMarco and Justin Lookadoo write in *Dateable: Are You? Are They?* “A guy will have a tendency to treat you like you are dressed. If you are dressed like a flesh buffet, don’t be surprised when he treats you like a piece of meat.”¹⁸ DiMarco’s influence is wide in evangelical circles. She is also a co-founder of Hungry Planet, a company which creates spiritual content for teens. When she tells young women “don’t be surprised when he treats you like a piece of meat,”¹⁹ she is alleviating the hypothetical male date from responsibility for sexualizing and objectifying the young woman in question. DiMarco is also suggesting that showing skin is objectifying oneself, making oneself into a “flesh buffet,” a metaphor of consumption

16 Laora Mastari, Bram Spruyt, and Jessy Siongers, “Benevolent and Hostile Sexism in Social Spheres: The Impact of Parents, School and Romance on Belgian Adolescents’ Sexist Attitudes,” *Frontiers in Sociology: Gender, Sex, & Sexualities* 4 (2019): Article 47, p. 4, doi:<https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2019.00047> (accessed June 27, 2020).

17 Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* (New York: Convergent Books, 2019), 36.

18 Hayley DiMarco and Justin Lookadoo, *Dateable: Are You? Are They?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 2003) 118.

19 *Ibid.*

that reinforces the idea of purity culture that young women’s bodies, like their virginity, are objects to be presented and taken and that their value as young women is primarily tied to a state of not-having-been-sexually-active. This reinforces the idea that sexual activity is transactional, contaminating, and depleting rather than an act of shared intimacy, mutual desire, and pleasure that can foster partnership. Sex is not food to be consumed, yet it is telling that this metaphor is deployed in a way that focuses on the consumption rather than the nourishment of relationship that is possible though shared physical intimacy. The bodies of women and girls are not “leftovers” for another lover after an encounter with an initial sexual partner, but purity culture teaches this lesson. These understandings of sex reinforce the ways in which purity culture assesses value for women and girls based on what they have refrained from doing and kept others from doing to them rather than assessing them based upon other deeds and demonstrations of virtue, service, generosity, and compassion.

This objectification is not simply used as a deterrent for teenage sexuality. It is not merely a tool used to promote abstinence; it permeates messages about marital sexuality, too. Pastor Mark Driscoll offered the following commentary on a verse of Song of Solomon, telling women in the audience at Edinburgh Scotland, “your breasts are the petting zoo” for their male spouses.²⁰ The metaphor of a petting zoo, with its literal understanding of incarcerated animals visited by guests who pay their owners for the privilege of petting the captive creatures, is quite literally dehumanizing. Such a message both objectifies and fragments the bodies of married women and ascribes to married men an entitlement to the bodies of their wives. Not surprising, then, is what follows among men in the circles in which these messages circulate. Brandon Ambrosino reports for *Politico* that “Longtime Liberty officials close to [Jerry] Falwell [Jr.] told me the university president has shown or texted his male confidants—including at least one employee who worked for him at Liberty—photos of his wife in provocative and sexual poses.”²¹ Nonconsensual circulation of sexual or nude photographs is increasingly understood as a form of violence, but purity culture messaging has suggested even images of his wife’s body are his to share in this way. She is not her own but his.

20 Mark Driscoll, “Sex, a Study of the Good Bits from Song of Solomon,” Edinburgh, November 18, 2007, <https://peterlumpkins.typepad.com/files/driscoll-scotland-sermon-copy.pdf> (Accessed June 23, 2020).

21 Brandon Ambrosino, “‘Someone’s Gotta Tell the Freakin’ Truth’: Jerry Falwell’s Aides Break Their Silence,” *Politico*, September 9, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/09/09/jerry-falwell-liberty-university-loans-227914> (Accessed May 21, 2020).

In this way, purity culture constitutes hostile sexism, the more overt sexism that makes apparent the investment in hierarchically arranged gender norms. Mastari, Spruyt, and Siongers explain, “Hostile sexism aims to preserve men’s dominance over women by underlining men’s power. It is expressed in a blatant and resentful way toward women who violate traditional roles. Women who don’t comply with these traditional (gender) roles are perceived as a threat to men’s dominant position. Hostile sexism overtly keeps women in a subordinate position and is even a precursor for sexual harassment and violence toward women.”²² Moreover, this hostile sexism is so pervasive it is written into sermons. Former president of both the Southern Baptist Convention and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Paige Patterson included this “joke” in one of his messages at an Awaken Conference—a conference for young adults—in Las Vegas in 2014. Patterson relayed,

About that time, a very attractive young co-ed walked by. And she wasn’t more than about 16, but mmmmm. Let me just say, she was nice. As she walked by, they didn’t think that momma was paying any attention to them, and one young man turned to the other one and he said, “Man, is she built.” In the middle of the synod, she stopped, wheeled around, slapped a hand over his mouth, loosened his teeth, said, “Young man, don’t you ever say anything like that again. If you do, I’ll mop up the face of the earth with you!” I saw my opportunity. I said, “Ma’am, leave him alone. He is just being biblical. That’s exactly what the Bible said. Lord God brought her, he built her, and brought her unto the man!”²³

Despite the sexism, pedophilia, and objectification in this story, Patterson would not be fired from his post at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary until 2018, four years after making these remarks. Over 3,300 women signed a letter calling for his resignation after Benjamin S. Cole began posting video of Patterson’s sexism under the username “baptistblogger” on YouTube.

This incident was not, of course, an isolated occurrence of sexism. In addition to the objectification of teenage girls, Patterson also counseled victims of domestic violence to stay with their abusive husbands.²⁴ While the letter

²² Mastari, Spruyt, and Siongers, 2.

²³ “Paige Patterson Objectifies a 16 Year Old Girl,” YouTube. Posted by Benjamin S. Cole, edited by BaptistBlogger, May 6, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDRUVmcaQ3k> (Accessed September 13, 2020).

²⁴ Letter to SWBTS Board of Trustees, May 6, 2018. <https://swbtsletter.com> (Accessed September 13, 2020).

writers' call for Patterson's resignation was both just and ultimately successful, the authors of this letter invoked a defense of purity culture in their argument to the SWBTS Board. They wrote that Patterson's "pattern of discourse ... fails in the call to protect the helpless, the call of Christ to love our neighbor as ourselves, and the biblical standard of sexual purity."²⁵ They found Patterson's objectification of the teenager too explicit and crude to abide but did not examine their own promotion of purity culture's inherent objectification that directs their leaders into believing it grants them permission to speak about women and girls in this degrading way.

Purity culture is rape culture because purity culture entails the ultimate form of objectification in its reduction of people, usually girls and women, to their bodies. This is the opposite of what adherents of purity messaging believe about the values they express; they argue that advocating "purity" is protective, is upholding the value of women and girls and even sexuality. However, its emphasis on the body has long-term damaging effects for those exposed to its ideas and contributes to a culture of violence. Purity culture manifests as both hostile and benevolent sexism. Benevolent sexism is biased behaviors or ideas rooted in ideas about gender that may seem positive to those expressing them, as many of the ideas expressed in purity culture seem positive to those who spread them. Mastari, Spruyt, and Siongers explain, "This form of sexism is instigated through paternal and traditional beliefs that perceive women as beautiful and pure, yet delicate and precious, and therefore in need of protection provided by men."²⁶ The "purity" of girls and women is ostensibly protected by fathers and churches whose teachings about chastity are intended to protect women from the devaluation believed to transpire through engagement of sexual activity. This perception of the inherent purity of women, however, has not historically been extended to Black women and other women and girls of color. This means purity culture also contributes to the discrimination and stereotyping these women and girls face. It can result in even stricter expectations of hyper-respectability by parents of young women or even the young women themselves in efforts to counteract racist beliefs about the supposed hypersexuality of Black women and girls and other women and girls of color. The gender hierarchy is not the only hierarchy purity culture reinforces.

25 Ibid.

26 Mastari, Spruyt, and Siongers, 2.

5 Purity Culture and White Supremacy

Purity culture is tangled up in the violence of white supremacy. Several bloggers of color have addressed the ways in which purity culture messaging casts women of color, queer, and trans women as “starting from a deficit of purity.”²⁷ Tamara Winfrey Harris, former blogger, former senior editor of *Racialicious* and author of *The Sisters Are Alright: Changing the Broken Narrative of Black Women in America*, writes, “For us, gender-biased concepts of female sexuality intersect with racist ones, leaving Black women fighting the stereotype that we are innately hypersexual, and thus, particularly valueless.”²⁸ Their work shares testimony of the damage done by purity culture, but it differs in its analysis of the ways in which white female bodies are assumed to be pure until acted upon, but female bodies of color are deemed impure from the start and are subject to suspicion in white supremacist cultures. Harris points out that sexual activity deemed impure when engaged in by a woman of color doesn’t just sully her reputation: “Our alleged irresponsible fornicating is blamed for everything from the welfare state to urban violence and poverty. To fail at sexual purity is not just to let down God (as if that isn’t enough), but to let down 39 million African Americans, while confirming racial stereotypes.”²⁹ Calling this out and offering analyses of Christian sexual ethics from a hermeneutic of pleasure, these writers strive to dismantle purity culture and its role in white supremacy. A hermeneutic is a theory or method of interpretation. These authors employ a hermeneutic of pleasure to affirm the positive aspects of pleasure. For Crunk Feminist Collective, Brittney Cooper, under the pen name of Crunktastic, wrote, “Sex is a form of creative power. And it is in the literal fact of its creative aspects that we feel alive, fully human, and connected. I think God wants nothing less than this for us, and that requires regular, intimate connections of bodies, or at the very least a very regular, intentional and unapologetic intimate connection with our own body.”³⁰

These insights are shared by researchers and violence prevention advocates. Wanda Swan, Director of The Swan Center for Research and Advocacy, explains,

27 Tamara Winfrey Harris, “Sunday Kind of Love: Sex and Spirituality in the Black Church,” *Bitch Media*, October 4, 2018, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/sex-and-spirituality-in-the-black-church> (accessed March 5, 2020).

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Brittney Cooper, “Single, Saved, and Sexin: The Redux.” Crunk Feminist Collective., March 14, 2013 <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2013/03/14/single-saved-and-sex-in-the-redux/> (accessed March 5, 2020).

“Because Black women and girls’ sexuality is so highly politicized by both the church and a host of other institutions, the presence of Black female-identified folks in these conversations almost always situates us at the intersection of weaponized religion, sexism and racism. There is a type of emotional whiplash that happens for us when we are subjected to layering the practice of purity culture on top of these other harms, because purity culture and religion’s overall shtick to the Black community are organically at odds.”³¹ The burden then of purity culture upon Black women and girls is even heavier than for white women and girls. Swan explains, “The outcome of purity culture, though not ideal for White women and girls, is starkly contradictory due to deeply-rooted sexual stereotypes of the ‘unrapable’ Black woman and the sexualized Black girl because of the lack of humanity that lies in the white supremacist gaze and governance of Black bodies. This also reverberates through our communities in the same way as others: with a strict hetero-normative lens, lack of communication around consent and pleasure, and a value being placed on those folks with close proximity to purity.”³² The results of this layering of oppressive ideologies are even more dire when sexual violence occurs.

6 Undermining Sexual Violence Prevention and Response

Purity culture is also rape culture in the ways it undermines sexual violence prevention and response measures. Because many forms of Christianity uphold patriarchy, many Christian communities fail victims of sexual violence by enforcing a culture of silence through the shaming of survivors of sexual assault as less valuable following the assault, as responsible for the violence, and as less important than the perpetrator. Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber asserts, “The issue behind most sexual harassment and misconduct is one of male domination, the kind that religion often tells us is ‘God’s will.’”³³ If male domination is believed to be the will of God, women and girls live in precarity, vulnerable to any men who would abuse such authority to perpetrate harassment, stalking, assault, and other forms of violence. Male domination as a religious ideology ensures men assume leadership positions, and the status and stature of these male leaders is often protected when allegations of

31 Interview with Wanda Swan, Director of The Swan Center for Advocacy & Research (June 28, 2020).

32 Ibid.

33 Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* (New York: Convergent Books, 2019), 44.

misconduct surface within congregations. Yet purity culture messages ensure harsh consequences for disclosure in the ways it objectifies women based upon constructions of “chastity.” Rather than the perpetrator whose violence caused what is considered a loss of “purity,” the victim is more commonly led to feel ashamed. A victim of sexual assault has little incentive to report the violence against them if revealing the assault results in public devaluation of their body and subsequently their self. Author of *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation and How I Broke Free*, Linda Kay Klein writes, “the purity movement classifies sexual violence by systematically silencing and hiding it, and that if and when it is exposed, the purity movement then *misclassifies* sexual violence as ‘sex’ rather than ‘violence.’”³⁴ This led the parents of one survivor Klein interviewed to consider their daughter not “solely a survivor, but also a sinner, and [they] were more focused on their daughter’s sins and how they led to the loss of her ‘purity’ than on the violence that was perpetrated against her.”³⁵ Purity culture is rape culture because it teaches the harmful myth that the raped body is worth less than the un-raped body. It teaches that any sexual contact, both consensual sex and nonconsensual violence, outside of heterosexual marriage devalues the touched body. It also shifts blame from the perpetrator of violence onto the victim of that violence.

What is especially appalling is that in purity culture’s sexist applications, the body of the perpetrator is likely exempted from devaluation. Overwhelmingly, perpetrators of sexual violence are men,³⁶ and men’s bodies are less regulated by purity culture. The bodies of men and boys are understood to be less contaminated (or not contaminated at all) by sexual activity. This is the inevitable consequence of the gender hierarchy of patriarchy. In *Purity and Danger* Mary Douglas writes, “It is not difficult to see how pollution beliefs can be used in a dialogue of claims and counter-claims to status. [...] patterns of sexual danger can be seen to express symmetry or hierarchy.”³⁷ Even when victims of sexual violence are male, sexual violence reinforces the gender hierarchy inherent in patriarchy as victims of violence are understood as “feminized” through their

34 Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (New York: Atria Books, 2019), 91.

35 Ibid.

36 Centers for Disease Control, The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey 2010 Summary Report. November 2011, https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf (accessed September 13, 2020).

37 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, (New York, NY: Routledge Classics, 2004; Originally published 1966) 4.

disempowerment regardless of gender in a culture that understands power as more clearly affiliated with traditional understandings of masculinity and men.

Consider again the accusation that girls and women who dress in a way that does not conceal their skin are creating a “flesh buffet.”³⁸ Linda Kay Klein explains how such understandings of girls’ and women’s bodies can have devastating effects. She writes, “At first glance, the modesty doctrine may appear harmless—perhaps even healthy—but the logic of victim-blaming that we too often see in rape cases begins here. When we demand that an individual dress in just the right way so as not to inspire sexual feelings in others, we set a precedent of blaming individuals for the thoughts feelings, and actions of other people that can play out in dangerous ways in rape and abuse cases.”³⁹ This shifting of blame runs counter to the message of Matthew 5:29 in which Jesus instructs listeners to gouge out their own eyes if they lead them into sin, a message of personal responsibility for guarding one’s own behavior.

Violence prevention advocates routinely see the damage done by purity culture upon the survivors they serve. Survivors who have grown up hearing purity culture messaging may have a harder time navigating the aftermath of an assault because the way purity culture ideology assesses value further traumatizes them. Cara Tuttle Bell, Director of the Project Safe Center for Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response at Vanderbilt University, asserts, “Purity culture reinforces discomfort and fear in confronting issues related to sexuality and sexual harm. The inability to confront and explore sexual health and, indeed, sexual pleasure is a primary obstacle in educating or re-educating young adults to view sexual activity as a collaborative form of communication involving verbal and nonverbal practices that are sometimes fraught with risk.”⁴⁰ Fellow violence prevention and response advocate Wanda Swan explains “Purity culture absolutely hinders anti-violence work in three major ways: (1) it refuses to address consent; (2) it reinforces gendered stereotypes that supports patriarchy, inequity, and the male gaze; and (3) it victim blames survivors of violence by equating their experience with failing God. [...] Purity culture is dangerous in how it stifles, silences, and sustains rape culture in the name of God for the preservation of the traditional family unit recognized by the church. Its negative impact is one that many of us in this field, as both educators and advocates, work to unravel within our specific communities.”⁴¹

38 DiMarco and Lookadoo, 118.

39 Klein, 92.

40 Interview with Cara Tuttle Bell, Director of the Project Safe Center for Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response at Vanderbilt University (June 27, 2020).

41 Interview with Wanda Swan, Director of The Swan Center for Advocacy & Research (June 28, 2020).

Purity culture's demands make it hard for victims of sexual violence to report their assaults and get the assistance they need, including medical attention, psychological services, family support, and legal recourse. Purity culture is rape culture for these explicit reasons and the ways in which it suggests harmed individuals are somehow responsible for and devalued by their own rapes. The devastating effects of this on survivors is obvious, but activists of faith also point out how the way purity culture functions as rape culture also harms religious communities. Too many survivors have turned to their churches for support and found their leaders complicit in promoting shame and silence. Author, attorney, and survivor Rachael Denhollander writes of institutional betrayals, "This damages God's children. It damages the gospel. And it should matter. Even, and especially, when it hurts and costs. Not because we want the church, or the gospel damaged, but because we want it seen in all its true beauty, and this mars it horribly."⁴² When she led the group of hundreds of gymnasts who came forward against perpetrator Larry Nassar, Denhollander did not find her own church supportive. Denhollander wrote for *The New York Times*, "I lost my church. [...] Fear of jeopardizing some overarching political, religious, financial or other ideology—or even just losing friends or status—leads to willful ignorance of what is right in front of our own eyes."⁴³ When church leaders shield perpetrators from consequences, they are complicit in rape culture. Church leaders who perpetrate harassment and violence and those who shield perpetrators create an environment that fosters further violence in the way they tacitly sanction such conduct. Furthermore, their own silence on the issue of sexual violence as sin is another way that churches prop up rape culture. Linda Kay Klein writes a statement in *Pure* that I could have written myself: "I've never seen a sermon crafted for people who suffered from sexual trauma."⁴⁴ In refusing to name sexual violence as a significant social problem or sin to be avoided, churches bear responsibility for helping to create the rape culture in which we live.

Fortunately, some congregations and their pastors do address the issue of sexual violence. Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber writes, "Being bearers of God's image allows us to insist on the self-determination of our bodies and our pleasure

42 Rachael Denhollander, Facebook Post, May 1, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/rachael-denhollander/when-its-in-our-own-community-evangelicals/1807296366017342/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

43 Rachael Denhollander, "The Price I Paid for Taking On Larry Nassar," *The New York Times*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/opinion/sunday/larry-nassar-rachael-denhollander.html?smid=tw-share> (accessed September 13, 2020).

44 Klein, 94.

and our hearts. [...] It allows us to call out and reject harassment, assault, the sexualization of children, and every other thing that compromises the inherent dignity of human bodies.”⁴⁵ In order to combat rape culture’s relationship to Christianity, more clergy should follow the model of Bolz-Weber’s direct and scripture-backed approach to discussing a Christian sexual ethics without endorsing a culture of shame.

7 Anti-pleasure, Anti-desire

The consequences of the shame taught by purity culture can be devastating. Not only do those consequences deter reporting of sexual violence among victims, but they also prevent those unharmed by sexual violence from engaging in healthy, pleasurable sex as consenting adults. Tina Schermer Sellers, director of the Medical Family Therapy Program at Seattle Pacific University writes, “One of the things I started noticing about ten years ago was that I was seeing more and more amounts of sexual shame, of religious sexual shame [...] horrendous amounts. The self-loathing that people were feeling and describing about themselves really paralleled the kind of self-loathing that you often see with somebody who’s experienced childhood sexual assault.”⁴⁶ This is not sexual health. Purity culture is rape culture in that it impedes sexual health even among many adults who have adhered to its regulations.

The World Health Organization’s definition of sexual health asserts “Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.”⁴⁷ Individuals in purity cultures are subject to an emphasis upon contaminating understandings of sexuality that do not simply evaporate overnight upon entering into marriage. Both Bolz-Weber and Klein observed in their interviews with adults who had grown up hearing purity culture messages the problem of shame interfering with sexual pleasure even within adult, consensual, marital sexual relationships. They often still experience shame surrounding sex acts and sometimes

45 Bolz-Weber, 45.

46 Tina Schermer Sellers, “Sexuality and Spirituality,” *The Sexuality and Spirituality Forum*. Seattle: The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology, 2012, https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/av_events/95/ (accessed June 27, 2020).

47 World Health Organization, “Defining Sexual Health,” *WHO* (2020) https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/sexual_health/sh_definitions/en/ (accessed September 13, 2020).

ignorance of the mechanics of pleasure and sexual response. In “Naked and Ashamed: Women and Evangelical Purity Culture,” Amanda Barbee writes, “Growing up within the purity movement, I was never taught about my own sexual response and sexual desire; I was only taught how to control the sexual response of the men around me.”⁴⁸ Given the aforementioned messages to married couples about male entitlement to female bodies and the prioritization of male desire, women raised in purity cultures are often left without crucial models or knowledge that would facilitate their own embrace of a healthy sexuality that includes the pursuit of pleasure. Bolz-Weber refers to this as “sexual flourishing.” “Sexual flourishing is for every type of body, every type of gender, every type of sex drive, every type of human,” she insists.⁴⁹ “What does sexual flourishing look like? It looks like: Incarnation, Gratitude and generosity, Everyone, without exception, Accompaniment, Forgiveness, Connection, Holiness, Poetry, Shamelessness,” she explains.⁵⁰ This is not an argument for sexual lawlessness and abandon but for an approach to sexuality that prioritizes consent, knowledge, and agency, not in spite of but because of faith. She writes, “These principles, which the faith provides us, can be our guide. They can lead us through our sexual reformation, through redefining the stale and oppressive sexual ethic the church has taught for so long. They can lead us to become good stewards of our bodies and of others’ bodies. They can provide insight into what we teach our children about sex and their bodies, and what we teach ourselves about sex and our bodies. They were there all along.”⁵¹

Desire can emerge from care and love instead of from objectification, but purity culture teaches that desire is lust and that lust is exploitative, contaminating, and degrading to the worth of those who engage in sex. Those exposed to purity messaging learn that they have to suppress desire to establish love and to establish love before engaging in sexual activity to that the sex will “mean something.” But it never meant that women and girls were not still objectified. It meant that they were objectified and loved at the same time, that love makes the objectification acceptable or that love reduces the possibility of objectification. This is obviously not always the case. Consider what some evangelical leaders have instructed husbands and wives about marital sexuality and what

48 Amanda Barbee, “Naked and Ashamed: Women and Evangelical Purity Culture,” *The Other Journal: An Intersection of Theology and Culture*, March 3, 2014, <https://theotherjournal.com/2014/03/03/naked-and-ashamed-women-and-evangelical-purity-culture/> (accessed June 23, 2020).

49 Bolz-Weber, 192.

50 Bolz-Weber, 198.

51 Ibid.

prominent leaders have said and done to their own wives. Their remarks reveal the objectification is part of how they understand even marital sexuality.

8 Conclusion

Many of the writers and activists I have quoted in this chapter are grappling with the purity culture messaging of their religious communities and specifically the interpretations of scripture on which purity culture depends. This is of course a feminist hermeneutic, but one that specifically depends upon a premise of a right to pleasure while specifically engaging the politics of pleasure through a sacred lens. Their reconsiderations of the damage of purity culture messaging ask us to consider a reinterpretation of God as a creator who affirms pleasure, who bestowed pleasure, specifically sexual pleasure, upon humans. Concurrently, they resist and reject interpretations of scripture that preach a gospel of shame and contamination central to purity culture. They vehemently reject the way purity culture depends upon the objectification of women, the absolute reduction of their worth to what has and has not happened to their bodies.

Sellers writes, “When we continue to shroud sexuality in silence and an abstinence only discourse, we continue to burden faith filled children, adolescents, young adults and adults with a deep shame that interrupts their ability to fully know God’s love and grace. Shame modulates distance in intimacy and sexual expression in the monogamous relationships that are foundational to community living and a significant expression of God’s active love.”⁵² The instruction of shame is, in the view of many, counter-biblical. As Bolz-Weber interprets the creation stories in the first three chapters of the book of Genesis, she says, “The very first blessing was sex.”⁵³ Moreover, she adds, “Let us grieve that we were not taught to love and respect the inherent dignity of our own human bodies. Grieve the decades we avoided sex when we could have been enjoying sex.”⁵⁴ This understanding reflects an appreciation for a creator God who designed bodies for pleasure, not domination, and a rejection of rape culture and the purity culture on which it depends.

52 Tina Schermer Sellers, “Christians Caught Between the Sheets—How ‘abstinence only’ Ideology Hurts Us,” *The Other Journal: An Intersection of Theology & Culture* 7 (Gender & Sexuality Issue 2006), <https://theotherjournal.com/2006/04/02/christians-caught-between-the-sheets-how-abstinence-only-ideology-hurts-us/> (accessed June 27, 2020).

53 Bolz-Weber, 30.

54 Bolz-Weber, 158.

Old Testament scholar Katherine Sakenfeld asserts, “Christian feminists who intend and hope, like the biblical prophets, to work within their religious heritage must address themselves to the authority of the Bible in the life of their community of faith. They must seek faithful ways of recovering, reinterpreting, and discerning God’s way in the tradition handed on in the Bible.”⁵⁵ The hermeneutic of pleasure deployed by Bolz-Weber, Klein, Cooper, and other contemporary Christian feminists challenging purity culture reinterprets the bible’s messages about human sexuality in ways that refuse the reduction of sexuality to procreation, that reject the idea that non-procreative sex is shameful and contaminating, that negates an understanding of pleasure as inherently threatening, and which demands agency, consent, and accurate information as crucial to engaging in sexual activity in accordance with a Christian ethic of dignity and sacredness of human life. “Purity is not the same as holiness. [...] Purity most often leads to pride or to despair, not to holiness. Because holiness is about union *with*, and purity is about separation *from*,” Bolz-Weber clarifies.⁵⁶ The embrace of purity culture currently separates many Christian communities from possibly playing a role in undermining rape culture because purity culture perpetuates it. Propping up rape culture must be understood, in any theology that affirms the dignity of each human life, to hinder the pursuit of holiness by these communities. May these communities hear the calls of Bolz-Weber, Klein, Cooper, Denhollander, Harris, Tuttle Bell, Swan, Barbee, Sellers, this author, and others to divest from purity culture, to stand in solidarity with survivors of sexual violence, and to affirm the sexual flourishing of their members, regardless of gender identity and sexual orientation. This requires abandoning the conservative interpretation of “you are not your own” promoted by purity culture proponents that dehumanizes and objectifies girls and women and advocating instead for the instruction of sexual ethic that asserts a right to safety, pleasure, affirmative consent, and accurate knowledge about bodies, sexualities, and sexual practices for all.

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55 Katherine Sakenfeld, “Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials,” *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985) 55.

56 Bolz-Weber, 22, 26.

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