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## **Learning the Limits of Salvation: Young Women, Hookup Culture, and the Failure of Catholic Colleges**

*Colleges promise young women a brand of salvation—that education guarantees their socio-economic success. Catholic colleges couple this promise with the message of Christian salvation, raising the stakes for these young women. Unfortunately, many women face a loss of confidence amidst the violence of the contemporary hookup culture that pervades college campuses. A feminist articulation of salvation serves as a much needed corrective: Catholic colleges are called to educate students in a faith that empowers them to unmake violence.*

### **Introduction**

College education is frequently sold today in terms of salvation—it is a guarantor of economic and social success in a culture that equates personhood with status and consumption. Education is perceived as the one-way ticket to the American Dream—it gives young people the tools to advance if they are willing to work hard enough and long enough, and makes the fleeting promise that it will turn you, no matter your current social location, into a power figure. This promise has been more recently extended to young women and they are taking full advantage—women are now completing more undergraduate and graduate degrees than men.<sup>1</sup> While this development is surely reassuring, it has resulted in an unexpected backlash—some are now claiming that the need for feminism no longer exists; that women now are demonstrably out-achieving men and have surely found equality.

A deeper look into the experiences of many young women during their college years fundamentally refutes this claim.<sup>2</sup> While many college students continue to find their education empowering, all too many report experiences of violence in the form of racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. Young women in particular speak about the prevalence of the hookup culture and sexual violence during their time in college.<sup>3</sup> Recent studies now link those

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<sup>1</sup> Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, “The Confidence Gap,” in *The Atlantic*, April 14, 2014, accessed April 17, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/04/the-confidence-gap/359815/>

<sup>2</sup> A few caveats: this paper will end up being primarily about the experience of middle to upper-middle class straight women. Race will also not be a primary category of analysis, though it is of the utmost significance. Women of color are more likely to suffer sexual assault and less likely to be taken seriously by authorities (for more information on this please see Samhita Mukhopadhyay “Trial by Media: Black Female Lasciviousness and the Question of Consent,” in *Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World without Rape*, ed. Jaclyn Friedman and Jessica Valienti (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008, 151-162.) as well as the work of Traci C. West and Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas.) Moreover, the current research in this area is limited to heterosexual assaults. This does not, of course, mean that same sex sexual violence is not occurring, just that the literature is still desperately needed. Finally, this paper, in recognition of a history of silencing, will focus primarily on the voices and experiences of young women. However, I wholeheartedly support efforts to better understand the impact of the hookup culture on young men, and analyses of how society’s construction of masculinity is damaging to the development of young men.

<sup>3</sup> I want to make it abundantly clear that while I am not entirely conflating “hooking-up” with sexual assault, and am aware of many feminist tracts that laud what they see as women’s sexual liberation, I am convinced

two violent college norms to the deterioration of young women's sense of self. The "hookup culture" is defined by brief, unemotional sexual encounters, ranging from relatively minor experiences to intercourse, that deprioritizes communication and that considers a coercive notion of consent to be the only standard for sexual contact. This paper will rely on studies that find this culture is one of entitlement and violence, where the standard of consent is threatened. This culture is pervasive on college campuses and it exerts a tremendous amount of social pressure on young women who are still in the process of self-discovery.

While this experience of violence raises important questions for theologians no matter the other details of the situation, it is important for us to remember the frequent use of salvation language in reference to higher education. How is our cultural understanding of salvation and the violence it visits on many young women impacting how these women understand religious salvation? This question is further complicated when we realize that the hookup culture and sexual assault are also staples of young women's experiences at Catholic and other religious universities. The Christian faith proclaims God's promise of salvation—the liberating and transforming experience of love, community, and faithfulness—and Catholic colleges are built to be ministers of the church's belief in that promise. Unfortunately, for many young women, their time at these institutions is one of shame, self-denial, and victimization. These young women are trained to associate violence with salvation. What are we, as ministers and teachers, called to do to unmake this association and create systems that promote justice and foster healthier understandings of salvation?

### **The Violence of Hooking-Up**

Contemporary sociological tracts acknowledge that the prevalence of the hookup culture on college campuses is participating in the deterioration of many young women's sense of self-worth. In this section, I will focus on three primary facets of the hookup culture that perpetuates this reality: that it is difficult to define, that it is pervasive, and that it devalues communication. Each of these characteristics contributes to an environment that enables sexual assault, polices the behavior of young women, and turns the promised experience of salvation into one of destructive violence.

Many researchers who undertake projects relating to the hookup culture on campus find that it is exceedingly difficult for students to articulate how it functions. Kathleen Bogle admits that it is nearly impossible to get a coherent definition from students.<sup>4</sup> This is not only true because the vast majority of students have never witnessed another dating pattern, but also because a hookup can range anywhere from kissing to intercourse.<sup>5</sup> This is how the hookup

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by the material presented here that shows the line between the hookup culture and the prevalence of rape and sexual violence to be very fuzzy. In some instances it seems that young people are using hooking-up as a placeholder term for sexual assault or rape, because they either are unsure of how to identify such violence, or they fear either silence or reprisal if they report. I am an advocate for young women learning to claim their own sexuality and to break out of the cycle of shame that has too long been used to police women's self-perception and behavior, but in order to make that change we need to help young women claim their agency and make active and informed choices about sexual activity and potential sexual partners. The hookup culture provides anything but, with its heavy reliance on social pressure to keeps individuals uncommunicative and complacent.

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen Bogle, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 30.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

culture functions: it is able to pull any partnered sexual act under its label, making it a ubiquitous and coercive standard.<sup>6</sup>

The hookup culture is normalized in the lives of college students,<sup>7</sup> in great part, because everyone around them, including parents, teachers, administrators, and sex educators assume that their behavior will conform to the hookup culture, and the best thing to do is minimize damage.<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that all students participate in the hookup culture to the same extent—some draw sexual boundaries and others abstain entirely. However, even these students have to pay the price of isolation for their decision not to comply.<sup>9</sup>

Colleges effectively market themselves as entering students' new home. What young women learn upon arrival is that they will have to make their home in the midst of a hookup culture that does not expect or value emotional commitments.<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that sexual pleasure is an unthought-of standard in this culture: "Hookup sex is fast, uncaring, unthinking, and perfunctory. Hookup culture promotes bad sex, boring sex, drunken sex you don't remember, sex you could care less about, sex where desire is absent, sex you have 'just because everyone else is, too,' or that 'just happens.'"<sup>11</sup> Individuals engage in acts of sexual intimacy, not because they desire it, but because it is expected of them.<sup>12</sup>

This disregard for pleasure is closely linked to hookup culture's disregard for communication. The most concerning result of this is that verbal communication, even consent, is unexpected and unnecessary. Indeed, verbal communication during a hookup breaks the social contract.<sup>13</sup> Bogle stresses that while "ascertaining whether someone is interested in a sexual encounter is an important aspect of the hook up script," individuals often rely on unreliable nonverbal cues before moving forward.<sup>14</sup> This reality causes Freitas to reevaluate how we talk about sexual assault and date rape with college students: "Within hookup culture, it is too simplistic to have conversations about date rape and 'no means no,' since this culture is one that by definition *excludes dating*...while promoting using copious amounts of alcohol. Taken together, it has students not only *not* saying no, but barely saying anything at all, including yes."<sup>15</sup> The hookup culture perpetually exists at the ugly boundary of sexual assault, in large part because it inhibits communication and reporting:

Several of the young women I interviewed discussed how, during a hookup, it did not occur to their partners to ask for—or even wait for—consent. Talking is not what the hookup is about—getting it done is. Though these women knew (more or less) that they had not said yes to sexual intimacy, they were also unwilling to call it sexual assault. Instead, they called on ambiguous language to avoid the claim. "I did not actually say no in the situation, it just kind of happened," said one young woman. "I didn't want to do it," she went on, but then later added, "I don't feel like he raped me, but it *was* against my will the first time."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Donna Freitas, *The End of Sex: How Hookup Culture is Leaving a Generation Unhappy, Sexually Unfulfilled, and Confused About Intimacy* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Kathleen Bogle, *Hooking Up*, 71.

<sup>10</sup> Donna Freitas, *The End of Sex*, 36.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Donna Freitas, *The End of Sex*, 53.

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Bogle, *Hooking Up*, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Donna Freitas, *The End of Sex*, 48.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

The hookup culture normalizes violence and promotes silence and complacency. Despite rhetoric around how much sexual assault rates have plummeted over the past several decades, the research proves otherwise. The percentage of women at college who will experience attempted rape or rape could be as high as 20-25%,<sup>17</sup> and the number of women who experience other forms of sexual assault is much, much higher.<sup>18</sup> In fact, “most recent studies of non-rape sexual victimization suggest that little has changed since the 1950s with respect to the extent of these types of victimizations committed against college women.”<sup>19</sup> Sexual assault remains a norm on college campuses, and the coerciveness of the hookup culture functions in such a way as to inhibit the full freedom and consent of participants.

Decreased communication also expels emotional ties from sexual encounters. This disconnect from emotions is something that incoming students had to learn. Many young women spoke to researchers about wanting “something more” but feeling “powerless” to pursue deeper relationships.<sup>20</sup> Young women often learn to repress their emotional response because risking that connection is frequently emotionally and psychologically devastating.<sup>21</sup> It is equally risky, however, for women to embrace the hookup culture. Women find that they are derided for behaviors ranging from alcohol consumption, to sexual activity, to wardrobe choices.<sup>22</sup> Their behavior is constantly policed: they are coerced into the hookup culture or risk social isolation, but to embrace the culture is to be labeled a “slut” and face social stigma.<sup>23</sup> It is unsurprising that students told researchers that hooking up could make them feel “miserable” and “abused,” fully cognizant that one night could ruin their reputation.<sup>24</sup> This outline of how the hookup culture operates on college campuses proves it to be a violent and uncompromising system. Some institutions have begun to notice this troubling trend and have started some preliminary investigations.

### **Damage Done: College Women’s Decreased Self-Esteem**

Boston College’s “Undergraduate Women Academic Self-Perceptions” study analyses this disturbing piece of information: that the school’s female students indicate decreased self-esteem over their college careers. The young women surveyed attribute this most to the social and sexual environment of the school.<sup>25</sup> At Boston College, women, on average, garner higher GPAs and are more involved leaders than their male counterparts, but regularly rate themselves lower than men do on self-assessments measuring “academic ability, intellectual self-confidence,

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<sup>17</sup> Bonnie A. Fisher, Leah E. Daigle, and Francis T. Cullen, *Unsafe in the Ivory Tower: The Sexual Victimization of College Women* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009), 70.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

<sup>20</sup> Kathleen Bogle, *Hooking Up*, 49.

<sup>21</sup> Donna Freitas, *The End of Sex*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Kathleen Bogle, *Hooking Up*, 111-112.

<sup>23</sup> Donna Freitas, *The End of Sex*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> In the interest of concision, and in light of my focus on the particular accountability of religious institutions, this paper only cites Boston College’s study, but other schools have uncovered shockingly similar information, including Duke University (historically associated with the United Methodist Church) (Roth, Susan. Chair. “Women’s Initiative.” Duke University, Durham, NC, 2004.

<http://universitywomen.stanford.edu/reports/WomensInitiativeReport.pdf>), and Princeton University (historically associated with the Presbyterian Church) (“Report of the Steering Committee on Undergraduate Women’s Leadership.” Princeton University: Princeton, NJ, 2011.

<http://www.princeton.edu/reports/2011/leadership/download/>).

and related skills.”<sup>26</sup> While first-year women rated themselves higher than the men “in the areas of drive to achieve, writing ability, cooperativeness, creativity, spirituality, and understanding of others” by senior year women’s self-assessment exceeded the men only in “spirituality, understanding of others, and writing ability.”<sup>27</sup> The women in the focus group that the school established in conjunction with this report answered overwhelmingly that the decline is associated with “BC Culture,” or the “social dynamics between male and female students and faculty.”<sup>28</sup> Many of the women pointed to a “disregard for women on campus,” focusing on “explicit and implicit expressions of disrespect from male students”<sup>29</sup> particularly when it comes to sex.<sup>30</sup>

It is equally disturbing that women who have preserved their sense of self-esteem attribute it to opting out of the campus culture.<sup>31</sup> This is particularly worrisome given Catholicism’s understanding of salvation occurring in community—these young women are learning that their best chance of survival is in isolation. Unfortunately, these young women might not be incorrect when they think that their peers or their administrators might not take claims of sexual assault seriously.<sup>32</sup> As a ministry of the church, Catholic colleges are called to reverse this tide by taking seriously the violence done to their female students and critically analyzing social and theological precepts that participated in the promulgation of violence.

### **Revisiting the Soteriological Framework**

If ministers, educators, and administrators at Catholic colleges are prepared to better address the hookup culture that permeates their campuses and attend to the heresy it preaches about Christian salvation, they must reflect on and critique their own soteriological assumptions and create spaces for that same process of reflection, analysis and renewal to take root in the campus community at large.

In light of the hookup culture’s tendency to particularly disenfranchise young women and patriarchal tendencies to inadequately protect survivors, the insights of feminist theology are particularly relevant. The works of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rebecca Chopp operate on two levels: 1.) as a resource for women who are suffering violence in the place that supposedly offered them salvation and where they are struggling to find God, and 2.) as a prophetic witness to the institutional bodies that have yet to sufficiently recognize or respond to this suffering. Both Schüssler Fiorenza’s “ekklēsia of wo/men” and Chopp’s “emancipatory transformation” rely upon making the experiences and voices of women public; on making the church a place of prophetic justice and mercy; and on articulating that God can be found with women who suffer.

It is clear that too many young women on college campuses—religious and secular alike—find their bodies, psyches, souls, and freedom abused by the hookup culture and the normalization of sexual assault. Society’s failure to respond reveals our continued allegiance to

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<sup>26</sup>“Undergraduate Women’s Academic Self-Perceptions.” Report of a Faculty Committee on Undergraduate Women” (Boston College, Boston, MA, 2013), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 16-17.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>32</sup> As is indicated by the 55 colleges under investigation for being non-compliant with Title IX, two of which are Catholic institutions. See Tyler Kingkade, “55 Colleges Face Sexual Assault Investigations,” in *Huffington Post*, May 1, 2014, accessed May 1, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/01/college-sexual-assault\\_n\\_5247267.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/01/college-sexual-assault_n_5247267.html).

the spirit-body dualism that asserts the superiority of the mind and spirit over the body and further associates men and masculinity with the intellect and the spirit and women and femininity with base bodily urges.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the suffering of women's bodies, of black and brown bodies, of queer bodies, is of no concern theologically—that suffering is either their just punishment, or their pathway to purification. It is in this tradition that the assault on young women's bodies follows, and they are learning that their bodies are made for consumption; that they should be long-suffering in the face of abuse; and that the gospel may not apply to them.

Feminist theologians have refuted this dualism by pointing to scripture: Jesus of Nazareth's attention to bodies in his ministry—providing food and drink, healing those in pain, washing the feet of his intimates, and allowing such corporeal acts of mercy to be reciprocated. Taking embodiment seriously as a place for theological reflection revolutionizes the way we understand and respond to sexual assault on college campuses. Firstly, it challenges us to talk about bodies, relationships, and sexuality with students. Donna Freitas' research began when she offered a course on dating and sexuality on campus and empowered her students to speak.<sup>34</sup> I am not advocating for an entire breakdown of professional boundaries, but rather for a space where students can speak honestly and be taken seriously. We ask students to critically analyze the world but we fearfully back away from their most immediately pressing concern. Broadcasting with our own dis-ease—both individually and institutionally—that bodies and relationships are not fit to speak of only further reinforces the silence, shame, and violence that manifests in the hookup culture. The investigations coming out of schools like Boston College are an important entry into these discussions, but it is a conversation that desperately needs to be opened up for wider participation.

This wider conversation points towards what Schüssler Fiorenza calls “the “ekklēsia of wo/men,” or the radical democracy that underwrites the operation of gender dualism.<sup>35</sup> It is fruitful to consider what Catholic colleges would look like if they practiced ekklēsia, and were grounded in the hopes of a truly democratic community. Ekklēsia insists that this hope “cannot be realized if wo/men's voices are not raised, not heard, and not heeded in the struggle for justice and liberation.”<sup>36</sup> Living into the ekklēsia of wo/men calls institutional bodies to seek out the voices of the marginalized and to invite them to preach in the public square. It is in the struggle to practice justice, freedom, and mercy that the ekklēsia is embodied and speaks.<sup>37</sup>

This brings us to the question of voice and agency. Young women feel disempowered by the hookup scene, and unfortunately the church and the academy have not always advocated for women's voices and experiences to be considered. Rebecca Chopp is particularly concerned by the way in which women's voices are silenced and subsumed by sexist linguistic and symbolic turns.<sup>38</sup> Christianity's participation in sexist language and symbol-making creates a crisis for many women who have struggled between loyalty to the church where they came to know God and their experience of oppression in that church. Chopp has great hope in the capacity of feminist theology to reconstruct the Christian tradition around “discourses that, through a multiplicity of strategies, allow each woman to speak her self, her desires, her time and space,

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<sup>33</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Transforming Vision: Explorations in Feminist The\*logy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), 36.

<sup>34</sup> Donna Freitas, *The End of Sex*, vii-ix.

<sup>35</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Transforming Vision*, 42.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 160.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 238.

<sup>38</sup> Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, and God* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 2.

her hopes, her God.”<sup>39</sup> These discourses proclaim a God of freedom, a God who suffers with those women whose bodies, psyches, and souls are assaulted by the violence and coercion of the hookup culture.<sup>40</sup>

Unmaking this violence on the campuses of Catholic colleges calls for intentional efforts to foster “emancipatory transformation” and the “ekklēsia of wo/men.” This can be done in myriad ways: by making feminist critique a standard tool in classroom conversations; by revisiting administrative policies with an eye towards hiring and promotion bias; by placing a premium on mentorship; by encouraging events that, in proper context, help women find their voices and claim their agency, their bodies, and their sexuality, like *The Vagina Monologues* and “Take Back the Night.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, we must begin to articulate religious and spiritual ways to unmake violence, such as thorough training for campus ministers on issues pertaining to sexual assault, prayers of the faithful that reflect this wound in the community, prayer services for those who have survived, and retreats that focus on embodiment and social justice. The Gospel that Catholic universities preach proclaims a God concerned with the unmaking of violence, and fostering a relationship with the Divine can empower our communities to live into justice and mercy.

When Catholic schools that promise both socio-economic and religious salvation reflect on how to preach salvation to the young women who suffer at the hands of the hookup culture and sexual assault on campus, and begin to act as more forceful advocates for these young women they engage in the unmaking of violence. They no longer participate in a culture that ties salvation with physical suffering and that ignores the needs of the vulnerable. Rather, they witness to a God who suffers with the hurting and live in relationship, in mercy, and in justice. They preach the dignity of all persons and foster a love that looks both inward and outward. It is in living and fostering discipleship that ministers and educators can unmake the violence that occurs in their midst, and speak of salvation in a way that rebelliously condemns violence.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>41</sup> All this presumes the baseline, of course, that safe, adequate, and confidential services are available to anyone seeking help related to violence of any kind, that fitting disciplinary action will occur, and that the school is ready and willing to work with law enforcement whenever the survivor so chooses.

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