Christianity and Sexuality

Girls and Women Forge New Paths

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BOOK REVIEW

Sonya Sharma. 2015. *Good Girls, Good Sex: Women Talk about Church and Sexuality*. Fernwood Publishing. 112 pp. \$21.00. ISBN 978-1-5526-6438-4 (paperback)

In *Good Girls, Good Sex: Women Talk about Church and Sexuality*, Sonya Sharma explores the intersection of young women's Christian identities and experiences of sexuality. This text reports on a qualitative study she conducted that involved 36 young women from Canada and Britain who represented a range of affiliation from "faithful churchgoers" to those who "had left church life" (10). Good girl/bad girl discourses have long caricatured women's sexuality in popular media, and Sharma uses this familiar framework to unpack the complexities and multiplicities of Christian women's sexuality as they negotiate powerful secular and religious discourses. Sharma is careful to highlight what she characterizes as a "a feminist thread [that] weaves through women's stories" (91) that she sees as manifested in the cultivation and exercise of agency in experiences of sexuality that challenge impositions of patriarchal structures within Christian churches while maintaining religious commitments. Sharma's nuanced analysis and careful articulation of the complexities of the ways in which young women navigate, often successfully, conflicting messages and convictions create an important space in the religion and sexuality literature. It disrupts the secular narrative that often dominates this discourse that posits the utter incompatibility of Christianity, in even its minimalist manifestation, and an authentic female sexual experience marked by the validation of female sexual desire and fulfilment.

At the risk of undermining the sincerity of the foregoing accolades, I see the limitations of this study as posing a serious barrier to its full potential value. Using the good girl/bad girl framework for analysis is certainly helpful for characterizing the conflicts of Christian women's sexual experiences and their modes of resistance in a way that is legible to a secular audience. However, it does not create space for an analysis of tropes of the virtuous women

that are characteristic of conceptualizations of women's sexuality within Christian theology. These could, no doubt, furnish the framework, at least to some extent, in which Christian women might construct an understanding and adjudication of their own experiences of sexuality. Numerous excerpts of interviews with young women in the study, for example, suggest a conscious decision to abstain from or limit sexual activity outside of marriage, and to champion the marriage context as the truly safe space for freedom in sexual expression. Such assertions are analyzed as exercises of agency that "made possible ways in which to deal with conflicting demands of accommodating and/or resisting church and non-church teaching on sexuality, creating openings to live out both their religious commitments and sexuality" (78). Such assertions, however, might just as easily be read as internalizations of the fear of and taboos against women's sexuality untethered from the gendered social/moral obligations typically embedded in Christian theologies and sexual ethics. Using the good girl/bad girl framework of secular media as the instrument for reading conflict and resistance becomes a shield against critique of religious ideologies that are likely as influential, if not more so, in the construction of young women's sexual experiences.

Sharma's study appears apologetic, and indeed she explicitly includes herself in the sample allowing herself to be interviewed by a trusted colleague. Within the context of religious studies, great methodological debates are being waged as to whether or not religion can and should be treated as a natural phenomenon, as any other academic area, or if it requires special methodological consideration pertaining to something beyond the natural realm. Arguably, an academic agnostic approach is the accepted religious studies standard, but Sharma's work seems to breach this standard with a subtle yet consistent apologetic tone. In the opening chapter, for example, Sharma lays out a series of cultural influences that have shaped the current status of women in Christian communities, and, in this enumeration, she cites secularization as a key factor in disrupting longstanding traditions of gendered social and religious life. Recounting scholarship on "the fragmentation of family life and the rise of individualism," Sharma, through her use of language, laments that "secularism seeped into the public sphere affecting areas such as education, government, and healthcare" (14). This sentiment is reinforced throughout the text by persistent staccato reminders of the heightened benefits of the church community. Editorial comments on the difficulties of abandoning church life reinforce its benefits: "there is much that churches provide for women, like a community and supportive networks" (75), and are particularly conspicuous at the end of Chapter 4, "Sexual Transgressions."

This chapter reveals the impact of guilt and shame imposed by such communities “resulting in self-harming [cutting], as well as in disembodied sexuality, where women disconnected from themselves during sexual events...” (74). This almost cavalier mention of what can only be read as severe psychological injury surely warrants a more robust critical inquiry into the ideological underpinnings of such so called supportive complexes.

Despite the lack of critical inquiry into the ideological underpinnings of Christianity and women’s sexuality, Sharma’s work marks an important path in such discussions. The cover of the book shows three women, one of them fidgeting awkwardly. Discussing sexuality in the context of conservative Christianity can be difficult and uncomfortable. What Sharma’s work shows is that despite the discomfort, women’s understandings and practices of sexuality are much richer, more self-determined, and more resistant than what is often depicted in the media and secular discourse. While many young women in Sharma’s study opt to confine their sexuality to heterosexual marriage, other women’s stories portray a diversity of experiences: some tell stories of seeking sexual experiences outside of marriage and some tell their stories of same-sex experiences. While some women in the study felt compelled to leave the church, most remained, and these stories showcase the possibility of developing a path that accommodates their Christian faith and “having the sex they want” (77) as Sharma puts it in Chapter 5.

Good Girls Good Sex is an important contribution to women’s studies scholarship. Feminism in religious studies is familiar, but the inclusion of religion as an analytical tool in women’s studies has been problematic. As Sharma points out, women have been wary of the patriarchal and colonizing history of religions, and so in some ways, the ideological critique I cite as lacking in this study has, largely, already been done. As many women continue to accept and endorse ideological premises, secular or religious, that harbour destructive potential, we as scholars and activists are pressed to imagine and invent tools that can navigate the complexity of lived experiences and unnecessarily oppressive discourses and their political structures. Talking to young women about their experiences, as Sharma does here, is the right place to start.

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