I'M TAKING BACK MY BODY (THE FEMALE BODY IN THE 'PURITY' CULTURE)

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the American purity movement by examining how the female body became part of an ideology offered as the most viable solution to moral and cultural crises and how this generated counterreactions from the members of the evangelical community (insiders and outsiders alike) since the evangelical discourse on body with its gender-based expressions produces schematised gender constructions and toxic forms of masculinity and femininity that generate confusion, shame and guilt. The four American writers mentioned here (Dianna Anderson, Bromleigh McCleneghan, Rachel Held Evans and Sarah Bessey) agree that biblical womanhood is a myth; a woman's body is not what "purity" culture suggests it should be; human sexuality is more than premarital abstinence and a set of rules; sacredness is not the appanage of marital sex. The red thread of all four writings is given by the non-dualistic thinking (rejecting Neoplatonic dichotomous separation between body and spirit) that asserts women's right to body ownership, a sexual ethics based on consent, mutuality, safety and respect, gender equality and partnership. Anderson, McCleneghan, Evans and Bessey are also among the fiercest contesters of the "purity" movement, an American evangelical movement that reduced purity to its genital dimension and salvation to purification of sexual desire.

Keywords: *purity; evangelical; body; gender; women.*

INTRODUCTION

As historians have already shown, the cultural and political influence of American evangelicals is directly related to their ability to effectively address widespread fears. Sexual purity rhetoric proved an asset to evangelicals seeking to maintain political and cultural influence. By associating sexual immorality to national

decline, and apocalyptic anticipation, leaders shaped a purity rhetoric that positioned Protestant evangelicalism as the salvation of American civilisation. This paper aims to analyse the American purity movement by examining how the female body became part of an ideology offered as the most viable solution to moral and cultural crises.

The new sexual ethics promoted by feminist writers issued from the evangelical milieu begins with a different perspective on the physical body allowing the shift from “your body belongs to God” theology to “your body is your own” ideology which comes as a legitimate inference for fact-based conclusions stating that in the evangelical purity culture women’s bodies are not their own, they are decided on by men (white, cisgender, heterosexual male pastors setting the dominant narrative of Christianity in the United States) while the distribution of power controls the very language women use to discuss their own experiences, making it hard for them to assert ownership over their own bodies.

The female writers I refer to in this study advocate for necessary acts of rebellion (against the system), bodily and intellectual autonomy, determination in affirming egalitarian ideas, acceptance of the difference, integration, non-dualism, rejection of misogyny and patriarchy, and recovery of true meanings of sexuality, body, and womanhood.

In a book published in 2015, titled *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence*, Sara Moslener noted that American “purity culture” emerged from the first wave of American feminism which, in her historical and sociological demonstration, is related to the moral authority that the 19th century American women held in the Victorian society and at home. According to Moslener, in Victorian culture, women lacked political authority, but had a moral ascendant upon men, traditionally viewed as usurpers of the domestic stability, given their penchant towards alcohol-related excesses and impure sexuality. Gender complementarianism coupled with idealized forms of womanhood and manhood resulted in the feminization of religion, which triggered an immediate response as a reaction to women’s religious leadership: muscular Christianity, characterised by manliness, morality, health and patriotism, a model perpetuated by the literature of the time and much cherished by the 20th-century American evangelicals.

Although contemporary purity movements may have their roots in the moral codes that regulated the life of white middle-class Victorian American families through the empowering authority of the female figures (responsible and guiding the moral conduct of men), it is not entirely true, though, that the actual sexual purity imposed and accepted or even preached by evangelical women is a form of empowerment, as the author of *Virgin Nation* claims:

As in the nineteenth century, today's sexually pure young women are in a position of power over men's sexuality by maintaining their own moral and bodily conduct. Sexual purity is a choice for female empowerment, but only within the construct of gender essentialism, where women's only option for bodily integrity is in not being sexually active and in taking responsibility for men's sexual purity. As a countercultural movement, sexual purity is only workable, then, within the gender ideology from which it emerged: that of nineteenth-century Victorian America. (Moslener 163)

The power position invoked by Moslener within the gender ideology is a tricky one for two reasons. First, ideally, the evangelical "purity culture" requires sexual purity and a moral conduct, very narrowly defined, to both men and women (there is no place for dominance or authoritative positions on this subject); second, female sexuality (in its bodily or inter-gender expression) is regulated by men (preachers, pastors, counsellors, therapists, theologians), representatives of a patriarchal mentality, whose regulating discourses are far from empowering women.

The asexualised vs. the sexualised female body

Dianna Anderson, a feminist writer raised Baptist and a victim of the purity movement, exposes in her 2016 book, *Damaged Goods: New Perspectives on Christian Purity*, the way in which the female body (and sexuality) is regulated, controlled, shamed, and owned by men of great influence in religious circles.

Much of the dominant narrative of Christianity in the United States comes from those who are in power – white, cisgender, heterosexual male pastors dominate and set the narratives of theology and the stories we tell each other about what our bodies mean. This distribution of power controls the very language we use to discuss our own experiences, making it hard for women to assert ownership over their own bodies. (Anderson 161)

Your body is yours. You make your own decisions about it. Other people do not wield control over you, and a healthy sexual ethic defies such untoward control. (Anderson 112) Women – and I'm talking especially to younger women – have a right to make decisions about sex for themselves. They do not owe anyone their body – whether it's their wedding night or their date bought them dinner. (Anderson 116)

Feminism – well represented in the recent years, but still a marginalised¹ movement in the evangelical tradition – is first and foremost a different hermeneutics breaking up with literalistic biblicism² and revisiting the normative texts through the lenses of cultural accommodation³ processes. It has the merit of giving a voice to women (banned from speaking in churches or from teaching men) while rejecting patriarchy and misogyny. Iconoclast in core matters such as female body, sexuality, and gender relations, evangelical feminism preaches inclusiveness (LGBTQ and other outsiders who do not conform) and comes as the visible form of underground and undermining attitudes of generations of mothers, sisters, daughters silenced or simply manipulated into believing ready-made ideologies wrapped as absolute spiritual truths.

Both Dianna Anderson (*Damaged Goods*, 2015) and Rachel Held Evans (*A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, 2012) succeed in revealing the tension that the American Protestant evangelical milieu creates and keeps between two hypostases of the female body, equally encouraged and discouraged: the asexualised vs. the sexualised (female) body.

In the “purity culture”, women’s bodies are at the same time sexualised and asexualised. The pledge of not having sex before marriage and the abstinence-only education led to the suppression of all “impure” thoughts or behaviours, a sort of anti-sexualisation imported along with the “modesty culture”, the teachings about sexuality before and after marriage or the patriarchal views on women (oppressive and repressive).

¹ Sally K. Gallagher explains the marginalization of evangelical feminism in an article written in 2004 for *Sociology of Religion*, ‘The Marginalization of Evangelical Feminism.’

²Here is a good definition of this concept, coming from sociologist Christian Smith: “By ‘biblicism’ I mean a theory about the Bible that emphasizes together its exclusive authority, infallibility, perspicuity, self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability.” (Smith viii).

³ The dichotomy religion of fear vs. religion of accommodation is also mentioned by Sarah Moslener in *Virgin Nation* to distinguish between two social paradigms: the religion of fear (the evangelical political culture during the middle of the past century, working to maintain boundaries – between the United States and the USSR, between Christianity and communism, between sexual morality and sexual deviance, and a radical chasm between what is holy and what is unholy) and the religion of accommodation, characterised by the willingness to dissolve the boundaries between religious and nonreligious cultures and drawing upon secular therapeutic discourses to create a morality based primarily upon the well-being of the individual and delivering a revivalist Christianity (‘70s) drawing upon secular countercultural youth movements: personal spiritual awakening, transcendence and ecstatic expression.

I policed my thoughts and my heart; sex wasn't even on my radar, although I knew some of my fellow students engaged in it. Even in my high school youth group, there was talk of who was sleeping with whom and what they'd done the Saturday night before church. It never occurred to me that not having sexual feelings was atypical for women of my age. I had shoved any thought of sex so far out of sight that I didn't know what lust or arousal felt like. (Anderson 66)

Asexuality is also mentioned by a woman interviewed by Dianna Anderson in her book as one of the most important evangelical ideals, sold as the ultimate spiritual communion with God. "Sex was worldly; it was but a shadow of other, more ideal emotions. I was blessed to not be consumed with such a base desire." (Anderson 121)

When it comes to sex and sexuality, the evangelical teachings are paradoxical, contradictory, and disturbing. No other realms in the evangelical culture are subject to such great paradoxes as the one related to human physicality, which unfortunately becomes the object of a minimalist, restrictive, and confusing rhetoric, creating sets of rules and impossible standards that only diminish the humanity of the individual. Women are told to be simultaneously sexy (to keep their husbands' interest alive and prevent them from going astray) and modest (in order not to be a stumbling block for other men), sex is depicted as something bad, totally wrong and sinful before marriage and sacred, good and desired by God after marriage, the body is concomitantly sinful and holy (as temple of God), sexual desire is either bad or good (yet, mostly bad, as it is associated with lust), women appear simultaneously as extremely powerful and completely powerless.

The idealised asexualisation of young (unmarried) women who are taught to suppress their sexual desires and deny their bodies is counterbalanced by the recommended sexualisation of married women who need to please their husbands and help them stay faithful. In both cases, women are viewed as the gatekeepers of male sexuality.

In Purity Culture women are the gatekeepers, the ones who control the difference between sin and life. If she lets too many men through, she is a jezebel, a harlot, a dangerous woman. If she is keeping them out, she is doing her duty in supporting the good Christian man. This "woman as gatekeeper" narrative centres men even when it comes to the sexual agency of women. In turning women into gatekeepers, purity culture judges women not on their own knowledge of their sexuality, but on solely outward expressions of that sexuality. Instead of valuing a woman's knowing herself well enough to know when she does and when she does not want to have sex, the purity movement places women in a position of supposed power where they own sex and have the ability to dole it out at will. But such a position turns sex into a transaction, rather than an exploration of knowledge and self. (Anderson 207)

The “woman as gatekeeper” narrative alludes to the 19th-century Victorian moral position of power attributed to women and interpreted by some authors as empowering (Sara Moslener) and by others as just faking the empowerment of women (“supposed power” – Anderson).

Rachel Held Evans mentions in her book the imperatives of attractiveness (shaming fat bodies, consequently) and the standard of beauty that evangelical women are supposed to maintain throughout all their life in order to please their husbands. Mark Driscoll’s⁴ words (“A wife who lets herself go and is not sexually available to her husband in the ways that the Song of Songs is so frank about is not responsible for her husband’s sin, but she may not be helping him either”) along with Dorothy Patterson’s⁵ dictum that “God’s woman gives time and effort to her appearance” and Martha Peace’s⁶ instructions to women to remain beautiful and sexually available for their husbands, declaring that “the husband should be so satisfied that even if another woman entices him, he won’t be tempted” (in the same line with the messages spread by Christian women’s conferences that emphasize the importance of keeping a beauty routine so that husbands will not be tempted to “look elsewhere”) convey an unequivocal message: women are sexual agencies responsible for men’s attitudes and behaviours. “Stay beautiful or your husband might leave you...and if he does, it’s partially your fault.” (Evans 208)

To the sexualisation/asexualisation of bodies in the “purity culture”, Dianna Anderson proposes a different sexual ethic which has nothing to do with the ethic advertised in the conservative evangelical circles, the latter consisting primarily in “a set of rules about when to say no”, born out of a culture of prohibition and denial. To an ethic advising the perfect mastery of the body and the incessant control of the flesh, Anderson opposes an ethic based on “integration and moderation”.

Good sex is characterised by three words: ethical (the importance of defining a personal ethic vs. the ethic imposed by an institution), consensual and safe. From Dianna Anderson’s viewpoint, a good sexual ethics incorporates both personal and societal norms, aligns with systems of justice, grace and mercy (does not rely upon rigid rules that create shame, but instead creates “positive ways to understand ourselves and our relationship to God and our world”), maintains

⁴ Mark A. Driscoll is an American evangelical pastor and author who created a lot of stir in the media with his crude misogyny.

⁵ Dorothy K. Patterson is a professor of theology in women’s studies at South-Western Baptist Theological Seminary, in Waco, Tx.

⁶ Martha Peace is an American evangelical Bible teacher and author of several books for women.

personal boundaries, defines itself as an ethic of dignity (treating people with humanity) via bodies that are not to be afraid of, but that are given to us so that “we may gain understanding of ourselves and of our world” (Anderson 124).

According to Anderson, the sacredness, so much talked about in the evangelical culture and limited to a special sexual frame – the heterosexual marriage – has nothing to do with rules and patterns and can be found and experienced in all sexual relationships, inside and outside marriage. In the purity movement sacredness is “deified and denied”. Human sexuality is described in terms of roles, submission, and procreation, all because “God said so”. “What is important is the engagement with the sacredness of knowing the other.” (Anderson 130) The newness of Anderson’s book is to be found beyond denouncing a patriarchal, oppressive theology, in redefining human sexuality and reconnecting women to their bodies and their sexuality. “Purity culture” robs women of their own sexual desires (and centres on man’s pleasure). “A theology and an ethic that centres on female pleasure...a theology that liberates us from rules – is the answer”. (Anderson 250)

NEW LANGUAGE AND NEW RHETORIC

When writing about sexuality in the evangelical culture, the language and the stylistic rhetoric that Anderson uses is marked by linguistic structures of moderation and the formulae of uncertainty and ambiguity. To the absolute truth promoters of the evangelical culture, Dianna Anderson opposes the dilemmatic spirit whose quest for truth is marked by doubt and incertitude. “God’s plan for sexuality has *many facets*.” “God’s plan for sexuality *isn’t necessarily cut-and-dried*.” (Anderson 86) “Except...it’s a lot *more complicated* than that.” (Anderson 180)

The same rhetoric of incertitude and doubt can be found in the writings of all other feminist authors. For Bromleigh McCleneghan, for example, sexual ethics and sexuality can only be defined with expressions of *ambiguity and pluralism*: “(desire is) pretty complicated”, “complex people”, “desire is equally complex”, “desire complicates...”, “the complex nature of pleasure”, “not easily defined”, “sex – a good among goods”, “God is not always ‘clear’ about what is right in every circumstance regarding our sexuality”, “Connecting fully with another person is often not an easy task.” Rachel Held Evans thinks that “believers should be wary of overzealous attempts to prescribe ‘biblical sex’, when sex – like beauty and like God – remains shaded with mystery. If Christians have learned anything from our rocky two-thousand-year theological history, it’s that we make the most beautiful things ugly when we try to systematize mystery. Even the

writers of Scripture knew that some things were simply beyond their grasp.” (Evans 230)

The third most important theme of Dianna Anderson’s book (apart from body and sexuality, already analysed above) relates to gender: gendered roles and gendered use of language in the evangelical tradition. The writer denounces gender-related biases permeating the “purity culture” and the strict gender division with which the evangelical culture operates. It is important to note that, from Anderson’s point of view, the evangelical tradition promotes a low view of women and men, as women are usually depicted as procreators and mothers and men are viewed as a sum of uncontrollable pulsations. “Men are beasts, women are wombs – this is the narrative the purity movement sells”, Anderson writes (165), quoting one of the conservative evangelical authors, Lookadoo, in his 2002 book, *Dateable*⁷, instructing youth on matters of sexuality and relationships: “Our basic nature comes from being male. And our first thought is sex. This very schematised depiction of the two sexes – caricatures of their worst qualities – makes the development of healthy relationships almost impossible: Friendships become impossible when every man is a fiend and every woman a potential Jezebel.” (Anderson 182)

Apart from being viewed as animals or beasts, reduced to their instincts, men have to suffer the pressure of a certain form of masculinity privileged by “purity culture”. They are expected to be pastors, elders, heads of households, rescuers, protectors, providers, all this as an act of fitting into the hierarchal representation of the family so dear to the evangelical culture: God-husband-wife-children.

At the end of her study on purity, Dianna Anderson concludes by saying that strict gender division serves the evangelical sexual ethic entirely built on strictly delimited gender roles. “The evangelical church is heavily engaged in policing the performance of gender – partly because the entire sexual ethic of purity culture is strictly invested in strictly enforced gender roles.” (Anderson 231)

⁷ Another purity advocate, Joshua Harris, questioned by Anderson in her anti-purity demonstration, makes the subject of a public debate as he distances himself from the ideological content of a book written in 1997, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, dissuading premarital relationships and promoting sexual purity. In October 2018, Joshua Harris released a statement apologizing for *I Kissed dating Goodbye* and announcing that he will be discontinuing its publication. ‘I no longer agree with its central idea that dating should be avoided. I now think that dating can be a healthy part of a person developing relationally and learning the qualities that matter most in a partner.’ (relevant magazine.com)

EVANGELICAL FEMINISM

This is also the reason why feminism remains a marginal movement inside American Protestantism. Sally K. Gallagher, the author of a very enlightening article titled *The Marginalization of Evangelical Feminism* and published in 2004 in *Sociology of Religion*, states that two thirds of American evangelicals are sceptical about feminism (understood as hostile to Christian values) because gender is the key marker of the evangelical subculture, and feminism – fighting against gender division and gender inequality – undermines subcultural identity and religious boundaries. Biblical feminism is marginalised because its critics link it with strands of secular feminism that evangelicals find unacceptable (arguments for androgyny are both counter intuitive and theologically unacceptable). Men and women are obviously not identical, the argument goes, and so feminism must be mistaken. Christian feminism is also accused of biblical relativism, enough for biblical literalists and gender essentialists to dismiss it. For this very reason Sarah Bessey calls herself a Jesus feminist, to discourage those who divorce feminism from Christianity.

In questioning the myth of biblical womanhood, Rachel Held Evans deconstructs preconceived ideas related to domesticity, beauty, modesty, submission. When it comes to beauty, Evans denounces the bias according to which the Bible holds women to a certain standard of beauty which shames fatness⁸ and imposes female attractiveness as a non-written rule in the couple dynamics.

Sexualisation of women in the evangelical culture following the total chastity required in their premarital condition (a commitment confirmed by purity pledges⁹) engenders mixed messages and ambiguous views about human sexuality. Rachel Held Evans caricaturises the ambivalence and the pressure that women (married or not) may feel, together with the feelings of shame and fear that such recommended “overnight” sexualisation trigger.

⁸ Dianna Anderson makes the same statement in her book, *Damaged Goods*: “Fatness is shamed in modesty culture because modesty culture is focused on the bodies of thin, white women. The shaming of fatter bodies extends from a strange conflation of the media and male gaze. Women’s bodies are simultaneously sexualized and anti-sexualized... Because women’s bodies are public property in Christian purity culture, and modesty culture teaches young men that female bodies are open for comment, many feel that they have the right to make judgments based on body shape. As explained above, men are taught that women’s bodies are a dangerous magnet for attraction, so women who do not fit the mould of “attractiveness” because of their body shape have betrayed their womanhood. If what defines womanhood is “I am tempted by it and it is dangerous to me,” then a female body that is not attractive to a man is not womanly.” (Anderson 142)

⁹ “I signed my first abstinence pledge when I was just fifteen.” (Rachel Held Evans 210)

Upon reaching her wedding night, a Christian woman is expected to transform from the model of chastity into a veritable sex goddess, ready to honor God by satisfying her husband's sexual needs without fail. I was told that, according to 1 Corinthians 7:4, I had no authority over my own body, but was responsible for yielding it entirely to my husband, who needed regular sex in order to remain faithful to me. (Evans 209)

The body shame, heavily rooted in the religious (Christian) system, is a cultural response to the narratives and images that teach us to judge and rank corporeal diversity according to a normative ideal. As observed by Michelle Lelwica in *Shameful Bodies*, in societies like ours, where industry, speed, productivity, and self-mastery are supreme values, bodies that are chronically sick, in pain, impaired, fat and old represent everything we have been taught to disdain: loss of control, inefficiency, dependence on others, and having to slow down. In the end, how we relate to our own bodies influences not only how we see and interact with others, but also how we relate to life itself.

The roots of the experience of body shame are religious and social (economic, historical, political, and cultural) and the religious systems perpetuate shame and fear through their mechanisms of perfection (holiness) and spiritual achievement. Shame is a religiously conditioned reaction, and one must know that where there is shame, there is a system. Religious systems have this huge potential to foster body shame and health/healing as, at the same time, part of the problem, and part of the solution. Religion as controlling paradigm promotes the energy of fight (we must either conquer adversity or escape it) while as transformative paradigm it enables us to metabolise difficulty and loss, sharpen our critical thinking, and deepen our sense of accountability to others. For the author of *Shameful Bodies: Religion and the Culture of Physical Improvement*, the most important shame trigger is the norm, the normative ideal (moral or physical). "I suggest that body shame is not a natural response to our physical vulnerabilities, particularities and limits, but a culturally/religiously conditioned reaction to our bodies' refusals to comply with the rules that emanate from the normative ideal." (Lelwica 45)

CONCLUSION

Although feminism continues to be a marginal movement inside the American evangelical tradition (according to some, a "dangerous" form of cultural accommodation that threatened evangelicalism's doctrinal and moral foundations and brought forward controversial issues like homosexuality, gay rights, or abortion that ultimately fractured the evangelical feminism), feminist writers

(Dianna Anderson, Rachel Held Evans, Sarah Bessey, Bromleigh McCleneghan) succeed in freeing the body of the ideologies that shaped it for centuries of cultural and religious history without necessarily creating a new ideology. Challenging the notion of gender (a key marker of the evangelical subculture) and giving women the right to dispose of their body and sexuality is the greatest freedom preached by the feminist authors mentioned here, their message being in stark contrast with the misogynist and patriarchal systems they denounce and ultimately abandon.

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BIONOTE

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