

## **Fulfilling Femininity and Transcending the Flesh: Traditional Religious Beliefs and Gender Ideals in Popular Women's Magazines**

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### **Abstract**

This article analyzes and assesses two prominent religious themes - the transcendence of the flesh and the association between women and the body - as they appear in popular women's magazines. Such themes are tacitly embedded in these texts' iconography and stories, which define the identity and virtue of womanhood through the body, and which make the achievement of this feminine ideal contingent on the transcendence of physical processes and needs. The religious beliefs that holiness depends on subduing the flesh and its cravings, and that females have especial proximity to the body, present a peculiar - if not precarious - dilemma for women. Women's magazines are not only contemporary carriers of these age-old views; they are also a primary means whereby girls and women negotiate the mixed messages they imply.

### **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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Several scholars outside the field of religion have noted the quasi-religious function of popular women's magazines. See, for example, Ferguson, Hesse-Biber, Bartky, and Wolf.

## 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.<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 Ancyra 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"

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Clark points out that while Genesis 2-3 was referred to constantly by the Church Fathers to argue that women's subordination to men was, from the beginning, divinely ordained, Genesis 1 (in which male and female are created simultaneously, both in God's image) was virtually ignored (15).

<sup>3</sup> My interpretation of the symbolic associations that the story of the Fall generates are based primarily on the writings of the early Church Fathers, which influenced the subsequent development of Christian theology in the West. In these writings, the idea that "woman" is closer to the body by virtue of her insufficient reason and her role in temptation is suggested by Eve's role in committing the first sin. In his treatise, *On Paradise*, for example, Ambrose writes: "She was the first to violate the divine command. She even dragged her husband along with her into sin and showed herself to be an incentive to him" (excerpted in Clark: 31). Implicitly, the Fathers' commentaries on how Eve's agency lead to destruction further suggest women's relegation to the physical realm, the realm of domestic service rather than public authority: "She [woman] exerted her authority once and exerted it badly . . . Therefore let her descend from the professor's chair! Those who know not how to teach, let them learn, [the apostle] says. If they don't want to learn but rather want to teach, they destroy both themselves and those who learn from them. This is the very thing that occurred through the woman's agency" (Chrysostom, *Discourse 4 on Genesis*, excerpted in Clark: 44). Not only does Eve's proximity to the body, and her corresponding "small intelligence" make her more susceptible to sin, but it also designates the one true purpose for which woman, according to Augustine, was made, namely, to bear children. See Augustine's *Literal Commentary on Genesis* (excerpted in Clark: 40, 28-29). A woman's child-bearing purpose is closely linked to that of serving her husband, particularly taking care of his physical needs and the "less important, inferior" work of the household. See Chrysostom, *The Kind of Women Who Ought To Be Taken As Wives* (excerpted in Clark: 37). Margaret Miles points out that Eve, more than any other scriptural character in the Christian West, "was the basis for a fictional figure of 'woman' that allowed men to feel that they understood both the 'nature' of actual women and appropriate male roles and responsibilities in relation to women" (1989: 119).

<sup>4</sup> Paul saw the flesh as inferior to the spirit, rather than evil in itself. Nevertheless, he insisted that good Christians must not live comfortably in their bodies: ". . . while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord" (2 Cor 5:6).

and "soul" did not become a radical dualism in the writings of Christian authors until the work of Rene Descartes,<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> Praising his sister Macrina's asceticism, Gregory of Nyssa reminds us that this holy person was *a woman*, "if indeed

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<sup>5</sup> Miles (1981) challenges the stereotypical assumption that early and medieval Christian authors assumed or posited a radical separation between body and soul. Through a close and contextualized reading of primary Christian texts, Miles reconstructs a Christian history of the human body that underscores the classical authors' assumptions that the human body and soul, though distinct, were inseparable. This argument does not undermine my assertion that the body and soul were hierarchically ranked in an antagonistic relationship in the works of early Christian writers. It simply suggests that these aspects of human existence were not seen as ontologically separate until Descartes.

<sup>6</sup> In his treatise *The Kind of Women Who Ought To Be Taken as Wives*, Chrysostom elaborates his vision of a woman's purpose in the Divine scheme of things: "To woman is assigned the presidency of the household; to man, all the business of the state, the marketplace, the administration of justice, government, the military, and all other such enterprises" (excerpted in Clark: 36). Augustine interprets the second story of Genesis to mean: "the woman was created to be man's helper specifically for the production of children" (*Literal Commentary on Genesis*, excerpted in Clark: 28). The domestic ideal of female holiness assumed that women's closeness to and responsibility for the body was not merely a punishment for their sinful nature; it was also an opportunity for their redemption.

<sup>7</sup> Clark suggests that female ascetics constituted a kind of "Third sex" (17). Jerome, for example, says that his friend Paula attained the height of ascetic perfection by "forgetting her sex and her bodily weakness," and by "showing endurance scarcely believable in a woman!" (excerpted in Clark: 203). According to Shaw, the attribution of manliness to female ascetics is typical in the ascetic discourse of the fourth and fifth centuries" (239; see also her discussion of "The Eschatological Body," 235-253).

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.<sup>8</sup>

[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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

[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).

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<sup>8</sup> While virginity marked the epitome of the ascetic "way of perfection" (Clark: 115), this form of self-denial was deemed impossible without the accompanying discipline of abstinence from food. Shaw demonstrates that virginity and fasting were two sides of the same ascetic coin in late antiquity. Renouncing food was a method for reducing sexual passions while making the body more obedient, virtuous, and subject to control (9). Shaw discusses early Christian asceticism as a means for regaining the purity of Eden (161-219). Miles writes that "male ascetics were repeatedly advised to consider all women without exception as threat, danger, and potential object of male lust" (1989: 76). Miles also shows how visual representations of the female body in the Christian West - especially the naked female body - similarly communicated sin, danger, evil, and sex (1989: 123). Visual depictions of Eve followed the written texts' emphasis on her guilt in initiating the first sin and causing her husband to follow suit (1989: 121).

<sup>9</sup> Birgitta's sons and daughters played a prominent role in her spirituality and theological vision, appearing frequently in legends about their mother as well as in her own writings (Atkinson: 170-184). According to her daughter Katarina, Birgitta and her husband prayed each time they made love that God would "give them a child who would serve him continually and never offend him" (quoted by Atkinson: 172). Atkinson's discussion suggests that for Birgitta, motherhood was a spiritual vocation. In contrast to Birgitta, Catherine of Siena's holiness was defined by her ascetic practices, including her vowed virginity, her fasting practices, and an assortment of other mortifying observances (Bynum 1987: 165-180).

<sup>10</sup> See Luther's *The Estate of Marriage* (excerpted in Clark and Richardson: 153, 155, 159). See also Luther's *Lectures on Genesis* in this same volume (163-168). According to Ruether, John Calvin's' theology of gender resembles that of Luther's in practice (122-126). Theoretically, however, Calvin saw women's inferior place in creation in more legalistic terms, whereas Luther viewed women's subordination as rooted in an ontological difference. Lyndal Roper explores the Protestant Reformation's theology of gender and its implications for women in Reformation Augsburg.

[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.<sup>11</sup>

### **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).

[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 the 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.<sup>12</sup> These ads, for instance, resurrect the idea that a woman's

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<sup>11</sup> Teresa, of course, was one of many nuns in the sixteenth century who preferred to keep rather than forfeit her religious vows to the emerging Protestant praise of marriage. While Teresa advised the nuns under her own care not to be too harsh in their own ascetic observances (see, for example, Peers: 92-93), she herself fasted regularly, though her not-eating and "lack of appetite" were at least partially connected to her poor health. In *The Book of Her Life*, Teresa explains: "for twenty years I had vomiting spells every morning so that I could not eat anything until after noon; sometimes I had to wait longer. From the time I began to receive Communion more frequently, I have had to vomit at night before going to bed. And it is more painful because I have to induce it with a feather or some other thing, for if I let this go the sickness I feel becomes very bad" (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez: 77, 88).

<sup>12</sup> Foucault's work illustrates the multiple levels on which oppression and domination are sustained in modern western industrial societies like the United States, where oppression by force and violent domination have been "infiltrated" by more subtle forms of social control (1979: 216). Using the terms of Foucault's analysis, one can argue that patriarchal oppression of women has not disappeared with the relative gains that many (though not all) women have made in the United States since the 1960s. Rather, the forms and mechanisms of women's oppression have become more dispersed, more subtle, and more informal (see also Foucault 1990). For feminist analyses of patriarchal oppression which draw on (and in many ways improve) the insights of Foucault, see Diamond and Quinby, Sawicki, Hill Collins, Haug (1987 and 1992), Bartky, and Bordo (1993).

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).

[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 forebears, 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).

### **"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.

[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).

[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).<sup>13</sup>

### **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."<sup>14</sup> 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,<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> The oppressive power of these orthodoxies is that they are seldom recognized as such.<sup>17</sup> The strategies of their production remain hidden, making their "truth" seem natural, timeless, you might say, God-given.

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<sup>13</sup> "The Amazing American Woman," *Ladies Home Journal* (September, 1998) 146+.

<sup>14</sup> Feminists commonly recognize the "constructed" quality of gender - its culturally-mediated content, its fictional quality, and its ritual-symbolic function. Judith Butler has noted that ideas about "men" and "women" are not only culturally produced, they are also socially "performed." This performance contributes to the *illusion* that there is an essence to one's womanhood, a seemingly transcendent or essential feminine core in which one's female gender identity is supposedly rooted.

<sup>15</sup> I am implying a parallel here between the function of religious symbols, as outlined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, and the function of women's magazine ideals. Geertz argues that religious symbols function as both "models of" divine existence and "models for" human behavior (93-94).

<sup>16</sup> To paraphrase Butler, we punish those who do not do their gender right: "Gender is . . . a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions - and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction 'compels' our belief in its necessity and naturalness" (140).

<sup>17</sup> To the extent that they are not recognized as such, dominant cultural norms and ideals can be said to be hegemonic, their power operating on an invisible level: through their repetition, homogeneity, and ubiquity. The term "hegemony" is associated with Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, who was writing during the 1920s and 30s. Since the early 1970s, "hegemony" has been used to describe "relationships of domination that are not visible as such" (During: 5). Bourdieu's concept of "doxa" parallels this notion of hegemony. Bourdieu argues that the "truth" of a culture's dominant doxa "goes without saying because it comes without saying. . . Every established order tends to produced (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness" (164-167). This conception of the invisibility of modern power and domination resembles Foucault's theory of power (1990: 92-102).

### 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.

[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).<sup>18</sup> Even magazines like *Essence*, which cater to minority women and celebrate 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

[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

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<sup>18</sup> The underrepresentation of models of color indicates the ongoing dominance of the Euro-American ideal of womanhood. *Essence* magazine reports that female models of color continue to be underrepresented in magazine advertising. Although African-Americans comprise about 11.3% of the readership of all consumer-magazines and 12.5% of the United States population, only 3.4% of advertising images in these texts depicted African Americans in 1991 (Gregory and Jacobs: 89-90, 126).

<sup>19</sup> Diana Fuss points out that women's magazines are one of the few public spaces where women can enjoy looking at other women with cultural impunity (713). While this argument raises interesting questions about the gender of the "gaze" that magazine images of women mediate and embody, I think that reading these texts as "subversive" depends on a level of consciousness that is unavailable to most girls and women in a culture where heterosexuality is materially and institutionally compulsory.

<sup>20</sup> In the end, this "commodification of otherness" raises not consciousness, but profits (hooks: 21). Bordo makes a similar point when she warns that "consumer capitalism depends on the continual production of novelty, of fresh images to stimulate desire," and it "frequently drops into marginalized neighborhoods in order to find them" (1993: 25). Tetzlaff cautions that while new representations may make some people feel more empowered, "Feeling empowered and being empowered are not the same thing" (262). Similarly, Mandziuk warns that it is politically dangerous to mistake individual play for social intervention (183).



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).<sup>21</sup> 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.

### **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.

[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.<sup>22</sup> 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

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<sup>21</sup> The belief that a woman's virtue is signified by an "age-defying" or "incorruptible" body recalls long-standing religious attitudes. In her discussion of Gregory of Nyssa's treatise, *On Virginity*, Clark notes a correlation between female virginity and the unchangeable, incorruptible nature of the Godhead. Virginity served to protect a woman from the body's inevitable change and decline by linking her symbolically to a heavenly realm where things do not decline or perish (118).

<sup>22</sup> See Brumberg (231-257). At the beginning of this century, Brumberg observes, women realized that they could not rely on science alone to achieve the beauty they so desired. In addition, the beauty experts preached and their followers believed in a new creed of self-denial: "to be beautiful, most women must suffer" (243). Brumberg examines this credo as it appeared in America's first best-selling weight-control book, Lulu Hunt Peters' *Diet and Health with a Key to the Calories*, published in 1918. In this book, the author naturalizes the painful struggle of losing weight that most women must undergo (some of them throughout their life) in order to achieve the slender ideal. In Brumberg's analysis, "Peters' book was among the first to articulate the new secular credo of physical denial: Modern women suffered to be beautiful (thin) rather than pious. Peters' language and thinking reverberated with references to religious ideas of temptation and sin" (242).

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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Much has been written recently about the ironically central role of the body in Christian practices (especially asceticism) that appear to be based on bodily denial. See for example, Brown, Bynum (1987 and 1991), Miles (1988), Coakley, and Shaw.

<sup>24</sup> Bordo uses Foucault's distinction between the "intelligible body" (the symbolic body, seen in dominant cultural representations) and the "useful body" (the practical body, lived and experienced in everyday rites, habits, and practices). The symbolic body suggests the norms and codes of conduct which the practical body carries out, thereby reinforcing the credibility of the symbolic norms (1993: 181). A number of other feminists discuss the relationship between cultural ideals of femininity and the apparently self-destructive practices that these ideals inspire. Generally speaking, these feminists agree that what makes these practices so compelling is the sense of self-definition and social affirmation that accompanies them. In turn, this sense ensures the maintenance of the dominant, unjust social order. See Haug (1992) and Bartky.

<sup>25</sup> A recent study reports that more than two-thirds of girls between grades five and twelve said that magazine images influenced their notion of the ideal body (Field, et al.). Sixty-six percent of the 548 girls interviewed for this study said they wanted to lose weight, though only 29 percent of them could be considered "overweight." On a CBS News edition of *48 Hours*, Dan Rather reported that 68% of women surveyed said that they felt worse about

[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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their own appearances after looking at magazine images of female models (March 2, 1994). Studies show that women tend to rate their own bodies as less attractive after viewing media images of model women (Cash, et al.: 351-358; Wartik: 26-27). The high degree of body-dissatisfaction and preoccupation among readers of popular women's magazines is further illustrated in a survey of readers of *Glamour* magazine, 76% of whom said they wanted to lose more weight (Wooley and Wooley: 198). Interestingly, a survey conducted in connection with *Essence*, a magazine that targets middle-class minority women, found that 71.5% of its readers were preoccupied with their bodies, and over two-thirds of them were using potentially dangerous techniques in an effort to lose weight (Villarosa: 19). One study of girls with eating disorders found that nearly half of them regularly scrutinized the images of models in magazines, wanting desperately to look like them. A 1997 *Psychology Today* survey found 62% of adolescent girls to be unhappy with their bodies (this study and survey are cited in Fraser 1998: 61). That the anorexic or bulimic crusade for thinness often draws initial inspiration from magazine icons of model women is evident in numerous stories of girls and women with eating disorders. In her memoir of anorexia and bulimia, for example, Marya Hornbacher recalls imitating and comparing herself to the ideal: "I practiced the looks in the mirror, casting bedroom eyes at my reflection, thrusting my hips to the side and tossing my hair. My body was wrong - breasts poking through my shirt, butt jutting, all curvaceous and terribly wrong. . . Legs too short, too round, thighs touch. *Seventeen* magazine advises that thighs should not touch. Mine touch. I suck" (Hornbacher: 44).

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