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Virginity in the Christian Tradition

Amy Brown Hughes

This entry traces the development of the Christian understanding of virginity with specific attention to theology and embodied, ecclesial practice. Often reductively assumed to be the bodily state of one (usually a woman) who has not had sexual intercourse, this entry examines virginity more broadly as a rich and complex theological tradition in Christianity. Throughout the Christian tradition, virginity is associated with the integrity, or intactness, of the virginal person and of the church as embodied and represented by that virginal person. Whether ordained as a consecrated virgin, avowed as a nun or lay virgin, or pledged to virginity temporarily, Christian virgins are understood as bound to Christ in an intimate relationship. While Western and Eastern Christianity maintain different emphases regarding virginity, in general virgins represent the body of Christ, their physical bodies functioning as icons, intact against the incursion of heresy, and as exemplary witnesses of purity.

Keywords: Virgin, Virginity, Asceticism, Celibacy, Body, Saints, Martyrdom, Christology, Virgin Mary, Ecclesiology, Theology and sexuality

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1 Virginity in the Christian Bible and Apocryphal Acts: c.700 BCE–200 CE

1.1 Contexts: the Jewish tradition, Vestal Virgins, and ascetic philosophical traditions

Christians drew upon a variety of concepts and practices from historical and contemporary contexts with which to construct virginity as practice, vocation, and theological category. The developing understanding of virginity in commentaries on scripture, in sermons, and in the practices of early Christians was worked out in dialogue with already existing conceptions of virginity and ascetic renunciation.

While the Old Testament does not make much of virginity beyond pre-marital virginity (e.g. Deut 22:13–30), early Christian writers found in its pages the basis for an extensive theology of virginity in the Song of Songs. These writers latched onto the precedent of the Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria and the allegorical approach to interpretation. Adopting this interpretative approach unlocked a cascade of interpretations of the Song as the consummate love story between Christ and the 'Bride', variously interpreted as the individual soul on ascent or the church. The commentaries and homilies that followed, especially those of Origen of Alexandria and Bernard of Clairvaux, not shaped only the structure of biblical interpretation that was influential through the Middle Ages, but also gave the church a story about the relationship between God and the church that permeated liturgy and prayers and charted vocational pathways for Christians of all backgrounds to live as 'brides' of Christ in monasticism.

In the Graeco-Roman context, ideas of virginity tended towards social and, even more specifically, religio-political understandings. Devotion to the goddess Vesta was an ancient cult. The priestesses of the cult were known as 'Vestal Virgins' and were responsible for tending to the hearth of Rome. To be a Vestal Virgin was not a lifetime commitment, but they functioned as embodied representatives upon which the success or failure of Rome hinged: 'The Vestals purified Rome, and Rome's purifiers had to be pure and perfect themselves' (Schultz 2012: 122). While the cult of Vesta diminished in the Christianized Roman Empire, there is evidence of their existence into the early fifth century (Undheim 2018: 32). While a direct conduit of influence cannot be made between the Vestal Virgins and the developing conception and practice of early Christian virginity, both traditions co-existed.

More generally, there is a significant amount of discursive and practical engagement between the developing theology and practice of virginity and the various philosophical movements of the time. While philosophical traditions shifted in and out of popularity, in early Christian writings on virginity one can discern significant engagement with the Stoic

tradition regarding restraint of one's passions, the Middle and Neo-Platonic traditions on ascent, and examples of the various ascetic practices of renunciation that marked one's adherence to a particular philosophical tradition.

Even as Christians rendered virginity culturally as the intersection of body and metaphor, medicine and myth, virtue and commodity, they primarily understood virginity as a theological category. In the opening letter to the fourth-century treatise *On Virginity*, Gregory of Nyssa points to virginity as 'a kind of door or entrance into a nobler way of life' (*Gregorii Nyssenii Opera* VIII.I; 1952: 247). In other words, virginity is indeed an embodied way of life, but primarily it is a way into something else. That something else is participation in the divine life because of the Incarnation. While the virtue of chastity (spiritual or bodily purity) can be used to describe a committed marital relationship, in Christian theological texts chastity is more often associated with the abstention from sexual activity either for the remainder of one's life or the entirety of one's life unto death. Therefore, virginity involved fulfilling two requirements: retaining life-long bodily integrity (no sexual activity) and embodying holiness or sanctity (purity) in one's actions, dress, and demeanor (Undheim 2012: 23). The assumption is that sexual renunciation is particularly associated with symbolizing the purity of Christ – in conception, birth, life, death, and resurrection. As such, the theology of virginity is entwined with Christology, theological anthropology, and eschatology. As Susanna Elm puts it, '[v]irginity allows humans to resemble God' (1994: 116). This overarching conception of virginity will hold throughout Christian history, even as the church adapts virginity's discrete theological emphases and practice in various political, social, cultural, and ecclesiological contexts.

1.2 Mary and the virginal conception

In Luke 1:26–28, a virgin named Mary is greeted by the angel Gabriel as the 'favoured one', one who has been chosen to bear the Son of God into the world. There is no doubt that the Virgin Mary had and continues to have a significant theological role in the conception of virginity in the Christian tradition. The Annunciation (the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary) is one of the most depicted scenes in the history of Christian art. The birth of Jesus Christ still occasions contested questions about divine parentage, the relationship between divinity and humanity in the person of Christ, the scope of redemption, and Mary's role in that redemption.

In the Christian tradition, Mary's virginity is largely a foregone conclusion as it is entwined with the confession of Christ as fully God and fully human. There are language differences and theological particularities depending on the tradition. Some traditions (e.g. Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox) confess Jesus Christ as one person and two natures, i.e. the hypostatic union or dyophysitism, and other traditions (e.g. Syrian, Coptic, Armenian, and Ethiopian Orthodox) confess Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Word in one

nature, i.e. miaphysitism. Across all traditions, however, Mary's virginity is fundamental to trinitarian and christological thought and remains a basic aspect of the liturgy of churches around the world in creeds, hymns, art, and the celebration of feasts. The connection between virginity and Christology prompts theological reflection on the consequences of God becoming human. Deriving from questions about the nature of sin and salvation, Mary's virginity has provoked extended theological reflection on her own birth and its connection to – or lack thereof – the effects of sin (Immaculate Conception) and the continuation of her virginal state after the birth of Christ (Perpetual Virginity). The Virgin Mary is a person as well as a theological construct embodied in the church. Mary's virginity was and is about Christ, but it is also about how women see themselves vis-à-vis Christ and the church.

1.3 Interpretations of Matthew 19:12

The association with Jesus and virginity begins very early in the Christian tradition due to Jesus remaining unmarried. Jesus' life and teachings came to be associated with embodying virtue. According to Methodius of Olympus' *Symposium* (late third century), for example, Christ as the Archvirgin initiated a specifically Christian way of life that demonstrates the full spectrum of virtue through the embodiment of the all-encompassing virtue of chastity.

In addition to assuming Christ's virginity, many early Christians latched onto Matt 19:12 as pivotal for the devoted life:

> For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can. (Matt 19:12)

Eunuchs in the Roman Empire occupied a precarious space as culturally and religiously ambiguous outsiders (Kuefler 2001: 31–36). Some assumed that castration eradicated sexual ability and even desire, therefore eunuchs were allowed into female space. Others took the position that because of their retention of sperm, a eunuch was almost hypermasculine and therefore possessed a threatening virility (Krawiec 2002: 128). In Christian spaces, differences in biblical interpretation added another layer of complexity. That Jesus includes a category for those who choose to become eunuchs indicated to early Christians that marriage and procreation were optional and even to be discarded to follow Christ. Many early Christians wrote on this passage; and it became associated with maintaining the integrity of the virginal life, especially for men. While most agreed that this passage was central to ascetic life, there was debate over interpretation (literal or allegorical/metaphorical) and application looked like in practice. While there is sparse evidence for self-castration among Christians, the concern that some would take this step lingered (Krawiec 2002: 129). Metaphorical renderings of Matt 19:12 were popular in

monastic communities, such as in the White Monastery under Shenoute (late fourth and fifth centuries). The practical guidance of this passage for the life of a monk did have limits, however, as demonstrated by the harsh admonitions of monastic leaders like Shenoute. Self-castration was grounds for immediate expulsion in the White Monastery, even if the monk's life was in danger from the self-inflicted wound (Krawiec 2002: 128).

1.4 Paul and 1 Corinthians 7

There are many passages in the Bible to which early Christians turned for instruction and encouragement on the virginal life, but the core passage of the developing theology and practice of virginity was 1 Corinthians 7. Paul writes, 'To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am'. Such clear endorsement of virginity set the stage for virginity to become the superior vocation for Christians. This passage is referenced in most major treatises on virginity or the religious life in the Christian tradition (Clark 1999: 259–329; Shuve 2019: 131–54). Among Christian theologians, interpretations of this passage varied. Some do not render it as a literal prohibition against marriage. Others like Origen of Alexandria and John Chrysostom utilize this passage to extol those who remain unmarried (Clark 1999: 264; Miller 2005: 105–107).

1.5 Virginity in apocryphal literature

The *Protoevangelium of James* (hereafter *Prot. Jas.*) includes the earliest extant story about the birth of Mary. This early Greek gospel and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas fostered similar narratives in Latin that attempt to tell more of Mary's story, such as the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (seventh century) and the Gospel of the Birth of Mary (ninth century). These extra details become foundational for later theological reception of Mary. While the Lukan narrative and the *Prot. Jas.* present Mary as virginal, the difference in the latter text is that Mary remains virginal even in childbirth. Mary exemplifies purity – from her service in the temple to her commitment to virginity as a young teen to her giving birth as a virgin (Foskett 2021: 136).

Sexual renunciation was not a peripheral consideration in the earliest Christian communities. As evidenced in fragments of early baptismal liturgies, many Syrian churches expected sexual renunciation of the baptized. Marcionite communities also associated baptism and abstinence by restricting baptism to virgins, widows, and separated spouses. Sexual renunciation is portrayed as a companion for conversion in early apocryphal texts such as the *Acts of Andrew*, *Acts of John*, and *Acts of Peter* (Finn 2020: 25). In the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Thecla chooses virginity over her engagement after hearing the Apostle Paul preach. She overcomes multiple obstacles and is eventually commissioned by Paul to preach. Thecla's story was wildly popular in the early church and was an exemplar of charismatic purity for many women (Davis 2003: 26). In the

Thecla narrative, virginity is key, and the theological reception of her story emerges with the beneficiaries of her legacy, such as Macrina in the fourth century and numerous devotees of her cult. Thecla’s story was translated into numerous languages and served as the model for the representation of later Christian women exemplars, such as in the fifth-century Armenian texts that depict the influential Armenian martyrs Sanduxt, from the *Martyrdom of St Thaddeus and Sanduxt*, and Hrip‘simē, from *The Martyrdom of the Hrip‘simian*, which is included in Agat‘angelos’s *History of the Armenians* (Zakarian 2021: 71–99).

1.6 Virginity and eschatology

From the earliest texts in the Christian tradition, embodying chastity through sexual renunciation was more than moral formation. Sexual renunciation was the theological reference point for individuals to herald the resurrected reality to come – a kingdom and a family without the social trappings of the current society. To follow Christ held the real possibility (or requirement for some) to remain unmarried throughout one’s life in anticipation of the kingdom of God. For example, the second-century encratic groups committed to lifelong celibacy (a life of sexual renunciation that may or may not have included previous sexual activity) as the preeminent way to follow Christ and to anticipate the eschaton.

For some early Christians, sexuality was not original to God’s creation and is understood as an accommodation because of the fall. Therefore, marriage (and procreation) is not necessary in the resurrection. Virgin ascetics like Thecla and Eugenia renounced typical markers of gender and sexuality (e.g. cutting their hair, casting off gendered dress, or entering male monasteries). These and similar renunciations were understood as anticipating the ‘angelic life’ to come proclaimed in passages like Matt 22:30: ‘For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.’ For the earliest Christians, virginity is about the beginning and about the end, narrating what humans should have been, could have been, and who they will be again.

2 Virginity in the early and medieval tradition: 200–1500

2.1 Martyrdom, asceticism, and virginity

Persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire ended in the early fourth century with the Edict of Milan (313 CE), when Christianity was deemed a legal religion. The period of the martyrs was formational and aspirational for early Christians. Martyr stories shaped the development of Christianity in all areas from liturgy to devotional practice. Those who embraced the ascetic or virginal life were viewed by early Christians as the offspring of the martyrs, with christological witness and authority as their inheritance.

Martyrs and virgin ascetics echoed Paul's desire to identify with Christ, be changed by Christ, live like Christ, die with Christ, and participate in the resurrection power and life of Christ (Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 4:16; 15:31; 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:10–11). The stories of virgin martyrs like Agnes of Rome, Febronia (Phebronia) of Nisibis, and Euphemia of Chalcedon include preservation of virginity (sometimes miraculously), endurance under torture, and account of their death under Diocletian (284–305 CE). Virgin martyrs are commemorated on feast days, and some have churches built in their honour. Later virgin ascetics were seen as participating in the tradition of the martyrs, their lives of discipline illustrating the power that the life of resurrection to come had over the temporal life.

By the beginning of the early fourth century, asceticism was well-established in Christianity (Brown 2008: 202). In antiquity, *askesis* could apply to any regimen of exercise with a goal of improvement – in performance, in manner of life, or in health and effectiveness of body and mind. Voluntary poverty, fasting, sexual renunciation, and a disciplined life of prayer were all practices exemplified in New Testament asceticism and the centuries following. Asceticism was a complex negotiation of one's body and agency as it related to earthly society and the heavenly city to come.

Sexual renunciation was also akin to rising above one's sex, especially as a woman. The proclivity of women towards deception and vice is a constant theme throughout early Christianity and the Middle Ages, fuelling the ascetic impetus to overcome the offending desires. As early as the second century, people wanted stories of women cast as virgin heroines, and like Thecla, they gained celebrity status as they proved femaleness was conquerable (Miller 2005: 10). A woman's spirituality was intrinsically linked, for better or for worse, with her bodily choices on sexuality. Most of the 'heroines' were of elite status, and the stamp of approval from monastic and other ecclesiastical leaders lent credibility to their stories and to female sanctity (Schulenburg 1998: 32).

The monastic movement in early Christianity was indebted to the solitary asceticism of the Desert Mothers and Fathers, but urban and aristocratic women like Macrina, Olympias, Marcella, Melania the Elder, Melania the Younger, and Paula had an outsized influence on the shaping of the ascetic life. They were scholars, patrons, and provided funds for building monasteries and shrines. The rise of the monastic establishment funded by aristocratic money pressed the established ecclesial authorities to contend with new avenues for women to participate in the Christian project. Virgin ascetics were on the forefront of the development of theology and practice in late antiquity.

2.2 Virginity in the West

In the West, virgins were the subject of theological, ecclesial, and devotional concern beginning in the early third century with Latin works like Tertullian of Carthage's *On the Veiling of Virgins* and Cyprian of Carthage's *On the Dress of Virgins*. In the fourth and

fifth centuries, virginity was propelled to the forefront of ecclesial discussion on devotion with Ambrose of Milan's multiple treatises on virginity, Augustine of Hippo's *On Holy Virginity*, and Jerome's famous *Letter 22* to the virgin Eustochium, as well as his *Against Helvidius*, in which Jerome defends Mary's perpetual virginal status, and *Against Jovinian*, in which Jerome takes on those who refused to privilege virginity. Ambrose and Jerome's conception of virginity perseveres well beyond the fifth century in works like Venantius Fortunatus' sixth-century hymn *On Virginity*, in which the consecrated virgin is aligned with the Virgin Mary, and Aldhelm's seventh-century treatises on virginity that re-narrate the stories of legendary virginal exemplars. Stories of early virgins (especially virgin martyrs like Thecla, Agnes, and Eulalia) were retold, reframed, and reinterpreted.

In the tenth century with Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim and other women who follow in the Middle Ages, those same virgin martyr stories are retold, reframed, and reinterpreted by women. Depending on the author and the audience, the theology varied. When women like Hrotsvitha, or Hildegard of Bingen in the twelfth century, write about virgin martyrs, the characterization tends to be richer and more prone to privilege agency than renditions by men that tended to de-emphasize personality and reframe towards passivity (McInerney 2003: 172–187). The material association of virgin and martyr remains continuous throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. By the thirteenth century, written stories of virgins (especially virgin martyrs) were popular among literate aristocratic women and depictions of Agnes, Margaret (or Marina) of Antioch, and Catherine of Alexandria graced the walls and windows of churches. These retellings and visual depictions made theology accessible to a broad swath of people as families chose names for their daughters, commissioned manuscripts (e.g. *Life of St Marguerite*, *Life of St Catherine*), visited holy sites, and were compelled to imitate the lush representations of female devotion.

2.3 Virginity in the East

In the East, the theology and practice of virginity was central in Greek, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian texts. In the late third century, Methodius of Olympus' *Symposium* recasts Plato's ten Athenian men talking about erotic love with ten Christian virgins talking about chastity. While treatises in the fourth century, like Athanasius of Alexandria's *On Virginity* (preserved in Syriac and Armenian), first *Letter to Virgins* (preserved in Coptic), and second *Letter to Virgins* (preserved in Syriac), Gregory of Nyssa's *On Virginity*, Basil of Caesarea's *Letter 46* to a 'fallen virgin', and Basil of Ancyra's *On the True Purity of Virginity* focus on the theological nature of chastity and the virtues of virginity for the virgin and for the church, others, like Chrysostom's *On Virginity*, have larger anti-heretical and even theo-political designs.

While treatises shaped the way bishops, priests, and their patrons thought about virginity, it was the life of Thecla and others like her, as well as the flourishing cult of the Virgin

Mary, that gripped the popular devotion and fuelled passion for the martyr-ascetic life. The fragmentation in the Christian tradition around this paradox of a woman giving birth to God is exhibited in the debate over Christology and Mariology in the early fifth century that culminated in the Council of Ephesus (431 CE). Cyril of Alexandria and his compatriot of convenience in Empress Pulcheria (a consecrated virgin) were united against Nestorius of Constantinople, whose claim that Mary was the *Christotokos* (Christ-bearer) rather than the *Theotokos* (God-bearer), summarily relegated him to a group that Nestorius himself was famous for countering – heretics. Christian empresses played important roles in the developing theology of the early church, especially regarding Christology, Mariology, and relics.

Beginning in the third and fourth centuries, the *Theotokos* appears in hymns and homilies. She is mentioned frequently in texts for her role in the Incarnation of Christ and her mediatory role in the history of redemption as the ‘Second Eve’. From the fifth to sixth centuries, Marian shrines and churches were established across the Eastern Empire and, along with the addition of feast days to the liturgical calendar, many hymns and homilies were composed in Greek and Syriac that focus on her mediatory power, as well as her purity, as accounts of her Dormition and Assumption began to circulate. At the second Council of Constantinople (533), the title of Ever-Virgin (Greek: *Aei-Parthenos*; Latin: *Semper Virgo*) was added to the principal Marian title *Theotokos* marking Mary’s perpetual virginity before, during, and after Christ’s birth as a fundamental Orthodox doctrine on the incarnation (Atanassova 2011: 596). With these changes and the popularly of works like the *Akathistos Hymn*, the Byzantine Virgin Mary’s role expands beyond *Theotokos* to intercessor and protector (Cunningham 2021: 37–65). Between the seventh and ninth centuries, hymns and homilies on Marian feast days expanded to include apocryphal accounts of Mary (such as the *Prot. Jas.*). The theological emphasis began to shift the Virgin Mary’s purity and status as chosen by God (Cunningham 2021: 104). At the end of the ninth century, the Virgin Mary was

> above all a symbol of the incarnation in this period; however, this aspect may be overlaid with human and maternal characteristics, as she weeps at the foot of Christ’s cross, and with monastic virtues, as she becomes a model for asceticism for Byzantine monks and nuns. (Cunningham 2021: 5)

2.4 The spiritual and political power of virginity

Boundary lines between vocations (e.g. virgins, widows, or deaconesses) are difficult to draw with any certainty, but the option for women to live as virgins within various strands of Christianity emerged early (McDowell 2011: 624). From as early as the third century, texts in the Syrian tradition attest to the ‘Daughters of the Covenant’ (*bnāt qyāmâ*), ascetic women who chose sexual continence, understood themselves as ‘betrothed to Christ’, lived in their communities, participated in church, and were identifiable by their dress in

some way. The Armenian tradition of consecrated virgins (*kusankʻ*) parallels this Syrian tradition with the addition of references to the virgins assisting deacons (Zakarian 2021: 111–112).

From the fourth century on, the virginal life was associated with the ‘angelic’ life, reflecting the harmony of God with the angels in heaven. Adhering to this ‘genderless’ ideal proved to be challenging across Christian traditions provoking various efforts to reform the communal life. In reform movements virginity was central to combating laxity in monastic communities, as laxity led to monks and nuns breaking their vow of celibacy. When Shenoute came to leadership at the White Monastery in the late-fourth century Egypt, for example, he instituted a series of changes for ascetic expectations that were to be universally applied to men and women (Krawiec 2002: 95). Later monastic reformers claimed that virginity was the only proven path that culminated in the successful ascent of the soul to union with God. Thus, reformers like Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century made virginity core to the success of the contemplative life. His paradigmatic work on the Song situated the soul as the bride and made the individual the focus of Christ’s affections. As was the case in late antique Christianity, medieval theologians such as Albert Magnus and Thomas Aquinas assume a value hierarchy of virtue. They promote virginity for both sexes, but female virgins, especially virgin martyrs, remained the pinnacle of virginal devotion with chaste widows next in line, while married women remained a distant third (Schulenburg 1998: 128).

2.4.1 Virginity inside and outside the convent

Some monasteries were structured with women’s involvement from the beginning, as was likely the case with the White Monastery. Women’s living situations vary depending on the location in late antiquity. In the North African monastic structure women lived separately under the auspices of male leadership from a distance. Even though separation was again central in Palestinian monasteries, men and women shared duties of leadership more evenly. In an urban setting like Alexandria in the fourth century, virgins remained at home or lived with a community of women. One living arrangement was particularly concerning to early theologians like Athanasius of Alexandria and John Chrysostom – that of the *virgins subintroductae* (Krawiec 2002: 122). As early as the second century (and possibly even earlier), some male and female ascetics chose to cohabitate in a ‘spiritual marriage’ (*syneisaktism*) marked by a shared vow of sexual continence. The practice was widespread despite repeated admonitions against it and condemnations by church councils (Miller 2005: 117–118).

The theology and practice of virginity for women was reassessed and reiterated in works like the anonymous twelfth-century didactic work *Mirror of Virgins*, a widely read work that features a consecrated virgin who desires the cloistered virginal life, or the Cistercian Ælred of Rievaulx’s *The Formation of Anchoresses*, that outlined a rule for women

recluses. Like the virgins of antiquity, the medieval view of virgins deemed them heroic and free from vice. Medieval cathedrals and churches are replete with images of these virginal heroines. Models of devotion were set in stone for the everyday person to see when they entered a church. While virgins might be cloistered, the visual theology and practice of virginity was forming the theology of everyday Christians.

2.4.2 Men and virginity

While it was believed that there was some way to evaluate a woman's physical state of virginity or lack thereof, there was no such option for men. The emphasis on virginity in the will in Albert and Aquinas assigns virginity to both sexes equally even if, as they note, the corruption of the vow was less clear in men. Virginity was measured for both men and women by their vow of renunciation. Adherence to this vow continued to be assessed by observance of patterns of behaviour and dress. Virginity was understood to be more than a physical state or vow, the depth of one's commitment to and fulfilment of a life of continence was known only by the Holy Spirit. Works like Gerald of Wales' *Jewel of the Church* and Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend* offered celibate (and/or virgin) men of the late twelfth century and beyond instruction that emphasizes themes of self-control and God's gracious intervention to mitigate or remove lust (Arnold 2003: 110).

2.4.3 Brides of Christ

While late antique treatises on virginity tend to look forward to the coming kingdom and the accompanying marital union between the faithful and Christ as Bridegroom, in the twelfth century, Hildegard of Bingen appears to place greater emphasis on the pre-fall state. According to Hildegard, the beauty of virginity is not only a kind of spiritual aesthetic, but a gateway to understanding the mysteries of God. While she does not devote an entire work to virginity, Hildegard's praise of a life of virtuous virginity courses throughout her books, such as in the visionary theological work the *Scivias*. Her influence on the developing mystical theology in the church was vast.

When Abbess Tengswich of Andernach wrote a letter expressing her concern that Hildegard's virgins were extravagantly dressed and adorned, Hildegard's response (*Letter* 52r) vaunts the freedom, privileges, and mysteries of virginity as marriage with Christ. For Hildegard, bridal apparel was indeed appropriate because the virgin embodies both the purity of the paradisal state and that of a betrothed bride. Throughout the Christian tradition, virginity is associated with the status of marriage and symbols of marriage (e.g. veils, rings, and crowns). Athanasius of Alexandria expected that those women who eschewed their status as married women to become brides of Christ must be secluded, even controlled for political use (Krawiec 2002: 122). From Tertullian's chastisement of virgins not wearing their veils to the complex matrix of veil symbolism in the Middle

Ages, veils are sites of various material theological significance that demarcate virgins' representation of the paradisal state and status as brides of Christ (Firey 2019: 156).

Nuptial imagery has long been associated with virginity in Christianity. For many theologians, the gravity of a virgin's mystical and spiritual marriage to Christ explains the extreme nature of the chastisement for a lapse in one's vows. Owing to the long tradition of interpreting the Song of Songs as the bridal song of the individual soul and of the church, nuptial imagery performs the theological function of describing union with Christ and the practical ecclesial function of attaching unattached women to an institution (the church). Marriage on Earth was necessary for the sake of procreation but ultimately temporary and dispensable, but 'the celestial bond with Christ was as impermeable as it was indissoluble' (Elliott 2012: 89). It is normative in the Christian tradition to associate virgins as the brides of Christ, but this imagery and its theological ramifications are by no means limited to female virgins. As Elizabeth A. Clark quips, 'For both theological and pastoral reasons, the Church Fathers deemed it wise to represent Jesus as an equal-opportunity Bridegroom' (Clark 2008: 16). All Christians can enjoy marriage with Christ, with all its mystical possibilities.

2.4.4 Virgins as intercessors

The developing conception of the Virgin Mary as intercessor and protector was mapped onto virgins who were understood to have intercessory power on behalf of individuals and the church. According to Kate Cooper, 'the intercession of Mary and other female saints – such as the virgin martyr Agnes – was understood to reach across the divide between heavenly and earthly spheres and thus to contribute to the spiritual wherewithal on which their earthly counterparts, Christian women, could draw' (2007: 100–101). The seventh-century Byzantine poet and composer Romanos Melodos hymns Mary as the loving mother of Christ and as choosing by her agency to participate in salvation as the advocate of Eve and, consequently, as intercessor and mediator for all humanity (Peltomaa 2015: 133). Virginal intercessory power was not limited to the spiritual in nature. In early modernity, '[h]oly virgins, above all consecrated nuns, represented a precious public resource. Endowed with the spiritual powers of the chaste, they served as intercessors for their communities in times of warfare, plague, or other social ills' (Strasser 2007: 76).

Virginal intercessory power was, however, prone to continual circumscription by ecclesiastical authorities. Alongside the multitude of treatises and sermons that regulated virgins, conciliar decisions played a significant role in the church's engagement with virgins. The Synod of Elvira (c.305–306), the first council known to have published canonical legislation, include three canons (possibly added later) that address the preservation of and breaking a vow of virginity as well as prohibition against cohabitation of clerics with virgins (Hess 2002: 40–42). The canons of the Synod of Ancyra (314)

include material on breaking a vow of virginity, prohibition against cohabitation with virgins, and the rape of virgins. The Council of Nicaea in 325 condemned the *virgins subintroductae* (women who cohabitated in 'spiritual marriage' with a man) and prohibited self-castration by clergy. The Council of Carthage in 418 restricts clergy visits to the homes of virgins and widows (Canon 38), outlines who is to be entrusted with dedicated virgins (Canon 44), and permits the veil for virgins younger than 25 years old (Canon 126).

2.5 Virginity and ecclesiology

Virginity was forming a new ecclesiology, one in which women had a definitive role to play. The Virgin Mary is the mother of God (*Theotokos*) as well as the mother of the body of Christ, i.e. the church. Theologically, consecrated virgins were associated with the ecclesial work of bearing new believers in baptism, a christological function that directly connected them to the martyr tradition. The changing nature of positions of authority in the early church meant that while the Virgin Mary enjoyed popular devotion and gave shape to the structure and liturgies of the church, virgin ascetics (along with other offices held mostly by women) were increasingly shut out of the hierarchy of authority even as they retained significant influence.

In ecclesiological renderings, bridal imagery is entwined with maternal imagery: the Bride of Christ is also the Mother Church. The maternal imagery in the Christian tradition is associated with the Virgin Mary and with Christ. As Ambrose of Milan writes, Christ is

> the bridegroom of a virgin and, if it can be said, Christ is the bridegroom of virginal chastity, for virginity is of Christ, but Christ is not of virginity. He is a virgin, then, who married [us]; he is a virgin who bore us in his womb; he is a virgin who brought us forth; he is a virgin who nursed us with his own milk (*On Virgins* 1.5.22; see 1997: 79).

The entwining of virgin and maternal images with Christology is common in the Middle Ages. Christ was not exclusively represented as male but was also depicted as 'a nursing mother, especially on account of his bleeding wounds, which were regarded as nourishment for the faithful' (Friesen 2007: 122). Descriptions of Jesus as the Bridegroom and Bride are derived from Matt 25:1–13, Eph 5:22–23, and allegorical interpretations of the Song. The expansive theological range of the Virgin Mary and Christology is employed to span the breadth of the intimacy of God in relationship with humans and the church.

2.6 Virginity and Christology

Virginity, martyrdom, and Christology remained closely entwined throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. One example is that of St Wilgefortis, a venerated virgin who was often depicted on a crucifix, martyred for renouncing sexuality. Her cult was so popular in Europe that in some areas her veneration displaced that of the Virgin Mary (Friesen 2007:

117). The virgin martyr, like Agnes or Euphemia, was sure to receive the highest reward in eternity, having stood strong in the face of earthly temptations and welcoming her death at the hands of her persecutors as the freedom to be united with God. In periods of peace for the church, the virgin was heralded as one worthy of the martyr's crown because the persistence and intensity of her commitment demonstrated a consistent life of death. The equation of virginity to daily martyrdom separated virgins as those who were 'other', effectively lending credibility to what the women said and did. According to Ambrose, 'virginity is not praiseworthy because it is found in martyrs but because it itself makes martyrs' (*On Virgins* 3.10; 1997: 76). Virgins of Christ are established as braver than those who are virgins of paganism or philosophy since it is a virginity that is not simply a renunciation of sexuality, but the promise of future union with the divine.

3 Reformations and royalty in the West: c.1500–1900

3.1 Protestant violence against virgins

The Protestant Reformation changed the course of monastic history by centering the family in their ecclesiology and denying pathways of virginity or celibacy their usual primacy. Effectively, marriage became the default position for all: 'For Protestants, God intended women to marry, not to hide themselves away behind cloister walls, cut off from society' (Leonard 2005: 2). From Martin Luther's perspective, enclosure was imprisoning women and hindering them from being the women God created them to be. Therefore, women religious were given little choice in submitting to marriage or facing dire consequences in some cases. Convents were not eradicated from Protestant areas, however. While the rhetoric against them and the religious life as vocation was targeted and often violent, some women stayed in the convent as Protestants in service to the community and preparing for marriage (Leonard 2005: 38). There is debate in contemporary scholarship about the ramifications of Protestant actions against convents and whether what happened could be characterized as liberation from a corrupt and misogynist system or an eradication of the last sanctioned career available to women (Leonard 2005: 3). For Protestant women, virginity became vital but temporary, as enclosure in marriage became the default vocation.

3.2 Catholic revitalization

The Catholic response to the effects of the Protestant Reformation on religious orders was not unlike previous waves of reforms. For Catholic women, the religious life remained an option but also became the site for various counter reforms, most of which resulted in tighter restrictions on enclosure. By the end of the thirteenth century, a sweeping emphasis on spirituality had birthed the new mendicant orders such as the Franciscans, the Carmelites, and the Dominicans. Defined as they were by their preaching and begging

(activities deemed inappropriate for women), the church hierarchy enacted several laws to enforce cloistering nuns.

3.2.1 Enforcing enclosure

Enclosure for prayer and contemplation was established with Boniface VIII's papal bull *Periculoso* (1298). These restrictions were not well received by all, nor were they evenly enforced. Determined to reinvigorate and reform, the last section of the Council of Trent (1563) prioritized purity and intactness with its sweeping efforts to enclose women religious. Urban convent walls were secured, windows were barred, convents in the countryside were moved inside city walls, and lay orders were required to enclose. Some women religious took to the reforms with a renewed sense of mission and ecclesial connection. The newly rigorous approach to the religious life established women like Teresa of Ávila as revered exemplars of what the virginal life offered. A renewed focus on possibilities for contemplation produced what are now classic works of spirituality, such as Teresa of Ávila's *Interior Castle* and John of the Cross' *Dark Night of the Soul*.

Others experienced required enclosure as akin to a prison that erased their effective presence in and mission to the community. The Council of Trent was not the last word on enclosure. In 1566, Pius V issued another papal bull, *Circa pastoralis*, to suppress all those women religious who had escaped the cloister. Even as Catholics moved to reinvigorate religious vows and structures that enclosed, there was no denying that women religious were moving towards a more outward-facing and active role in society with convents becoming schools, hospices, retirement homes, orphanages, among other things (Leonard 2005: 153). The active orders were popular so, yet again, enforcement was uneven and orders like the Beguines and Ursulines continued to reject such restrictions.

3.2.2 Virginity and lay women

The cloister was home to many women who vowed virginity, but there were many others who were not cloistered and chose virginity, making their own 'unofficial' vow. The popular draw of lay orders such as the Ursulines, founded in 1535 by Angela Merici, arose from their wide embrace of women across class and the invitation to prayer, teaching, and charity (Leonard 2005: 123). The Ursulines were so named for the martyr Ursula who traveled to Rome to avoid marriage with an entourage of 11,000 virgins, who were slaughtered by the Huns. Ursula was killed with an arrow when she refused to become the chief's concubine. Hildegard retells Ursula and the virgins' story in a collection of songs. The Beguines took no vows and resisted any formal association with or as an established order. The spirituality of thirteenth-century Beguine women like Hadewijch of Antwerp and Mechtild of Magdeburg was groundbreaking and influential. Their passionate descriptions of marriage to Christ made their way across Europe in the fourteenth through sixteenth

centuries and influenced women like Catherine of Siena who understood marriage to Christ as core to her virginal vocation.

Marriage to Christ was central to the spirituality and vocation of many uncloistered, lay women. Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and Bridget of Sweden each in their own way embraced the life of virtue and found Christ to be their intimate companion. Unmarried or married, these women clung to Christ, assured by him of their value and connection to the divine life. These women were under almost constant pressure to enclose or to become more restrictive. While there was some movement of women into cloisters (either by force or by choice), the lay orders and Beguines remained true to their mission, even defiantly against hierarchical maneuvers to bring them under the auspices of male supervision.

3.3 Elizabeth I: virginity and power

The association of paradisal incorruption and virginity wielded theological power as well as political power. As Ulrike Strasser notes,

> [t]he political nature of virginity and its importance to the functioning of the polis was generally accepted in early modern culture. In more than one way the virginal body represented a crucial resource and reservoir of power for state and society. Communities often called upon sacred virgins for protection in times of warfare, plague, or other social ills. (Strasser 2007: 5)

While the political calculus of Empress Pulcheria's vow of virginity as a young teenager is a matter for speculation, there is no question Elizabeth I wielded virginity as a theo-political implement. Her virginity communicated the fragility of the security of her rule and England's future, but it also stood as a symbol of fortitude against incursion of all kinds – political and heretical. Her intactness represented security of state and her purity promoted Protestantism as the new adjudicator of heresy.

Prior to the 1580s, there were few representations of Elizabeth I as virgin queen. However, once it became apparent that there would be no marriage or heir, the iconography of 'Virgin Queen' became dominant and her virginity was widely on display in miniatures and court paintings (Doran 2003: 191). Since Elizabeth I was a Protestant queen, a shift had to occur:

> Once the queen's withdrawal from the marriage market became apparent, writers combined the Protestant ideology of female domestication with the Catholic idealization of virginity. The result was the iconography of 'The Virgin Queen,' a chaste monarch who resisted the weaknesses of the flesh but was also a loyal wife to her nation and a loving mother to her people. (Kendrick 2009: 47–48)

With Elizabeth I as the Virgin Queen, the Virgin Mary was displaced or forcibly removed with a slew of anti-Marian campaigns (Blank 2007: 182). Elizabeth I's claim on virginity would prove to be singular among English Protestant women. England's move to Protestantism (with the forcible closure of monasteries under Henry VII and the Protestant reign of Elizabeth I) meant that 'two models of Catholic ideal femininity – the virgin martyr and the Virgin Mary – become less available to English women' (Harol 2006: 12).

3.4 The Virgin Mary and the Reformations

For many of the Protestant reformers (e.g. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin), their histological commitments include Mary's perpetual virginity and even the assumption of her sinlessness (Kreitzer 2004: 9). However, the proliferation of new denominations that resulted from the Protestant Reformation, beget new claims on what was core to Christian faith and its aim for mission. For many of these denominations, the theological commitments connected to the Virgin Mary presented problems. The historical claim to her virginity for the sake of Christ's birth remained but other theological claims related to her virginity were deemed irrelevant or even idolatrous. It is a stunning shift. The Virgin Mary once represented the inviolable church, her purity and intactness holding the line against division and heresy, and in Protestantism, at best she is perceived as overemphasized, and at worst she is an idol that threatens to topple Christ as the centre of the Christian faith.

The question of the role of the Virgin Mary is entwined with Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology. For Catholics, the Virgin Mary is the church, the body of Christ, and as such, Christ's life as a human (and therefore redemption) is tied to her. In other words, there is no Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology without her as central. For Protestants, the Virgin Mary has been largely reduced to a historical role. She is admired for her obedience and necessary for soteriology and Christology in the sense that her humanity grounds the humanity of Jesus Christ, the saviour of the world. For Protestants, vocational virginity was not a viable option for women, but the vaunted value of family made the emphasis on pre-marital virginity necessary: 'Protestant reformers were thus in the awkward position of challenging Mary's perpetual virginity, her divinity, and her capacity to become an idolatrous object of worship, while simultaneously advocating the importance of virginity at marriage' (Harol 2006: 113). Ecclesiologically, however, the Virgin Mary is irrelevant for most in the Protestant tradition.

3.5 Virginity and vocation beyond the Reformations

The Protestant Reformation provoked an old question with new fervour: what opportunities does the Christian tradition offer unmarried women who, either by choice or circumstance, remain unmarried? The question of the vocation of women in Christianity is as ancient as the church. The antiquity, longevity, and popularity of the vocation of virginity in

its multivarious forms demonstrates that women understood themselves as needing dedicated space to serve God and that they (and the ecclesial powers that be) understood the vital role they played. The theology and practice of virginity were fundamental to the development of Christology in early Christianity and shaped the structure of the church. Beyond the early centuries, the theology of virginity continued to shape liturgical practice and Christian devotion. The flourishing of new orders like the Beguines, the visionary contributions of Hildegard and other female mystics, and the cultural and political roles women religious held through the Reformation and into the modern period demonstrate that virginity was never marginal, even when women were marginalized by a series of ecclesiastical restrictions.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, virginity as vocation in convents fades in ubiquity, but remains potent and effective in certain local communities and in missionary activity. Instead, virginity as an assemblage of abstract ideals of purity, modesty, and marriageability comes to the fore (Harol 2006: 9). Female virginity has always been assessed and prized in some form or fashion as virtue but, when associated with royal succession or the preservation of one's noble status in marriage and offspring, virginity became a carefully adjudicated commodity. As Harol posits, in the eighteenth century, 'with the emergence of critiques of models of inherited virtue, virginity becomes not merely a chaste vessel through which virtue and rights can pass, but rather a sign of virtue and a mode of creating rights in itself' (2006: 10). Virginity and virtue, then, become 'middle-class values' available to those who have the means to commodify their investment (Harol 2006: 11).

The transition to the nineteenth century in revolutionary Europe brought extensive instability for women religious, especially women who lived in communities: 'Cloistering became a daring and difficult vocation' (McNamara 1996: 567). As they fled war and violence, refugee nuns were separated from the sustaining resources of their convents and their dowries. In spaces of political revolution, nuns, as well as women from lay orders like the Ursulines, were convenient targets for torture to stoke or quell unrest. Burning convents and raping and torturing such women (sometimes even in the name of 'liberation') carried the symbolic meaning of destroying the integrity and purity of the ecclesial and political powers they represented.

4 Convents, colonization, and culture: 1900–present

4.1 The changing convent

Throughout most of Christian history, with very few exceptions, only men have been permitted ordination to the priesthood and higher offices. While there is compelling evidence for women priests and even bishops early in the Christian tradition, from the

early second century on, ecclesiastical structures effectively limited the avenues for women's leadership roles. The only exception to this rule, even if severely circumscribed and regulated, was the consecrated virgin. The vow of virginity and the role of nuns have gone through many shifts. Some changes were imposed from without, such as the various conciliar regulations on the appearance and enclosure of women religious. Other changes arose from within the ranks of women religious themselves, such as Hildegard changing requirements on dress and adornment and nuns in recent years who champion women's ordination. Changes abound, but virginity remains central to the vow of women religious.

In the Coptic Church, communal living for virgins in contemplative convents has existed since Pachomius (292–346 CE). Prior to a revitalization in the Coptic Church that began in the 1940s that spread to monasteries in the 1950s, written material about Coptic nuns was scarce. This revitalization opened space for expansion and visibility. For instance, the nuns of the Daughters of St Mary (Banat Maryam) started a community in 1965 marked by a more active life of service in education and medical fields. While some contemplative monastic orders have seen sharp decreases in numbers of monks and nuns, Coptic convents have grown significantly since the 1970s. The influx of women into both the contemplative and active communities provoked Patriarch Shenouda III to establish a new status of 'consecrated women' in the 1970s to incorporate more active lay women into the church. Consecrated women do not live in convents and orient their service in their bishoprics toward new needs in the Coptic Church (Van Doorn-Harder 1997: 83–84). Most of these lay women take a vow of celibacy (virginity for unmarried women is assumed in the Egyptian context), but there are some who will serve for a few years and then marry. The expansion of options for Coptic women has led to changes in requirements for acceptance, especially regarding educational level of modern nuns that 'sharply contrasts with that of the early nuns: where the majority of nuns in previous ages were widows and old or handicapped maidens, now nuns must hold university degrees' (Van Doorn-Harder 1995: 72). Regardless of growth and other shifts in service and requirements for a modern context, Coptic women in contemplative and active orders understand themselves as in continuity with the Pachomian monastic system and its ancient practice and values.

Outside of the convent, women make up the majority in Christian communities around the world and remain largely excluded from any established ecclesial authority structure. For many of these Christian women, devotion to the Virgin Mary shapes their experience of Christianity day-to-day. Marian devotion connects women to an expansive array of aspirational ideals of purity, fertility, motherhood, and femininity that affect everyday life and bond women to one another, to God, and to their Christian community and traditions. In Ethiopia, for example, women express love for Maryam who is both mortal and exalted. In the Virgin Mary, Ethiopian women access the mystery and power of their tradition in relatable and relational ways, even as they remain marginal to the authority structure of the church: 'Although she [Maryam] is both intimate with women because of her femininity,

and also above them all in spiritual importance, and she nonetheless allows women a stature that they would not otherwise achieve' (Marcus 2002: 19).

4.2 The complicated legacy of women religious

Through the physical presence of nuns and new convents or through the literary and missionary presence of moral preaching and teaching on the family and sexuality, the Western theology of virginity is normative. Indeed, the history of colonization and the destruction of indigenous cultures and peoples are tied with virginity: 'Europeans frequently derived the belief that virginity was an attribute of being civilized, which was to say Christian, European, and white' (Blank 2007: 11). European women religious were often complicit in the coercive campaigns for 'civilization' as missionaries and colonial agents in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. White, missionary nuns were seen as an effective 'civilizing force' at this intersection of charity and economic power (McNamara 1996: 583).

Some Christian Indigenous and enslaved women worked in convents or joined convents, but their acceptance and their contribution (and even their baptism) was often ignored, denigrated, or tokenized (Broomhall 2007: 59–60). Because of ingrained conceptions about blood purity in Spanish colonies, 'Black, indigenous and *casta* women often lived in convents as servants, but they could not become nuns' because they were understood as inherently amoral or immoral (Bristol 2007: 68). Africans and their descendants were not understood as capable of having virtue as their colonizer counterparts. Restrictions such as these, however, did not stop lay women from making vows and forming communities of their own. In colonial Peru, for instance, Indigenous women lived as *beatas* (the blessed), privately vowing sexual renunciation, wearing habits, and living simply (Burns 2007: 81–84). These assumptions about race and class continue to have rhetorical and theological effects to this day:

> In the West, virginity not only has a sexual orientation and a gender, it has a color. Christian symbology traditionally uses light and lightness of color to indicate purity and holiness, while darkness and darker colors are associated with sin and corruption. (Blank 2007: 11)

By the mid-eighteenth century, Dominican *beatas* were also fixtures in China (Menegon 2009: 303). Young women who refused marriage immediately became a source of anxiety, not only for marriage norms and obligations towards ancestors, but also for the effectual challenge it presented to male authority. After initial resistance, by the mid-seventeenth century *beatas* became accepted and even revered: 'Since their vocation was increasingly understood as conforming to both Confucian and Christian orthodox expectations of moral behavior, families started seeing these unmarried daughters as a badge of honor' (Menegon 2009: 334).

As colonial powers shifted or waned in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Indigenous clergy and sisters began taking over where those of European descent had left off. How to contend with the imprint of colonial and Western orientation (culturally, politically, and theologically) on these churches and religious communities has been the source of debate and theological reflection. What roles virginity and celibacy has in these many locales going forward remain open questions of deep significance for the future of Christianity.

4.3 True love waits: abstinence and the church

Rooted in purity movements of the nineteenth century and popularized among Protestant evangelicals in the twentieth century, abstinence campaigns and purity pledges have become normative for many Christians in North America. Instead of a life-long vow of virginity, all Christian adolescents (regardless of gender) are prevailed upon to pledge virginity until marriage. While these campaigns and pledges have made some inroads among Christians in other nations, virginity and the idealization of abstinence take up a significant amount of cultural and moral space in the United States in particular, the effects of which ripple beyond the walls of the church into entertainment, social norms, and politics.

Sexual abstinence has never only been about sex; it always has ‘political, as well as moral and religious, implications’ (Gardner 2011: 3). The bracketing of the emphasis on sexual purity to teenagers and young adults combines the Protestant reformers’ position of default marriage for all with the theological, moral, and political weight of intactness usually assigned to the vocational virgin. Sexual purity (a modern narrowing of ‘chastity’) has been designated by various evangelical Christian leaders, such as Billy Graham and James Dobson, as the last defence against a variety of incursions, not only of the church but of the nation (i.e. the United States; Moslener 2015: 75–95). It is a foregone conclusion that personal sexual practice and national or even global security are associated (Moslener 2015: 155). The intersection with politics and social stability provides opportunities for this new theology of virginity to dictate what constitutes a healthy, prosperous, and, above all, godly nation: ‘By asserting a causal relationship among sexual immorality, national decline, and impending apocalypse, evangelical leaders shaped a purity rhetoric that positioned Protestant evangelicalism as the salvation of American civilization’ (Moslener 2015: 3).

Choosing virginity, then, is to communicate the power of the countercultural, that is the rarity of purity and choosing abstinence. In this paradigm, adherence to God’s call for ‘sexual purity’ includes pledging virginity until marriage as well as a constellation of other markers of purity, such as modest dress and comportment, purity of one’s thoughts and speech, and the refusal to consume pornography. As the *Silver Ring Thing Sexual Abstinence Study Bible* claims:

> Purity is a way of life. It has to do with the way you dress, the way you act, what you think, and what you say. Purity is not about what you cannot do but rather about treasuring who you are. (Gardner 2011: 29–30)

4.4 Virginity and theological anthropology

It is generally assumed that virginity can be identified by the intact presence of a hymen. Even with all the discussion of 'intactness' that we find in texts about virginity, there is significant debate about when assessments of genitalia for evidence (or lack thereof) of virginity began to assume the presence of a physical hymen (Rosenberg 2018: 14–15). Such tests of virginity in the Christian tradition (and outside of it) have been unevenly required and administered depending on cultural traditions and/or social status. The idea of an intact or broken hymen remains lodged in cultural understandings of virginity even as its existence is anatomically inconclusive at best. Rhetorically, virginity's intactness communicates vulnerability and invulnerability of the body, the body of the individual and bodies that are the Church.

The Christian tradition includes significant deliberation on the ramifications of sexual violence on those who live the virginal life. While some would align virginity with one's agency arguing that it cannot be taken by force (Augustine of Hippo in *The City of God*, for example), such articulations tend to hesitate in offering theological and practical support to survivors of sexual assault in the sense of allowing them to remain in their position as a consecrated virgin. In more recent years, some claim that for survivors of sexual violence, there is no need to mourn its loss or re-pledge virginity. In addition, if someone chooses a life of virginity after having been sexually active (in marriage or otherwise), God's forgiveness is understood to rehabilitate one's virginity. In practice, however, the Christian tradition has struggled and continues to struggle to equate the virginity of the violated (or the claims to possess 'second virginity' or 'renewed virginity') with virginity that has never experienced sexuality in any form (Gardner 2011: 32; Kelly 2000: 122).

While Augustine grants the virgin agency and explicitly rejects dying by suicide to avoid sexual violation, others such as John Chrysostom praised virgins like Pelagia in the early fourth century who died by suicide to avoid the possibility of sexual violation. Chrysostom and many other early Christian theologians generally condemn suicide, but the potential violation of a dedicated virgin 'bride of Christ' appears to warrant an exception (Walker 2020: 59–61). According to Jerome, 'although God can do all things, He cannot raise up a virgin after she has fallen. He has power, indeed, to free her from penalty, but He has no power to crown one who has been corrupted' (*Letter* 22.5; see 1963: 138). Along a similar vein, Thomas Aquinas, deemed that virginity was 'so fragile and complex a condition that even God is incapable of restoring the woman to her pristine state' (Elliott 2012: 108). The Christian tradition communicates paradoxically both that virginity lost is beyond even God's

power to restore and that virginity is unassailably held fast by God's power and human agency.

The complicated entwining of Christology, theological anthropology, and ecclesiology lodges virginity as central to Christian experience. The Christian tradition repeatedly extols the virtues of the virginal life as marked by participation in the divine life, eschatological hope, and expansive agency. As for ways forward, what role virginity will play in Christianity in the future depends on if and how the church addresses abuses and communicates anew that the theology and practice of virginity can be a vocation marked by human flourishing.

Attributions

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