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Table of Contents

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Fulfilling Femininity and Transcending the Flesh

Traditional Religious Beliefs and Gender Ideals in Popular Women's Magazines

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Introduction

[1] I must confess that my interest in popular women's magazines was not initially academic. Between the ages of 12 and 20, I consumed a steady diet of *Seventeen* magazine. This, of course, was not so unusual. Millions of other white, middle-class teenage girls were similarly navigating the turbulence of youth with the help of these glossy images. Meanwhile, millions of white, middle-class housewives - like my mother - were busy reading *Ladies Home Journal,* cover to cover, month to month. What fascinates me now about my mother's and my devotion to these seemingly profane, popular texts, is that it blended so well with the religious beliefs and gender ideals transmitted to us through our Christian faith.

[2] It is possible to argue that popular women's magazines are "sacred texts" for millions of American girls and women. They serve what has historically been a religious function, mediating a search for meaning in the face of suffering, injustice, and uncertainty (Lelwica: Chapter 2). In this essay, I explore how the quasi-religious function of these texts is connected to some traditional religious beliefs and gender ideals that are tacitly embedded (and to some extent renegotiated) in them.<1> In particular, Christianity has been a vehicle for two widespread beliefs about gender and the body that women's magazines reproduce: first, the belief that women are closer to the body than men; and second, the belief that the body must be monitored, mastered, and transcended if holiness is to be achieved. Let's begin by considering these two beliefs, in order to better understand the gender ideals to which they give rise.

The Legacy of Eve and the Problem of the Body

[3] The association between women and the body in classic Christian theology takes its cue from the second account of creation.<2> In Genesis 2-3, Eve's derivation from Adam's flesh suggests that women represent the physical side of human existence; her designation as Adam's "helper" suggests women's primary role in caring for the body's needs in the form of domestic service; and her lack of restraint in eating the apple suggests women's susceptibility to bodily cravings. Eve's proximity to the body is sealed by her punishment for committing the first sin: "In pain you shall bring forth children," the Lord declares, "Yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you'" (Gen 2:16).<3> Eve's legacy is renewed in New Testament texts like 1 Timothy 2:11-15, where women are ordered to be silent and submissive because of Eve's transgression, though they can be "saved through child-bearing," if they continue in faith with modesty.

[4] Biblical associations between women and the body coexist alongside another prominent Christian idea, namely, that the body can be an obstacle in the pursuit of spiritual virtue. The battle between the will of the "spirit" and that of the "flesh" is an ongoing motif in Paul's letters. "I mortify my body and bring it into subjection," he writes (1 Cor 9:27), comparing faithful Christians to athletes who exercise self-control. Though Paul is less dualistic than his Gnostic competitors (see, e.g. 2 Cor 4:7-11), he still sees the body as inferior to the soul and thus as an impediment to Christian perfection.<4> Early Church Fathers extend and elaborate this idea. For Jerome, the body is a "burden" the spirit must bear on its earthly pilgrimage. Basil of Ancrya sees the flesh as weighing down the "wings of the soul," which might otherwise soar to

the heights of Christian holiness (quoted by Shaw: 2-3). Though the hierarchical antagonism between "body" and "soul" did not become a radical dualism in the writings of Christian authors until the work of Rene Descartes,<5> it nevertheless contributed to the belief that the body needs to be brought into submission if salvation is to be obtained.

[5] Taken together, the beliefs that women are closer to the body than men, and that spiritual perfection depends on subduing the flesh, present a kind of dilemma for women: *women are condemned to the very flesh they must transcend in order to be saved.* This riddle has shaped the struggles of women throughout Christian history. Today, it is resurrected in popular women's magazines. Through a variety of articles and images, these texts reinforce the association between women and physicality, even as they encourage women to monitor, manipulate and ultimately defy their bodies' gravity and changes.

Two Classic Christian Ideals of Female Holiness

[6] In the early church, the problem that women are tied to the bodies they're supposed to transcend was partially resolved through the creation of two avenues for female holiness: women could fulfill their physical/female "destiny" by becoming dutiful wives and selfless mothers, or they could pursue an ascetic ideal of relative independence, self-denial and self-control. I call these two visions of female holiness the *domestic* and the *ascetic* ideals.

[7] In the domestic ideal, a woman's carnal/sexual nature becomes an opportunity for a uniquely feminine kind of salvation, namely, that of bearing children while pleasing and serving her husband. Though condemned to the flesh, the good Christian woman uses this inferior means to restore the order and happiness spoiled by Eve. Augustine praises women who bring forth children and selflessly care for them and their husbands. John Chrysostom appoints dutiful wives to the "presidency of the household."<6> In contrast to this domestic vision, the ascetic ideal constructs female holiness through the subjugation of female flesh. By mastering her "bodily weakness" (Jerome's term), a female ascetic becomes an honorary man.<7> Praising his sister Macrina's asceticism, Gregory of Nyssa reminds us that this holy person was *a woman,* "if indeed you can say 'a woman,'" since through her ascetic observances "she surpassed that nature" (excerpted in Clark: 121). Abstaining from sex and food removed ascetic women from a body that is prone to passion and corruption, birth and decay - the very aspects of life which women's bodies were seen to represent. At the same time, ascetic fasting and virginity provided a means for early Christian women to regain the purity of Eden before the Fall.<8>

[8] The domestic and ascetic ideals of female holiness that emerge in the writings of the Church Fathers echo throughout Christian history. In the late medieval era we find maternal saints like Birgitta of Sweden, devoted wife and mother of eight children, alongside ascetic holies like Catherine of Siena, who died a virgin from self-starvation. <9> A century and a half later, the domestic vision of female holiness flourished in the writings of Protestant reformers like Martin Luther, who encouraged nuns to forsake their vows, since "man and woman should and must come together in order to multiply." Luther believed that the "estate of marriage" was divinely ordained, and that a wife should regard her "duties" - "as she suckles the child, rocks and bathes it, and cares for it in other ways; and as she busies herself with other duties and renders help and obedience to her husband" - as a divine gift and natural calling.<10>

[9] While a Protestant theology of gender constructed female holiness through images of motherly sacrifice, wifely obedience, and domestic fulfillment, Catholic authors' continued to affirm ascetic theologies that implicitly associated women with the cravings of the flesh. In the sixteenth century, for example, Erasmus of Rotterdam warned that

> that slimy snake, the first betrayer of our peace and the father of restlessness, never ceases to watch and lie in wait beneath the heel of woman, whom he once poisoned. By 'woman' we mean, of course, the carnal or sensual part of man. For this is our Eve, through whom the crafty serpent entices and lures our minds to deadly pleasures (Dolan: 29).

[10] Echoing this theme, Saint Ignatius devised spiritual exercises for combatting the enemy who "acts like a woman," hiding in "sensual delights and pleasures" (Mottola: 131, 129). In the context of the Catholic Reformation, such images and associations heightened the holiness of women like Saint Teresa of Avila, who defied her bodily wants and worldly desires for the sake of a more mystical union.<11>

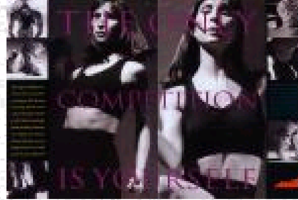
Domestic and Ascetic Visions of Womanhood in Popular Women's Magazines

[11] Today, Christian ideals of female domesticity and asceticism are recycled in two visions of womanhood that popular women's magazines construct. The domestic ideal is most commonly seen in magazines geared for white, middle-class, wives and mothers, i.e. *Ladies Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, McCalls,* and the like. In these texts, true womanhood is defined primarily through images of motherhood and marriage (image #1). The ascetic ideal of female holiness appears more often in fashion magazines like *Glamour, Allure, Cosmopolitan, Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue,* which are geared toward younger, middle-class, mostly single-white-female consumers. In these texts, womanly perfection is depicted primarily through visions of female independence and career success (image #2), idealized beauty (image #3), and/or physical discipline (image #4).

1. *Ladies Home Journal* (Sept 1998)

2. *Essence* (Oct 1998) [left] *Vogue* (Sept 1998) [right]

3. *Vogue* (Sept 1998)



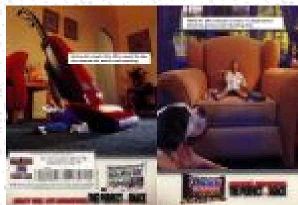
4. *Allure* (Sept 1993)

[12] I should point out that the magazines I'm considering here are some of the most popular and *mainstream.* This means that the ideologies of gender, race, sexuality and class embedded in them have widespread (if not dominant) social influence. A closer look at the images in which these ideologies circulate reveals their ties to some of Christianity's more popular beliefs about the body and gender.

[13] Images of the domestic ideal show women fulfilling themselves by taking care of the needs of others. This includes caring for their families' bodily needs, whether by feeding them (image #5) or by keeping them groomed and clean (image #6). Such images suggest that the female body itself implies a woman's destiny, recalling the religious links between wifely duties, motherly sacrifice, and feminine fulfillment. To some extent, this "destiny" is modified in magazine representations of domesticity, most of which do not stipulate wifely obedience. While this may be a sign that women have "come a long way," (image #7) it may also mean that male-privilege has assumed more mundane and/or subtle forms.<12> These ads, for instance, resurrect the idea that a woman's job is to ensure the comfort of others, in the words of John Chrysostom, to "provide . . . complete security for her husband and free . . . him from all such household concerns" (excerpted in Clark: 36-37).

5. *For Women First* (Nov 1998)

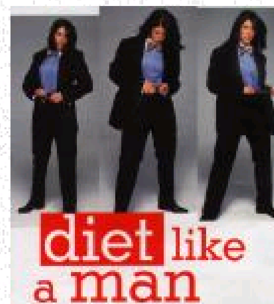
6. *Ladies Home Journal* (Sept 1998)



7. *Ladies Home Journal* (Sept 1998)

[14] In contrast to the domestic ideal, magazine images of female asceticism show women fulfilling themselves through individual success and self-control. If the domestic ideal promotes a kind of feminine fulfillment through the role of wife and mother, the ascetic ideal promises to save/liberate women from the limits of life in the female body. This promise resembles the religious trope of "becoming male," the path that early female ascetics pursued in their efforts to rise above the undistinguished plight of ordinary Christian women. "I am a woman in sex, but not in spirit," the ascetic images seem to say, echoing the words that abbess Sarah told her desert followers in the middle of the 4th century (quoted in Miles 1989: 53).

[15] The theme of transcending female flesh appears in a variety of images that show women gaining confidence by exercising "manly" virtues. One article advises women to "diet like a man" (image #8; Gerosa: 106). Women today are encouraged to deny themselves the pleasures of eating in order to maximize their health and beauty, rather than their holiness. And yet, perhaps not unlike their ascetic foresisters, such denial also enables them to transcend the confines of the female/body prison. The "masculine" virtue of self-control is frequently inscribed on the emaciated bodies of women who look like adolescent males (Image #9). Like the female ascetics of old, whose prolonged fasts were seen to destroy their distinctively female bodily features (Shaw: 9), these scrawny ideals of feminine beauty shatter rather than confirm a woman's physical destiny. The taut, flat tummies of the waifs remind women that motherhood is now a choice (image #10).



8. *Ladies Home Journal* (Oct 1998)

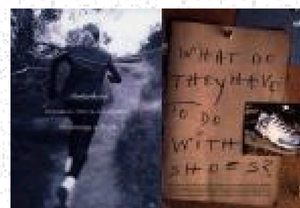
"Just Do It": The Superwoman Alternative

[16] Like other forms of popular culture, women's magazines both reflect and shape broader social developments and changes. Amid the contested terrain of gender in the past few decades, the traditional distinction between the domestic and ascetic ideals has become a lot more fuzzy. Many women today reject Christianity's dualistic solution to the problem of women's imprisonment in the flesh that needs to be defied. In fact, many women never had a choice between motherhood and paid labor, marriage and independence, taking care of others and nurturing themselves. And many women no longer want to choose.

9. *Vogue* (May 1995)

[17] Popular women's magazine reflect and support changing gender expectations with images like image #11: "Motherhood. Breaking the Glass Ceiling. Becoming a Bride. What do they have to do with shoes?" Such images *disperse* (rather than resolve) the riddle of women's entrapment in the bodies they must transcend by incorporating the ascetic and domestic ideals into a vision of "Superwoman": a woman whose body/spirit knows no limits, a woman who can "just do it." The blending of ascetic and domestic ideals is also seen in images that depict the rewards of self-denial as heterosexual happiness. The pale-faced, waifish woman finds fulfillment in the arms of a man (image #12). Magazines also feature articles on independent-minded, female celebrities (in this case, Uma Thurman) who discuss the rewards of motherhood and marriage (image #13).

10. *Harper's Bazaar* (Mar 1998)



11. *Glamour* (Apr 1998)

[18] Inversely, domestic images of women are sometimes overlaid with the ascetic imperative of self-control, usually in the form of warnings to married women and mothers not to "let yourself go." An ad in *Glamour* magazine implies that even pregnant women should strive to maintain beautiful hair (image #14). An article from *Good Housekeeping* tells women how to care for the *nutritional needs* of their family's diet, while monitoring the *caloric content* of their own (Mermelstein and Wapner: 119-120). Fifty-five percent of the women in a *Ladies Home Journal* survey say it's important to continually improve their looks; 83% of them consider themselves to be "spiritual" (image #15).<13>

12. *Vogue* (Sept 1998)

The Glamorization of Indoctrination

[19] As glimpsed in the mirror of these shiny pages, being a woman has become a lot more complicated today. Indeed, the co-existence and overlap of competing ideals of womanhood in these texts illustrate the *constructed* and *performative* character of "gender."<14> And yet, the power of these images - their grip on real women's bodies and imaginations - resides in their capacity to convince us otherwise. For many women, these are not simply commercially produced portraits of feminine perfection; they are *models of* and *models for* womanhood,<15> pointing to an invisible essence, a seemingly

transcendent truth that gives meaning and purpose to their day-to-day existence.

[20] If the other-worldly, air-brushed quality of magazine images tends to reify the "truths" they circulate, their virtual omnipresence tends to conceal their indoctrinating measures and effects. Both the "truths" and the "effects" of magazine images vary among their diverse consumers. While mainstream images proffer ideals with which *some* women measure themselves, they provide standards by which *all* women may be judged acceptable or unworthy. Whether internal or external, such judgments suggest that these popular visions function more like orthodoxies, dictating the "right" way to be a woman, promising salvation to those who obey.<16> The oppressive power of these orthodoxies is that they are seldom recognized as such.<17> The strategies of their production remain hidden, making their "truth" seem natural, timeless, you might say, God-given.

13. *Harper's Bazaar* (Mar 1998)

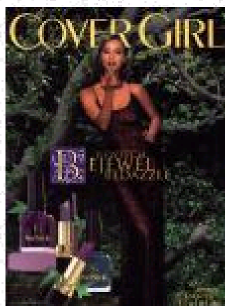
14. *Glamour* (Apr 1998)

15. *Ladies Home Journal* (Sept 1998)

Fear of Deviance, Desire, Death: The Construction of the Orthodox Ideal

[21] One of these strategies is the erasure of female diversity. This tactic both reflects and ensures the prominence of the feminine ideal that mainstream women's magazines circulate.

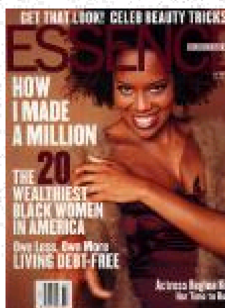
Whether housewife or career woman, nurturing mother or boyish waif, these texts envision "true womanhood" through dominant cultural conventions of social privilege, especially material wealth, though white skin, heterosexuality, and youth are also typical ingredients. The social makeup of this normative vision is not accidental given the contested terrain of the United States today. In a society where most overt forms of discrimination are rhetorically proscribed, popular icons of womanhood play a key role in maintaining social inequalities (Young: 135-136). Indirectly, such icons reinforce both the privilege of women who are white, wealthy, heterosexual, and young, and the privilege of men who, by contrast, are not "called" to define themselves through their bodies.



16. *McCalls* (Sept 1998)

17. *Vogue* (Oct 1993)

[22] Even the recent appearance of "images of diversity" tends to reinforce rather than upset the dominant culture's feminine ideal by incorporating stereotypes of otherness into their appeal - in the case image #16, stereotypes of Black women as wild, exotic, and sexually luring. Many dark-skinned models of womanhood maintain their ties to the standard (Caucasian) ideal through their thin lips and nose (image #17) - features associated with whiteness in this culture (hooks: 63-67, 71-72).<18> Even magazines like *Essence,* which cater to minority women and celebrate



18. *Essence* (Oct 1998)

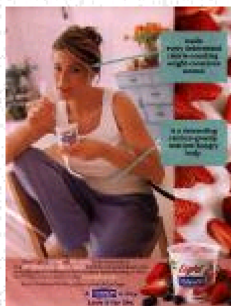
diversity, often emulate the bourgeois ethos and aspirations of the dominant culture, as the cover story of an issue illustrates (image #18). Similarly, images that could be read as having a lesbian subtext - depictions of women enjoying the touch or gaze of other women (images #19 and #20) - tend to be overshadowed by the compulsory heterosexuality that mainstream women's magazines mediate. A plethora of articles advising women "how to please your man" underscore this point.<19> In short, such representational revisions tend to ease - rather than explore - the tensions between magazines' orthodox visions of womanhood and their socially diverse consumers. The so-called "diversity" of such images is undercut by the hegemonic logic that drives their production: the logic of market capitalism.<20>

19. *Glamour* (July 1993)

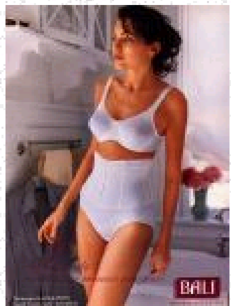
20. *Harper's Bazaar* (Mar 1993)

[23] There is, I think, a distant but distinct connection between the fear of difference that permeates mainstream women's magazines and fear of the body that plagues so much traditional Christian theology. It seems to me that both fears stem from the body's vulnerability: its capacity to deviate, to desire, to die. Given women's long-standing association with deviance, desire, and death, it's not surprising that magazines erase these signs to produce a purified, orthodox ideal. This erasure is evident in the glorification of bodies that are young and thin. By covering up her grey hair and wrinkles, a woman can defy her body's inevitable "corruption" and decomposition (image #21).<21> By maintaining a figure that's fit and trim, a woman can hide the secret of her longing (image #22). Note that this woman's "hungry" body is a "greedy" body: a body that's prone to temptation, a body that could lead to damnation, a body that's in need of salvation.

21. *Ladies Home Journal* (Sept 1998)



22. *McCalls* (Sept 1998)

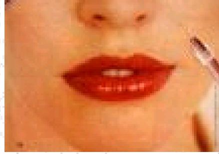


23. *Vogue* (Sept 1998)

The Redemption of the Female Body: Suffering Made Beautiful

[24] By encouraging women to correct, conquer, or conceal their physical processes and cravings, women's magazines replay the riddle of women's enslavement to that which they must ultimately defy: their bodies. These texts reproduce age-old associations between women and bodies by encouraging readers to preoccupy themselves with their flesh. Whether

domestic or ascetic, housewife or waif, the cumulative message of these texts is that *it's a woman's body that defines her* - her womb, her hair, her skin, her thighs - not the complexity of her life experiences or the divinity of her search. And if a woman's body is seen to define her, it is not surprising that she will devote herself to (re)defining it. Her body thus becomes the site of her struggle for self-definition.



24. *American Woman* (Dec 1998)

[25] Women's magazines do not simply reinscribe the belief that a woman's body is her destiny; they also teach her how to seek salvation both from and with her body. Thus these texts don't simply turn women into objects. Their images preserve the promise of transcendence. In the mirror of their thin ideals, female agency is narrowly oriented, not obliterated.

[26] Women's magazines direct their readers' subjectivities to the task of pleasing others, especially the laborious, physical, and often painful activity of becoming "beautiful." Since the turn of this century, the idea that women must suffer for beauty has supplanted (and perhaps incorporated) the belief that women must suffer to be holy.<22> Just as Christian stories of female saints glorify women's pain as linking them intimately with Christ, so magazines glamorize the tortures women undergo to imitate the ideal. Catherine of Siena wore a heavy chain around her waist to remind her of Christ's suffering. Nowadays, we have the "waistnipper" girdle to help us approximate the ideal - assuming our diets haven't done the trick (image #23). (Obviously, it's the common paradigm - i.e., women-must-suffer-to-be-holy / beautiful - that I'm highlighting here - not the historical similarities). A host of articles and images naturalize the pain through which feminine "beauty" is produced. One article discusses a new method for concealing wrinkles: injecting the bacteria that causes food poisoning into facial muscles (image #24; Gordon: 36-37).

[27] The pain through which true womanhood is created in these texts is not simply an invitation to female masochism. At least apparently, such sacrifice solves the riddle of women's attachment to the body they must rise above. In both classic Christian theology and in women's magazines, physical suffering *transforms* the female body from an *obstacle* into a *vehicle* for feminine perfection. This ambiguity links Christian ideals of womanhood to today's pop cultural visions. Ironically, in both cases, the emphasis on mastering the flesh ensures the body's centrality.<23> This tacit irony adds to the popularity of women's magazines in an era where new opportunities for women co-exist and co-mingle with long-standing oppressions.

Reproducing the Dilemma

[28] Whether fulfilling femininity or transcending the flesh (or both), the sacrifices that women's magazines encourage are offset by the rewards they promise and *seem* to deliver. Magazine ideals of womanhood foster a sense of self-determination, inner-satisfaction, and social approval for those who strive to imitate their "truths." They do so, however, by rendering women more subservient, as Susan Bordo points out (1993: 27), more pliable and thus more "useful" to the dominant cultural order.<24> Moreover, the salvation/liberation that these ideals promise depends on their viewers' prior agreement that they are flawed and in need of correction (Bordo 1997). Ultimately, the disciplines that such ideals inspire serve a disciplinary function, rewarding women for punishing themselves for deviating from the orthodox ideal, and the social hierarchies that this ideal incarnates and sanctifies.

[29] Women who are gripped by the "truths" that popular women's magazines construct are not, I would argue, simply duped. They are also searching for a way out of the riddle that has haunted them since the fall of Eve. Unfortunately, the ideals of womanhood that mainstream women's magazines uphold for our worship reinstate the dilemma they're supposed to resolve. As a result, looking at these texts leaves many women feeling more - not less - at war with the bodies in which they feel trapped. Even my female undergraduates, who insist that women's magazines are "just for fun," admit that they usually feel depressed and shameful after thumbing through the latest issue of *Vogue*. Studies on the effects of women's magazines among their readers confirm these anecdotal reports.<25>

[30] Sadly, neither women's presumed proximity to the flesh, nor their persistent attempts to defy their physical processes and cravings, has enabled them to feel more at home in their bodies. Ironically, many women today, perhaps largely thanks to the dominant culture's glossy images, feel more disconnected than ever from the bodies with which they are preoccupied. Insofar as such feelings are fueled by beliefs

and ideals that are historically linked to religion, they are not simply symptoms of personal vanity or low self-esteem. The sense of shame that a lot of women feel when looking in the mirrors of magazine "perfection" suggests the links between these texts and the anti-body, misogynist religious legacies embedded in them.

[31] While such links underscore the need for scholars of religion to recognize and critique these legacies in both their classic and glamorous manifestations, our approach, I think, should not be purely iconoclastic. The impoverishment of pop cultural ideals does not negate the need for popular images, or even the need for truth and beauty. Rather, it points to the need for alternative symbolic resources: a wider repertoire of images, beliefs, rituals and stories (both traditional and non-traditional) that might more adequately nourish the complexity and diversity of women's struggles, bodies and spirits.

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