ReWilding the Sacred: Navigating Spirituality After Purity Culture

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Introduction:
We learned to save ourselves for our future spouse: no sex, no kissing, no exploring our body or anyone else's until we were married. As an emerging woman, purity culture dictated my daily choices: modest clothing to hide my body, submissive words to hide my mind.

Purity Culture Includes:

- Abstinence-based sex education
- Strict Binary Gender Roles (complementarianism)
- Purity linked to spiritual status and worth
- Sexual exploration as dangerous and sinful

I did not marry when purity culture taught I should (no man decided to pursue me; what was I to do?) My friends who married were not happy. (Turns out, sex isn't a switch you can flip after the wedding ceremony.) **Sex was hard**, relationships were bad, shame was pervasive. I found out I **wasn't straight**. Neither were my friends. We began to realize purity culture had failed us. That changed everything.

"What is this worldview that you have that is treating women as second class citizens? Purity…is so embedded in the [church] hierarchy and the patriarchy that to continue to enact this on other people would harm my soul." -Jamie (gay cis man)

Purity culture was **inseparable from the faith** I had passionately practiced since childhood. My understanding of God, my place in the world, my community, and my own sexuality were all consumed by purity culture. When that fell apart, everything went with it. Starting with God.

I began attending college when I was 38. (Educating women is a waste of resources, my pastors had said.) I wanted to know if purity culture had worked for anyone. I wanted to know what we were doing to heal, after purity culture.

I wanted to learn to use my own voice.

Participants personalized their spiritual practices, even if remaining Christian.

Christian

"My religious practices are much less stringent and legalistic than the way I was raised. The best word I can use to describe them is 'playful'."
–Ashley (straight cis woman)



Something Else

"My practices now are rooted in self-acceptance and self-love."
–Sue (bi cis woman)

"Therapy to me is spiritual practice. That is how I nourish my soul."
– Jennifer (bi cis woman)



Atheist

"I don't know anything. It feels beautiful to not know anything."
–Nicole (gay cis woman)

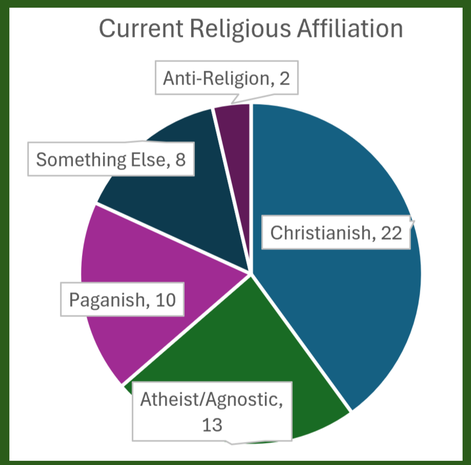
"I tried to settle being gay with the Bible. Too much trauma, ultimately. Ended up as an atheist."
–Ash (lesbian nonbinary)



Pagan

"There's a lot of trust for the individual. What feels good to me is allowed to feel good. And is allowed to guide some of what I'm doing."
–Riley (bi genderfluid)







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The Research

The questions:

Q1: What conflicts did participants experience between themselves and their spiritual community? How did they navigate conflicts?

Q2: How do participants negotiate their spiritual or religious beliefs after conflict?

Participants

55 Adults between the ages of 19-54
(All were raised in Christian Purity Culture)

Gender: Cis Woman (28), Cis Man (14), Trans Man (6), Genderqueer/Nonbinary (5), Trans Woman (2)

Sexual Orientation/Identity: Asexual (2), Gay (1), Bisexual/Pansexual (20), Demisexual (8), Heterosexual (18), Homosexual (4), Lesbian (3), No Response (4)

Race: White (44), Biracial (American Indian, White, Black, Latinx) (3), Black (2), No Response (7)

Method

- Semi-structured interviews
- Interviews lasted 24-91 minutes
- Questions regarding religious conflict and change were extracted from each interview
- Thematic analysis is being performed, using an Indigenous autoethnographic frame

Analysis is ongoing; these findings are preliminary

The Conflicts

- Queer issues (homophobia, etc.)
- Purity Culture/Complementarianism
- Traumatic experiences
- Theological conflicts
- Kerplunk (smaller issues build up until faith collapse)

Ongoing Impacts

The Christianity that spawned purity culture worked for some participants. Still, most of us experienced conflicts that could only be resolved through a life-changing renegotiation of religious beliefs and spiritual practices. The impact often lingers.

"Now it's like—I feel very alone in my head. I still sort of desire the kind of intimate community that church communities can have." –Drew

"I'm too secular for the Christian world and too Christian for the secular world. And it's still…deep down I fear I'm gonna go to hell." –Chris