

# **A personal encounter with purity culture: Evangelical Christian schooling in Aotearoa/New Zealand**

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## **Abstract**

In this article, I employ an autoethnographic lens to look at the evangelical Christian purity movement, which I experienced within my high school and church in Aotearoa/New Zealand. To frame my discussion, I focus on two best-selling books by evangelical Christian writer Dannah Gresh: *Secret keeper: The delicate power of modesty* (2002) and also *And the bride wore white: Seven secrets to sexual purity* (2012). Both of these books were reverentially passed around my school and church circles as though they were sacred scripture. My analysis of Gresh's writing and evangelical purity culture does not arrive without an agenda, but comes with a plea to end abstinence-only sex education and purity teachings.

## **Key words**

*Abstinence, Christianity, evangelicalism, gender, modesty, purity, sex education, virginity.*

## **Introduction**

In the early 1990s and 2000s, there was a particularly potent, purity-based evangelical Zeitgeist that stormed America and swept overseas to Aotearoa/New Zealand. What washed up on our shores were the adopted principles of abstinence, the virtues of feminine virginity and the morality of marriage – a minefield of values that many evangelical Christians here embraced. Embedded in this mania, we buried our heads in the sand. I say 'we', as I employ an autoethnographic lens in this article to look within the evangelical purity movement. What follows are my own stories, and I am present in them as a privileged, Pākehā, middle-class, tertiary-level educated, self-identifying woman, who benefits from the current heteronormative order.

From 2005 to 2015, I attended a private, evangelical Christian school in Aotearoa/New Zealand. My sister and female cousin, alongside a few friends who shared the same schooling, were also interpellated into a similar system. Among this few, we retrospectively called our Christian schooling 'cultish', as our school engendered a feedback loop between church fellowship and everyday indoctrination in the classroom. Since leaving school and

going to university, I have been able to begin hoisting my head out of the evangelical sandbank. In writing this article, I do not intend to critique the entirety of Christian culture, but rather to point to its most fundamentalist fringes of evangelicalism. I have many happy memories of being situated within a strong church community and schooling, yet I also recognise its more pernicious side. To frame my discussion, I draw on two best-selling, evangelical books by Dannah Gresh: *Secret keeper: The Delicate Power of Modesty* (2002) and also *And the bride wore white: Seven secrets to sexual purity* (2012). These books (the first aimed at middle-schooler, tween-age girls, the latter at high-school teenagers and young adult women) were reverentially passed around my school and church circles as though they were themselves biblical. My analysis of Gresh's work does not arrive without an agenda, but comes with a plea to end the dangerous impact of abstinence-only sex education and purity teachings. As pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber emphatically argues, 'we should not be more loyal to an idea, a doctrine, or an interpretation of a Bible verse than we are to *people*' (2020, p. 5, emphasis original). The church should not be permitted to hurt people.

### **'Born-again': Evangelical Christianity and the feminised church**

The evangelical church is an evolving subculture, or counterculture, but its most stubborn message has always been that of sexual purity (Klein, 2018; Moslener, 2015). The main threads of purity culture can be traced through the following themes: waiting until marriage is God's original design for sex; your body is God's temple, so don't desecrate it with sexual sin; lust is a ceaseless battle; men are pursuers and women are passive; pursuing purity is not just about virginity but about righteousness and holiness too; and true heterosexual love is like Christ's love for his feminised church. Essential to comprehending this Christian subculture is the notion of being 'born-again' through the spiritual rebirth of accepting Jesus Christ as your saviour. Karen Armstrong refers to the work of theologian Normal Powell Williams, who suggested that such 'twice-born' Christians 'tend to adopt theologies which are fundamentalist and literal ... [and] are unable to come to terms peacefully with their sexual lives prior to conversion' (Armstrong, 1987, p. 30). For born-again Christians, sex is always tainted by sin and shameful desires.

Born-again Christianity also relies on flashy alter-calls, religious fervour and impassioned personal testimonies. This was very evident within the churches I attended during my teens, and consequently, I always felt isolated there. I had been born into my faith – I inherited it from my parents along with my genes, it seemed. My father had previously

been a pastor and my mother a children's minister.<sup>1</sup> I never felt like I needed to be born-again, to fall on the floor crying and shaking, or fling my hands toward the ceiling, overcome with the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> Such expressions, or possessions, of the 'holy spirit' is evidence of pentecostal and charismatic influences. As religious historian Kate Bowler suggests, 'Pentecostals ... alone [have] required an involuntary ecstatic utterance as a credential for ordination and full participation in the community' (2013, ch. 1). Bowler also adds that young church congregations are 'encouraged' by the spirit (and their pastors) to dance under the flashing lights, sometimes amidst smoke machines, as if they were in a 'night club' (2013, ch. 4). What I have learned since leaving is that I was situated within a similarly fundamentalist, evangelical church, with pentecostal and charismatic elements.

Fundamentalist, evangelical churches are characterised by their devotion to biblical literalism, capitalism, counter-culturalism, individualism and, most regrettably, sexual conservatism. This is an establishment that 'caters to the tastes, comforts and concerns of middle-class conservatives' (Moslener, 2015, p. 11). And the apostle Paul, the founder of the first churches, is the evangelical's greatest hero. Although the New Testament epistles of Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy, Ephesians and Colossians were likely written decades after Paul's death by successors assuming his name (Armstrong, 1987, pp. 15-16), many of these epistles are still considered crucial texts for evangelicals. It is within their pages that we find teachings on women's modesty and subordination, sexual abstinence, and the church as Christ's 'bride'. This feminisation of the church occurred alongside its evolution from an egalitarian movement to an institution steeped in gender hierarchy. As Armstrong explains:

Paul had seen the Church and Christ as an inseparable unit; each Christian had a special function in the Church: just as each member of the human body has a special function and are all dependent on one another, no function or gift in the Church is superior to any other ... Because they are Christ they cannot be separated from him in any way at all. By the time Ephesians [5:21-32] was written, the Church is seen as separate from Christ: the Institutional Church is emerging to stand between Christ and the individual Christian and will subordinate some members of the Church to others – clergy over laity, celibate over married people, men over women. This is fundamentally opposed to Paul's egalitarianism. (1987, p. 261)

Lost were the gender-blind cries of believers being 'neither male nor female in Christ' (Galatians 3:28), and instead, a feminised Church became subordinated to a masculinised Christ (Colossians 1:18; 3:18). The egalitarian teachings of Jesus and Paul were replaced by a hierarchy of a masculine God over a feminine church, men over women, and masters over

slaves. I believe that it is in the literal and un-contextualised interpretations of these passages that we can locate the rotten roots of fundamentalist evangelical purity discourses.<sup>3</sup> These discourses are embedded in a deep-seated misogyny that fundamentally distrusts egalitarianism. As a young, curious teenager attempting to cultivate my spirituality alongside my sexuality, purity discourses dictated what could be discussed, questioned, said and unsaid in church. Sexuality was a stifled conversation. The Bible, being read literally to its own detriment, was used as a weapon.

### **Secret keepers and purity in my New Zealand Christian school**

Of course, sexuality was not only taboo in church, but in my Christian school too. The intermediate years heralded the exciting era of Christian camps, mufti-days, graduation from children's church and admittance into youth group, where the big kids gathered. This was a time marked by a sharp increase in sex-segregated purity panels (no doubt coinciding with girls' coming of age) as well as 'relationship evenings'<sup>4</sup> where 'daddy-daughter dates' were encouraged, spaghetti-strap singlets for girls were banned, purity rings became popular and we began passing around modesty manuals, such as those penned by Gresh. We also had our first sex-education classes, which could be more accurately described as abstinence-only classes. Abstinence-only sex education is marked by a sexual conservatism that forbids premarital sex, same-sex attraction,<sup>5</sup> pornography, masturbation and even sexual thoughts and fantasies. To learn the mechanics of our maturing bodies, we were sent to the science department and given a graphic glimpse into the taboos of boys' wet dreams and girls' periods. This was accompanied by a video of a man and a woman sitting under a white sheet, bolt upright in bed, clasping hands like ghostly lovers. This, laughed our male science teacher, was sex.

In New Zealand schools, sex-education programmes 'have been uneven to say the least ... [due to] an increasingly neoliberal approach to education, which allows schools to choose curricula' (Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 601). Our semi-private school capitalised on this neoliberal discretion to enforce a decidedly conservative curriculum. Schools, like churches, are institutions with an immense amount of power. As Louisa Allen asserts, they are 'sites for the production of sexual identities' (2007, p. 221), yet they are already 'heteronormative spaces' (2017, p. 101). Therefore, New Zealand schools are nationally reproducing 'default' heteronormative identities, 'othering' and excluding a broad spectrum of sexualities (Allen, 2017, p. 101). According to Allen, New Zealand schools smother sexual identities even

further by investing ‘in a particular sort of student that is “ideally” non-sexual’ (2007, p. 222).

This construction of ‘non-sexual’ students is gendered further within evangelical Christian contexts, whereby men are regarded as inherently sexual pursuers, whilst women are naturally moral pillars of a non-sexual purity and passivity. The New Zealand nation as a whole has inherited a pioneering ‘muscular Christianity’ from the ‘Motherland’ of Britain, which upholds ideals of ‘manliness, morality, health and patriotism’ (Moslener, 2015, p. 22). This muscular Christian ideal of manhood depends on an equally ideal womanhood – the Angel of the House (Armstrong, 1987, p. 32; Bronfen, 1992, p. 218); such gender complementarianism serves to preserve ‘social stability’, with the presence of ‘female piety’ preventing ‘the vices of uncontrolled masculinity’ (Moslener, 2015, p. 27). The construction of man’s uncontrollable, bestial and debasing lust reaches right back to the early Church Fathers, namely Saint Augustine (a ‘born-again’ Christian himself), whose theory of concupiscence has corrupted western theology ever since. Concupiscence is sex reimagined as a ‘raging and irrational force’ that gets in the way of God (Armstrong, 1987, p. 32). Thus, sexuality becomes a hurdle to men’s spirituality as they ‘attempt to assert mastery over their baser selves’ (Moslener, 2015, p. 25). A leaflet published in 1888 by the New Zealand Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) argued that women should be allowed to vote because they ‘are less accessible than most men to most of the debasing influences’ (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2017). Pākehā women’s presence as political actors in the Aotearoa/New Zealand public sphere was predicated on first de-sexualising themselves. It is no coincidence that first-wave feminism ‘coincided with the earliest purity movement’ (Moslener, 2015, p. 16). WCTUs in both the United States and Aotearoa/New Zealand invoked these ‘antagonistic’ Victorian ‘gender ideologies’ of uncontrolled masculinity and angelic purity (Moslener, 2015, p. 7).

The rhetoric of rape, as man’s uncontrollable lust, seems an odd bedfellow for purity discourses, yet they lie hand in hand. And they are directly imported alongside colonialism. The WCTU was not only coded for gender, but also for colour. Purity discourses coincided with nationalistic discourses that ‘capitalized on racialized and sexualized fears of national decline and asserted a causal relationship between sexual immorality, Anglo-Saxon decline, and national decay’ (Moslener, 2015, p. 8). It is no coincidence that purity culture is mostly embraced by white, middle-class, conservative Christians – the majority of the demographic make-up of my old school. Throughout the history of evangelical purity culture, purity has never simply been a matter of social and sexual hygiene, but it preserved the idealized ‘white

race'. Thus, the 'purpose of sex [wa]s simply procreation' (Valenti, 2009, p. 43), and marriage was championed as a state-sponsored system that ensured white, Christian, conservative hegemony and contained men's uncontrollable lusts. The threads of racism, colonialism and sexism are inextricably intertwined. When white women are rendered as good, clean and pure, all other women are rendered 'dirty' and damaged (Valenti, 2009, p. 45).

Overemphasising men's lust whilst denying women's sexual presence set a precedent wherein sexuality was a problem. It still is. As Allen notes regarding abstinence-only sex education, students learn to see their 'sexuality [as] a problem to be managed rather than a positive part of youthful identity' (2005, p. 390). The 'missing discourse of desire' is evident not only in Christian schools, but in schools across Aotearoa/New Zealand (Allen, 2013, 295). And if desire is missing, then girls' desires are entirely lost. White, Christian, female desires don't exist – they are starved of oxygen high up on a pedestal that 'protect[s] our innocence and insure[s] our purity' whilst also separating us from the possibility of our own pleasure (Webster, 1985, p. 386). Anyone (or, more accurately, any woman) who falls off this pedestal is radically excluded from this realisation of Christianity.

Evangelical Christian modesty manuals are one of the many ways that girls' desires are reined in and rendered invisible in the classroom. Dannah Gresh's *Secret Keeper: The Delicate Power of Modesty* (2002) is one such manual that is presented in a tone of benign 'guys and gals' Pennsylvanian charm for tween and teenage girls.<sup>6</sup> Gresh rode the tide of the abstinence movement in America, which included abstinence-only sex education that has received a total of US\$2 billion in US federal funding since 1981 (Klein, 2018, Introduction). This funding coincided with the advent of the individualistic, countercultural, evangelical megachurch that 'resemble[d] corporate headquarters' (Moslener, 2015, p. 10), and throughout the 1990s, there was a shift from chastity being a young person's 'private choice' to it becoming a political declaration, with evangelical groups such as True Love Waits and Silver Ring Thing reaching millions of young people with their purity and abstinence teaching (Moslener, 2015, pp. 3, 110). Throughout this period, the commodification and fetishisation of female virginity remained persistent, combining with these other elements to create a highly-orchestrated tidal wave of fear and moral outrage. The revitalisation of the virginity movement, or 'the purity myth' as Jessica Valenti calls it, had 'conservatives and evangelical Christians at the helm', whipping up a sensationalist moral panic of 'girls gone wild' (Valenti, 2009, p. 23). And as churches became increasingly focused on capitalism and profit, girls became re-commodified within a Christian context.

Gresh herself continuously employs advertising theory as evidence of boys having been ‘created’ to be ‘visually stimulated’ and girls’ bodies being created to contain sexual capital (2002, pp. 34, 42). She describes meeting a girl who feels she possesses ‘power’ when men are drawn to look at her, yet paradoxically hates the persistence of their gaze (2002, p. 10). Gresh informs the girl that this is evidence of her feminine ‘allure’, a euphemistic term for the pervasive and misogynistic male gaze (2002, p. 11). Gresh goes on to explain that:

Modesty is the source of this delicate yet formidable power, making it a power in and of itself. It’s delicate because it can be so innocently given away without your even knowing it. It’s formidable ... because once you’ve mastered it, no man will be given access to the full secrets behind your allure until you so desire. (2002, p. 11)

Gresh repeatedly talks about the ‘secrets’ that lie behind a girl’s ‘allure’, which she insists are the ‘most powerful part’ of girl’s ‘beauty’ (2002, p. 24). While she never explicitly explains what these ‘secrets’ are, it becomes clear that this is a euphemism for a girl’s virginity. Gresh employs ambiguity as an insurance policy against claims of virginity fetishisation. In interviews and blogposts, she has stated that purity is not a synonym for virginity (Gresh, 2014b; see also Wyngaard, 2019). Yet throughout *Secret Keeper*, she expresses her belief that God made girls with a gift which can only be ‘given’ once. This is a conditional gift, a conditional beauty, it is for one man only (‘one man’ is often italicised, underlined or both in the book). Confusingly, Gresh also claims that girls must keep this gift a secret and that they are also ‘worthy of every glance you receive ... The masterpiece is applauded with many glances’ (2002, p. 20).

As young girls, we therefore learn that we are rewarded by the male gaze. In a commodified body economy, glances are as good as gold. But, too much of this currency and you have begun to ‘prostitut[e] [your]self visually’ (Gresh, 2002, p. 55). Gresh reminds girls that ‘immodesty ... [is a] cheap thrill that requires no investments on [a guy’s] part ... Modesty protects the true secrets of your body for one man, requiring him to invest in your life in order to one day enjoy your allure. It invites a guy to earn your virtue’ (2002, p. 46). Notice again the commodified rhetoric: cheap thrills, investments, inviting and earning virtue. Emotions have become economic in this capitalist minefield of losses, gains, gifts, investments, earnings, trusts, risks, rewards and profits, creating what Armstrong describes as a ‘cult of female dependency’ (1987, p. 281). The evangelical response to alarmist cries of hypersexualisation has therefore been to reinforce the capitalist commodification of teenage girls by fetishising virginity. Jessica Valenti notes with irony that ‘virginity worship’ is the same as sexualisation, and ‘raunch culture’ exists because of the repressed, religious right

(2009, pp. 70, 95). Or, as Breanne Fahs (2010, p. 116) puts it, repression fosters obsession. Similarly, Allen notes that discourses of girls' desire are 'limited' to provocative, promiscuous and commodified depictions, which cause girls to internalise misogyny through modesty self-surveillance and the incessant navel-gazing of encouraged narcissism (2013, p. 296). As objects of desire, they cannot be sexual subjects (Allen, 2017, pp. 297-298).

Thus, rather than equipping girls to discover their own real desires, they are stifled by virginity fetishisation and a patriarchal 'perpetual girlhood' (Valenti, 2009, p. 30). Contemporary evangelical purity culture preserves perpetual girlhood into adulthood, fostering a generational learned helplessness of feminine weakness, naïveté and ignorance. Girls are taught that preparing for autonomous adulthood is undesirable (Valenti, 2009, p. 65). And although preparation for adulthood is a school's institutional role, abstinence-only sex education functions to further generate perpetual girlhood. Schools become secondary, 'substitute' parents that determine what its 'child' is allowed to know (Allen, 2007, p. 228). For Christian girls, this is doubly devastating as the church creates a patriarchal theology that aligns God with their 'earthly fathers',<sup>7</sup> and schools perpetuate a state-sanctioned paternalism that determines what girls can, or cannot, know. Girls therefore have three substitute parents: God, the state and schools.

## **Stumbling blocks and victim blame**

While Gresh insists to girls that they are rewarded by the male gaze, she also reminds them that they may cause their 'Christian brothers to stumble' if they wear too-revealing clothes, and thereby topple a guy's innocent glance into one of grievous lust (2002, pp. 36-37). The phrase 'stumbling block' is repeatedly deployed by evangelical Christians to chastise girls for being tempting *things* that boys and men can trip over (Klein, 2018, Introduction). This power, 'so innocently given away without your even knowing it' (Gresh, 2002, p. 24), typifies the world order envisioned by the early Church Father Tertullian (another 'born-again' Christian). In his third-century treatise *On Female Dress*, Tertullian emphatically connects female appearance with the original sin of Eve, with the result that 'each woman is completely responsible for destroying men ... [because of] something as apparently unimportant as women's clothes' (Armstrong, 1987, p. 55). Tertullian lectures women that 'as soon as man has lusted after your beauty, he has in his mind already committed the sin which his lust was imagining and he perished because of this, and you have been made the sword that destroys him' (*On Female Dress*, II, ii; cited in Armstrong, 1987, p. 55). Another



founding church father, the fourth-century Jerome, shared a number of Tertullian's anxieties about women's sexuality and was so sexually repressed that he even feared women walking around: 'As you walk along your shiny black shoes by their creaking give an invitation to young men' (Letter cxvii; cited in Armstrong, 1987, p. 59).

These third- and fourth-century fears of the destructive lust that women can inspire remain alive and well in contemporary purity discourse. Sixteen hundred years later, Gresh tells her teen girl readers that a skirt with a slit 'invites' boys to 'finish the picture' and fill in the gaps by imagining the rest of her body – this, insists Gresh, is 'simple visual science' (2002, p. 43). And '[i]f a guy sees a girl walking around in tight clothes ... well, she might as well hang a noose around the neck of his spiritual life' (Gresh, 2002, p. 44). Girls, it seems, are causing guys to commit spiritual suicide. Unsuspecting girls are accidentally luring unsuspecting guys in a cycle of helplessness driven by uncontrollable male sexual lust. Because girls' immodest clothes (and by association, girls' bodies) are essentially a source of 'sin' (Gresh, 2002, p. 39).

The biblical verse of Matthew 5:28 is often cited as evidence of this helplessness men are goaded to; in the words of Jesus, 'I say to you that everyone who so much as looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart' (Amplified Bible). Yet does this verse really mean that girls and women are 'stumbling blocks' for men, and must therefore constantly police their appearance? According to Armstrong:

Jesus was not making a particular issue of lust here, but was illustrating his admirable religious insight that mere external conformity to a set of rules is not enough for the truly religious man. It is the attitude in his heart that counts, not a meticulous performance of burdensome commandments. Tertullian twists this potentially liberating idea into a truly frightening view of the moral world. (1987, p. 55)

For centuries, then, modesty has been envisioned as obedience to God, in a gendered regime where unruly bodies are reined in through disciplining girls' dress and deterring their desires. Christian girls are constructed as bodies that must be brought under control to guard good, Christian boys, and barricade themselves against the invasion of bad, non-Christian boys. In turn, good, Christian boys must fortify their minds against foreign invasions of lust incited by immodestly dressed girls. Lust thus becomes a battle; it is not natural. Girls' only option is to assume responsibility for men's sexual purity by practicing modesty (Moslener, 2009, p. 108).

Moreover, this purity discourse perpetuates various myths about sexual violence that scaffold rape culture. It is bad, unsaved boys who rape, not good, Christian boys. But girls –

beware! You might cause your Christian brothers to stumble, turning them into bad boys. So, if you get raped, it's probably your fault. Gresh warns her teen girl readers that:

Altering the course of ... lust once aroused is very difficult for a guy. I'm not saying that a guy has no responsibility to control his own arousal ... But sometimes a girl can attract the wrong kind of guy with what she wears. I don't even mean a really, really bad guy. You could just attract a really, really nice guy whose moral standard has been suddenly and terribly weakened. (2002, p. 35)

Make no mistake, this is victim blaming at its worst. Girls are blamed for attracting bad guys or weakening good ones. If a girl wears any clothes that might cause her Christian brothers to stumble, she is effectively responsible for what boys see and how they behave. Women's clothing can talk, it can actually ask for it. So, as my school said, no spaghetti straps.

Years after publishing *Secret keeper*, Gresh clarified in a blogpost that guys are not 'off the hook' when it comes to rape. Rather, a non-Christian woman who has not been taught modesty should be safe around saved men: she should 'find herself PROTECTED by a godly man' (Gresh, 2016; capitals original). But benevolent sexism is still sexism. The necessity of patriarchal protection implies that women are weak and passive. In the battle of lust, Gresh declares that 'modesty is the first line of defence for your purity' (2002, 49). Because guys just can't help themselves, girls!

Abstinence-only sex education similarly advocates that purity is always a 'choice' and modesty is effective risk-management against sexual assault. This instantly shames and stigmatises victims of sexual abuse, assault and rape, insinuating that they have not made the 'right' choices. Yet the high rates of sexual violence in our society proves that rape has nothing to do with purity (Valenti, 2009, p. 108). But this does not stop evangelical purity proponents from repeatedly peddling similar discourses to Gresh that exonerate perpetrators of rape and blame their victims. As Kathryn Klement and Brad Sagarin demonstrate in their study of evangelical Christian books for women, these books consistently set 'higher standards of conduct for girls (...dressing modestly, not flirting) than for boys (...boys are visual creatures, they can't help it)' (2017, p. 218). According to Heather Hendershot, the construction of teenage boys as 'out of control' creates:

a body that can only be controlled/cured by a spiritual commitment to chastity ... fundamentalist chastity discourse may inadvertently encourage boys to be sexually violent and girls to see submission to sexual violence as natural ... Crudely put, when all bodily control is lost, boys give in to their urge to rape and girls give in to their urge to submit to rape ... It sometimes seems that rape per se does not exist for

fundamentalists. Instead, boys ‘lose control’ or ‘force themselves’ on girls. (2002, p. 92; cited in Fahs, 2010, p. 121)

Fundamentalist gender complementarianism, although claiming gender *difference*, encourages gendered *dominance*. And, as evident above, it also encourages rape culture. Men’s ‘ethics are safe from criticism’ as sex is simply too risky for women, while women are left with an ‘ethics of passivity’ (Valenti, 2009, pp. 25, 109).

### **Abstinence angst ... until marriage, that is**

As us girls grew older, we were allowed to read Gresh’s ‘racier’ adult book, *And the bride wore white: Seven secrets to sexual purity* (2012). *Secret keeper* had ended with a ‘love note’ from Jesus: ‘I am enthralled by your beauty. Oh, how I love you ... how precious your body is to me. Will you honour me with it? Will you love me back?’ (2002, p. 68). The only boyfriend Gresh had allowed us was Jesus, who was imposed on us as a possessive, stalkerish boyfriend always imploring us to love him. At my school, if a boy and a girl were standing close together, we would shout ‘Make room for Jesus!’ at them. Naturally, we thought we were hilarious.

Of course, Jesus has been a girl’s first boyfriend for centuries. The first purity rings were emblems worn by the saintly virgins – such as Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila and Catherine de Ricci – as evidence of their consecration and marriage to Christ (Armstrong, 1987, p. 152). But as we graduated from *Secret keeper* to *And the bride wore white*, we also graduated from Jesus-as-boyfriend to husband training. Jesus became the jilted lover, because the ideology of marriage is integral to the evangelical Christian worldview. Through marriage, every home can be envisioned as a little bastion of God’s heavenly kingdom. This idea emerged with the WCTU, which sought premarital purity as a ‘social salvation’ from venereal disease, drunkenness and other moral depravities (Moslener, 2015, pp. 4, 18, 30, 44).

In over 100 years since the WCTU’s campaigns, Christian conservatives haven’t changed their tune. Gresh contends that the ‘only no-risk method of protection against HPV [human papillomavirus] is abstinence ... a woman who is not sexually active will never acquire HPV’ (2012, ch. 2). Gresh’s assertions here essentially shame victims of sexual assault and rape, who could contract HPV or another sexually-transmitted infection (STI) from their rapist. She also articulates an oft-cited conservative belief that the HPV vaccine makes girls promiscuous, which, as Valenti notes, has as much validity as the following

statement: ‘If you give a kid a tetanus shot, she’ll want to jab rusty nails in her feet’ (2009, p. 71). At my school, it was a walk of shame to the nurse’s office to get the (funded) ‘slut’ vaccine and only one girl was ‘promiscuous’ enough (or, more accurately, brave enough) to take it. She was never able to shake off the stigma. Some parents thought it wiser to pay for their daughters to get the vaccine from their GP, thereby sparing them the shame. But I wonder if some girls never received the vaccine because their parents couldn’t afford to get it privately, or because they too were influenced by the miasma of stigma and shame that surrounded it. Purity culture, it appears, would rather risk cancer over girls’ safe, sexual activity (Valenti, 2009, p. 71).

Mind you, for Gresh, there is no such thing as ‘safe, sexual activity’. Satan is the sole author of ‘safe-sex’, she writes, because it is ‘one of the most dangerous activities that exist’ (2012, ch. 2). Alongside a shopping-list of STIs, Gresh cites that condoms only work ‘50 percent of the time’ (2012, ch. 2). With a distinct tone of fear-mongering, Gresh cites rates of teenage pregnancies, cancer, loneliness and suicide; premarital sex is even equated with death (2012, ch. 5). This is part of the price of impurity: ‘Giving your body away might someday need to be paid for in the form of pregnancy, AIDs or some other STDs’ (Gresh, 2012, ch. 5). Again, the sexual economy resurfaces, only the stakes are costlier.

Gresh’s questionable statistics should come as no surprise. Various studies have shown that ‘over 80 percent of abstinence programs contain false or misleading information about sex and reproductive health’ (Valenti, 2009, p. 218). Fear-mongering, false information and shame-tactics has ensured that:

[a] generation of young [people]... has been indoctrinated not only with messages about how wrong, dirty, and immoral premarital sex is, but also with subjective, and often false, information: that contraception is ineffective (and sometimes dangerous); that abortion is wrong; that any sexual activity outside of marriage is likely to make you diseased, poor, depressed, and suicidal. (Valenti, 2009, p. 102)

Jason Bivins’ analysis of late twentieth-century evangelicalism found that it is a ‘religion of fear’ (2008; cited in Moslener, 2015, p. 9), while historian Angela Lahr contends that evangelicals emerge in ages of anxiety (2007; cited in Moslener, 2015, p. 9). Evangelical movements feed on fear to survive. They are sustained by the current craze, whether that be the threat of war, sexual liberation, feminism, LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and more) rights or BIPOC (black, indigenous and people of colour) rights. Nothing feeds the fire of fear more than ignorance; hence, ‘misinformation is just the tip of the abstinence iceberg’ (Valenti, 2009, p. 105).

Abstinence-only sex education has a whole host of other failings too. Studies have found that middle-schoolers who received abstinence-only education were ‘just as likely’ to have sex as teenagers who hadn’t (Valenti, 2009, p. 119). The only difference between these two groups is that one is misinformed. Teenagers who have had abstinence-only education, or have pledged their purity, are less likely to use condoms and more likely to have anal or oral sex to preserve their ‘technical’ virginity (Valenti, 2009, p. 120; Fahs, 2010, pp. 117, 125). Anal and oral sex were known within the Christian circles I inhabited as ‘loopholes’, while using a condom only confirmed you had ‘planned’ to be promiscuous, it didn’t ‘just happen’. Chastity and purity pledges only delay the first experience of vaginal intercourse by up to 18 months for primarily white, 15-to-17-year-olds, making pledges virtually ineffective for older teenagers and minorities (Fahs, 2010, p. 124). Gresh is very proud of this 18-month delay, claiming that it is ‘good’ (2014a), even though it only works for a small demographic, something she omits to mention. And as Linda Klein argues, abstinence-only sex education does not meaningfully delay sex, but it does increase sexual shame (2018, Introduction). According to Klein, the abstinence rhetoric of purity culture is:

traumatising many girls and maturing women haunted by sexual and gender-based anxiety, fear, and physical experiences [such as vaginismus] that ... mimic the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Based on our nightmares, panic attacks, and paranoia, one might think that my childhood friends and I had been to war. And in fact, we had. We went to war with ... our own bodies, and our own sexual natures. (2018, Introduction)

Similar to Linda Klein, ex-evangelical Jamie Lee Finch (2019) experienced a distinctly religious dimension of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), called Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS). RTS often accompanies other disorders, including anxiety, eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, depression and substance abuse (Finch, 2019, ‘Trauma and PTSD’). Abstinence-only sex education *does* achieve something, then: lasting trauma and distress. It also guarantees students’ sexual repression and ‘securing their conformity to conservative and religious mores’ (Allen, 2011, p. 105). ‘Danger and fear’ are two of the key tools that abstinence-only educators use (Allen, 2011, p. 47), and purity-based education pushes girls in particular to experience more anxiety, more risk, more shame and less pleasure.

## **Prosperity, pleasure, and procreation**

The purity movement also propagates the ‘sexual prosperity gospel’, as coined by Katelyn Beatly (2019). The sexual prosperity gospel is ‘Evangelical purity culture’s [own] brand of sexual repression’, as Finch calls it (2019, ‘Conclusion’). It is primarily a legalistic bargain that a purity-pledging young person makes with God: as a reward for premarital chastity, God will grant ‘a good Christian spouse, great sex and perpetual marital fulfilment’ (Beatly, 2019). In other words, a pure premarital state makes a perfect marriage union. Hence, sexual purity, with its ‘promises of marital bliss and sexual ecstasy, is a most compelling metaphor for the Christian faith and the promise of eternal salvation’ (Moslener, 2015, p. 14). Sexual prosperity sprang naturally out of the larger, legalistic prosperity gospel which advocates spiritual abundance, and which reinterprets the self-replicating nature of white, heteronormative, middle-to-upper-class privilege as God-granted ‘miracles’. According to Kate Bowler, in her comprehensive study of American Christianity, the prosperity gospel is an ‘orientation’, not a cut-and-dry ‘cattle brand’ (2013, ‘Appendix B’).

Gresh affirms the sexual prosperity gospel using some more highly dubious statistics, noting that Christian, married wives who ‘wait’ until their wedding night experience greater sexual satisfaction and have a ‘distinct “oneness” with their husbands’ (2012, ch. 14). The sexual satisfaction found within marriage is not, it appears, about orgasms or pleasure, but the ‘smirking’ knowledge that ‘your relationship is more “complete” than other people’s *because you waited*’ (Valenti, 2009, p. 44; emphasis original). This marriage contract, or bargaining chip with God, has a distinct and conditional clause: ‘*If you wait, then it will be a blast*’ (Gresh, 2012, ch. 14; emphasis original). Bewilderingly, Gresh also placates readers who have already been sexually active that they can renew their purity, just as the biblical prostitute Rahab renewed hers,<sup>8</sup> implying that premarital sex is practically prostitution. Excessive sexual pleasure is ever-present, warns Gresh, lurking about like Satan to lure girls in with lies about sex (2012, ch. 2). Equipping young Christians with safe-sex practices therefore only encourages them to spiral into a heathenistic hedonism.

With a cultural legacy of inherited neuroses around sex (Armstrong, 1987), it’s no surprise that Christianity devised a binary order of heavenly purity opposing an underworld of pleasure. Men, with their uncontrollable lusts, are afforded pleasure, while women are depicted as ‘such emotional creatures’ (Klement & Sagarin, 2017, p. 207) who are incapable of separating sex from emotion. Women who choose to be sexually active outside of marriage are thus portrayed as being ‘broken in some way; they’ve disconnected from their emotions, and are acting like men’ (Klement & Sagarin, 2017, p. 215). Gresh blames the

feminist movement for perverting the ‘natural’ gender regime and ‘now we have girls pursuing guys... sexually! ...It’s out of control!’ (2012, ch. 3). Girls have gone wild!

I cannot claim to know what went on in the boys’ sex education talks at my school, as discussions about sex were segregated. But it was both assumed and frowned upon that boys had been masturbating since middle-school. Masturbation was made into a masculine word. And so, it seemed, was pleasure. Women could seek pleasure solely in marriage, where husbands could dictate desires to their wives, creating in them an ‘extreme sexual dependency’ (Armstrong, 1987, p. 247). Valenti argues that this over-dependency and underrepresentation of female pleasure is a ‘surefire way to ensure not that young women won’t have sex, but rather that they’ll have it without pleasure ... Pleasure is widely dismissed, if not denounced, in the virginity movement’ (2009, p. 43). Unless of course, it is procreational. Gresh reminds her female readers that sex is ‘fun!’ and is also ‘for making babies!’ (2012, ch. 14). Pleasure and procreation, it appears, go hand in hand for women.

We Christian girls had learnt from *Secret keeper* that we could be an accidental temptress, and this is reinforced in *And the bride wore white*. As well as being likened to Rahab, girls are also invited to see themselves as Eve – the first fallen woman and archetypal temptress (Genesis 2-3). Eve is equated with all women in *And the bride wore white*. Like Eve, our sins are forgiven but never forgotten. Like Eve, we must ‘accept the consequences’ of procuring the forbidden fruit (Gresh, 2012, ch. 15). Only our ‘fruit’ is sex. Gresh frames girls’ and women’s sexualities as a source of sin and evil. None other than Satan himself ‘looks at your sexuality much like he did Eve’s Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil’ (Gresh, 2012, ch. 2). Gresh uses a possessive apostrophe to highlight that it is *Eve’s* tree, not Adam’s, thereby placing the blame and culpability for the sin of sexual knowledge squarely on *her* shoulders. Gresh further explains that, as Satan tempts Eve to ‘just’ touch the forbidden fruit, ‘just’ touching sex includes oral sex, sexting and posting ‘provocative profile pictures’ on social media (2012, ch. 3). God, insists Gresh, says ‘No!’ to these things, ‘and you can too. No debating. No touching. Just “No!”’; even ‘emotional fantasy’ is off the table (2012, ch. 3).

Through discourses such as these, women have been ‘trained not to cultivate the self but to suppress it’ and sacrifice it; sacrifice has been the sole ‘mission’ of women throughout history (Armstrong, 1987, p. 207), including the sacrifice of their sexuality. The marriage bed is anticipated as a ‘sacrificial alter where the woman suffers the sexual attentions of her husband’ (Armstrong, 1987, p. 77). Or, as Gresh puts it, the site where the hymen is broken and bleeds, in ‘most’ cases at least (2012, ch. 13). Drawing on misinformation about the

hymen that has long been medically disproven, Gresh constructs the marriage sacrificial alter as the last remaining ‘blood covenant sacrifice God still asks that we practice today ... your sexuality’ (2012, ch. 13). Here, evangelical hangovers from Puritan covenant theology combined with the Calvinist ‘distrust of pleasure’ are evident (Armstrong, 1987, p. 55). What happens in the marriage bed, insists Gresh, is between ‘you, your husband and God’ (2012, ch. 13). God becomes the second ‘guy’ in the room, just as he was the guy-in-the-sky who filled the ‘hole in your heart’, according to a female group leader in my church. Gresh reminds girls that the first man to fill this ‘guy-shaped hole’ in their heart is their father (2012, ch. 12). The psychoanalytic allusions are glaringly obvious, particularly when we also consider those daddy/daughter dates so well-loved in evangelical Christian circles (thankfully, my own father never subjected me to such an evening, he thought the events were ‘disgusting’). Fathers are made the ‘*literal* gatekeepers for ... their daughters’ sexualities’ (Fahs, 2010, p. 35; emphasis original). There are so many gatekeepers, though: protective fathers, the patriarchal God, paternalistic schooling, and a girl’s own learned helplessness. All these aspects colour premarital sex as ‘perpetually perilous’ and ‘pleasure-less’ (Allen, 2011, p. 105). As Allen has noted about abstinence-only sex education, students who consider their own sexuality as inherently ‘wrong’ are set up for failure (2007, p. 222). We cannot expect generations of young people to be ‘fine’ after such an education (Valenti, 2009, p. 119).

## **The poster girl**

In 2012, I made my diary debut. Only each entry began with ‘Dear Lord’ rather than ‘Dear Diary’, thanks to my church and school inspiring daily, devotional reflections. Evidently, my hard work in penning my tween angst paid off, as at the end of the year I won the ‘Christian Character’ award at prize-giving, which was, ironically, a much-coveted award. In hindsight, it is hard to pin down precisely what I thought of purity culture, being so embedded in it at the time. But the few entries in my various diary volumes that specifically mention purity were all in direct relation to one person: Cassidy.<sup>9</sup>

Cassidy was in my sister’s year group (five years older than me); she was my small-group leader at church,<sup>10</sup> and was dating the church heartthrob Lewis. When I was 13, I wrote that ‘I am learning at the moment (through relationship evenings and [Cassidy’s] small groups) that we have to find our beauty and identity in you, God – and to stay pure’. I look back on such a cringe entry and laugh, as even then, purity was an elusive afterthought. When



I was 14, I wrote an entry on Cassidy, who had once again spoken about purity at church. She was the one who told me that God alone could fill the ‘hole in your heart’. Women, as I would grow to learn, were created to be incomplete without men, and vice versa. Cassidy often gave talks about her dogged-eared and underlined favourite book, *And the bride wore white*, which she carted around alongside her Bible. She was the poster-girl of born-again Christianity. She had converted from Catholicism and was a born-again virgin. Her testimony was a tour de force from sexual sin, to regret, to redemption and renewed purity. Cassidy came to my school to speak to the middle-school girls on a panel about purity. She was also propped up on her penitent pedestal at school-run ‘relationship evenings’ and made an appearance at almost every event. She was showcased in both the church and school as an example of how we can be ‘cleansed’ of any sin. Even Cassidy, even her worst sexual sin, could be forgiven, it appeared.

At church there was a complicated politics of purity. Women like Cassidy were unable to share their previous sexual experiences, which would be tainted with shame, but were required to spout about purity. Behind closed doors and in shady church corners, Cassidy might be whispered about as the one who ‘strayed’, but her past indiscretions lent her a certain mystique by virtue of being the only young woman (that I knew of) in our church friendship circle who had sexual knowledge and experience. Yet this was a double-edged sword, as these experiences were also frowned upon by her peer group, who, in their superiority, were still considered ‘pure’. Cassidy was expected to confess to her boyfriend that she had engaged in premarital sex, if he hadn’t already heard through church and community gossip. As Samantha Pugsley notes,<sup>11</sup> gossip can be the ‘lifeblood’ of a church (2014), and gossip was as good as currency in my church, with sex-talk being of the utmost premium. Whilst girls were the gossips, boys were the gatekeepers of sexual knowledge: they were the masturbating majority, who made sexual jokes at the girls’ blushing expense. A distinctly gendered knowledge gap was therefore maintained: girls were rendered the ‘blissfully’ ignorant, pure gatekeepers of sex. Those girls (like Cassidy) who had sexually experimented held this premium on knowledge, but were condemned for their promiscuity and impurity. Born-again virginity made all previous sexual experiences sinful. At that time, in our eyes, there was no positive premarital sex; marriage was the lone island of pleasure. To many newly-married Christian couples, though, this was far from the reality they encountered. ‘Doing the deed’ had been demonised for so many years, how were they supposed to reconcile the rhetoric of sexual shame with their newfound marital status? How, as Bolz-Weber (2020, p. 4) asks, can Christians suddenly flip a ‘switch’ in their brains and

bodies from shame and sin to joy and pleasure? This complicated system of sex that I learned through church and school gossip permeated almost my entire socialisation. I was part of a church, a Christian school, a youth group, church camp and worship band. All, aside from one paramount place of refuge (my parents), pointed to purity.<sup>12</sup>

## Concluding thoughts

Best-selling book *And the bride wore white* was first published in 1999. Dannah Gresh holds in the 2012 updated edition that she has helped at least 250,000 young women (2012, ‘Acknowledgments’). I have no doubt that this book is *not* helpful, but chillingly harmful and spiritually abusive. It frames purity culture as the bedfellow of rape culture, wrapping it up in the rhetoric of girls’ spiritual and cultural empowerment. Purity is sold as a radical, political and countercultural choice. Yet purity teachings and abstinence-only sex education do not create choices – they are detrimentally damaging and ineffective, as has been well-demonstrated by educationalists (Allen, 2011, p. 139). The purity movement, spearheaded by authors like Gresh, put forward a fundamentalist Christian regime that ‘splinter[s]’ its subjects sexually and spiritually (Allen, 2007, p. 231). We cannot let anyone carry around a splintered self any longer. We must teach effective and safe sex education and equip young people to become independent, decision-making adults. To finish by paraphrasing the words of Sharon Thompson (1985, p. 376), teenage girls are not enjoying too much, too soon. Rather, they have been afforded too little pleasure, too few options, and all too late.

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## Notes

1. My mother was herself raised by a Brethren woman. The Brethren have four central doctrines: non-creedalism (New Testament is the central creed), pacifism (my great-grandfather was a conscientious objector in World War I), simplistic (no drinking, smoking, dancing, secular schooling, etc.) and believer’s baptism.
2. These types of behaviour (crying, shaking, falling and frantic prayer) were very common in this church and were perceived as evidence of your faith.

3. After conversing with my parents about this research, I have since discovered that Ephesians 5:21-32 was part of the passage my father chose to write his final paper on for his Bachelor of Theology. He chose to argue that these verses did not justify a woman's submission, a radical thought in a conservative, late-twentieth-century Christian university, and he was ridiculed by his peers. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.
4. Relationship evenings were after-school events where pupils and their parents gathered to talk about purity. These meetings were sex-segregated too, and could include mothers and daughters or mothers and sons or fathers and daughters or fathers and sons.
5. Non-heteronormative sexualities are essentially non-existent for many evangelicals, who envisage 'same-sex attraction' as but a temporary perversion of which you can be 'cured'.
6. *Secret keeper* was rebranded in 2019 as *True girl*, after the original name came under fire. See Gresh (2019) for further details.
7. 'Earthly fathers' was a saying used in my church to separate one's biological father from one's 'heavenly father'/God. This was incredibly isolating for young people who were adopted, whose fathers had left them, or who had lost their fathers.
8. Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute who protected Israelite spies in the Old Testament book of Joshua. She supported Israelite claims to Canaanite land and was spared when God's chosen people conquered her home city, Jericho. In biblical interpretive traditions, she is considered a reformed 'harlot' who had faith in the true God. Rahab is also mentioned in Jesus' genealogy in the New Testament gospel of Matthew (Matt. 1:5).
9. All the names I mention in this section have been changed to protect people's privacy.
10. A small-group leader shepherds a group of younger, same-sex mentees in a church, stimulating discussion and leading prayer.
11. Samantha Pugsley is the author of the notorious article, 'I waited until my wedding night to lose my virginity and I wish I hadn't', which stirred up controversy in my church.
12. My parents told me that it was better to have premarital sex than to get married just to have sex. Marriage, they told me, was a huge commitment and not for the faint-hearted.

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