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35. • Rebecca Barrett-Fox

CONSTRAINTS AND FREEDOM IN CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIAN WOMEN'S LIVES (NEW)

Rebecca Barrett-Fox is a professor of sociology at Arkansas State University, where she directs women and gender studies. Her research focuses on conservative Christian movements in the United States, particularly the links between gender, sex, theology, and politics. She is the author of *God Hates: Westboro Baptist Church, American Nationalism, and the Religious Right* (University Press of Kansas, 2016), as well as numerous articles about religion, politics, and hate groups. The following piece was written specifically for this collection.

Hannah (who shared her story over a course of interviews but requested that her real name and identifying information not be shared) hoists her toddler daughter into the swing on the playground as her older daughter climbs the slide. Her friend Rachel should arrive soon with her own preschoolers, and Hannah is anxious. Rachel is pregnant again, as Hannah should be now, too—except that her third pregnancy ended a month ago in the stillbirth of a yearned-for baby boy. She attends a two hundred-person independent fundamentalist church—a

congregation that interprets the Bible literally and espouses conservative political and social views and has no official ties to any other church. She loves her church and values the intergenerational mentoring of other women. They model for her Proverbs 31 womanhood, a template of femininity drawn from a Biblical passage describing the ideal wife and mother as both beautiful and hardworking. Broadly rejecting what they see as government interference, they homeschool their own many children. Despite their busy lives, after her stillbirth, members of the

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church provided several weeks' worth of meals and babysitting for the girls so that Hannah and her husband could focus on the funeral. Now, Hannah is not sure she can bear to see Rachel. She is blessed to have Quiverfull friends—families who believe that any form of birth control is a sin. As Psalm 127:4–5 in the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible states, “As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them.” However, she sometimes feels that the other wives in her church have made childbearing a competition—one in which a still-birth is a sign of failure. She worries that her feelings may be rooted in jealousy and resolves to devote more prayer to the issue.

For conservative and fundamentalist Christians like Hannah, gender identities and roles are informed by orthodoxy (“right belief”), which tells participants what they should believe about gender, sex, and sexuality, and orthopraxis (“right practice”), which tells them what they should do. Hannah’s beliefs about fertility shape her hopes about childbearing; her beliefs about gender shape her ideas about mothering. Though many women find such constraints oppressive, others find them empowering—a paradox that has often puzzled observers. In *You Can Be the Wife of a Happy Husband*, self-help author and motivational speaker Darien B. Cooper explains the liberating effects of constraints that she experienced in her own life-long marriage to her husband, saying, “Submission never means that our personalities, abilities, talents, or individuality should be buried. Rather, they are to be directed so they can be maximized and reflect the goodness and glory of God” (Cooper 23). Though there are many varieties of conservative Christianity, each stresses submission of the individual’s life to the will of God, a will that is committed to gender complementarianism—the idea that God created everyone with a sex that aligns with a masculine or feminine gender and that God values and loves men and women equally but has created them for different roles (Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood). Strife, unhappiness, and inequality are not the result of gender distinctions but of people’s fight against them. Christian

gender manuals, such as *The Total Woman*, *The Power of a Praying Wife*, *Raising a Modern-Day Knight*, and *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secrets of a Man’s Soul*, stress that marital harmony comes from embracing the limitations that conservative belief places on our lives and then excelling within those limits. While the details of orthopraxis vary among conservative Christian groups, three domains of women’s lives, explored in this essay, are the targets of religious control: sexuality, bodies, and marriage and reproduction.

SEXUALITY

As the sexual revolution began to reshape mainstream American culture, many conservative Christians, such as Tim and Beverly LaHaye in *The Act of Marriage* (1976), argued for sexual passion in marriage. In their handbook, the LaHayes explained how new couples could achieve sexual pleasure—including orgasms for the bride, an explicit recognition that women deserve sexual pleasure. More recently, some conservative churches have tried pro-sex programming. Sermon series about sex’s importance, along with ad campaigns promoting these series, are especially popular in nondenominational megachurches known for recruiting new members. Books such as *Holy Sex!* and *Intended for Pleasure* suggest that sex is created by God for human pleasure, not just procreation, and that heterosexual married partners have a mutual obligation to have great sex. Pastor Ed Young and his wife Lisa encourage a seven-day “sexperiment” (also the title of their book) in which congregants commit to having sex every day for a week. Pastor Mark Driscoll, coauthor with his wife Grace Driscoll of *Real Marriage*, has gone further, listing all the kinds of sex that the figures in the Bible’s Song of Solomon had that Christians, too, should be having: fellatio, cunnilingus, “sacred stripping” (erotic dance for one’s partner alone), and outdoor sex.

Yet these explicit commands for Christians to have sex are still presented within the narrow confines of married monogamous heterosexuality. Hebrews 13:4 of the KJV admonishes that “marriage

be held in honor by all, and the bed undefiled" and warns that that "fornicators and adulterers God will judge." This verse is often used to explain that *only* heterosexual, cisgender marital sex is honorable; even if LGBTQ+ people are legally married, sex is sinful. Additionally, among more conservative groups, divorce is sinful (though being the victim of a divorce is not), and any remarriage, even between opposite-sex partners, may be considered adultery.

Within conservative Christian culture, as in secular culture, women are seen as less interested in sex's physical aspects and more interested in emotional connection, whereas men are depicted as primarily interested in physical sensation. Explains Juli Slattery of Focus on the Family, a conservative Christian media organization:

A woman's sexual desire is far more connected to emotions than her husband's sex drive is.

A man can experience sexual arousal apart from any emotional attachment. He can look at a naked woman and feel intense physical desire for her, while *at the same time* he may be completely devoted to and in love with his wife. For most women, this just doesn't compute. (para. 5)

Christian gender manuals consistently frame sex as *resulting from* emotional connection for women and *causing* emotional connection for men—giving women, who control access to sex, an inherent power advantage. In this view, men do not seek emotional connection to women, though women *need* emotional connection for sex. In contrast, because men are attracted to women's physical bodies, men are inherently tempted by women. Indeed, writers often coach men on how to express, within a range of acceptable "masculine" styles, those emotions that will connect them to women—and lead to holy sex. In contrast, because women are not attuned to men's physical desire, both married and unmarried women must be frequently reminded that their bodies tempt men; their appearances must be policed to protect men they encounter. The American Decency Association, a conservative Christian organization that opposes "indecent" media, ranging from pornography

to lingerie catalogues, reminds women of their duty in one of their radio spots:

Ladies, God calls you to walk in this world as a candle among straw or gunpowder. A fire can injure and destroy many lives. Are you aware of how powerful your dress affects men? Does your style of dress help or hinder men? Bring glory to God as you honor God by your modesty. (Johnson)

First, women must recognize normative standards of sexual attractiveness, such as exposed knees and cleavage, then must refuse to adopt them for men's sake. In this way, every woman must morally guard men's spirituality and sexuality with her own body.

BODIES

Gender embodiment varies across conservative Christian subcultures, but modesty, however, defined, is valued highly, as is gender difference. In many groups, modesty and gender distinctiveness mean unisex dress is prohibited. Amish, conservative Mennonites, FLDS, and River Brethren, some Pentecostals and Baptists, and others require women to wear dresses that cover the majority of the leg and hide the outline of breasts. FLDS dress codes, for example, never allow women to show ankles, and both Amish and conservative Mennonites wear "cape dresses," which include an apron-like top to de-emphasize breasts. Among the most conservative groups, cosmetics are forbidden, as is hair cutting because 1 Corinthians 11:15 of the KJV declares that "if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering." Some groups mandate long or uncut hair, sometimes in combination with head coverings such as the *kapp* (Amish), *Mitz* (Hutterite), or scarf or bonnet to indicate submission to the God-ordained hierarchy described in 1 Corinthians 11:3: "that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." For groups that adopt head coverings, it is evidence of a woman's agreement with male leadership in the family and church and her willingness to be under the authority of men.

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Among evangelical churches that are theologically and politically conservative while still engaging mainstream culture more than sects such as the Amish, women have to negotiate more ambiguous standards. Southern Baptists, Covenant Evangelicals, members of the Church of Christ, women in nondenominational churches, and many others must be simultaneously modest and attractive to their husbands without tempting other men. They must also put enough effort into their appearance that their husbands and others know that they care about being attractive to and therefore respectful of their husbands without prompting lust in other men or allowing such effort to interfere with other wifely duties. They face a double bind: if they fail to comply with these codes, they are either slovenly or vain, either disrespectful of their husbands' needs to have an attractive wife or disrespectful of other husbands (and their wives) by tempting men.

MARRIAGE AND REPRODUCTION

Because marriage is so highly valued (and perhaps because premarital sex is prohibited), conservative Christians tend to marry and have children (and more of them) at a younger age than their peers. While most Protestants have long accepted birth control methods and most Catholics who reject artificial birth control still use natural family planning (tracking fertility and abstaining from sex during ovulation), the most conservative groups do not. Families involved in the Quiverfull Movement, which reaches across denominations, reject all efforts to control family size or the spacing between births, including periodic abstinence within marriage. In this view, children are *always* a blessing from God, and therefore contraceptives or abstaining during times of female fertility is a rejection of God's blessing and, by extension, God's plan and God's authority. Pregnancy avoidance is thus a rejection of the hierarchy of authority over women's lives: God, then husband.

Men, like women, must accept their place in this hierarchy: the head of the family—a term often

reviled outside of conservative Christian subculture but one that proponents insist makes sense. Male "headship" means taking responsibility for the family, eschewing laziness and controlling behaviors and, for Quiverfull families, openness to large families. They can only do this, though, when women give them respect—something that may be difficult for women (Smith 95). In this model, men need respect and women need love, and only when they give each other what they require will marriage be happy (Eggerichs 5).

FREEDOM IN CONSTRAINT

Not every woman yields all domains of her life easily or fully to the doctrines and practices of her conservative Christian religion. Even when such groups thrive, women are not simply doing what they are told. They innovate, pushing beliefs to allow new practices. Religion has been a place where women lead before they can do so in other domains, such as politics or the workplace. The Salvation Army, a group organized around the masculine metaphor of the military, allowed nineteenth-century women to travel to cities, an opportunity they would have likely not had otherwise, to evangelize. Pentecostalism's somatic focus allows women's bodies to be inhabited by the Holy Spirit, giving them spiritual authority at least sometimes. Amish sects carefully proscribe women's dress, including the type and color of cloth, the style of dress, and the process for creating clothing, but within those confines, women express themselves with pride. Women who live in religious enclaves find support and community in them absent in the secular world, even if they must sometimes negotiate the rules of those communities carefully and creatively, as the story of Hannah, profiled at the beginning of this essay, suggests.

Hannah suffered eight miscarriages before undergoing a partial hysterectomy. Even as she mourned the loss of her fertility, she felt relieved not to have to suffer further pregnancy losses. During her fertility struggles, she had internalized implication that her "closed womb" was due to weak faith or unconfessed

sin, but when biological children were no longer the measure of God's love for her, Hannah was able to approach her husband about alternatives to achieving her dream of motherhood. They soon adopted two children from Belarus, and they hope to adopt through domestic foster care. In this way, Hannah's body continues to rear, if not bear, children, cementing her place under her husband's headship and thus indicating her willingness to submit to God's gendered will for her life. Keeping her focus on maintaining that hierarchal relationship, rather

than obsessing about fertility, has, Hannah shares, made her more available to God's directions for her life and brought two wonderful children into it. Like many women who willingly remain in their conservative tradition, she has found that the narrow confines of her faith have allowed her a deeper experience of it. Only by listening to women's own stories and their interpretations of their experiences can scholars hope to understand what, on the surface, seems like a paradox between women's subjugation and their liberation.

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36. • Jessica E. Birch

LOVE, LABOR, AND LORDE (NEW)

Jessica E. Birch is a lecturer in the general education SAGES program at Case Western University. Her teaching and research focus on how cultural narratives justify and perpetuate social inequality, using the theoretical lenses of feminist theory, critical race theory, critical pedagogy, multiethnic literature analysis, and cultural studies; she is particularly interested in the intersections among these areas. She is the area chair for race and ethnicity, as well as for popular culture and pedagogy, for the Midwest Popular Culture Association and has done a series of workshops on pedagogical inclusivity at the National Women's Studies Association Conference. Recent publications include contributions in *Gothic and Racism* (Universitas

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