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BOOK REVIEW

Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns, by Christine J. Gardner.

Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011, 264 pp.;
\$24.95 USD (paper)

Reviewed by
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Evangelical messages about adolescent sexuality appear straight-forward: unless they are married (and heterosexual), teens should not have sex. However, as communications scholar Christine J. Gardner shows in her book, *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns*, how evangelicals go about promoting abstinence is both complicated and unexpected.

Gardner focuses on how social meanings about religion and sexuality are constructed in evangelical abstinence campaign by examining the rhetoric of three U.S. campaigns (the primary focus of the book) and one African campaign. One of her most surprising findings—and the one for which the book's title is based—is that U.S. evangelicals use sex in order to sell abstinence. Instead of stressing that unmarried teens should not have sex, these campaigns emphasize that great sex awaits them in marriage. Sex in marriage is both the “goal” and “reward” (48) of teenage abstinence. Gardner argues that this approach problematically makes the message of evangelical abstinence campaigns all about eventual self-fulfillment that campaigns cannot actually guarantee, rather than religious qualities like sacrifice or suffering.

Using qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews and participant observations, Gardner goes beyond the standard debate over the effectiveness of evangelical abstinent campaigns. Past research, almost exclusively based on survey data, generally finds that teenagers who pledge abstinence are only slightly less likely or as likely to be sexually active as their non' pledging

counterparts, though their sexual debuts may come later than nonpledging teens. Instead of questioning whether or not pledging teens are sexually active or are abstinent (which her research shows are not clear-cut categories in the first place), Gardner examines what abstinence means for evangelical teenagers and how they negotiate it within their everyday lives. A strength of Gardner's book is that she is able to examine the differences between the ways that messages about abstinence are presented and the ways in which they are received. This is most obvious in her comparison of U.S.- and African-based campaigns. Unlike U.S. evangelicals who focus on self-fulfillment, African evangelicals see abstinence as primarily a religious act of following God's commands. Whereas the U.S. campaigns emphasize individual choice, this makes little sense in an African context "in which choices are already limited" (147).

Gardner spends much time grappling with the role of individual choice within evangelical abstinence campaigns. One of the most compelling aspects of the book is how she identifies agency both as a rhetorical tool used by the U.S. campaigns and as being enacted by abstinent pledgers. The campaigns frame abstinence as an individual choice that teenagers are capable of making, despite societal pressures to give in to sexual temptation. Abstinent teens are therefore able to view their sexually active peers as *lacking* agency for doing what society expects of them; the "not-doing" of abstinence is what requires agency. Especially for women, U.S. evangelicals focus on the ways in which abstinence can be empowering—modesty as women's power against men and self-esteem a result of a high self-worth associated with sexual purity. Even as Gardner points out that the campaigns do much to reinforce traditional gender roles, she identifies agency for abstinent teens in ways that previous studies have left out. Importantly, she points out that feminist scholars who are critical of abstinence campaigns for producing guilt and shame that surround teenage sexual activity have not acknowledged the agency of evangelical teens who participate in the campaigns.

Gardner concludes her book by offering suggestions to improve evangelical abstinence campaigns, noting that abstinence encourages teens to "respect their bodies" and "make wise, healthy choices" (190). In some ways, this conclusion makes Gardner guilty of doing exactly what she accuses some feminist scholars of doing, except in reverse: she excludes sexually active teens from the definition of those who respect their bodies and make wise and healthy choices. This may be a weakness of the book, but it does not take away from Gardner's rich observations about evangelical abstinence.

Making *Chastity Sexy* offers a convincing critique of U.S. evangelicals who use secular means (an emphasis on individual satisfaction) in order to promote a religious message (abstinence before marriage). Not all readers will agree with Gardner's prescription that campaigns should return to

their religious roots and promote qualities of “pious living,” like sacrifice and suffering (196) or with her argument that teenagers will find the message of piety as convincing as (and ultimately more realistic and rewarding than) the message of good sex in marriage. Nonetheless, this book is well argued and will appeal to a broad audience. For an undergraduate course, Gardner’s work is highly readable and offers a way to discuss the cultural specificity of religious messages by comparing evangelical Christianity in the United States and Africa. For advanced scholars, Gardner provides an excellent qualitative examination of how religious persons make sense of their sexuality within contemporary society.