

How to reject purity culture but keep your faith

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(RNS)—Whether it was wearing a “True Love Waits” ring, reading *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* or awaiting a fairy-tale marriage, as a teenager Camden Morgante was all-in on what is often referred to as “purity culture,” a set of beliefs and accompanying resources that emphasize saving sex until marriage.

The culture that developed around these teachings—books, rings, conferences, branded Bibles and more—had a particular heyday within evangelical circles in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Now a mental health professional with a doctorate in psychology, she understands the emotional, physical and spiritual repercussions that can result from what she describes as purity culture’s false promises.

But rather than causing her to leave Christianity behind, reckoning with the negative impact of purity culture has only made her more certain of what she believes and why.

That’s in part why she has written a book.

“My main goal was to help readers see that they can heal from purity culture and hold onto their faith,” Morgante told RNS.

Written with the firsthand knowledge of a onetime purity culture proponent and the insight of a psychologist, *Recovering from Purity Culture: Dismantle the Myths, Reject Shame-Based Sexuality, and Move Forward in Your Faith* is a new release from Baker Books that offers practical tools for stepping toward healing.

RNS spoke to Morgante about alternatives to purity culture's sexual ethic, the connections between purity culture and sexual disorders and how to avoid perpetuating purity culture in adulthood. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What are some similarities between purity culture and the regency-era approach to marriage and sex in shows like *Bridgerton*?

I define purity culture as a largely evangelical movement that peaked in the 1990s to 2000s that attempted to persuade young people to avoid sex. But certainly the belief in virginity, especially for women, has been present for hundreds, if not thousands of years, and in many cultures.

When I started watching *Bridgerton*, a show that I really like, the similarities really stuck out to me. Women's virtue is tied to their virginity and desirability as a partner, and they're considered unclean or damaged if they are even alone with a man. You also see the flip-switch myth perpetuated in that show, this idea that once you get married, sex is just automatically going to be amazing. And the truth is that sex is a learned skill that we have to work on together.

You write that purity culture can contribute to rape culture. How so?

Purity culture includes this modesty culture of policing women's clothing choices and caring about what the opposite sex thinks about your clothing. The whole purpose of being modest is to prevent men from lusting after you.

It's not a big jump from that to rape culture, where you blame women for their sexual assault by questioning, 'What were you wearing? Who were you with?' Certainly we see rape culture not just in the church; it's part of

our society as well.

And the 'Me Too' movement has brought a lot of needed attention, but we need more attention to that in the church, too, and the ways that these well-intentioned teachings about purity have inadvertently contributed to allowing sexual abuse to occur and to be covered up in the church.

Can you explain how, from your perspective, a sexual ethic based on consent can trade one form of legalism for another?

In my chapter on reconstructing your sexual ethic, I am taking a middle perspective of criticizing both an ethic of shame, which is what I call purity culture, and an ethic of consent, which is a dominant perspective in our society today, and also the dominant perspective often in progressive Christianity as well.

The reason I criticize that is because it doesn't do the work to discover the deeper "why" of one's sexual ethic. Even if you no longer hold to a traditional Christian sexual ethic of waiting until marriage and faithfulness between the two spouses, there's still more to your sexual ethic than just, as long as it's legal and consensual, it's fine.

I really wanted to challenge people to dig deeper and to see that when you swing the pendulum and exchange purity culture for what society is offering you, you're still not doing the work of discovering your own beliefs and values and then making choices aligned with those beliefs.

What might be an alternative to both purity culture and the ethic of consent?

A values-congruent sexual ethic is the middle path I recommend. And I recognize that can look different to people. I wanted to be honest about where I landed, but I want you to have your own process. I encourage

people to figure out their own values and make choices aligned with those values.

As you note in your book, Sheila Wray Gregoire and her team found that Christian women report vaginismus at more than twice the rate of the general population. What does that have to do with purity culture?

Vaginismus is a sexual pain disorder for women that makes sex extremely painful or even impossible, because the vaginal walls spasm and clench up. I conceptualize purity culture as a form of trauma for some people, because it can lead to a traumatic response in your body.

I have clients who've been married for 15 years to a healthy spouse who's safe and loving and faithful, and yet their body still cringes. They still feel shame about sex. They're in their head, instead of in their body during sex.

There are all sorts of physical responses even after people have intellectually left behind the myths of purity culture. Because purity culture uses fear and shame as tools of control to persuade people to avoid sex before marriage, that doesn't just get turned off once you're married.

And so, I think vaginismus is a response to that where the body is recoiling and reacting to attempted penetration by clenching up and closing off, literally, because you've been taught to avoid sex for so long and suppress your sexuality.

As a psychologist, what are some initial recommendations you might give to someone experiencing the physical consequences of purity

culture?

I start off by validating their experience. These symptoms are normal, and I see them a lot in my clients. Research shows that the sexual responses of people who come out of purity culture look very similar to the sexual responses of sexual assault survivors. I help them understand these reactions in their body, so they're not carrying that shame of thinking there's something wrong with them.

And then one of the best tools I have found in my practice is mindfulness meditation. People can start to develop a relationship with their body that helps the embodiment process begin. Instead of suppressing and avoiding, denying, my goal is to help them embrace and connect and integrate to the different parts of themselves.

Purity culture doesn't just impact people physically—it can have spiritual repercussions, too. What has that looked like for your clients?

I wanted to also destigmatize the process of deconstruction in the book. Rethinking your beliefs really goes hand in hand with recovering from purity culture, because it's going to open up broader questions about the purpose of sex, our theology of suffering, gender roles, singleness, sin and grace. I want people to know it's healthy.

I cite James Fowler's theory of spiritual development in the book. His theory shows how, as our abstract thinking develops, our spirituality will also have more complexity. Those who remain in more black-and-white thinking, they're going to remain at earlier stages of faith development. So while deconstruction is normal, it can be painful and isolating, and for that reason, we need community. And we need to know that we don't have to lose our identity as Christians.

I use the analogy of house repairs in the book. It doesn't have to mean

demolishing one's spiritual house. It can be a renovation of your faith house, and Jesus can be with you in that process.

What advice do you have for how Christians might avoid passing purity culture on to future generations?

In the book, I offer strategies and scripts for parents. That can look like having ongoing conversations and starting early, talking about their bodies, talking about and modeling consent in shame-free ways.

Embed the conversation about sexuality in broader conversations about values. How do we show respect for others and their bodies? How do we show respect for our own bodies and our own desires or boundaries?

Help your kids think through different moral dilemmas that come up on TV or with friends. That way, they're learning how to think, and it's not just you telling them what to think.