

Religion, Miss America, and the Construction of Evangelical Womanhood

by

Mandy Ellene McMichael

Graduate Program in Religion

Duke University

Date: April 8, 2014

Approved:

Grant Wacker, Supervisor

Mark Chaves

Randy L. Maddox

Thomas A. Tweed

Timothy B. Tyson

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Christian engagement with beauty contests shifted dramatically between the initial Miss America pageant in 1921 and its 90th anniversary in 2011. This dissertation explores how and why many Christians found the organization an institution worthy of partnership with the church. It examines three aspects of Christian involvement in the contest: the long history of beauty pageants, the persistent emphasis on individual physical attractiveness, and the idea of witness in southern evangelical culture. It argues that after 1965, at least two factors enabled the unlikely marriage of Christians and the Miss America Organization: the perceived threat of second-wave feminism and evangelicalism's increasing desire to engage culture. In addition, Christian contestants gained rewards, both tangible and intangible, from their pageant participation. Most significant for some Christian women, the competition functioned as an arena in which women could serve as Christian evangelists. Pleasure, prizes, performance, and purpose: contestants found all these and more on the stage. The goal here is not to prove that the Miss America pageant is somehow inherently religious, but rather that the Christians who participated in the contest were dealing with multiple expectations from church and culture that dictated, influenced, and explained their experience. This dissertation describes the place Christian women found in the Miss America pageant for their religious self-understanding. By telling the story of Christian women in a gendered

and sexualized arena, I hope to emphasize the flexibility of gender roles and religious mores inherent in Christian participation.

Dedication

To Chad, for your unwavering support

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Acknowledgements

While researching and writing my dissertation, I frequently remarked that writing a dissertation is a lot like pregnancy and childbirth – except harder. With no set gestation period, a dissertation can drag on for years before reaching “full term.” Mine certainly did. Thankfully, a community of support ensured the successful completion of this project. Though it is impossible to name everyone, some individuals deserve special recognition for the time, encouragement, and friendship they poured into my life over the last eight years of doctoral study.

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Huntingdon College proved the perfect place to write a dissertation about pageants. My city offered access to a plethora of contests within easy driving distance. My students – too many to name – brought me anecdotes, articles, and questions. The gift of teaching them brought numerous assurances that I had chosen the right career. Two students were instrumental in the final stages of the dissertation. Russ Barnwell scoured databases to help me locate newspaper articles and Zachary Turner prepared the appendix of Miss Americas' religious affiliations. My department chair juggled class scheduling to help me maximize writing time. Conversations with colleagues across the campus enriched my work. I am grateful to all parts of my Huntingdon family for the care they have shown our family over the last five years.

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Introduction

The cult of beauty exemplifies an important tenet of popular religion: all aspects of life can provide religious illumination when believers see them in a sacred perspective.

Charles Reagan Wilson, *Judgment & Grace in Dixie*, 1995¹

During her reign as Miss Alabama and subsequently as Miss America 1995, Heather Whitestone, a Baptist, traveled the nation promoting her platform of youth motivation entitled "Anything is Possible." The first Miss America with a disability, Whitestone encouraged youth to focus on their abilities rather than their disabilities, claiming that her religious faith was a powerful motivator for helping her achieve success.² As a high school student, I heard Whitestone speak about God's hand in making anything possible. I remember how poised she looked standing in the pulpit of Prattville, Alabama's First Baptist Church, and the power she held in that moment. My mother had brought me to that church to hear a successful, Christian woman speak a word from the Lord. Never mind that she had donned a swimsuit on national television.

Pageants permeated Southern culture. Winners like Whitestone became local celebrities, often finding their way into schools, churches, Kiwanis meetings, and other community events. She used her national status as Miss America as a platform to promote her religious convictions. Whitestone was neither the first nor the last Miss

¹ Charles Reagan Wilson, *Judgment & Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 158.

² Heather Whitestone with Angela Elwell Hunt, *Listening with My Heart* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

America to mix faith and celebrity. Miss America 1985, Sharlene Wells (Mormon), Miss America 1996, Shawntel Smith (Pentecostal), and Miss America 2007, Lauren Nelson (Methodist), were just three of the many local and national winners who saw pageantry as part of their religious journeys. In the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, Christian women took to the stage with a mission in surprising numbers. To be sure, not all Christians approved of pageants. Equally important, not all women who participated in beauty contests claimed to be Christian. Still, more than half of the winners post-1965 professed Christianity.

At first, Miss America's faith earned nationwide attention by accident. Miss America 1965, Vonda Van Dyke (Methodist, Miss Arizona) was the first winner to speak about her commitments publicly. At that time, Miss America contestants signed a contract agreeing not to talk about religion or politics, but when Emcee Bert Parks asked Van Dyke whether her Bible served as her good luck charm, she seized the opportunity. She answered, "I do not consider my Bible a good-luck charm. It is the most important book I own."³ After seeing the positive responses from the American public to Van Dyke, pageant officials decided to change the rules.⁴ Van Dyke paved the way for many Christians who took the stage after her, including Whitestone. Those Christian winners

³ Vonda Kay Van Dyke, *That Girl in Your Mirror* (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1966), 118.

⁴ John W. Kennedy, "Miss (Christian) America," *Today's Christian*, 2003, accessed January 29, 2014, <http://www.christianity.com/11622493/?p=0>.

received overwhelming support and encouragement from their religious traditions and some even cited their pageant careers as preparation for Christian ministry.

Of course, to many observers (not to say most), the marriage between church and pageantry never should have taken place. When the Miss America Pageant began in 1921, Baptists, Quakers, and Methodists alike called for Christians to steer clear of bathing revues like those in Atlantic City. Baptists passed a “Resolution on Beauty Contests” in 1926 that stated, in part, that “‘Whereas, beauty contests and so-called ‘bathing revues’ ...tend to lower true and genuine respect for womanhood...We, the Southern Baptist Convention do deplore and condemn all such contests and revues.”⁵ Those religious voices aided in shutting the pageant down for six years (1928-1932 and 1934).⁶ This victory proved to be short lived as Atlantic City businessmen rallied to revive the competition. In the process, they won many religious groups to their side and have kept them there ever since.

For many years the relationship between Christianity and pageants won praise in denominational publications from *The Alabama Baptist* to *Pneuma*. In the twenty-first century, it stirred up some controversy in the Christian blogosphere. In 2009, a media explosion surrounding the ethics of pageantry led to articles on the blogs of *Associated Baptist Press*, *Her.meneutics*, and *GetReligion.org* among others. The attention given to

⁵ Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution passed at the Southern Baptist Convention, 1926,” *SBC Resolutions*, May 1926, accessed July 18 2012, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=280>.

⁶ Frank Deford, *There She Is: The Life and Times of Miss America* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 129ff.

evangelical winners such as Carrie Prejean and Teresa Scanlan proved, perhaps surprisingly, that a large number of Christians still paid attention to beauty pageants in America. Moreover, while the articles offered insights about pageantry, the real gems were found in the comment streams. People wanted to talk about the relationship between evangelicals and pageants. Many praised the women, some offered hesitant support of Christian pageant participation, and others criticized it. Each contributed to an ongoing conversation about women and the church.

This dissertation explores the place Christian women found in the Miss America pageant for their religious self-understanding. They noted that pageant participation offered more than the hope of a crown; it gave them a venue in which to develop confidence, practice community service, and celebrate women's scholarship. In addition, many contestants talked about their participation in religious terms, though of course such self-descriptions must be considered critically. I consider cultural and evangelical expectations of women to offer other explanations for their participation.

The unlikely partnership between Christians and the Miss America Pageant deserves sustained attention. My work adds to the conversation by providing an historical overview of Christian pageant participation. I explore the home that many Christian women discovered in pageantry, demonstrating that some found their faith strengthened by their participation even as others sought to distance themselves from the organization. My primary aim is unpacking the delicate balancing of Christian

teachings and pageant culture by contestants, churches, and the broader Christian community. Second, I hope to illumine the contests' influence on the construction of evangelical womanhood, especially in the South.

Statement of Problem and Argument

Christians' relationship to beauty contests shifted dramatically between the initial Miss America pageant in 1921 and its 90th anniversary in 2011. Following a rocky start, Christians enjoyed a mostly amicable relationship with the organization. Why did Christians find this public forum so attractive and how did they justify the inevitable objectification of women in pageants? What made this objectification "virtuous" and other sexualized arenas "sinful"? In other words, why did Christians support beauty contests when, on the face of it, they should not? In this dissertation, I explore how and why Christians found the Miss America pageant a worthy partner. I examine three aspects of Christian involvement in the contest: the long history of beauty pageants, the persistent emphasis on physical attractiveness, and the idea of witness in Southern evangelical culture.

First, I argue that after 1965 at least two factors enabled the unlikely marriage of Christians and the Miss America Organization: the perceived threat of second-wave feminism, and evangelicalism's increasing desire to engage culture. The rise of second-wave feminism left many conservative Christians scrambling to find allies who promoted traditional gender roles. Some Christians saw the classical womanhood touted

by the Miss America Pageant as a perfect match. In addition, the flexibility of evangelicalism recognized beauty contests as a neutral space. These (largely conservative) Christians sought to enforce their worldview on America at large, using all of the tools at their disposal to reach the world for Christ. Pageants afforded an attractive venue.

Second, I contend that Christian contestants gained rewards, both tangible and intangible, from their pageant participation. For some Christian women, the Miss America Pageant functioned as an arena in which women could serve as Christian evangelists. It allowed them to “preach” when their conservative religious traditions denied them access to the traditional forums for witness. The contests also provided participants a space in which to develop confidence, practice community service, and celebrate women’s scholarship. Moreover, they provided an opportunity to earn scholarship money for undergraduate, graduate, and professional school education. Finally, for some participants, pageants were a source of pleasure akin to participation in athletic events; they loved the exhilaration of performing and competing. Pleasure, prizes, performance, and purpose: contestants found all these and more on the pageant circuit.

Significance

Few scholars consider the relationship between religion and pageants. Indeed I found no book length treatment. By examining the rich connection between the two, this

dissertation demonstrates the usefulness of lived religion as a tool for cultural historians. It sheds light on scholarly understandings of women and evangelicalism, noting that diversity of experience existed among religious women, even within conservative traditions. Those women performed religious notions of gender that afforded them real power within certain spheres. And, while the cultural scripts ascribed to pageants that (could) involve objectification and exploitation never disappeared, some women actively reinterpreted the scripts by assigning them religious value. To understand the role of women's subjectivity and power in American culture, religious historians need to take seriously both the dominant cultural scripts of pageants such as Miss America, as well as how participants reinterpreted these scripts through religious lenses to construct alternate ideals of Christian womanhood. This dissertation begins to do that.

My project is significant in another way. By telling the story of largely conservative Christian women presenting themselves in a gendered and sexualized arena, I hope to emphasize the flexibility of gender roles and religious mores. Pageants, for many of these women, were religiously sanctioned events in which baring one's body was acceptable. Some of the religious women involved in pageants were acutely aware of the contradictions and tensions present in their participation, but some were not. Many seemed to enjoy the theatrical nature of pageants. Some of them loathed it. Others found themselves somewhere in between. All of them, however, learned to navigate and narrate their participation and their faith. Like most instances where

sacred and secular meet, it was not a simple relationship. The women learned to negotiate the inconsistencies between their belief and practice as most believers do.⁷

Finally, my work contributes to a recent trend in the fields of preaching, evangelism, and religious history to highlight the presence of women in “preaching” roles.⁸ Anna Carter Florence and Lacey Warner both advocate a wider definition of evangelism in their work on preaching as testimony and nineteenth century reform, respectively.⁹ My project contributes to this growing body of literature, demonstrating how some Christian women created space for ministry. While the runway seems an unlikely place to encounter God, and an even stranger place to preach, God has been no stranger to the stage.¹⁰

Methods and Sources

No one writes from a disinterested place.¹¹ All writers, academics included, bring their stories with them to their work. I am no exception. As much as possible I tried to

⁷ Mark Chaves, “Rain Dances in the Dry Season: Overcoming the Religious Congruence Fallacy,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 1 (March 2010): 1-14. This article helped me articulate the incongruence between belief and practice. Chaves’s assertion that: “Religious incongruence is not the same thing as religious insincerity or hypocrisy” rang true.

⁸ For one example, see Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁹ Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching As Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007) and Lacey Warner, *Saving Women: Retrieving Evangelistic Theology and Practice* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Harry Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991).

¹¹ While numerous examples of scholarly positioning exist, the following proved particularly helpful to me in thinking about how to convey my relationship to evangelicalism, pageants, and the South. Susan Ridgely Bales, *When I was a Child: Children’s Interpretations of First Communion* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford

embrace my “in-betweenness” as an insider-outsider.¹² On more than one occasion, however, I found myself longing for a dissertation topic that looked nothing like me. I felt isolated in this in-between space where “no one likes what I write.” Still, as Grant Wacker noted, “I suspect that the posture of being half out and half in, though awkward, defines the fate of many religious historians. Sooner or later most of us end up writing autobiography anyway. The challenge is to make it more than that.”¹³ The story I tell here is, in multiple ways, my own. I trust I managed to make it about more than that.

My relationship with pageants goes back as far as I can remember. My cousin won a lot of pageants. I won exactly one, but I watched, and eventually competed, in many more. In Alabama, where I grew up, pageants were celebrated community events. At one time, the Miss Alabama Pageant boasted as many contestants as the national contest. The subtle shift from pride to embarrassment over my pageant forays happened slowly. It never struck me as odd until sometime while in graduate school at Duke Divinity School. Like many scholars, I embarked on this journey, in part, to make sense

University Press, 2013); Elizabeth H. Flowers, *Into the Pulpit, Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power Since World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); and Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and America Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001).
¹² Susan Ridgely Bales used the term “in-betweenness” to describe her own research in *When I was a Child*, pp. 55-61. Thomas Tweed’s discussion of reflexive positioning, of “always crossing boundaries, always moving across,” in *Crossing and Dwelling* also proved instructive. While these two ways of describing position are seemingly at odds with one another, I found both helpful in understanding the multiple spaces I encountered.

¹³ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below*, p. x.

of my own story and the stories of so many Southern evangelical women like myself.

Why did this easy relationship between Christians and pageants exist?

Somewhere in the midst of that research, my embarrassment waned a little. I still saw the inconsistencies, but now I recognized that it was a bit more complex. I struggled to portray “my Miss Americas” in a way that they would see themselves in the story while still examining the tensions between Christianity and pageantry that continued to surface. Indeed, on one occasion, my advisor counseled that I had erred on the side of “too much wine” and not enough “academic water.” I sought to correct that problem by including more voices and allowing the varying perspectives to speak to one another. To capture the complexity of the story, I found it necessary to employ both historical and ethnographic research.¹⁴

Most notably, my ethnographic work entailed pageant attendance.¹⁵ Over the course of seven years, I frequented numerous beauty contests at the local, state, and national level. All of the local and state pageants I observed were in either Alabama or

¹⁴ Two courses shaped my ethnographic research profoundly: “Approaches to the Study of Religion in the United States” with Professor Thomas Tweed and “The Art of Ethnography” with Professor Glenn Hinson, both at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. In the first, I wrote a first draft of how I planned to conduct field research at the Miss Alabama Pageant, including an initial survey. In the second, I immersed myself in North Carolina pageant culture for a semester. The assignments for this class gave me the first taste of what actually *doing* and *writing* ethnography was like and Hinson’s emphasis on collaborative ethnography remained the ideal, even though I found it was not always possible.

¹⁵ My approach was informed by many works in anthropology and sociology, but I found this co-authored text especially useful: Donald E. Miller and Barry Jay Seltzer, *Writing and Research in Religious Studies* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1992).

North Carolina.¹⁶ Most, though not all, were affiliated with the Miss America Organization. In January 2011, I attended the 90th Anniversary Miss America Pageant in Las Vegas, Nevada. Combined, I visited more than twenty-five pageants and watched many others on television.¹⁷ I also surveyed the Miss Alabama contestants for four years from 2006-2009 (Appendix A).¹⁸ Though I spoke with many individuals informally about their (or their daughter's) pageant participation, I conducted formal interviews with only two contestants. Still, I found that all of these encounters, especially a friendship forged with one "pageant mom," informed my work far beyond what the word "informal" might suggest.¹⁹ Last, in 2007, I attended Work Weekend for the Miss North Carolina Pageant in Raleigh, North Carolina. As part of that event, I attended the training session for individuals seeking to be certified as preliminary pageant judges in

¹⁶ The decision to focus on Alabama and North Carolina was largely one of convenience. These were the two states in which I resided during my research. In addition, it offered me a comparison between two southern states. Moving forward, it will be imperative to attend state pageants in other areas of the country.

¹⁷ Local pageants were one-day affairs, but state and national contests often lasted three or four nights. The competition I attended with the greatest consistency was the Miss Alabama Pageant. I observed all preliminaries and finals of the pageant from 2006-2012 with the exception of 2008.

¹⁸ Julie Byrne's book *O God of Players: The Story of the Immaculata Mighty Macs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) provided a helpful example for writing and conducting a survey. In the end, I used very little of the material I gleaned from the surveys directly, though the answers encountered there prompted more questions and suggested new avenues for research.

¹⁹ Luke Eric Lassiter's work *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), especially Chapter Six, "Ethnographic Honesty," informed my approach to ethnographic research and pushed me to include my own experience at some points in the narrative. In addition, Chapter One of Ruth Behar's book *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996) offered further reflection on the value and danger of including a personal narrative in one's printed research and a reminder that one's personal narrative necessarily affects her field research.

the Miss NC pageant system. All of these experiences added depth to my understanding of pageant culture and enriched my narrative with firsthand observations.

If personal encounters with pageantry initiated my investigation, historical inquiry solidified my hypothesis that the relationship between Christians and beauty contests deserved further analysis. Along the way, I strove to situate the story of Christian pageant participation within the larger narrative of American evangelicalism. I discovered a vast treasure of pageant literature that was largely untouched. Contestant autobiographies, pageant programs, and Christian magazines blended Christianity and competitions so seamlessly that at times it was difficult to determine where faith ended and pageantry began. I became even more convinced of the import of relating this story, exploring the tensions between belief and practice for these mostly conservative Christians. As Laurie Maffly-Kipp pointed out in the introduction to *Practicing Protestants*, “practices both mediate religious culture (thereby regulating behavior) and express creativity, improvisation, and resistance.”²⁰ That is, people’s practices do not always match their beliefs.²¹ In fact, they say one thing and do another all the time. I discovered that Christianity as practiced by beauty pageant contestants and their supporters expressed much “creativity, improvisation, and resistance.”

²⁰ Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh Eric Schmidt, Mark R. Valeri, eds., *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America: 1630-1965* (Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 7.

²¹ See also Chaves, “Rain Dances in the Dry Season.” Chaves notes that indeed religious beliefs and practice rarely correspond; religious incongruence is the norm.

To decipher pageant narratives and situate them within American religious history, I looked to sociology, feminist studies, and women's history, including women's religious history. These interlocutors feature prominently at different moments of the dissertation, moving in and out of the spotlight, but all influenced my thinking even when not directly cited. Women's studies, in particular, offered a wealth of publications about pageants as well as the beauty culture that it reflected. These explorations of the Miss America Pageant offered a helpful starting point. Often, they provided a counter-narrative to the one told by evangelical Christians in the competition. The story shared by Christian Miss Americas was a largely positive one. The presence of alternative, often contradicting, viewpoints of the same event enriched my work.

Terms

Evangelicals

Most of the Christian pageant contestants that I studied were evangelicals broadly conceived. With historian Elizabeth Flowers, I understand American evangelicals as a diverse group "born of the great revivals that swept the country during the second Great Awakening" who "emphasized belief in the Bible as the inspired word of God, the experience of individual conversion, the assurance of salvation through the work of Jesus Christ, and the ongoing cultivation of a personal relationship with God

within the community of the church.”²² Perhaps even more important to my work here was the urgency with which evangelicals engaged in missions and evangelism.

Evangelical participants in the Miss America pageant saw it as a mission field ripe for harvest.

When appropriate I employ the term “conservative Christian” instead of *evangelical* and a contestant’s denominational affiliation as well. While Catholics, Mormons, and Mainline Protestants float in and out of the story, they were not its primary focus. And, even though African American evangelicals feature prominently at points, I was not able to parse their experience extensively. To be sure, many differences existed for black women who competed on a predominantly white stage, but for the most part analysis of those intricacies fell outside the scope of this project. For better or for worse, the stories of African Americans and whites mingle and are presented as one.

Cultural and Symbolic Capital

Miss America contestants spoke of rewards that the pageant afforded them. While some of these prizes were monetary, many more were not tied to perceived personal, social, and spiritual gains. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice provided some helpful terminology for exploring the “capital” many pageant participants described.

²² Elizabeth H. Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*, 9. See also David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company); and Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Bourdieu noted that much of his work focused on “the idea that struggles for recognition are a fundamental dimension of social life and that what is at stake in them is the accumulation of a particular form of capital.”²³ As Randal Johnson explained in an introduction to some of Bourdieu’s work, “Authority based on consecration or prestige is purely symbolic and may or may not imply possession of increased economic capital. Bourdieu thus developed, as an integral part of his theory of practice, the concept of *symbolic power* based on diverse forms of capital which are not reducible to economic capital.” [emphasis in original]²⁴ Two forms of capital outlined by Bourdieu proved most useful to my work: cultural capital and symbolic capital.

First, I employ Bourdieu’s definition of cultural capital to explore the various advantages participants claimed came from pageant participation. Cultural capital refers to “forms of cultural knowledge, competencies or dispositions.” This knowledge “equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural artefacts.”²⁵ In other words, cultural capital helps an individual increase his or her social standing. Examples include education, language skills, and physical attractiveness. Most notably, the attractiveness of pageant contestants afforded them cultural capital. Their beauty was a form of currency.

²³ Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 22.

²⁴ Randal Johnson, “Editor’s Introduction: Pierre Bourdieu on Art, Literature, and Culture,” in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, by Pierre Bourdieu (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1993), 7.

²⁵ Ibid.

Second, Bourdieu's description of symbolic capital "as capital founded on cognition [connaissance] and recognition [reconnaissance]" also aided my work.²⁶ For pageant winners, their title functioned as their special position or recognition. This celebrity status, though limited, afforded them access and power in particular venues. Their "honour in the sense of reputation and prestige" provided resources that would have remained unavailable to them without the crown.²⁷

Pageant participants received various amounts of cultural and symbolic capital during and after their tenure on the stage.

What's in a name?

Early in this project, I decided to refer to pageant participants by their competition names. Quite simply, this was about ease and consistency. Though many Miss Americas used their maiden names professionally after marriage, not all of them did. In addition, the marriages of pageant winners, like those of other women, sometimes ended in divorce. Winners could change names multiple times over the course of their career. Using different names for the same contestant throughout the dissertation proved confusing and unwieldy. Referring to the women by their "pageant name" streamlined the narrative. There are two exceptions to this formula. First, when a Miss America wrote a book under her married name, I reference it using that name in

²⁶ Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 22.

²⁷ Ibid.

the footnotes and bibliography. Second, if someone else referred to a Miss America winner or contestant by her married name and I quote that person directly, I did not change it.

Likewise I follow the terminology of pageant culture, employing the language of crowns, titles, and queens throughout the dissertation. I follow contestant use of masculine pronouns for God as well, but only when I quote them directly.

Finally, I must comment about my use of the proper noun Miss America. When it appears alone, Miss America refers to the person wearing the crown. When I want to reference the contest, I employ the phrase Miss America Pageant, Miss America Organization, or Miss America Competition. Again, I made this choice to facilitate understanding.

Summary of Chapters

To explore the relationship between Christians and the Miss America Pageant, I divide the dissertation into five chapters that probe the subject both chronologically and thematically. Chapter One offers a brief history of beauty contests in America with particular attention given to the longest running one, the Miss America Scholarship Organization. That chapter examines some of the reasons women participated in pageants and argues that religion offers an unexplored category that helps us understand the importance of these competitions in American culture. Using Pierre

Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and symbolic capital, I suggest that beauty contests afforded Christian women a form of "spiritual capital" as well.²⁸

Chapter Two notes the controversy, religious and otherwise, that plagued the Miss America Competition throughout its ninety-year history. It chronicles the changing ideals of beauty in American culture, suggesting that America's beauty obsessed culture offers a partial explanation for pageantry's prevalence in spite of protests. It also explores how Christians, many of whom championed modesty as a virtue, came to find a home in the contest. Using the work of Judith Butler, it examines the notion of gender as performed, seeing the pageant as a ritual predicated on the perfection and performance of prescribed gender ideals. These performances simultaneously recreated and reinforced gendered identities.²⁹ I argue that Christians offered varying explanations for participation, many of which drew on their Christian understandings of gender, beauty, and the body.

In Chapter Three, I describe the shifting relationship between the Christian community and the Miss America Pageant. From 1921 to 1965, it was somewhat contested, but after 1965 it warmed considerably. I document that unlikely partnership,

²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1984); Randal Johnson, "Editor's Introduction: Pierre Bourdieu on Art, Literature, and Culture," in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, by Pierre Bourdieu (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1993); Bradford Verter, "Spiritual Capital: Theorizing Religion with Bourdieu against Bourdieu," in *Sociological Theory* 21, No. 2 (June 2003): 150-174.

²⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999). Sara Salih, ed. with Judith Butler, *The Judith Butler Reader* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), especially Introduction and Part I "Sex, Gender Performativity, and the Matter of Bodies."

showing how religious communities showered “their” contestants with support in the form of time, money, and publicity. Finally, I cite broader cultural trends that offer context to this unlikely association and consider the continued critique of beauty contests by some voices within the Christian community.

In Chapters Four and Five, I make an intentional shift to think about pageants from the point of view of the participants themselves. Though I strive to note how contestants responded to outside critiques, the focus is on how they enacted their faith both during and after the competition. After 1965, many conservative Christians spoke openly about the religious aspects of their pageant participation, narrating their experiences using the language of their religious tradition. Like other evangelicals, they saw God’s hand directing their everyday lives, pageantry included. In dissecting their testimonies and “pageant prayers,” a distinct pattern emerges that mimics traditional conversion narratives. Chapter Four expounds on this model using the words of the contestants to describe their journey from crisis to call to reward. Many women found the cultural capital available through pageants enticing and used religious language to describe their pursuit of the crown.

The final chapter considers the life of pageant queens after their reign. It highlights the ongoing ministry of these contestants, arguing that their evangelism did not end after they handed over the crown. Indeed, some used their title to launch their careers. As such, their time as Miss America served as a kind of ordination and

probationary period during which they tested their wings. Post year of service, they were commissioned to continue their goodwill efforts. Like their non-pageant sisters in ministry, these women often found creative ways to engage in the work of the church. Chapter Five navigates these post-stage stories, acknowledging the varying degrees to which Miss America winners and participants understood their work as evangelism and claimed the language of ministry.

The Epilogue offers further reflection upon the significance of Christian Miss Americas, explores the limits of the crown, and finds evidence that beauty competitions impacted the Christian culture beyond what my dissertation describes. I strive to show how my project opens up further fields of inquiry. For example, it seems possible that the elevation of Christian pageant winners as “ministers” or “evangelists” might actually be hindering women’s full involvement in Christian leadership (even as I acknowledge that it has opened many doors). In addition, the presence of a Miss Christian America Pageant, beauty magazines for Christians, Christian makeovers, and Christian modeling services deserve further analysis. Their presence offers a host of unexplored or underexplored avenues.

Throughout the dissertation, I strive to show that pageantry changed some of the rules of evangelical culture for young women. Beauty contests represented an alternate subculture in which women found more freedom of expression. Pageants provided one avenue by which women willingly utilized their bodies to gain access to religious

power. It served as a means for acting out their faith in order to reap religious benefits such as speaking to and performing for churches. At the same time, the competitions reinscribed deeply held gender assumptions about the role of women, resulting in a metaphorical sacrificing of women's bodies that many participants and supporters failed to detect.

Final Note

Years later, the irony of Heather Whitestone's speech in the First Baptist Church pulpit confused me. In some ways, my dissertation is my attempt to shed light on this phenomenon. My goal is not to prove that the Miss America Pageant is somehow inherently religious, but rather that the Christians who participated in the contest were dealing with multiple expectations from church and culture that dictated, influenced, and explained their experience.

When possible, competing voices appear side-by-side to allow a fuller picture of Christian interaction with pageants. That being said, the primary narrative I hope to sketch is that of Christian cooperation with the Miss America Organization. It is not intended as the final word on the subject, but rather seeks to illumine one small piece of it. I hope it serves as an invitation to others to explore this rich site of ritual with its many voices, concerns, and meanings. I hope to honor the intentionality of the women involved even as I implicitly ask readers to examine the religious implications of pageant participation for Christians.

1. Pageant Promises

The history of beauty contests tells us much about American attitudes toward physical appearance and women's expected roles. Rituals following set procedures, beauty contests have long existed to legitimize the Cinderella mythology for women, to make it seem that beauty is all a woman needs for success and, as a corollary, that beauty ought to be a major pursuit of all women. In addition, beauty contests also illuminate American attitudes toward sensuality and offer a gauge of the influence of Victorianism in American culture. They reveal the nature of community rites designed to further cultural homogeneity and to integrate social classes within the American democratic order.

Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty*, 1983¹

The term "pageant" conjures up a variety of images for Americans. Most picture the Miss America Pageant or a similar nationally televised event. Some imagine crying winners receiving a crown while humbly thanking the judges. Others hear Bert Parks singing "There She Is" as the newly crowned Miss America takes her first walk down the runway. Still others recall ballerinas en pointe, opera singers, or marimba players. Some claim a favorite Miss America: Bess Myerson, Lee Meriwether, or Heather Whitestone, and almost everyone knows someone or knows someone who knows someone that competed in the Miss America Organization. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find an American with no recollection of a beauty contest. In many places pageants have been, it seems, as American as apple pie.

¹ Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 249.

Not everyone has liked these competitions, however. Indeed, tension, controversy, and the struggle to survive amidst criticism and protests define American pageant history. Miss America, the quintessential pageant, faced criticism throughout its history. After a promising start in the 1920s, the competition ceased temporarily owing in part to complaints from religious groups. Through the years, it received complaints from women's rights groups, Civil Rights organizations, and numerous Christian denominations. Yet the pageant reinvented itself on numerous occasions in its attempt to remain not only acceptable, but also relevant to potential contestants and society at large. At different times, pageants promised participants prizes, purpose, pleasure, and the thrill of performance. It managed to adapt to the times, even if change came slowly, and emerge victorious on the other side, securing its status as the longest-running beauty contest in United States history. Some contestants spoke fondly of their pageant careers and recruited others to walk the runway. Others sought to distance themselves from their title and its negative impact on their lives. Chapter One tells this surprisingly contested story, and suggests that religion offers an unexamined category that sheds new light on the pageant's influence.

A Brief history of Pageants

The word *pageant* often invokes the televised productions of Miss America, Miss USA, and Miss Universe. Not surprisingly, most scholars begin their discussion of this phenomenon with the founding of the Miss America Pageant in 1921 and pay little

attention to its forerunners. Some form of these rituals, however, date back to the nineteenth century. Between 1800 and 1920 beauty pageants, or beauty contests, gradually morphed into their current form. These events changed as the idea of displaying women's bodies became less controversial. They also garnered greater acceptance as they melded cultural elements from different classes.²

The modern day beauty pageant developed from early American displays of attractiveness that drew on traditions, events, and practices from England and elsewhere. May Day celebrations represented some of the earliest celebrations of pulchritude in America. Even though the Puritans forbade May Day observance, it secured a lasting place as a ritual of childhood. Young women in both England and the colonies enjoyed crowning their favorite friend "Queen of the May." May Day continued into the modern era as a ritual common at girls' schools, as they were called, such as Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, and Mount Holyoke.³ In the South, Judson College, Randolph-Macon Women's College, and Nashville Female Academy also hosted May Day celebrations. The schools hosted elaborate affairs complete with the crowning of a May Day Queen.

May Day festivities, once festivals of fertility rites, celebrated other feminine ideals in 19th and 20th century America. More specifically, Southern May Day Queens

² Banner, *American Beauty*, 249-50.

³ *Ibid.*, 250.

represented the quintessential southern belle.⁴ At Judson College, for example, May Day included field day festivities, crowning the Queen of May, and dancing around the May Pole. It resembled the medieval tournament with dancers and other entertainers performing for the queen and her court of honor. Students incorporated African Americans into their dramas as slaves, mascots, and other subservient actors.⁵ As noted by historian Christie Farnham, these activities celebrated “society’s definition of femininity, whereby men offered women protection in return for deference.”⁶ Women, despite evangelical teachings emphasizing inward beauty, enjoyed the pursuit of beauty and its celebration at May Days. They took their place on the pedestal, enjoying a rare opportunity for personal display.⁷ The queen and her court embodied Southern womanhood: the perfect mixture of humility, grace, and beauty.

Americans’ fascination with royalty and rule did not end with crowning college women queen for a day. They also exhibited themselves in tournaments reminiscent of medieval times. Nineteenth-century tournaments, with their use of women as prizes, paved the way for later displays of female beauty. These events, held primarily in the South, harkened back to the medieval pageantry of kings, queens, and knights. The South’s fascination with horsemanship and military ways combined with its penchant

⁴ Christie Anne Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 168-69.

⁵ Judson College yearbook, *Conversationalist*, 1920, n.p.

⁶ Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 168-69.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 169-70.

for aristocracy to thrust tournaments into mainstream Southern culture. Tournaments occurred regularly as a part of holiday celebrations. At these events, men riding horses competed to see who could spear the most rings with their javelin or best mangle the picture of an opponent. The winner picked a woman to serve as the queen of the tournament with the runners up selecting the members of her court. Tournaments became a favorite pastime among southerners. Northerners hosted tournaments too, but the tournament never gained the popularity there that it did in the South.⁸

If tournaments and May Day festivals helped introduce the concept of queens to America, local festivals solidified their place as American mainstays. City festivals showcased women's bodies in the name of civic celebration, a tradition that would continue with later pageants. As Lois Banner wrote, "What is most interesting in the long history of queens for May Day celebrations, tournaments, and festivals is how rarely there was any protest against an action that might have been seen as a violation of the Victorian prohibition against a woman displaying herself in public."⁹ Protests still occurred periodically, however. The New Orleans Mardi Gras, to which many festivals trace their origins, first proposed adding a queen to their celebration in 1871. This idea met with protest from some of the conservatives, but the organizers sidestepped the criticism by stipulating that the women vying for the title of queen must be married.

⁸ Banner, *American Beauty*, 251.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 253.

They also “chose” the queens through the same process used in the old Twelfth Night celebrations. Festival coordinators baked a bean in a cake and the woman who received the bean became the queen.¹⁰ Other festival hosts and beauty pageant organizers used similar selection processes to avoid criticism about displaying women’s bodies and thus contradicting Victorian sensibilities.

Local festivals honored beautiful women, presenting pictures and crowning winners. These events, legacies of New Orleans’s Mardi Gras, were highly stratified by class. Hosts at middle class events brilliantly skirted the issue of display by making the choice appear random or organizing more acceptable photo contests. Women chosen could deny actively seeking recognition, resulting in the adoration of a virtuous woman rather than the exhibition of an ostentatious one. Organizers also worked to ensure that morally sound women participated. They added provisions such as those used when the first *Mardi Gras* queen was chosen. Most important, however, leaders emphasized the patriotism, morality, and civility of the events, downplaying the display of women’s bodies.

Despite the concern expressed over the objectification of women in these early contests, beauty and women’s bodies received myriad public attention. Even when

¹⁰ Ibid., 251-53. Twelfth Night parties “elected” a king and a queen at random. These parties, held twelve days after Christmas to celebrate the magi’s gifts to the baby Jesus, featured two cakes with a ring baked into one and a bean baked into the other. The man who received the ring and the woman who found the bean became king and queen for the night.

judges chose winners at random, women were still displayed and objectified. They symbolized greater things, enacting and celebrating ideals outside themselves. As historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg articulated, "Girls' bodies mirror[ed] American cultural values."¹¹ Beauty co-opted women's bodies perhaps in much the same way that factories and farms co-opted men's bodies. As discussed in Chapter Two, what constituted beauty in America shifted during the time of the early pageants. It evolved from a moral category that bore evidence of astute character to an outward conformity to certain bodily standards. Early feminists touted beauty as attainable by all; early festivals assured that it would heretofore be a competition of the "fittest."¹² The events, then, influenced and affected all women and not just those who chose to participate. As Banner noted, "Public festivals reinforced the centrality of physical beauty in women's lives and made of beauty a matter of competition and elitism and not of democratic cooperation among women."¹³ The pursuit of good looks became a staple of female society. Attractiveness offered women cultural capital and access to power long before women donned swimsuits and sauntered down the beach (or the runway).

The first modern beauty contest can be traced to Phineas T. Barnum in 1854.

Barnum (inadvertently) discovered a solution to the problem of displaying middle and

¹¹ Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), xxxiii.

¹² Banner and Brumberg both described this shift from cultivating character to sculpting the body as the essence of achieving beauty.

¹³ Banner, *American Beauty*, 254.

upper class women while increasing the emphasis on beauty. In essence, he eliminated some of the randomness claimed by previous events. Barnum proposed a contest to determine the most beautiful woman in America. The new challenge resembled the competitions he already held for babies, dogs, and flowers. However, Barnum's plan crossed the lines of decency for the majority of Americans in the mid-nineteenth century. He did not anticipate the many negative reactions he received. Yet with a few tweaks, Barnum enacted his quest to discover America's beauty. His contest became a daguerreotype competition where contestants (or someone else) submitted a picture as their entry. In effect, Barnum instituted Miss Photogenic. He turned photographs of contestants into paintings that hung in a "Congress of Beauty" and the public voted on their favorites. Anyone with money could vote and many cast votes throughout the contest. Barnum appealed to Americans' sense of national pride, claiming that the top ten beauties would be placed in a book of national beauties. He encouraged Americans to help him prove once and for all that American women were the prettiest in the world.¹⁴ From the beginning, beauty contests included patriotic pleas in an attempt to validate their presence and justify women's participation in them. Appeals to God and country reverberated in the pageants that followed too.

¹⁴ "People and Events: Origins of the Beauty Pageant," PBS website, Accessed February 18, 2014, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/peopleevents/e_origins.html and Banner, *American Beauty*, 255-56.

Following Barnum's successful daguerreotype contest, photo contests grew in popularity. Newspapers hosted these competitions as a way to increase readership, offering prizes to females and emphasizing the importance of beauty as women's role. It also ensured that women could maintain their sense of demureness and decorum. One of the most popular of these contests occurred in 1905, when "Promoters of the St. Louis Exposition" invited newspapers "to select a representative young woman from their city to compete for a beauty title at the Exposition...according to one report, [there were] forty thousand photo entries."¹⁵ Since a woman did not have to enter a contest herself (but could be nominated without her knowledge or consent), she could maintain a sense of humility. She could argue that she was not putting herself on display.

While critiques of pageants continued, several factors suggest that toward the turn of the century the contests experienced a greater level of acceptance. First, one of the first resort pageants from which the Miss America Pageant evolved took place at Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, in 1880.¹⁶ Second, carnivals as a site for beauty contests gained prominence at the end of the nineteenth century. One final example of the growing prominence of pageants will suffice. As late as 1907 the *Ladies' Home Journal* (*LHJ*) denounced pageants as sinful.¹⁷ By 1911, it hosted its own beauty contest.¹⁸ The

¹⁵ Ibid., "People and Events: Origins of the Beauty Pageant."

¹⁶ "People and Events: Origins of the Beauty Pageant," PBS website, Accessed 18 February 2014, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/peopleevents/e_origins.html.

¹⁷ William Morris, "In an Editorial Way," *The Ladies' Home Journal*, XXIB, no. 5 (April 1907): 5-6.

LHJ found an ally in the halls of pageantry; together they sold more products. These contests increased the pageant's influence beyond the lower classes as they incorporated and modified middle class values. This move by the *LHJ* signaled a mainstreaming of beauty contests.

Despite the prevalence of photo competitions, many continued a class-based argument that "refined women" would never display themselves publicly. To put one's entire form on parade proved different from submitting a photograph of one's face. Women in lower classes, looking for upward mobility, found pageants to be an audition of sorts. Winners often received an opportunity in modeling or the theater. They used their bodies in much the same way that middle and upper class women used their money or family name. It was their greatest asset and they were not ashamed to use it. For many of them, they had nothing to lose in doing so. The primary goal of beauty pageants remained "social discipline and not social advance," however.¹⁹ Women who competed worked toward the ideals espoused by their particular community and most received little long-term compensation. Indeed, most went on to live average lives. This is not to suggest that female participants necessarily understood themselves as

¹⁸ Deborah G. Felder, *A Century of Women: The Most Influential Events in Twentieth-Century Women's History* (New York: Citadel Press Books, 1999), 111.

¹⁹ Banner, *American Beauty*, 260-64.

projectors of culture. Rather, they saw the social approval that behaving in certain ways garnered them and found that reason enough to espouse them.

Pageants, festivals, carnivals, and other celebrations of beauty – as with most of life in the nineteenth century – were highly divided by class. Victorian sensibilities did not reach as deeply into immigrant communities where Catholicism’s emphasis on display welcomed the celebration of bodies and beauty at festivals, religious and otherwise. The most famous winner from these early pageants was Clara Bow, who used her pageant success to escape poverty and launch a movie career.²⁰ This desire for unconventional success would carry over into the early years of the Miss America pageant though it was rarely attained.

The Miss America Pageant, to some extent, lessened the class divide. As Lois Banner argued:

Although by 1905 the photographic beauty contest was an accepted feature of American life...there was still difficulty when it came to a question of presumably refined women publicly displaying themselves before judges or the public. This problem would not be completely overcome until the Miss America promoters successfully combined the features of lower-class carnivals with upper-class festivals and thereby fused energy with refinement in a natural and national setting that celebrated the young American woman as a symbol of national pride, power, and modernity.²¹

²⁰ Ibid., 252, 258, 263.

²¹ Ibid., 260-61.

Again, by mapping national ideals onto contestants' bodies, pageant promoters sought to skirt the issue of the problematic display of women's bodies in Victorian America. Nonetheless, the American pageant began and remained a largely middle class phenomenon. Upper class women hosted debutante balls that celebrated their beauty and status; they did not need another venue for competition. Middle and lower class women competed with their faces and their bodies in pageants in much the same way that men competed in sports.²²

Making Miss America possible

The arguments against early pageants often involved ethical concerns about the display of women's bodies, but the eventual prominence of the contests suggest a reconfiguring of morality issues, not an absence of them. The desire to live a pious life did not disappear; rather ideas about values shifted, resulting in a contest that celebrated national pride alongside a newly defined sound moral character. Several factors contributed this shift. For example, the rise of modeling as a respected career for women aided the acceptance of beauty pageants into the wider American culture.

In the nineteenth century, modeling was not a respectable occupation for women. In fact, many models remained anonymous, refusing to let artists for whom they posed pass their name on to other artists for fear of public scrutiny.²³ Many people

²² Ibid., 264.

²³ Ibid., 261.

considered models, like their sisters in the theater business, to be prostitutes on the side. However, toward the end of the nineteenth century public sentiments toward both models and actresses shifted. The publication of the novel *Trilby* in 1894 furthered the shift. Women (and presumably men) sympathized with the character Trilby, an orphan who supported herself in part through modeling for artists.²⁴ This mainstreaming of models' work led to an influx of women wanting to work in these professions. More important, Americans began to see the lives of actresses and models as glamorous and romantic. They revered individuals they once scorned.²⁵ The novel opened the eyes of many to the hard work of modeling.

From a purely business standpoint, advertisers began to realize that "sex sold." Or, put more mildly, the use of female images sold. The use of women in advertisements was prohibited in most of the 19th century. However, by the 1890s bans against the use of women models had loosened and no longer existed. Companies began using pictures of women to sell cigarettes, perfume, and magazines. Even newspapers joined the ranks of those wanting to make a buck with "pretty faces."²⁶ Women posed for advertising photos, but increasingly stores also called on them to model clothing. This use of women's forms to display goods helped open the door for the acceptance of beauty

²⁴ Ibid., 170.

²⁵ Ibid., 261-64.

²⁶ John Brisben Walker, "Beauty in Advertising Illustration," *Cosmopolitan* 33 (September 1902): 491-500. Ibid., 261-62.

pageants. Women found themselves in New York department stores watching other women parade down a runway in the latest fashions.²⁷ Both sets of women helped usher in a new era in the beauty industry. The promotion of one's looks became a given. Models spoke for attractiveness. No longer the outcasts, they became examples. Quite literally, they modeled all things other women aspired to be.

"Chorus girls" also joined the ranks of those set free from the ridicule of Victorian culture. As the historian Robert Clyde Allen argued, "Florenz Ziegfield made the chorus girl 'respectable' in the 1910s by divesting her image and figure of working-class culture...Hers was the sage, non-threatening sexuality of the middle-class girl next door, not the predatory sexuality of the burlesque poster."²⁸ When the display of beauty became associated with middle class refinement instead of lower class vulgarity, it was okay to project it in the contests. Pageants provided a space for women to parade their good looks and be rewarded for it. The rise in such competitions paralleled the increase of models and chorus girls. Together all three gained credibility in American society. To varying levels, many women found their experiences empowering. To be sure, beauty pageants were not careers and no one made a living from competing in them. Likewise, no one won a crown for being a model. Still, women enjoyed an agency in both fields not afforded to them in much of 19th century and early 20th century life. In short,

²⁷ Banner, *American Beauty*, 262.

²⁸ Robert Clyde Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 272; Banner, *American Beauty*, 263.

developments in the world of modeling and entertainment opened a new realm of possibilities for the modern woman, one in which pleasure could be sought and experienced outside the home with less fear of being ostracized.

The quintessential pageant

The sportswriter and journalist Frank Deford argued that despite earlier bathing revues and beauty contests, Miss America paved the way for all pageants that followed. It became the standard in the world of pageantry. However, it could not claim the distinction of being the first contest to recognize a national beauty. The first competition to crown a “Miss United States” occurred at Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, in 1880. Myrtle Meriwether, a Pennsylvania native won the first and only “Miss United States” title given by the Delaware pageant. A secretary enticed by the \$300 bridal trousseau, Meriwether led the way for countless contenders. She endured a weeklong competition before being named “the most beautiful unmarried woman in our nation.” The judges included Thomas Edison.²⁹

No one attempted a similar nationwide pageant for 41 years, until the Miss America Pageant formally appeared. The competition emerged on the scene as a local tourist attraction, but evolved into a national phenomenon. It groomed, promoted, and celebrated ideal femininity in its contestants and, by extension, womanhood more broadly. Through the years, many applauded this salute to women, seeing the pageant

²⁹ Frank Deford, *There She Is: The Life and Times of Miss America* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 108-10.

as a unique venue to honor and encourage women to embrace their femininity. Others labeled the pageant as immoral, criticizing it and its participants for putting the female form on public display. Still others, like Banner, believed the admiration women gained for their participation came at too high a cost. She writes, "As the beauty queen left her throne in the tournament and festival, stepped out of the photograph, and shed her clothes, donning a bathing suit so that more of her body could be seen, women also shed their association with morality, masked their professional skills, and became sex objects, competing in an arena where men were the judges and the promoters."³⁰ In contrast, I hope to show that women continued to profess their morality *and* asserted more control than she credits them.

1920s-1950s: From a Shaky Start to the Golden Years

The Miss America competition began in Atlantic City in 1921 in an effort to keep tourists in the city past the Labor Day holiday. It evolved into the world's largest provider of scholarships to young women, awarding more than \$45 million by 2003.³¹ As part of the "Fall Frolic," Miss America began as one event among the many intended to entertain and delay guests. The first year it consisted of eight contestants representing United States cities. Each young woman won a trip to Atlantic City after winning her local newspaper photo contest. These preliminary events resembled the newspaper

³⁰ Banner, *American Beauty*, 264.

³¹ "Key Facts and Figures," Miss America Website, accessed February 18, 2014, <http://www.missamerica.org/scholarships/purpose.aspx>.

contestants made popular in the mid-nineteenth century. Once in Atlantic City, the women entered the “Inter-City Beauty Contest” where they were “judged on 50 percent audience applause and 50 percent judges’ choice.”³² At the end of the festivities, officials named 16-year-old Margaret Gorman from Washington, D.C. as the winner.

Many claimed that Gorman looked like Mary Pickford, a well-known star in silent pictures.³³ Both Gorman and Pickford possessed long, curly hair, bright eyes, and innocent smiles. They offered the security of today’s girl next door. As Film Studies scholar Gaylan Studlar argued, “Pickford appealed to and through a kind of cultural pedophilia that looked to the innocent child-woman to personify nostalgic ideals of femininity.” In other words, “the articulation of Pickford as an antimodernist, Victorian indebted model of femininity served as one antidote to a perceived crisis in feminine sexual behavior. It is well documented that in the 1910s and 1920s, the flapper and the new woman symbolized American women’s perceived transgression of the traditional feminine sexual norms of passivity and restraint.”³⁴ The selection of Gorman as the first Miss America seems to suggest that the pageant wished to distinguish itself from this new womanhood. As historian Kimberly Hamlin noted, “Mary Pickford became famous playing wide-eyed, innocent adolescents...Beyond legitimizing the pageant and allaying

³² A. R. Riverol, *Live From Atlantic City: A History of the Miss America Pageant Before, After and in Spite of Television* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992), 12-25.

³³ Deford, *There She Is*, 117; Banner, *American Beauty*, 268-69.

³⁴ Gaylan Studlar, “Oh, ‘Doll Divine’: Mary Pickford, Masquerade, and the Pedophilic Gaze,” in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, eds. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 360-61.

middle-class reservations about it, Gorman's selection and her similarities with Pickford testify to the pageant's conservative and reactive nature."³⁵ Early winners of the Miss America contest possessed "long hair, youth, innocence and domesticity," all qualities thought to "promote images of the traditional, wholesome girl with no aspirations for the stage of public life."³⁶

Even the first Miss America Pageant (though not yet called this) represented a grand affair. Contestants arrived for the main events on a seashell barge dressed as mermaids. King Neptune, portrayed by eighty-one-year-old smokeless gunpowder inventor Hudson Maxim, introduced them to a waiting crowd. The young women participated in the rolling chair parade where crowds cheered them enthusiastically.³⁷ Because the "Inter-City Beauties" proved so popular, they also appeared in the Bather's Revue. In this contest, the eight participants competed against winners of "professional" and "amateur" rank. Perhaps owing to her popularity from the day before, Margaret Gorman swept this contest too, securing for herself the prized Golden Mermaid.³⁸

³⁵ Kimberly Hamlin, "Bathing Suits and Backlash," in *The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in America's Most Famous Pageant*, eds. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 35-36.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁷ Ann-Marie Bivans, *Miss America: In Pursuit of the Crown* (New York: MasterMedia Limited, 1991), 10. See also Chapter 7 in Frank Deford, *There She Is*; and Chapter 1 in A. R. Riverol, *Live from Atlantic City: The History of the Miss America before, after, and in Spite of Television* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992).

³⁸ There are differences in the sourcing here; some suggest the pageant occupied several days and others that it was one day.

Gorman received a replica of Lady Liberty's pronged tiara and a coronation robe fashioned from a huge American flag.³⁹

Seventy-two-year-old Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, was one of the many spectators who favored Gorman. "She represents the type of womanhood America needs," he told the *New York Times*, "strong, red-blooded, able to shoulder the responsibilities of homemaking and motherhood. It is in her type that the hope of the country rests."⁴⁰ His statement promoted what Miss America wanted to be about. The country expected Miss America to model ideal American womanhood. Even in the midst of many advances for women, such as voting, homemaking and motherhood still reigned as woman's ultimate goal.

The Miss America contest grew quickly. By the second year, the competitors increased from eight to fifty-seven. Newspapers throughout the country sponsored competitions with seventy-five women entering the Baltimore contest alone.⁴¹ It appeared that the plan of those Atlantic City businessmen had worked. People flocked to Atlantic City to get a glimpse of the bathing beauties, bringing their money with them. The pageant grew more complex by its second year. Judges added an evening gown segment to the pageant as well as preliminary eliminations. After scandals in the

³⁹ Bivans, *Miss America: In Pursuit of the Crown*, 11. Again, some sources say she was the only one to receive her crown the next year and not when she won.

⁴⁰ "People & Events: The First Miss America Beauty Pageant, 1921," PBS website, accessed March 15, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/peopleevents/e_first.html.

⁴¹ Deford, *There She Is*, 116.

early years such as women eloping during their reign, the pageant instituted the rule that competitors must be unmarried.⁴²

The pageant succeeded in drumming up extra tourist revenue and eventually evolved into an institution all of its own. As the contest grew, it sought its identity separate from the series of events such as the rolling chair parade that made up the "Fall Frolic." However, not all approved of this new means of encouraging tourism. Many complained that it was immoral and destructive. With Victorian ideals still regnant, some claimed that pageantry would corrupt the institution of womanhood.⁴³ Some questioned the reputation of young women who would dare enter such a contest. Eventually these voices of protest led to the suspension of the pageant from 1928-1932 and 1934. Religious groups, Baptists, Quakers, and Methodists among them, called for their adherents to steer clear.⁴⁴ Their voices joined those of women's groups disgusted that women were being elected as the model of womanhood based on their looks rather than their character. These complaints led to a loss of sponsorship.⁴⁵ Thus two groups

⁴² Bivans, *Miss America*, 11-2.

⁴³ "Attacks Bathing Review: Preacher Says Atlantic City Event Endangers Youthful Morals," *The New York Times* (11 September 1923): 15; "Criticism Well Deserved," *The New York Times* (21 April 1924): 16; "Attack Beauty Pageant: Philadelphia Women Sign Protest to Atlantic City Authorities," *The New York Times* (1 March 1927): 3; "Women Open Fight on Beauty Pageant: Tell Atlantic City Officials That Contests Harm Entrants and Commercialize Shore," *The New York Times* (18 November 1927): 12; "Bishop Condemns Beauty Pageant," *The New York Times* (20 November 1927):10.

⁴⁴ Ibid., Southern Baptist Convention, "Resolution passed at the Southern Baptist Convention, 1926," *SBC Resolutions*, May 1926, accessed July 18, 2012, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=280>.

⁴⁵ Some scholars also suggest that the pageant shut down because it was not profitable. For discussion of both financial and moral reasons, see Bivans, *Miss America*, 11-12; Deford, *There She Is*, 129ff.; and Riverol, *Live From Atlantic City*, 23-25.

opposed the event for different reasons. Religious groups worried about issues of modesty and proto-feminists critiqued its objectification of women.

Yet many businessmen in Atlantic City refused to see the competition die. In 1933, they rallied support to bring it back. The pageant continued to struggle amidst criticism that the young women competing were not of sound character or on the grounds that the bathing attire was inappropriate. In a last ditch effort, Eddie Corcoran hired Lenora Slaughter, a member of the St. Petersburg Florida Chamber of Commerce staff (and the nation's only woman pageant director) to produce the pageant. Slaughter's boss allegedly said, "Well, you ought to go up there and show those damn Yankees how to do a real job with a pageant!"⁴⁶ Slaughter moved to Atlantic City determined to remake the pageant into something of which the nation could be proud. A Southern Baptist, Slaughter knew the importance of image and worked to sanitize the Miss America Pageant.

Miss America underwent many changes during these early decades. Pageant officials struggled with negative responses even as they tried to tailor make Miss America's image. In 1935, Slaughter arrived in Atlantic City. She worked tirelessly and planned meticulously. She succeeded in turning the bathing revue into a respectable enterprise. She shunned the word "bathing suit" in favor of the term "swimsuit" in an effort to play up the athleticism rather than the sensuality of the event. She instituted

⁴⁶ Bivans, 12-13.

scholarships for winners while women fought to gain a place in higher education.⁴⁷ Bess Myerson received the first scholarship in 1945. She was the first Jewish winner and the first college graduate to serve as Miss America. Slaughter made Miss America acceptable, desirable even for a young woman with a college education. She created an icon.

Part of Slaughter's genius involved appealing to religious folks. During her tenure, Slaughter established a rule that banned contestants from visiting bars and nightclubs, instituted curfews, forbade contestants to speak to any man alone, and added a talent component.⁴⁸ Christians felt increasingly at home in the pageant, as Slaughter reformed it. She invited some of them to serve as chaperones. Many who once opposed the pageants most vocally became its fiercest allies. In short, during her long term, the pageant evolved from a struggling sideshow to a freestanding enterprise that functioned as the female Super Bowl for many years.

In 1941, Slaughter became national executive director. As noted, the pageant crowned its first Jewish winner during her tenure in this position. Bess Myerson of New York entered the pageant because of the scholarship money awarded. She used the money to study music. Slaughter asked Myerson to change her name to something less

⁴⁷ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 37-40.

⁴⁸ Bivans, *Miss America*, 13-14.

Jewish-sounding, but Myerson refused.⁴⁹ She toured the nation like other Miss Americas before her. Some hospitals and patients refused to admit a Jew.⁵⁰ Though anti-Semitism ran high during this period, it is reasonable to assume that Myerson's position helped solidify the melding of Jews into the American melting pot.

The first Miss Alabama crowned Miss America (1951), Yolande Betbeze, also reigned under the helm of Lenora Slaughter. She refused to pose in her swimsuit at the pageant, famously saying, "I'm an opera singer, not a pin-up!"⁵¹ Slaughter stood by Betbeze's decision even though it cost the pageant its biggest sponsor, Catalina swimsuit.⁵² In 1948, three years earlier, Slaughter had decided to host the coronation ceremony with the young women in their evening gowns rather than their swimsuits. Betbeze's decision mirrored Slaughter's in many ways and further defined the pageant as a respectable enterprise. Betbeze's refusal to pose in a swimsuit set the stage for Miss America to become more than a pretty face, boosting Slaughter's campaign toward a professional organization.

Miss America continued to change with the times, responding to new career

⁴⁹ Susan Dworkin with Bess Myerson, *Miss America, 1945: Bess Myerson and the Year that Changed our Lives* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2000), 92-94.

⁵⁰ Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, 163-64.

⁵¹ "1951: Yolande Betbeze," Miss America website, accessed January 18, 2014, <http://www.missamerica.org/our-miss-americas/1950/1951.aspx>.

⁵² Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, 44. After Betbeze refused to pose in a swimsuit, Catalina Swimsuits pulled their sponsorship of the pageant and launched its own pageant. Originally known as Miss United Nations, the pageant eventually became the Miss Universe Organization, which has been owned by Donald Trump since 1996. The title that corresponds to Miss America is Miss USA, a precursor to Miss Universe.

paths for women. For one thing, it offered scholarships to the winners and encouraged them to uphold high moral standards. Moreover, the next big change came when the pageant became televised in 1954. Television changed the format and scope. Evelyn Margaret Ay crowned the first Miss America on television, but that honor came with a cost. Officials forced Evelyn Margaret Ay, famous for out-talking Billy Graham at a luncheon for the United Fund in Detroit, to give up her speech at the coronation owing to time constraints.⁵³ Ironically, Miss America lost some of her voice when she became a national icon on television. The new medium began to structure the pageant. This struggle between Miss America as organization and Miss America as person would continue throughout its tenure.

1960s-1980s: Protests and Milestones

Turbulent years followed the pageant golden age of the 1950s. The nation reeled from the Vietnam War, antiwar protesters, "hippies," the Civil Rights Movement, the sexual revolution, and the women's rights movement. As it struggled to redefine itself in light of the shifting times, Miss America struggled to survive. Faced with criticism of sexism from feminists and racism the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Miss America's desire to stay relevant remained. Somehow she came out on the other side. This time the protests did not shut the pageant down. If anything, they revived it as the contest worked to prove that it was anything but sexist

⁵³ Deford, *There She Is*, 3, 204-05; Riverol, *Live From Atlantic City*, 55.

and racist.

Feminists picketed the pageant for the first time in 1968. They carried placards down the boardwalk that read, "Welcome to the Cattle Auction" and "No More Beauty Standards." They threw bras and other items of putative female oppression such as copies of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, high heels, and girdles into the "freedom trashcan." Contrary to popular belief, the women did not actually burn their bras. They failed to secure a fire permit so they symbolically disposed of them. Protestors claimed that the pageant not only put women on display but also hurt women's rights.⁵⁴ They argued that pageants paraded women around the stage like cattle, featuring their bodies and breeding over their minds. Feminists continued to protest the pageant into the 1970s.⁵⁵

Albert Marks, appointed pageant chairman in 1965, faced the criticism that the pageant was "exploitative and degrading to women."⁵⁶ He retorted, "We were picketed by a number of wild-eyed females out of New York. They needed a publicity vehicle to climb aboard that dealt with women-and believe me, they got it!"⁵⁷ Of course, much of the press described the protestors as unattractive and chalked up the protest to jealousy. The bus company canceled on protestors in 1969 when the women gave Atlantic City

⁵⁴ "No More Miss America!" *Time Magazine*, September 13, 1968, 36; Nell Greenfieldboyce, "Pageant Protest Sparked Bra-Burning Myth," *Echoes of 1968*, September 5, 2008, accessed February 18, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94240375>; "People and Events: The 1968 Protest," PBS website, Accessed February 18, 2014,

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/peopleevents/e_feminists.html; Deford, *There She Is*, 257.

⁵⁵ *Miss America: A Documentary Film*, DVD, Directed by Lisa Ades. (Brooklyn: Clio Inc. and Orchard Films, 2001).

⁵⁶ Bivans, *Miss America*, 25.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

law enforcement their bus information. Consequently, the 1969 protest proved smaller.⁵⁸

The Miss America Pageant faced criticism from the civil rights movement as well. The NAACP staged a “positive protest” of the Miss America Pageant in 1968. Hosting a Miss Black America competition at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Atlantic City just blocks from the Miss America Pageant, they “celebrated black women by creating an all-black contest while maintaining that its goal was to protest the exclusionary practices of the Miss America pageant.”⁵⁹ Many critics called the pageant “lily white,” and the NAACP asked the Pageant publicly to “voice its commitment to increasing minority participation.” Marks assured critics that according to the by-laws any woman in the United States could compete in Miss America. He noted that non-white contestants had competed in the National Pageant (a Native American in 1941 and an Asian in 1948). He also acknowledged that organizers wanted a black candidate, but they could not find one. The nation did not have to wait long, however. In 1970, Cheryl Brown became the first African American to compete for the Miss America crown after she won Miss Iowa.⁶⁰ Of course, not all African American contest aspirers wanted to be a part of the Miss America pageant. African Americans had their own pageants that dated back longer than Miss America. In the midst of the Civil Rights struggle and in the aftermath of some victories, some African Americans celebrated black beauty instead of trying to

⁵⁸ Deford, *There She Is*, 257-58.

⁵⁹ Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3-4.

⁶⁰ Bivans, *Miss America*, 26-27.

conform to white standards of beauty.⁶¹

Not all women felt oppressed by the pageant. Indeed, pageant organizers and pageant contenders alike worked to prove that the pageant empowered women. They lauded winners' professional accomplishments, noting that the women used the scholarship money to earn graduate degrees. In particular, pageant officials liked to recount the accomplishments of two Miss Americas crowned during the height of the protests. Miss America 1974, Rebecca King, used her scholarships to pay for law school and Miss America 1975, Shirley Cothran, earned a doctorate with the help of pageant funds. Pageant supporters cited these two women and others like them as evidence against the feminists' allegations of oppression.⁶² This new accomplished woman celebrated by the competition signaled the coming of a new era in pageantry: one in which women struggled to embrace the new "do-it-all" model of womanhood.

The 1980s brought a roller coaster of emotions for pageant organizers. They experienced relief as the pageant increased scholarship funds, recruited more "modern" women as contestants, and broke several racial barriers. However, in the midst of these triumphs the pageant underwent a bit of sex scandal and a few growing pains as leadership switched hands, or, microphones, as the case might be.

In 1980, two African American contestants finished in the top ten for the first

⁶¹ "People & Events: Breaking the Color Line at the Pageant," PBS website, accessed February 18, 2014, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/peopleevents/e_inclusion.html.

⁶² Bivans, *Miss America*, 26.

time. Washington State's Doris Hayes, a talent winner, and Arkansas's Lencola Sullivan, a swimsuit winner, both earned spots in the finals. Sullivan advanced even further, placing in the top five. Three years later, Vanessa Williams and Suzette Charles made history by finishing as Miss America 1984 and her runner up, respectively.⁶³ They not only made history but also symbolized the dawning of a new era for Miss America, one where a non-white woman could be chosen as America's ideal.

Unfortunately for Williams, and the pageant, she was both the first black woman to wear the crown and the first individual asked to give it up. Near the end of her year of service, *Penthouse* magazine announced that they possessed sexually explicit photographs of Williams with another woman. They planned to run the pictures to coincide with the end of her reign. In a press conference on July 24, 1984, Williams gave up the crown because of "the potential harm to the pageant, and the deep division that a bitter fight may cause."⁶⁴ Pageant officials asked her to resign after an onslaught of negative media coverage. Before the release of the photos and her resignation, and, indeed, even after the scandal, Williams remained one of the most famous Miss Americas.⁶⁵

⁶³ Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, Chapter 4, "Bodies of Difference: Race, Nation, and the Troubled Reign of Vanessa Williams," 123-152; Bivans, *Miss America*, 28. To be sure, Miss America still portrayed a very "white" style of beauty so some African Americans criticized black women who chose to downplay their ethnic qualities to participate in this white arena. Nevertheless, this marked a crucial turning point in the pageant.

⁶⁴ Rick Hampson, "Vanessa Williams Gives up Her Miss America Crown," *Gettysburg Times*, July 24, 1984, 4; Bivans, *Miss America*, 31.

⁶⁵ Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, Chapter 4.

Williams's resignation capped a list of struggles the pageant faced in the early 1980s. The press balked about the pageants' decision to replace the long-term master of ceremonies Bert Parks with Ron Ely. A campaign to "Bring back Bert" ensued, but Marks stayed firm. Ely's tenure was short lived. Gary Collins, husband of former Miss America Mary Ann Mobley, succeeded Ely in 1982, serving as the master of ceremonies until 1990. Bad press also followed the temporary removal of the coronation song, "There She Is," in 1982. Three Miss Americas received their crowns to other pageant tunes as pageant officials struggled to win a contractual dispute that eventually allowed them to use "the" song again.⁶⁶ In the midst of these struggles to adjust to changes in the pageant, the newspapers accused Miss America 1983, Debra Sue Maffett, of undergoing cosmetic surgery.⁶⁷ All of this negative press surrounding the pageant gave feminists and other pageant opponents more opportunities to complain about the contest. The pageant knew it needed a facelift of its own if it hoped to survive.

One final feminist protest gave the pageant just the publicity push it needed to help improve its image. Michelle Anderson, Miss Santa Cruz, pulled a banner out of her evening gown that stated, "Pageants Hurt All Women" during the live broadcast of the 1988 Miss California Pageant. Her actions hurt many people as for months she had feigned interest in pageants and friendships with other contestants and pageant officials.

⁶⁶ Bivans, *Miss America*, 29.

⁶⁷ "Nature Got Little Boost," *Observer-Reporter*, section D.

She explained her plan to *People* magazine, observing, "Pageants force all women to lie about who they are. I don't think I was lying any more than anyone else."⁶⁸ Miss California president Robert Arnhym expressed anger that protestors compromised his pageant, stating, "While I respect their right to their point of view, I have a right to conduct this program and my contestants have a right to participate in this program. We do not interfere with their efforts to protest it and they have no right to interfere with our efforts to conduct it." The protest fiasco actually enhanced media coverage for the pageant, allowing them to share their story in venues normally unavailable to them.⁶⁹

Despite these controversies, the pageant thrived. Contestants throughout the nation continued to enter preliminaries and sponsors continued to give money. The scholarship fund more than doubled. In 1980, the Miss America system awarded more than \$2 million. By 1989, that number had increased to more than \$5 million. Miss America 1980 received a \$20,000 scholarship. Her successor in 1989 received \$35,000.⁷⁰ In 1987, Albert Parks retired from his spot as chairman of the board and chief executive officer. He passed the reigns to Leonard C. Horn, an Atlantic City Attorney. Horn made some critical changes. All in all, the 1980s was a time of adjusting, restructuring, and rebuilding for the new era of pageantry that lay ahead.

⁶⁸ Michael Neil with Dirk Mathison, "Pageant Officials Are Calling Michelle Anderson Every Name in the Book Except Miss California," *People*, July 4, 1988, accessed February 18, 2014, <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20099348,00.html>.

⁶⁹ Bivans, *Miss America*, 31-32.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

Horn ensured the pageant's future by emphasizing its commitment to the "advancement of women." He implemented changes that broadened the organization and its influence. Horn founded the Miss America "Organization" that became the parent company of the Miss America Pageant. This organization was made up of three divisions: the Miss America Pageant, the Miss America Scholarship Fund, and the Miss America Foundation. Horn designed the Foundation "to expand scholarship opportunities beyond contestants alone." He also instituted an advisory committee of professional women who advised officials on "women's issues, program development, and Miss America's reign."⁷¹

1990s-2011: Professionalizing the Pageant

The 1990s saw further reorganization. In 1991, the new co-hosts Regis Philbin and Kathy Lee Gifford took over for Gary Collins just in time to embrace the new, more professional Miss America image. The new leaders emphasized community service, professional development, and public speaking. Miss America officials required contestants to submit written essays on community issues and to answer onstage questions to demonstrate their grasp of current events. Each contestant also selected an official social "platform." The winner worked on behalf of her particular social cause during her year of service. Finally, the pageant instituted a new judging format that increased the weight of personal interviews, which allegedly relegated the swimsuit

⁷¹ Bivans, *Miss America*, 32-33.

competition to a lesser role.⁷²

Throughout the 1990s, scholarship funds continued to grow. Under Horn's leadership, the organization began a Fruit of the Loom "Quality of Life" program that awarded more than \$60,000 annually to contestants for their outstanding community service. The pageant also instituted a \$10,000 "Women's Achievement Award." They gave this sum annually to an American woman who exemplified outstanding volunteer service. Finally, the pageant began giving a \$10,000 scholarship to Miss America's college to aid any female student.⁷³ By 1997, scholarships provided nationwide totaled \$32 million.

To be sure, not all changes seemed to promote the pageant's commitments to service and scholarship. For example, for the first time since 1947, the contest allowed participants to wear two-piece swimsuits.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, despite this move toward more revealing competition wear, many women flocked to enter the pageants. In fact, they saw pageants as a way to pay for their education. These women embraced, ignored, or failed to see any problems with competing in a swimsuit for scholarship money, using the money earned through pageants to pay for law school, medical school, or graduate school.

The Miss America Pageant strove to remain relevant. They sought to be more

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ "Two-Piece Swimsuits Return to the Miss America pageant," *Kingman Daily Miner*, September 14, 1997, 5A. In 1947, contestants wore identical two-piece bathing suits.

inclusive of “different” types of women. However, the “differences” remained socially acceptable ones. The Pageant overcame race barriers, advocated for women’s education, promoted community service, and celebrated individuals who overcame personal trials and struggles. Three African American women won the title in the 1990s, two in back-to-back years (Debbie Turner in 1990 and Marjorie Vincent in 1991, Kimberly Aiken was the third African American winner in 1994). During this decade the Miss America Organization also crowned the first Miss America with a disability, Heather Whitestone, and the first Miss America with a life threatening illness, Nicole Johnson, (1995 and 1999, respectively). All of these forces worked together to create a new look for Miss America.⁷⁵ The 1980s and 1990s also saw an influx of conservative Christians into the pageant. Mormons, Baptists, and Pentecostals all found a home in the organization. At the beginning of the new millennium, the future looked bright.

The pageant seemed to gain momentum in the 2000s. It broke another ethnic barrier as the first Asian American woman received the Miss America crown in 2000. Miss Hawaii, Angela Perez Baraquo, was also the first teacher to wear the crown. Throughout the decade contestants continued their community service, drawing positive attention especially in the aftermath of 9-11 when Americans felt a resurgence of patriotism and civic pride. Indeed, in 2007, when Sam Haskell III became the new

⁷⁵ “1990’s – Decade in Review,” Miss America website, accessed 18 February 2014, <http://www.missamerica.org/our-miss-americas/1990/review.aspx>.

chairman of the Board of Directors, the organization designated the Children's Miracle Network (CMN) as its national platform. All Miss America participants at the local, state, and national levels dedicated time and resources to this organization in addition to their personal platform. The Organization felt the partnership would benefit both parties, providing CMN with money, volunteers, and advertising while receiving a publicity boost they needed to bring the Miss America Pageant into the spotlight again.⁷⁶

Miss America also started a teen pageant. The Miss America Outstanding Teen Pageant (held in Orlando for the first time in 2005) acted as a feeder system for the Miss America pageant. Girls between the ages of thirteen and sixteen participated in this contest, transitioning into the Miss America system when they were at least seventeen and seniors in high school.⁷⁷ (Miss America contestants ranged from 17 to 24). Miss America's Outstanding Teen contestants also competed for college scholarships. Their contest mirrored that of their big sister pageant with the exception of the swimsuit competition. Outstanding Teens competed in a lifestyle and fitness routine that possessed both group and individual components.⁷⁸ This method for determining physical fitness mirrored that used in the Distinguished Young Women program (formerly, Junior Miss) and suggests that on some level pageant leaders recognized the

⁷⁶ "The 2000s – Decade in Review," Miss America website, accessed February 18, 2014, <http://www.missamerica.org/our-miss-americas/2000/review.aspx>.

⁷⁷ "Age/Education Eligibility," Miss America's Outstanding Teen website, accessed February 18, 2014, <http://www.maoteen.org/content/detail.php?Age-Education-Eligibility-2>.

⁷⁸ "Becoming a Contestant," Miss Alabama's Outstanding Teen website, accessed February 18, 2014, <http://outstandingteen.homestead.com/agerequirements.html>.

hypocrisy of their claim that the swimsuit phase of the Miss America competition featured athleticism rather than sexuality.

Despite growth through new programs, the 2000s also brought struggles as the parent organization fought plummeting television ratings. The pageant moved to Las Vegas in 2006 where it was hosted in January instead of the traditional September. This move coincided with the pageant losing its place on network television, which simultaneously cut into its viewing potential and freed it to reinvent itself. The organization landed a one-year contract with Country Music Television (CMT) before securing a more permanent spot on The Learning Channel (TLC). In its quest to remain a staple of American pop culture, the pageant adopted some conventions from reality shows, allowing the television audience to vote on people's choice awards, showing more behind the scenes footage, and adding more drama to the results show. This drive to provide entertainment seemed to cloud their claim to be a scholarship program.

Despite its rocky relationship with television and its diminishing role in American society, the pageant continued to grow. Thousands of young women around the nation still competed in local and state pageants, fervently hoping to make it to the national pageant. Scholarship funds grew with the organization awarding more than \$45 million dollars annually by 2003. Miss America boasted its status as the largest provider of scholarships to women in the world, leading more and more women to state that

earning money for college served as their primary reason for participating.⁷⁹ Even seminary students found the money to be earned through the Miss America competition too great an opportunity to pass up. They donned a swimsuit and took to the stage with their peers. As the role of women in American society changed, the Miss America Organization, as always, tried to ensure that it kept pace.

The Road to Miss America: How does the Process Work?

In 2011, the road to Miss America was still a long, tedious one. Some might argue that contestants dedicated more time, energy, and, money in their quest than any who had come before. Gone were the days of submitting a photo to a local newspaper contest and hoping that yours was chosen. Women who won the gauntlet of local and state pageants arrived at the national pageant for a week's worth of competitions. They did more than ride on a float and stroll down the beach in a swimsuit. In fact, many insiders referred to the Miss America as "the Super Bowl for women." Young women spent numerous hours training physically, mentally, and emotionally for the process. Competitors gave up their weekends to compete in preliminary pageants, log community service hours, and make guest appearances. Miss America consumed more than a few days for Miss America hopefuls around the nation. For many, the pursuit of the crown was their life.

⁷⁹ "Participate and Earn Scholarships," Miss America website, accessed February 19, 2014, <http://www.missamerica.org/scholarships/purpose.aspx>.

The makeup of the Miss America Pageant changed throughout its tenure. In the early years, it openly referred to itself as a “Bathing Revue.” As time progressed, it sought to become a more “respectable” enterprise. In 1935, the pageant added a talent competition (though it was not a requirement until 1938) and in 1945 started awarding scholarships.⁸⁰ Eventually, it took to calling itself a scholarship pageant and prided itself on celebrating ambitious, hard working young women. It saw itself and marketed itself as a beneficial program for its constituents, one that groomed them into acceptable role models for all while celebrating their unique contributions to society. They resisted feminist criticisms, noting that the pageant celebrated the modern woman by helping her reach her goals. Pageant literature pointed to the many professional women the pageant had aided even as it restructured itself to address feminists’ complaints and remain relevant.

Contestants in 2011 reached Miss America by winning their state title. To compete at the state level, most states required that a young woman win a smaller, local event known as a preliminary pageant. The number of participants varied greatly from state to state. Southern states like Alabama, South Carolina, and Texas regularly boasted forty plus competitors while Vermont, Montana, and Alaska sometimes attracted less than a dozen. These local competitions followed all of the rules of the national one. Young women competed in five phases of competition that made up a portion of their

⁸⁰ Bivans, *Miss America*, 14ff.

total score: lifestyle and fitness in swimsuit (15%), evening wear (25%), talent (35%), private interview (25%), and onstage questions (5%).⁸¹ The only competition phase that persisted from the 1921 event was the swimsuit competition. The costumes lost some fabric along the way as styles changed and ideas about the display of women's bodies loosened up, but it remained the one staple of the contest. To be sure, standards for acceptable dress on campus and elsewhere changed dramatically from 1921-2011 as well. One could argue that alterations to pageant dress mirrored those seen in the culture at large.

Judges at the local, state, and national levels all followed the same criteria when evaluating contestants. Indeed, a certain number of judges at each pageant had to be Miss America certified. They received specialized training through a seminar or training session.⁸² They were then added to the list of qualified panelists in the state. At least one novice judge was required as well. In the 1920s, scores were assigned based on the breakdown of the woman's body. In 2011, women received a score between 1 and 10 for each of the five categories of competition. These scores determined which contestants proceeded to the final round at state and national competitions. At some pageants, a

⁸¹ "National Judging Process," Miss America website, accessed February 19, 2014, <http://www.missamerica.org/news/press-kit/national-judging-process.aspx>.

⁸² On June 21, 2007, I attended the Work Weekend for the Miss North Carolina Scholarship Organization. As part of the event, I went through the judges training. On another occasion, I procured a handout from the Miss Alabama Pageant about their certification process.

process known as the Final Ballot determined the winner. In Final Ballot, judges ranked the top five contestants and auditors determined the winner based on those rankings.⁸³

In addition to competing in the five phases of competition, the Miss America Organization added a community service requirement in 1990. Contestants compiled portfolios, detailing their work on social issues from Breast Cancer Awareness to Character Education. A separate panel evaluated the contestants' record and announced the five finalists for the Quality of Life Award during the competition week of Miss America. In addition to the national awards, many states presented a contestant with the Miss America Quality of Life Award for community service. Even though a contestant's charity work was not evaluated directly, it played into two of the competition categories: interview and onstage questions. Judges routinely asked contestants to comment on their platform, giving basic statistics about the issue, the need for volunteers, or how she grew interested in that particular cause. Panelists also asked contestants to comment on their involvement with the organization. This focus on community became a point of pride for Miss America. Along with scholarships, it distinguished its contestants and winners from those of other pageants such as Miss USA.⁸⁴

Miss America celebrated its shift from beauty pageant to scholarship pageant. Many supporters showered the organization with accolades for their commitment to

⁸³ "National Judging Process," Miss America website, accessed February 19, 2014, <http://www.missamerica.org/news/press-kit/national-judging-process.aspx>.

⁸⁴ Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, 44-47.

women's higher education. However, one must hold this "good" in tension with other things. Miss America was still a beauty pageant. It enjoyed, and some may argue exploited, women's bodies even as it funded women's accomplishments. Attractiveness remained a requirement, even if an unstated one. In some ways, this proved more damaging than the pageants that acknowledged that theirs rewarded beauty over brains. For starters, the scholarship pageant lingo lured many women who would never participate in a beauty pageant per se. It neutralized the activity. More important, the Miss America pageant expanded the myth that women must excel at everything. In theory, the new and improved pageant celebrated the whole woman. In reality, it added more items to the list. No longer was a pretty face enough. Ideal women possessed talent that could be showcased on stage, spoke articulately about politics and current events, volunteered in the community, walked elegantly in heels, and wore a smile while doing it.

Miss America, the South, and American Evangelicalism

In 2011, the South boasted more Miss Americas than any other region of the country. Thirty-two Miss Americas hailed from that region. The Midwest claimed the next highest number with twenty-five, followed by the West with sixteen, and the Northeast with eleven.⁸⁵ If one investigated more recent pageant winners from 1980-2011, the percentage of Southern winners increases even more, with sixteen Miss

⁸⁵ I calculated regional winners using the list of Miss Americas on the Miss America website.

Americas claiming the South as their home. Some argued that this uneven distribution resulted from the rest of the country's loss of interest in pageantry. Others claimed that the South's conservatism matched the pageant's traditionalism. Still others noted that Miss America, as a largely rural, middle class phenomenon, fit the demographics of the South well.⁸⁶ More subtly, it might also say something about the expansionist power or exportability of Southern ideals of beauty and religion. As sociologist Mark A. Shibley showed, "recent changes represent the movement of Southern-style religion in the mainstream of American culture. The growth of conservative Protestantism nationwide is not just a resurgence of evangelical religion but Southern-style religion in particular."⁸⁷ My work suggests that the spread of Southern religion paralleled the spread of Southern beauty ideals the resulted in a Southernization of the beauty pageant as well.

Of course, many southerners speculated that the South produced more Miss Americas because their women were prettier.⁸⁸ However, a Southern Miss America admitted, "We do well in Miss America for one reason: we don't have many metropolitan areas. We have all those little towns and cities and Jaycees that don't have anything better to do than run beauty pageants. It's not the Southern girls, it's the

⁸⁶ Charles Reagan Wilson, "The Cult of Beauty," in *Judgment & Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995); Deford, *There She Is*, 81.

⁸⁷ Mark A. Shibley, "The Southernization of America Religion: Testing a Hypothesis," *Sociological Analysis* 52, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 170-71.

⁸⁸ See Chapter 2 for an explanation of the relationship of beauty ideals to the pageant.

country girls.”⁸⁹ As the Miss America pageant grew older, it thrived on small towns. Small towns enjoyed the excitement of seeing one of “their girls” compete at state. Throughout the country, local civic organizations sponsored pageants in the hope that their town might produce the next Miss America. From a contestant’s perspective, pageants presented one of the few “professional” opportunities for young women in small towns. Their towns lacked the leadership programs, arts institutes, or drama camps available to their New York City sisters. Pageants offered them a place to showcase their talent and develop public speaking skills.

While women from other parts of the country were enticed by the promise of scholarships, Southern women craved the title itself.⁹⁰ As James Rucker, a Vicksburg mail carrier, who was executive director of Miss Mississippi stated, “In Mississippi, it’s tradition for the best girls to come out for the Pageant. In Mississippi, the best girls just want to be Miss Mississippi.”⁹¹ My dissertation, in part, tries to explain why Southern women wanted to win their state pageants, and ultimately, Miss America. It acknowledges the truth behind earlier explanations while adding another factor: religion. The influence of religion has eluded most historians yet serves as a critical feature of the South’s success.

⁸⁹ Deford, *There She Is*, 82.

⁹⁰ This has shifted some since 1980. More contestants, Southern and otherwise, claimed scholarship opportunities as a motivator for participation.

⁹¹ Deford, *There She Is*, 82.

Pageant Promises

Contestants claimed that participation in beauty contests offered them rewards from crowns to scholarships. These benefits, both tangible and intangible, fit into four categories that will be discussed throughout this dissertation: pleasure, prizes, performance, and purpose. Women found the cultural and symbolic capital afforded them through their participation outweighed any potential drawbacks. Christian contestants also possessed and earned “spiritual capital” that acted as cultural capital within particular spheres.

As argued by sociologist Bradford Verter, “Personal piety may be viewed as a matter of taste...and thus as a marker of status within struggles for domination in a variety of contexts. Spiritual knowledge, competencies, and preferences may be understood as valuable assets in the economy of symbolic goods.”⁹² Spiritual capital, he noted, “may be translated into other forms of capital” and “might bring social and economic advancement.”⁹³ In the case of evangelical pageant participants, they used the language of their tradition and their newly earned titles to gain access to pulpits and publications. Sometimes their spiritual capital helped them earn more spiritual capital. It might have even helped some secure their crown and access to a wider stage.

⁹² Bradford Verter, “Spiritual Capital: Theorizing Religion with Bourdieu against Bourdieu,” in *Sociological Theory* 21, No. 2 (June 2003): 152.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 168.

Beyond Miss America

Miss America paved the way for modern pageantry. Child pageants to Junior Miss to Miss Universe all drew their cues from America's first sweetheart. And, while the Miss America competition presented itself as a scholarship pageant rather than a beauty pageant, not all pageant contenders paid attention to this logistical difference. From small town Miss Labor Day pageants to state Rodeo Queens many women in America, especially in the South, grew up in search of a crown. Like their predecessors, pageants after 1921 served as markers of community, civic duty, and patriotism. Communities mapped their pride, hopes, and dreams onto women's bodies. They celebrated their community by crowning a representative. This woman served as the town's public face.

Pageants also permeated American pop culture in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. From television series to movies to newspapers, Americans found themselves bombarded with images of women (or girls) in crowns or in search of one. Movies such as *Drop Dead Gorgeous* and *Miss Congeniality* satirized contestants as shallow, spiteful individuals with win-at-all-cost attitudes. These movies also suggested that pageants and their participants, while somewhat frivolous, posed no real threat. In fact, they allowed, they may have done some good.

Most media attention given to young girls and their pageant participation highlighted the unfairness of it. The award winning film *Little Miss Sunshine* unveiled

the overly serious nature of pageants as well as the financial, emotional, and physical costs of competition. TLC's reality series, *Toddlers and Tiaras*, like *Little Miss Sunshine*, emphasized the unrealistic expectations placed on young girls by their parents, trainers, and ultimately themselves. *Toddlers and Tiaras* also revealed the sexualization of young girls that took place in pageants, dance contests, and other arenas that displayed young girls' bodies. Girls learned early the value of a pretty face and a flirtatious gaze.⁹⁴ They understood their bodies as either their greatest asset or their greatest liability. Many of these girls wanted nothing more than to be pretty, beautiful, or sexy. And, many of them entered pageants to see these aspirations validated.

And yet, pageants proved more complex than that. They were not mere tools of female subjugation. Pageants offered girls and young women opportunities for leadership, money for school, and confidence for public speaking. They created and celebrated a single gendered arena where young women held power and exerted influence. Contestants learned self-discipline through pageant participation as well as good sportsmanship. They practiced community service, perfected a talent, and forged friendships. Beauty competitions provided them a safe space to explore their limits and test their boundaries.

⁹⁴ See Patrice A. Oppliger, *Girls Gone Skank: The Sexualization of Girls in American Culture* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008) and Peggy Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

Likewise, pageant contestants proved to be complex individuals whose descriptions of pageants and the benefits of pageant participation should be taken seriously. Indeed one cannot dispute the many community service hours logged by all of the Miss America contestants in the nation. Neither can one argue with the millions of dollars in scholarships awarded annually. My dissertation seeks to hold these perspectives in tension: the critiques of outsiders with the defenses of insiders, the tensions between pageant participation and evangelical beliefs for contestants, and second wave feminists' critiques of pageants with third wave feminists' ambivalence. Engaging this complex system, I hope to show how religion functioned in pageants and for pageant contestants, with particular attention to its role in the construction and promotion of modern evangelical culture.

2. Pageants and Pulchritude

There She Is, Miss America
There She Is, your ideal.
With so many beauties,
She took the town by storm,
With her All-American face and form –
And There She Is,
Walking on air, she is,
Fairest of the fair, she is,
Miss America!

Bernie Wayne, *Miss America* lyrics, 1955¹

Beauty may be only skin deep, but that is deep enough to confer
an unsettling array of advantages.

Deborah L. Rhode, *The Beauty Bias*, 2010²

Introduction

As the music started pumping, Chris Harrison announced the first semi-finalist to compete in the lifestyle and fitness competition (better known as the swimsuit competition to outsiders) of the 2011 Miss America finals. Each of the fifteen women took to the stage in what had become to me a familiar gait. They smiled. They twirled. Some placed their hands on their hips to draw further emphasis to both their tiny waists and their swinging hips. After the initial grin and spin, they pranced down the runway where they paused for a little more hip action. It seemed that “the thing” this year was

¹ Bernie Wayne, “Miss America,” quoted in Ann-Marie Bivans, *Miss America: In Pursuit of the Crown* (New York: MasterMedia Limited, 1991), 3.

² Deborah L. Rhode, *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 23.

hip movement. Almost all of the contestants stopped at the end of the runway, planted a foot, extended the other foot to open the hips, and hit the beats with each hip before seductively pulling one leg back into the traditional pageant stance (one foot slightly behind the other, angled out in a modified fourth position). Admittedly it was quite catching.³ And, it looked better than the old stop, pivot, hold of venerable and the walk-around-in-a-circle-without-stopping of yesteryear. But this emphasis on the hips and the movement of them in this way signaled a new level of sexuality in the pageant. Sex appeal always bubbled just below the surface (or some would argue on the surface) of the pageant, but with lyrics that proclaimed, “So come on, let’s go, Let’s lose control, Let’s do it all night, Til we can’t do it no mo” playing in the background while women in bikinis shook their hips there was really no denying the sex appeal.⁴ Or, was there?

Many pageant officials, participants, and competition supporters denied the innate sexuality involved in beauty contests. The Miss America Pageant prided itself on being a scholarship program, maintaining that the lifestyle and fitness in swimsuit portion was a means of determining health and wellness and not a way to validate the exploitation of women’s bodies. Christians and non-Christians alike pointed out the importance of physical health to a person’s overall wellbeing as reason enough to incorporate this segment into the competition. Some even argued in favor of the two-

³ Miss America Pageant, Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino, Las Vegas, January 15, 2011, on site visit.

⁴ The Black-Eyed Peas, “The Time (Dirty Bit)” on *The Beginning*, Released November 5, 2010.

piece or bikini as the best way to demonstrate one's fitness. Of course, this "choice" between one piece and two-piece was often no choice at all. Contestants sometimes felt pressure from directors, judges, and even supporters to shun the one piece. In essence, they feared that choosing the more modest swimwear would result in certain loss.

Of the 53 contestants in Miss America 2011, only one, Kylie Kofoed, a Mormon representing Idaho, wore a one-piece swimsuit. The remaining 52 donned a bikini (there was too little fabric to call it a "two-piece") to demonstrate their physical fitness, confidence, and poise for the judges.⁵ I should have been shocked that the 17-year old evangelical Christian who won the pageant chose the bikini, but I was not. It was what I had come to expect from my research on the Miss America pageant and its preliminaries. Very few women chose to wear one-piece swimsuits, and after witnessing the fate of those who did, I understood why. In my observation, a one-piece swimsuit was a liability. This handicap could be overcome in preliminary competitions if one had an outstanding talent, interview, or both, but it got increasingly difficult to overcome when one reached the national competition. In more than one instance, I watched novice state competitors reject their one-piece as they became more pageant-savvy.

Eschewing one-piece swimwear for a two-piece represented merely one obvious way that pageant competitors conformed. Hair, makeup, gown choice, and on-stage walk all became more polished as young women moved through the Miss America

⁵ Miss America Pageant, Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino, Las Vegas, January 11-15, 2011.

system. Contestants learned to perform not only their talents but also all of the aspects – physical, mental, and emotional – expected of a Miss America. They perfected each glance, turn, and answer in a manner similar to how basketball players learn to dribble, shoot, and rebound. Here Judith Butler’s theory of gender as performed and performative proves useful: The pageant as ritual was predicated on the perfection and performance of prescribed gender ideals, chief among them beauty.⁶ Often, women found their pursuit of “success” linked to beauty even off the pageant stage.

Throughout American history, beauty ideals, like all culturally contrived categories, changed. The norms for women in height, weight, and facial composition varied: fat, pale, tan, blonde, brunette, curly, and straight all experienced their time. To be sure, some female characteristics remained constant, including facial and body symmetry, a clear complexion, and youth.⁷ Achieving beauty often involved developing one’s character in addition to one’s complexion, but sometimes beauty itself was equated with goodness.⁸ Regardless, with the rise of the cosmetics industry in the early twentieth century physical traits edged out character as the primary means of achieving

⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), Preface.

⁷ Rhode, 46. Rhode also notes that height in men has proven a desirable trait across time and culture.

⁸ Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz, “The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children’s Fairy Tales,” *Gender and Society* 17, no. 5 (October 2003): 711-26.

good looks. Always, beauty concerned women.⁹ Attractiveness denoted a feminine quality that women pursued and men admired.

Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the pursuit of beauty affected many, if not most, women's lives. While one's race and class certainly impacted their relationship to beauty culture, in many ways its influence reached across such distinctions. Achieving beauty became the work of women as they aspired to the cultural capital it provided. Attractive women achieved success as defined by society more readily than their less attractive peers.¹⁰ Physical charm not only drew male attention in the form of marriage proposals, but being beautiful also afforded women a greater chance at career advancement.¹¹ Society dictated that women be good-looking and rewarded them accordingly. More important, culture expected women to work on becoming more beautiful. From cosmetics to dieting, women subjected their bodies to multiple regimes in their quests for physical perfection.

Christians also were influenced by the conventions of the times. They encouraged the pursuit of outward beauty either through an insistence that one's body

⁹ See Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), for a social history of beauty in America. Banner argues, "the identification of women with beauty has a lengthy tradition in Western culture," 10.

¹⁰ See Rhode's *The Beauty Bias* for a more comprehensive look at appearance-related bias, especially Chapter 1 "Introduction" and Chapter 2 "The Importance of Appearance and the Costs of Conformity."

¹¹ Rita Freedman, *Beauty Bound* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1986), 143-44. Freedman notes that high school guidance counselors often made comments about girls' attractiveness. Likewise, male college students rated essays accompanied by a picture of a pretty girl more favorably than those written by less attractive ones. Women judged their attractive peers more harshly. However, both sexes judged essays written by males "without regard to the author's appearance."

reflected one's soul or the admission that one's outward appearance influenced outsiders' perceptions of Christianity. They stressed the importance of caring for one's "temple" through diet and exercise, the goal of which often mirrored the images produced by the mainstream media. Women rallied to showcase their inner piety through their outward appearance. One logical conclusion was that Christians celebrated the achievement of ideal beauty by accepting – and sometimes co-opting – beauty pageants. This chapter recounts the shifting ideals of beauty in America as well as the cultural currency, both secular and Christian, attractive women received based on their physical appearance.

Put differently, an ideal of true womanhood existed from the time of the Civil War through 2011, even if it changed. It included both physical and behavioral traits (though here I focus largely on the physical).¹² In each period, some very specific combination of those traits was identified as the model. Ideals emphasized beauty and morality, seeing the two as innately connected. Trends influenced these definitions, and different forces disseminated that ideal to masses of women. In a world where cultural norms for female beauty persisted and evolved, Christians sometimes adopted those ideals, considering them crucial to professing and practicing their piety properly. Over time, women sought the cultural capital gained by adhering to ideals of beauty. To be sure, some women found themselves outside the acceptable standards of beauty. This

¹² Banner, *American Beauty*.

did not, however, stop them from striving to meet those ideals or, in the case of some ethnic minorities, developing their own.¹³ To understand how those norms shaped many Christian women, we must outline those ideals.

Shifting Ideals and The Means to Achieve Them: Pursuing Beauty

The standards for body types and facial features did not change as quickly or as often as hemlines, but most American women lived long enough to see them shift. As notions of what constituted feminine altered, so too did expectations for women regarding their face and form. Women adjusted to perform their new roles. Some submitted their bodies to physical transformations as ideals changed. In the nineteenth century, many relied on outside forces to tell them when to diet or eat as thin and then “voluptuous” became the ideal. Others refused to exercise or made exercise a priority, all in quest of the perfect body. With the invention of local anesthesia, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, women took more drastic measures. Breast enhancement surgeries, tummy tucks, liposuction, and other invasive procedures proved popular.¹⁴ Briefly surveying these changes demonstrated the long-standing relationship between

¹³ For a discussion of black beauty culture in America, its emergence and its ideals, see Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). For a more general examination of “beauty as a central dimension of femininity,” see Rita Freedman, *Beauty Bound*. For Christian engagement with beauty and diet culture, see R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

¹⁴ For how and why women in the 20th century sought to discipline their bodies to fit an ideal, see Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), especially Chapter 4 “Body Projects.”

women and beauty, showing that in each case it was something performed by women as a means of gaining power. Their attractiveness, at times, acted as cultural capital. Other times women earned actual capital in salary and scholarships from their adherence to feminine ideals.¹⁵

The ideals women strove for changed over time. In *American Beauty*, Lois Banner outlined four beauty types for the period between 1800 and 1921: the “steel-engraving lady,” the “voluptuous woman,” the “Gibson Girl,” and the “flapper.”¹⁶ In the early nineteenth century, the “steel-engraving lady” possessed a frail, pale frame with tiny features. Fashion magazines and lithographs endorsed this waif-like beauty with an oval or heart-shaped face, sloped shoulders, and a small waist.¹⁷ By the Civil War, the voluptuous woman followed fast on her heels. This new ideal celebrated buxom women with curves.¹⁸ Between 1895 and World War I, the Gibson girl grew popular thanks to the drawings of Charles Dana Gibson. Though thinner than the voluptuous woman, she retained the large bosom and large hips. In addition, she was tall and possessed thick,

¹⁵ The commodification of women’s bodies in beauty culture, and in pageantry, deserves much fuller attention than I was able to give it in this dissertation. Pageants served as an arena in which the baring of women’s bodies in exchange for goods was socially acceptable unlike other professions involving the showcasing of women’s bodies such as stripping, pornography, and prostitution. Still, even in pageants, much money was made with the use of women’s bodies. Winners in Miss America Competitions won scholarships and appearance fees. More money was made at the winner’s expense. Pageant coaches, dress designers, beauty experts, advertisers, and more benefited from the display of women’s bodies in these competitions.

¹⁶ Banner, 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 107, 127. Banner noted that the voluptuous woman represented a lower class model of beauty that middle and upper classes eventually accepted. She also acknowledged that in the late nineteenth century both the “steel-engraved lady” and the “natural woman” competed with the voluptuous woman for popularity, 128. All three became standards dictated by the Anglo Saxon middle class.

dark hair, a small mouth, and a snub nose.¹⁹ The tide of beauty again shifted in 1913 when the “flapper” took center stage. The flapper presented “a slim body with good muscle tone” and an overall youthful appearance free of wrinkles and gray hair. She modeled shorter skirts, bound her breasts, and retained the small face and lips of the steel-engraving lady.²⁰

The stock market crash of 1929 ushered in a more sophisticated, serious look for women that dominated the 1930s and 1940s. Greta Garbo, a film star, personified this style, a look intent on lower hemlines, larger eyes and lips, longer hair, and a bigger bosom. Dresses received shoulder pads that gave women a boxier, more confident look that offered more “freedom of movement.”²¹ This classy look for women of the 1930s contrasted with that expected of young girls. There the ideal rested on child star Shirley Temple, always portrayed as young and innocent. During these decades the need for women to look young vanished temporarily as the country sought to recover from tough times through portraying all of its citizens, men and women alike, as competent and mature.²² The expectations of the 1940s continued moving toward strong, independent women as more women entered the workforce during the war. “Rosie the Riveter” and

¹⁹ Ibid., 154.

²⁰ Ibid., 278-79.

²¹ Ibid., 280-81.

²² Ibid., 282-83.

the actress Rosalind Russell, both of whom demonstrated more generally masculine qualities, became the feminine ideals.²³

The emphasis on strength and confidence over traditional femininity did not last long as the post-World War II decades saw new types emerge. The 1950s brought a return to Victorian ideals complete with longer skirts and cinched waists. It touted two beauty ideals: the “adolescent, asexual models of beauty” and the “voluptuous, earthy one.”²⁴ Fashion options included both full skirts with crinoline petticoats and form-fitting pencil skirts that made it difficult to walk. Corsets again became standard in dressing rooms as women sought to accentuate their waistline, making it as small as possible. This emphasis on weight and body shape filtered into magazine ads and articles. For example, a 1955 issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* (hereafter, *LHJ*) included a height and weight chart for reference (women were to weigh themselves in their clothing and calculate their height in two inch heels). The ad went on to state: “check overweight here! Have grapefruit instead,” and featured a picture of a grapefruit followed by further notes about its health benefits.²⁵ Personal success stories through diet and fashion makeovers abounded. One article entitled, “100 pounds off...I hardly know myself!” was part of a series of beauty biographies featured in the journal. It told the story of Margie Webb, a self-proclaimed “fatty,” who finally came to her senses and

²³ Ibid., 283.

²⁴ Ibid., 283-84.

²⁵ *Ladies' Home Journal*, February 1955, n.p.

lost the weight she needed to look “the part she always wanted to play – a proud and pretty wife and mother.”²⁶ In an article for teens entitled “What do your clothes do for you?,” the journal advised, “If your weight is a problem, see a doctor about losing it, of course.”²⁷ Even articles that sought to emphasize various types of beauty, such as, “Enjoy Yourself, You’re Prettier Than You Think,” advised developing one’s “speaking voice into an outstanding beauty feature.”²⁸ Especially for the non-beautiful, some effort to obtain attractiveness remained necessary.

The liberation movements of the 1960s embraced multiple images of beauty, refuting the belief that one ideal of beauty existed. Many women of this decade rebelled not only against the “commercial culture of beauty and fashion, but also against the notion of a single or standard ideal of beauty based on Western European types.”²⁹ This trend opened the door for African Americans and other ethnic minorities to be featured in beauty magazines, runways, and eventually in beauty pageants. To be sure, the consumerism of the 1950s did not disappear completely. Advertisers and the burgeoning fashion industry found a way to produce and sell the new fads just as they had produced the look of days gone by.³⁰ Pin curls were replaced with bobs, red lipstick

²⁶ Ibid., July 1955, 54-55.

²⁷ Ibid., August 1955, 36.

²⁸ Ibid., November 1955, 188.

²⁹ Banner, 5.

³⁰ Ibid., 286-87.

with no makeup, and mid-calf poodle skirts with miniskirts. Nevertheless, women still pursued beauty. Even in this age of nonconformity, trends mattered.

As a 1964 article in the *LHJ* noted, “If you grew up with the faces on this page, are you sure you’ve also grown up with the times? Or is your daughter constantly after you to stop looking like a dated photograph?” This piece, which compared photographs of movie stars from the 1930s and 1940s to pictures of the stars’ daughters noted the difference between the “artificial beauty” of the 1940s and the “natural look” of the 1960s. While noting that “this natural look requires at least as much artifice as the mannered looks of the ‘40s,” the author delighted that, though all beautiful, “these young women don’t all look alike.”³¹ The shift in the 1960s allowed women to emphasize their best features through different hairstyles and (minimal) makeup regimes rather than striving for one particular look. Still, individuals featured in magazines and on runways possessed clear complexions, symmetrical faces, and thin bodies. And as models replaced film stars as the trendsetters, women in the United States embraced extreme thinness as a beauty ideal that remained into the 21st century.³² Diet ads such as “How to Diet Without Self-Pity” and success stories for various diet techniques continued to mark women’s magazines like the *LHJ*.³³

³¹ *LHJ*, August 1964, n.p.

³² Banner, 287-88.

³³ *LHJ*, 1960s.

The natural look of the 1960s seeped into the 1970s as women continued to wear minimal makeup and longer hair. Indeed, some women of the 1970s had (or ironed to achieve) straight hair that reached to the middle of their back. Miniskirts and bellbottoms remained in fashion and jeans became a standard part of many women's wardrobes. The pursuit of beauty still consumed many women's time as they searched the ever-increasing number of women's magazines, some dedicated exclusively to beauty and fashion, for tips on everything from diets and exercise to how to apply lipstick. A 1974 article in the *LHJ*, "The Computer Says: 'Eat the Foods you Love, Lose the Fat You Hate!,'" promoted Dr. Georgina Faludi's diet that could be tailored to each individual's likes and dislikes with the use of a computer program. The perceived need for this resource was explained in the first paragraph, "Happiness is *never* having to diet. But for the 23 million overweight American women, the next best thing is a diet that lets them lose weight safely, steadily and oh-so-pleasantly."³⁴ Other articles such as "How to be a knockout" and "Can You Please Come to Washington?" offered typical makeover stories popular in years past, complete with before and after pictures.³⁵ Even in the counter culture of the 1960s and 1970s, beauty was still at the forefront of many women's minds. Indeed even in the midst of accepting new forms of attractiveness, traditional pulchritude such as "voluptuous blondes and elegant brunettes" still had

³⁴ *LHJ*, Jan 1974, 118.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Feb 1974, 100-104 and Jan 1974, respectively.

their place.³⁶ Women continued to perform expected beauty roles as they sought the cultural capital such ideals afforded.

The 1980s brought a “conservative, business-oriented era,” which was reflected in beauty and fashion trends.³⁷ As more women entered the workforce, business suits and other professional dress that included scarves, ties, and big shoulder pads became popular. Boxy masculine shoulders and a loose necktie combined with high-heeled shoes and ample makeup to create a new power woman image. Hot pink lipstick replaced the red lipstick of the 1950s and bright eye shadow in shades of blue, green, and pink brightened faces. Exercise and diet continued to gain followers as aerobics and fad diets such as Slim Fast became popular. Women permed their hair as beauty ideals mandated that curly hair was again in vogue. Ethnic beauty made more strides into mainstream culture with the success of television shows such as *The Cosby Show*. Indeed, the Cosbys donned the 1986 cover of the *LHIJ*, evidence of the show’s far-reaching impact. This television series and others also helped normalize, and even celebrate, working mothers. Women adjusted to new opportunities, but women found the same expectations of attractiveness applied.

Beauty remained central for women into the 21st century. In the 1990s and 2000s, as in the decades preceding them, dieting and exercising to achieve a thin body

³⁶ Banner, 289.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 290.

dominated women's lives. While concern for one's health contributed to the weight loss culture, a desire to achieve perfection proved an equally motivating factor for many. One *LHJ* article questioned whether one could be fat *and* happy. The journalist interviewed two overweight women and told their stories. Perhaps not surprisingly, one woman spoke of her ability to accept herself as she was while the other one lamented that she dealt with "shame every day." Both, however, noted that they found society's views of fat people disturbing.³⁸ In an article the next month, subscribers read about "What THIN Women Really EAT" in hope of gaining insight from their dietary decisions. Even more telling perhaps was a series entitled "Real Solutions" that told the story of three women who altered their appearances with everything for losing 100 pounds to receiving a nose job. As the author noted, "Yes, beauty is only skin deep. But feeling good about our looks is key to self-esteem. When these women altered their appearances, they found their lives changed as well."³⁹ Appearance fostered confidence.

Whiteness was always normative. For most Americans the ideal always included white skin and white features. Even African Americans that succeeded in beauty pageants usually possessed some Anglo features that allowed them to "pass" as attractive next to their white competition.⁴⁰ Ethnic minorities in America, especially African Americans, struggled to succeed in the pursuit of beauty as defined by white

³⁸ *LHJ*, March 1995.

³⁹ Cynthia Hanson, "Real Solutions," *LHJ*, April 2000, 42.

⁴⁰ Dawn Perlmutter, "Miss America: Whose Ideal?," in *Beauty Matters*, ed. Peg Zeglin Brand (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 158.

middle-class culture like light skin and straight hair.⁴¹ Cosmetics offered dark skinned women the chance to embrace, or, at the least, model, these white values. Some African Americans debated the political meaning of cosmetics while others promoted them. Skin color and hair texture proved some of the most disputed topics. Educator Nannie Helen Burroughs urged women to choose education over makeup as the means to self-improvement, but her message and that of other reformers often fell on deaf ears. Beauty culture spread quickly and deeply through the African American community as women opened beauty salons, sold cosmetics, and passed on beauty rituals to their daughters.⁴² Women drove the beauty industry among African Americans, accepting the jobs that boosted their community's economy.⁴³

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s brought change as marchers declared, "Black is Beautiful." During this decade, many African Americans embraced their curly hair, making the Afro a popular hairstyle. In addition, Donyale Luna became the first black model to appear in general fashion magazines such as *Vogue*. Black beauty bore increasing influence outside the black community even if white remained the ideal. For example, some white women in the 1960s embraced the Afro as their hairstyle.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26-30. For more on how race and gender influenced beauty, see the essays in Peg Zeglin Brand, ed. *Beauty Matters* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), especially "Introduction: How Beauty Matters" and Chapter 7 "Miss America: Whose Ideal?"

⁴² Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), Chapter 7 "Shades of Difference."

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

⁴⁴ Banner, 289.

The freedom of the 1960s also encouraged the acceptance of a broader range of beauty ideals, though not all were equally welcome on the pageant stage or on the Parisian runway. A 1992 article in the *Journal of Advertising* argued in part that, “perceivers distinguish multiple types of human attractiveness.” It proposed five primary types (Classic Beauty, Cute, Sex-Kitten, Sensual, and Girl-Next-Door) and three “tentative” types (Trendy, Exotic, and Feminine) of beauty, suggesting individuals sorted beauty on a more nuanced scale than pretty or not pretty.⁴⁵ The researchers also investigated how different beauty types “matched up” with particular advertising companies. Likewise, I suggest that not all beauty “types” found great success in pageantry. Overwhelmingly Miss America winners possessed classic beauty, though some certainly fit the characteristics of cute or girl-next-door. Plus, it bears repeating that beauty in contemporary America *always* involved thin bodies and flawless faces even if a refusal to support one “look” continued into the 21st-century.

Fashion trends, cosmetics, and hairstyles all rode the changing tides of beauty ideals. The prescriptions arrived in the form of magazine ads, novels, films, and eventually, television and beauty pageants. Cosmetic salespeople who advertised mascara for thicker, fuller lashes in one decade touted face cream that promoted a

⁴⁵ Michael R. Solomon, Richard D. Ashmore, and Laura C. Longo, “The Beauty Match-up Hypothesis: Congruence between Types of Beauty and Product Images in Advertising,” *Journal of Advertising* 21, no. 4 (December 1992): 25.

natural look in the next one.⁴⁶ Many women saw the pursuit of beauty as inescapable. It was, as Banner argued, “the counterpart of the self-made-man mythology for men...beauty was supposed to attract wealthy and powerful men into marriage.”⁴⁷ Horatio Alger’s novels depicted this ideology of the self-made man. Through his tales of “luck and pluck” he encouraged boys that character development and industriousness would lead to economic empowerment.⁴⁸ Beauty functioned in much the same way for women. They could ascend society by taking control of their beauty. Both ethics were appropriations of a wider American ideal of social mobility. The pursuit of beauty caused division and competition among women – with the boss’s son as the prize. Later, as women’s goals extended beyond marrying well, pageants provided an arena for continued competition.⁴⁹ Instead of the boss’s son, the winner received a crown, fame (though usually short-lived), and later, scholarship money.

Beauty as Cultural Currency in the 20th and 21st centuries –

Despite shifts in what constituted the ideal weight, hair style, or body type, the underlying pressure to conform to external criteria of beauty remained constant. Even children's fairy tales placed an inordinate amount of words and energy on describing the

⁴⁶ For more on America’s beauty culture, see Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*.

⁴⁷ Banner, 14.

⁴⁸ William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 90-93.

⁴⁹ It seems worth noting that some contestants spoke of their Miss America credentials as beneficial in the marriage market as late as 1985 (and, one imagines, even later). See Debra Deitering Maddox, “The Miss America Pageant’s Influence on the Self-Construction of Its 1985 Contestants,” (MA Thesis, University of Nebraska, 2001), 75.

relative attractiveness of the heroine or female victim.⁵⁰ Despite the fluctuation in fashions, cosmetics, and ideal body types, women's need to pursue beauty remained constant. Some might argue that the acquisition and maintenance of good looks became more important as the ability to change one's appearance became more readily available. Women confessed various reasons for succumbing to beauty rituals and the pursuit of an ideal body, but even those who refused to play in the beauty competition of life admitted they were contestants by default.⁵¹ Attractiveness counted, offering rewards from marriage proposals to job advances. As Margie Webb put it, "By just *looking* like a normal person, I discovered my ideas, suggestions, preferences were no longer fluffed off as 'fat girl' notions. *They* carried some weight."⁵²

As women flocked to the workforce in the 1980s, they noted the importance of appearance not only for marriage prospects but also for career advancement, self-esteem/confidence, and social success. As Naomi Wolf argued, "Beauty was no longer just a symbolic form of currency; it literally *became* money. The informal currency system of the marriage market, formalized in the workplace, was enshrined in the law."⁵³ Women's looks proved a commodity not just for those in "beauty-driven" trades like acting or modeling. Rather, what Wolf termed the "professional beauty qualification"

⁵⁰ Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz, 717.

⁵¹ Rhode, Chapter 2 "The Importance of Appearance and the Costs of Conformity" and Chapter 3 "The Pursuit of Beauty."

⁵² *LHJ*, July 1955, p84. Emphasis in the original.

⁵³ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (New York: HarperCollins Perennial, 2002), 21.

subjected all working women to beauty standards not applied to men in similar fields.⁵⁴ Thus, despite the notion that women advanced beyond looks to abilities, what changed for many women was how their attractiveness (or lack thereof) paid off: from marriage to jobs (though marriage prospects remained important for many women). For women in the late 20th century and early 21st century, beauty mattered. Its achievement offered real cultural capital.

Attractiveness (or, at the least, some acceptance of society's beauty standards) proved crucial for many women in the work place. While the importance of a pretty face varied based on one's chosen field and geographic location, overall "less attractive individuals are less likely to be hired and promoted, and they earn lower salaries despite the absence of any differences in cognitive ability" even in fields like law.⁵⁵ Weight discrimination, in particular, plagued many individuals in search of jobs. Women often found themselves subjected to assumptions about the abilities of obese individuals rather than facts.⁵⁶ Also of note are the "grooming codes" employed by some places of business. For example, Reno's Harrah's Casino used to require female servers to wear makeup, fingernail polish, and styled hair. Male employees "needed only short haircuts and fingernails that were 'neatly trimmed.'" A federal appellate court upheld Harrah's

⁵⁴ Ibid., 27ff.

⁵⁵ Rhode, 27.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 95. One company doctor admitted that an obese woman he examined "had no health problems and that he had performed no agility tests; he simply assumed that she was unfit because he had watched her 'waddling down the hall' to her exam.'" This did not, however, stop him from declaring her unable to perform the responsibilities of a bus driver.

policy when a female employee challenged it, changing their makeup policy only after they received bad press.⁵⁷ Other forms of appearance-based discrimination from dress codes to weight requirements abounded in many places of business if not explicitly, then implicitly. Women in the workplace walked a fine line between being attractive enough while not being too attractive. In both extremes, employers evaluated women based on outward characteristics rather than job performance.⁵⁸

Appearance-based discrimination in the workplace reinforced double standards for men and women. For example, while men gained respect and distinction as they aged, women found themselves bombarded with products to help them prevent or stall the aging process. Old age robbed women of one of their most marketable assets, youth.⁵⁹ Even female senators were not immune to accepting beauty standards. "Of the sixteen female United States senators between ages forty-six and seventy-four, not one has visible gray hair; nor do 90 percent of the women in the House of Representatives."⁶⁰ Women succumbed to beauty treatments for various reasons from seeing it as a form of empowerment to the need to fulfill a job requirement.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Ibid., 12, 116.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 96-97.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 61-63.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁶¹ For an investigation of "body work" as a negotiation of "gendered identity," see Debra L. Gimlin, *Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), especially the Introduction. Gimlin discovered that some women found this "work" to be a source of empowerment in the face of difficult to achieve beauty ideals.

When beauty was equated with goodness, matters became even more complicated. Individuals who were attractive were not always good, but their beauty allowed them more leeway perhaps than a less attractive colleague. For example, “unattractive individuals receive less favorable treatment in a variety of settings, including higher sentences and lower damage awards in simulated legal proceedings.”⁶² One finds this belief in the innate goodness of the beautiful in children’s fairy tales as well. If Cinderella's beauty and virtue was central to the story, so too was the ugliness (both physically and otherwise) of her stepsisters.⁶³ Based on this and other childhood stories, one might argue that good deeds begot beauty or that ugliness caused ill behavior. Obviously this was not true. In both theory and practice, this belief proved destructive to the recipients of the critique. “Less attractive individuals are less likely to be viewed as smart, happy, interesting, likeable, successful, and well-adjusted.” Likewise, “their unfavorable treatment can erode self-esteem, self-confidence, and social skills, which compound their disadvantages.” Studies even found that teachers believed attractive students to be more intelligent.⁶⁴ The presence or absence of culturally decided good looks determined more than just who embarked in a career on the runway. Attractive individuals received rewards that were not always commensurate with their work. Women sought the rewards that accepting beauty guidelines provided.

⁶² Rhode, 27.

⁶³ Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz, 718-19.

⁶⁴ Rhode, 26-27.

This trend toward garnering praise for one's beauty began early for women.⁶⁵ Young girls in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries were trained to seek approval for their appearance. While child beauty pageants offered one way through which adults encouraged young girls to use their bodies to please others rather than using them to achieve something, young women learned to value their looks over their abilities in a myriad of ways. As Peggy Orenstein argued in *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, the media bombarded young girls with messages that their looks were of primary importance. From the Disney princess craze to Barbie dolls to Bratz dolls, marketers (along with parents) provided young girls countless opportunities to focus on the importance of achieving the right look. Indeed, even *Sesame Street* struggled with female characters, noting that, "audiences seem to judge them by different standards than the males."⁶⁶ In other words, female characters needed to be relatively attractive for the viewers to like them. *Sesame Street* creators researched every aspect of their newest female addition from the size of her nose to the length of her lashes. Abby, a "pretty" pink "fairy in training," proved to be all the designers hoped and more.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ The pursuit of outward beauty over inner character has proven more important in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries than in centuries before. As Joan Jacobs Brumberg noted in her work, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, "The traditional emphasis on 'good works' as opposed to 'good looks' meant that the lives of young women in the nineteenth century had a very different orientation from those of girls today," xx-xxi.

⁶⁶ Peggy Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girly-Girl Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 40.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 39-41.

Some might believe that the gendering of a cartoon character is of little consequence, but a beauty-obsessed culture that demanded physical perfection even from its female cartoon characters speaks volumes. Of course, designers and executives claimed to be “honoring the range of play patterns girls have,” believing “all this pink-and-pretty...was about giving girls *more* choices, not fewer.”⁶⁸ Parents of young girls struggled to see “more choices” when everything from blocks to baseball bats was made in pink or blue. As Orenstein so aptly put it, “Abby would trouble me far less if there could be a female Muppet as surly as Oscar or as id-driven as Cookie or as goofy as Grover: if there were more ‘play patterns’ to ‘honor’ than just this one.”⁶⁹ However, since the use of media, marketing, and children's literature to inform children's worldviews and promote cultural expectations proved widespread, more and more girls “chose” the “play pattern” thrust upon them. This failed to result in the empowered young women that one would expect in the 20th and 21st century. In fact, “by age twelve, girls place greater emphasis on attractiveness than competence.”⁷⁰ While this pattern might seem harmless, “according to the American Psychological Association, the girlie-girl culture’s emphasis on beauty and play-sexiness can increase girls’ vulnerability to pitfalls that

⁶⁸ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 43.

⁷⁰ Rhode, 26.

most concern parents: depression, eating disorders, distorted body image, risky sexual behavior.”⁷¹ In other words, the rewards of beauty (from young to old) came at a price.

Women (and their daughters) participated, to varying degrees, in a quest for beauty that rewarded them according to how they looked. Indeed, as noted, many who refused to subscribe to cultural standards of attractiveness were reprimanded or punished. Even women who considered themselves feminists participated in various beauty practices when they found America’s beauty culture inescapable.⁷² Beauty contests simply represented a more explicit form of the competition in which all women found themselves. In it, women subscribed to gendered expectations of beauty, literally performing them on the stage.

Christian teachings on beauty and the body

One of my aims has been to demonstrate what fans of Oprah Winfrey’s spiritual-material fitness pursuits already know: that there is no tidy line between so-called religious and so-called secular prescriptive norms pertaining to the body. Even when persons have espoused such a distinction—some Protestants arguing that slimness should be an explicitly pious goal because it reflects God’s glory,

⁷¹ Ibid., 6. Not surprisingly, many pageant contestants experienced depression, anxiety, and eating disorders too. Some blamed the pageant, but others found the pageant helped them overcome these issues. Many had internalized societal expectations so fully that they saw failure only in themselves. See, for example, Maddox, “The Miss America Pageant’s Influence;” Yasmin Khorram, “Miss America Kirsten Haglund Opens Up About Her Battle with Anorexia,” CNN, March 16, 2012, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/16/health/miss-america-haglund-anorexia/>; Paul Mountjoy, “Youngest Miss America Teresa Scanlan: Depression Conquered,” *Washington Times Communities*, September 11, 2013, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://communities.washingtontimes.com/neighborhood/steps-authentic-happiness-positive-psychology/2013/sep/11/youngest-miss-america-teresa-scanlan-depression-co/>.

⁷² Rhode, 77.

for instance—they have vigorously advocated the worldly benefits of a thin body, including health, beauty, love, and prestige.⁷³

Christians too found themselves engulfed by issues concerning beauty and the body. Since the days of the early church, they had been concerned with matters of dress and the comportment of their bodies. Christian teachings on the body, especially women's bodies, varied from time to time, place to place, and from group to group. Marie Griffith's work *Born Again Bodies* provides the most comprehensive treatment on American Christianity's relationship to bodies.⁷⁴ From her work, one learns that in America too, Christians interacted with teachings on dress and the body in various ways. She argued that religious belief and practice appropriated expectations all along the way. Christian and secular beauty ideals worked together to create the body-obsessed American society of the twenty-first century.⁷⁵

Here I note some of these teachings as well as three reasons that Christian women found the pursuit of beauty and the perfect bodies to be crucial to their religious lives. This brief overview will serve as a foundation for the chapters that follow (in which I will expound upon many of these themes). The main point is that throughout Christian history, bodies mattered. Much has been taught about beauty and its definition and role within Christian life.

⁷³ R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2004), 241.

⁷⁴ Griffith's extensive research provided the foundation for this section.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 10, 12-13, and 249.

As Griffith notes, “While speaking in disparate voices as to the particular techniques and aims most suitable to keeping the body in check, disciples have concurrently verified a basic religious obligation to cultivate correct bodily practice and create a proper *looking* body.”⁷⁶ Even Mary Baker Eddy, who “taught the unreality of the human body,” took special regard for her appearance.⁷⁷ For example, Eddy requested that those painting her portrait eliminate her gray hair and perfect the imperfections of her face that showed in photographs as she determined them not adequate representations of her appearance.⁷⁸ Most Protestant Christians esteemed the body as important beyond its being a vehicle for the soul. The care of the body proved crucial to Christian teachings. Of course, the reasons that Christians pursued bodily perfection differed across time and place as well as from group to group. Likewise, individuals offered multiple reasons for embracing cultural ideals of beauty as religious disciplines.

Christians engaged in dieting and exercise to become healthier, to attract a mate, and to gain self-esteem, but most important, as a spiritual discipline. At risk was more than just becoming beautiful; many Christian dieters saw their efforts as religious acts of submission to God’s authority. They interpreted their success as signs of a pure heart and God’s favor and their failure as sin. Thinness became “the visible marker of

⁷⁶ Ibid., 239, emphasis in the original.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 74.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 77ff.

godliness.”⁷⁹ Christian diet programs from *I Prayed Myself Thin* to *More of Jesus, Less of Me* encouraged women to look to God for help.⁸⁰ Many fitness writers taught that since verses such as I Corinthians 6:19 equated the body with a “temple of the Holy Spirit,” Scripture demanded that Christians care for their bodies. Participants saw devotional dieting and exercise as a way to engage in the self-care mandated in scripture. Some programs met weekly to hold one another accountable much like secular programs, but Christian groups claimed that pleasing God was their motivation even if their weight loss also resulted in other, more mundane rewards.⁸¹ Yet the need to “care” for one’s body was often mistaken for a need to achieve the perfect body as “there would always be room in the arena of Christian discipline for improvement.”⁸² Many of these diet programs failed to note a difference between individuals whose weight put them at an increased health risk and those merely seeking the paper-thin body so popular in American culture.⁸³ The Christian diet culture, while unquestionably helpful to some, appropriated ideals of bodily perfection that often came at the expense of its participants’ health. It tied one’s failure to achieve weight goals to lack of dependence on God.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 180, 187-88, 192, 205

⁸⁰ There were Christian weight loss books written by and for both men and women. However, they proved more popular among women. Griffith, Chapters 4 and 5.

⁸¹ Griffith, 220.

⁸² Ibid., 205.

⁸³ Ibid.

Within many conservative traditions, evangelical and otherwise, the need to attract a mate remained a staple reason that women participated in American beauty culture and the Christian diet subculture. For example, one Latter-day Saint woman in her twenties recounted the importance of thinness and beauty to Mormon culture as both a missionary tactic and as a way to attract a spouse. She studied *The Inside-Out Beauty Book* at church while a teenager. Classes included make-up demonstrations, hair-styling tips, and cooking advice as she and her peers learned how to “beautify themselves for God’s sake.”⁸⁴ Even evangelical magazines like Focus on the Family’s *Brio* for teenage girls included beauty tips. While authors always emphasized the importance of inner above outward beauty, it still offered makeup tricks, dating advice, and fashion tips. More recently, Thomas Nelson published a *Biblezine* just for teenage girls that looked like a copy of *Seventeen*. *Revolve*, a New Testament in magazine form, also included quizzes, articles on dating, and thoughts about other topics important to teenage girls. They printed several different portions of the Bible in *Biblezine* form.⁸⁵ Whether advised to wear the two-piece bathing suit or forego it, many Christian groups taught their daughters the importance of accepting some beauty ideals as a way to attract a godly husband.

Across the theological spectrum, Christians noted the importance (or, at the least, modeled the importance) of being well groomed for effective ministry in addition to attracting a spouse. A glance at the book jackets in a local Christian bookstore yielded

⁸⁴ *The Inside-Out Beauty Book* was “a popular Christian grooming guide first published in 1978.” Griffith, 196.

⁸⁵ *Revolve: The Complete New Testament*, Thomas Nelson, 2003.

well-coiffed men and women ready to help their readers lose weight, get out of debt, find a mate, or raise godly children – all in the name of growing closer to God. For example, Beth Moore’s Bible study *So Long, Insecurity* featured Moore’s fully made-up face complete with earrings, a fashionable haircut, and highlights.⁸⁶ Like so many other evangelists, Moore’s striking good looks helped her appeal to broad audiences. Some Christians viewed overweight Christian leaders with suspicion, believing them to be lazy or lacking in self-control.⁸⁷ And, if an overweight Christian dared to comment on beauty or fashion, they often found themselves criticized even further. For example, Victoria Weinstein, a Unitarian Universalist minister in Massachusetts, kept a blog under the pseudonym PeaceBang that offered professional advice for women clergy. This on-going project, “Beauty Tips For Ministers,” provided tips on subjects as diverse as “basic grooming issues,” “fighting frump,” and “make-up and skin care.” Weinstein, an overweight (though attractive by other cultural standards) single female minister, often drew criticism for her writing. Sometimes individuals criticized her for focusing on non-spiritual matters such as dress and makeup while others chastised her for commenting on fashion because of her weight. For example, one reader e-mailed her the following: “Let me share a harsh reality with you: you are fat. For someone who has to shop in the plus sizes section to criticize other clergy members for their appearance is

⁸⁶ Beth Moore, “So Long, Insecurity: You’ve Been a Bad Friend to Us,” accessed November 4, 2011, <http://www.solonginsecurity.com/>.

⁸⁷ This seems particularly true for women. Somehow it is hard to imagine a female Jerry Falwell.

hypocritical.”⁸⁸ Weinstein responded to his criticism as she does that of her other detractors: with grace and humor (and perhaps a bit of self-righteousness). Yet, her willingness to accept different body shapes aside, she wrote about the importance of clergy image, noting in the about section of her blog: “PeaceBang thinks of herself as the stage mother to the American clergy, and she wants ALL her babies to be stars! This is the gospel of Beauty Tips for Ministers: if clergy people believe that religious life is vital, relevant and beautiful, they should look the part.”⁸⁹ Weinstein, like her conservative counterparts (and her thinner ones) believed a pretty face, a professional wardrobe, and an overall look of togetherness was just the thing the church needed to present itself to a world in need of spiritual direction.⁹⁰

Regardless of the reason, all of these examples represent (to differing degrees) how Christians co-opted or reinterpreted mainstream ideals as religious. Each also accepted (again, to various degrees) cultural measures of success. Or, as Griffith argued they stood in a long line of Christians who influenced culture’s obsession with the body. Still, dangers lurked even in religiously motivated bodywork. Christian young people suffered from eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia in similar rates to American

⁸⁸ Victoria Weinstein, “More Fat Haters,” *Beauty Tips for Ministers* blog, posted October 14, 2011, accessed November 4, 2011, <http://beautytipsforministers.com/2011/10/14/more-fat-haters/#comments>.

⁸⁹ Weinstein, “About This Ministry,” accessed February 24, 2014, <http://beautytipsforministers.com/about-this-blog/>.

⁹⁰ See also Cassie, Lindsay, and Megan, “Steeple & Stiletto: Life In Between,” accessed February 24, 2014, <http://steepleandstiletto.com/>. This was another blog of women in ministry who discuss fashion; the last post was over a year ago.

teenagers in general. And, as Griffith pointed out, “The pressure to be thin and beautiful may be even greater for teens in the devotional world for the same reasons it is so considerable among their older female counterparts: the duty to serve as a glowing witness to Christ’s transformative power.”⁹¹ This same pressure played a role among Christians who participated in pageants. Often their congregations were silent or even encouraging of young women and their body projects.

Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, looks mattered. Attractive individuals proved more successful than those who were less beautiful. It makes sense that many Christians wanted to convey that they were productive, good-looking individuals. Like a college campus, they put their best foot forward, allowing if not requiring that individuals in positions of church leadership possessed a certain look. From assigning religious meaning to culturally desirable traits to reinterpreting scriptural teachings on the body, some Christians accepted cultural markers of success all in the guise of being more spiritual. For these Christians, a perfect body or having a body “project” testified to their religious devotion, allowing them to witness to God’s work in their lives. For some, it also served as a tool for evangelism, a way of welcoming others into the fold who wanted to achieve this polished, successful look.

⁹¹ Griffith, 245.

Perfectly Performed Beauty: Pageants as Sites for Determining Success

While neither the pervasive persistence of beauty culture nor the power beauty conveys fully explains the prevalence of pageants, it does suggest that such competitions fit well in America's beauty-obsessed culture. These contests accepted appearance ideals and rewarded the girls and young women that embraced them. Bourdieu's language of distinction and cultural capital proved useful in understanding this trend. Since society determined the aesthetic qualities desirable, the tastes of individuals within particular classes and groups were predetermined. These distinctions were reinforced in everyday life. Performances of these ideals within pageant culture reinscribed deeply entrenched societal ideals.⁹²

To be sure, pageants such as Miss America capitalized on the "whole woman" ideal that became prevalent in the second half of the twentieth century. The Miss America competition acknowledged the many aspects of true womanhood in America and welcomed the opportunity to further the acceptance of this well roundedness. Yet, physical attractiveness remained critical for success in pageantry. And as Rhode's research demonstrated, most women must conform to current beauty expectations to advance their careers whether they be modeling or practicing law.⁹³ The Miss America

⁹² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁹³ Rhode, 6.

Pageant offered a boot camp of sorts to explore and perfect the qualities that society deemed most desirable. Women literally performed the roles expected of them.

Pageants functioned as a sort of survival of the fittest. Young women who experienced success in the pageant world gained confidence that they could meet the rigid demands placed on women's bodies in the workforce. And yet, Miss America winners noted consistently that their win was not just about their looks. They longed to be respected beyond their dress size, to be recognized for their accomplishments on the stage or their successes as entrepreneurs.⁹⁴ But thus far no one has succeeded in becoming Miss America without good looks. Overall, the Miss America Pageant has not valued diversity in size, shape, and "look." More often, it defined true womanhood by modeling cultural norms for the feminine form, claiming the winner to all Americans as "your ideal."⁹⁵

This ideal, not surprisingly, encompassed those characteristics deemed beautiful by the culture. Hairstyles, dress designs, and swimwear changed with the fashion tides, but consistently winners possessed the four standard characteristics of beauty noted by Rhodes: facial and body symmetry, a clear complexion, and youth. They also embodied

⁹⁴ See, for example, the stories in Penny Pearlman, *Pretty Smart: Lessons From Our Miss Americas* (Bloomington, Indiana: AuthorHouse, 2009) and the narratives conveyed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

⁹⁵ Bernie Wayne, *Miss America* theme song, 1955.

thinness.⁹⁶ With the pageant's emphasis on physical fitness, contestants routinely spoke of diet and exercise as a primary form of preparation. Winners discussed doing whatever it took to win. This went far beyond buying a gown currently in vogue (though there is much to say there too). For example, many contestants in the latter part of the 20th century achieved a perfectly tanned body through sunbathing, sunless tanners, or tanning beds. Others ensured cleavage by taping their breasts together. Teresa Scanlon, Miss America 2011, wore a wig for the competition to give her the long blonde locks she (and America) desired.⁹⁷

Many contestants saw this intense training as akin to that endured by professional athletes. It could also be likened to training for a marathon. Regardless, many did not seem to mind the long hours of preparation, seeing it as valuable to their life beyond the Miss America stage. In fact, many Miss America winners utilized their title to open doors to successful careers in fields from sports broadcasting to acting. Others used the scholarship money they won to pay for medical school, law school, and divinity school. Still others embraced their role as a Miss America as a lifelong event, using the title as a launching pad for a career in motivational speaking, writing, or performing. As I introduce these women, I strive to show that Miss America participants

⁹⁶ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

⁹⁷ Katelyn Beaty, "Miss America and the Bikini Question," *Her.meneutics* blog, January 2011, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2011/january/miss-america-and-bikini-question.html?paging=off>.

(and especially the winners) fulfilled and perpetuated beauty ideals in America as they found empowerment in the process. In addition, I explore the religious lives of these contestants, noting how their beliefs informed their decision to be involved in pageants. Some even spoke of God's hand in making their Miss America dreams a reality, claiming their win to be an act of God.⁹⁸

Christians and the Miss America Pageant

When Sharlene Wells won the Miss America Pageant in 1985, just months after the publication of sexually explicit photos of Vanessa Williams (ex-Miss America 1984), many conjectured that she won because of her strong religious beliefs. Wells, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), was only the second LDS member to wear the crown. Her high moral caliber and good looks worked to reestablish a wholesome well-rounded image. For contestants, she, not Williams, was the ideal Miss America, the one who understood the subtle difference between celebrating a physically fit body and flaunting a sexy one. Participants' self-understanding of idealized womanhood demanded that the stereotypical view of pageant participants be revised to make room for the daughter of a church elder in the Mormon Church with stringent moral values and impeccable character, stellar grades, career ambitions, and a sports record in its ranks.

⁹⁸ Teresa Scanlan, "Miss America is Here: Why Am I Competing?," *Miss Nebraska 2010: Promoting Positive Body Image and Self-Acceptance, One Person at a Time Blog*, January 4, 2011, accessed January 29, 2014, <http://teresatravelsandtidbits.blogspot.com/2011/01/miss-america-is-here-why-am-i-competing.html>.

Many contestants in the Miss America contest were aware of the powerful cultural scripts that dictated that they be thin, pleasant, and attractive. Indeed, some of them expressed frustration with the negative stereotypes that characterized them as “shallow and spiteful,” citing themselves and their peers as exceptions to these labels. They argued that pageant participation offered them more than the hope of a crown. Perhaps most important, it provided an opportunity to earn much-needed scholarship money. Participants stressed the importance of these funds, noting that the Miss America Organization was the largest provider of scholarships to young women in the world. Former Governor Sarah Palin’s remarks about her participation in pageants highlighted this fact. In addition, the Rev. Nicole Lamarche (Miss California 2003) claimed that she had approximately \$30,000 less in loans thanks to her success in beauty contests.⁹⁹ Contestants’ motivations for pageant participation seemed to be driven by a variety of factors; their testimonies add to the picture of a “pageant girl.”

Still, the protests of the Miss America competition in the 1960s and a recent decline in pageant popularity demonstrated the power of the negative portrayal of pageants. Think, for example, of the popular understanding of “pageant girls” portrayed in the movies *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, *Miss Congeniality*, and *Little Miss Sunshine*. To be sure, there is truth in these critiques. However, ascribing to the belief that pageants were

⁹⁹ LaMarche noted, “I still owe \$40,000 in student loans. That’s more than I earn in a year. If it hadn’t been for Miss America, I would owe \$70,000.” Paul Gauvin, “Church Land Model Pastor, So To Speak,” *The Barnstable Patriot*, April 24, 2007, accessed March 14, 2014, http://www.barnstablepatriot.com/home2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12990&Itemid=5.

merely choruses of empty requests for world peace overlooks what the women (and the contests) claimed to be about. Through my interactions with contestants, I found that these cultural scripts did not adequately describe them or their motivation. In their pageant performances, survey responses, and conversations, it became clear that many saw themselves as religious actors, not victims, using pageants to reinterpret beauty as a religious ideal.

For many Christian participants, a religious script trumped the cultural script. They assigned meaning to many components of the pageant. When their religious script conflicted with the cultural one, young women negotiated the tensions by reinterpreting the event in religious terms. Here I will discuss only the swimsuit competition as it fits best with the pulchritude pageants demanded.

Despite how typical pageant scripts lent themselves to cooption by Christian women in search of ministry opportunities, there was one very obvious tension: women were not only judged on their community service platform or their ability to do well in an interview, public appearance, or talent performance. They were also scored on their bodies throughout the competition, but most notably in the swimsuit and evening wear portions. What did one do with the evening wear competition if they were a conservative evangelical Christian? Or, even more problematic, the swimsuit competition?

Religious mores about sexuality and display often came into conflict. In beauty contests, young women heralding modesty as a virtue, routinely appeared on stage in a bikini for the swimsuit competition. While Christian competitors responded to this portion of the contest in numerous ways, evidence indicated four primary ways that they “handled” the swimsuit competition.

When asked about what her least favorite thing about the Miss Alabama pageant was, one consultant responded, “Probably walking in a swimsuit in front of about 2,000 people!”¹⁰⁰ Some pageant contestants expressed contempt toward this portion of the pageant, citing it as “unnecessary” and claiming, “they show us off like cattle. There are other ways to see if we are physically fit.”¹⁰¹ Another young woman lamented “the constant focus on being outwardly beautiful and the way women compare themselves with other [led] to feelings of inferiority.”¹⁰² However they all recognized that competing in this phase was necessary to win the crown. So, put simply: they grinned and bore it. Some said: this is the shortest part of the competition and in some ways the easiest. Swimwear was only thirty seconds.

Other contestants reinterpreted the swimsuit competition as a way to display that they had taken seriously God’s commandment to treat their bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. They claimed that since their bodies are God’s temples, they should care

¹⁰⁰ Miss Alabama survey response.

¹⁰¹ Miss Alabama survey response.

¹⁰² Miss Alabama survey response.

about its physical condition. Much like Marie Griffith described her work on the Christian diet culture, contestants viewed the body as something to be tamed; to glorify God with one's body, one must discipline the body through diet and exercise. By taking seriously God's demand to love God with their whole heart, body, soul, and mind, these women asserted that they were glorifying God with their bodies. The swimsuit competition offered them a vehicle for demonstrating that. Shelli Renee Yoder, Miss Illinois 1992 and now an opponent of pageants wrote, "The possibility of achieving perfection arrested me and seemed to clarify the Gospel of Matthew's prescription, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'"¹⁰³ Yoder's pursuit of perfection landed her a preliminary swimsuit award and second runner-up to Miss America. Like others, she interpreted the focus on the body as another arena in which to achieve the perfection demanded by God.

Some participants viewed the swimsuit competition as a way to make a faith statement. Take, for example, Miss Utah 2007, Katie Millar. Millar, a Mormon, made headlines because of her choice to wear a one-piece swimsuit. She also followed a strict modesty code in all phases of competition. Millar was thrilled when she made it to the Top Ten, thinking, "I get to wear my one piece swimsuit on national TV and hopefully a

¹⁰³ Shelli Yoder, "Pursuing a Crown of Perfection: A Journey from Atlantic City to Vanderbilt University Divinity School," *The Spire* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2002).

girl will see that she doesn't have to show a lot of skin to get attention or do well in society today."¹⁰⁴ As noted above, few contestants choose this route.

Finally, some Christian participants saw no tension between baring their body and testifying to their faith. They saw no need to complain, justify, or reinterpret.¹⁰⁵ Regardless of one's internal motivations, all of the contestants donned a swimsuit of some sort and walked across the stage. Some even found cause to celebrate it. This reaction held true across competition categories. Contestants expressed gratefulness for the chance to minister through their pageant participation.

To be sure, self explanation was not the only way to understand what took place during the swimsuit competition or any other phase of the pageant. Bourdieu might argue that women leveraged their cultural capital for a chance at greater reward or social mobility. Butler would contend that the women were participating in "stylized bodily acts" to construct gender. Since both sex and gender were socially constructed categories for Butler, they required constant reiteration. Pageants offered one very public example of gender being performed and thus created. This repetition of beauty norms and gender expectations served as both the acting out of one's gender and the

¹⁰⁴ Mary O'Hayes, "Miss Utah: 'She Doesn't have to Show a Lot of Skin,'" *Modestly Yours*, posted on February 7, 2007, accessed July 21, 2012,

http://blogs.modestlyyours.net/modestly_yours/2007/02/miss_utah_she_d.html.

¹⁰⁵ Matthew Barakat, "Teresa Scanlan, Miss America 2011, Finds Fit at Conservative Patrick Henry College," *Huffington Post*, September 7, 2013, accessed March 24, 2014,

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/07/teresa-scanlan-miss-america-patrick-henry-college_n_3886688.html?

creation of that gender. Gender was, to use Butler's terms, both performed and performative.¹⁰⁶

Beauty pageant contestants understood themselves as actors and not subjects that were acted upon. Bourdieu and Butler viewed participants as societal reflectors that demonstrated the pervasiveness of culturally inscribed notions of gender, especially beauty. Participant confessions helped the women make sense of their individual decisions. For most, gender was a predetermined category that they were celebrating. Butler and Bourdieu provided insight into what might be happening externally to explain the pageant phenomenon. All aided in unpacking the multiple layers at work on stage.

Conclusion

American Christians in the 20th century found themselves engulfed in a consumer culture obsessed with beauty. They responded in various ways to the emphases placed on women's bodies by everything from music videos to lipstick advertisements. Some insisted upon modesty as a virtue, urging the young women within their fold to focus on matters of the heart. Others insisted that God wanted Christians to take care of their bodies through diet and exercise, insisting that God desired thinness. Still others blurred the lines a bit by insisting that beauty was a gift

¹⁰⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), Preface, Part III.

from God that came in many forms. All seemed to walk the delicate soul versus body line that plagued the earliest of Christians. Finally, even some of the most modest of Christians praised their daughters when they were successful in pageants (e.g., Mormon and Pentecostal). Christian participation in beauty pageants offers a window to explore how Christian views about women's bodies played out (quite literally) on the stage.

As noted, religion and beauty pageants, Christianity in particular, enjoyed a complicated history in the United States. This, however, was not the end of the story. In time, Christians became increasingly comfortable with their daughters donning swimsuits and competing for scholarship dollars. Indeed many Americans assumed Miss America should be Christian. Christian identity became another part of America's ideal for womanhood. The position of Miss America proved a coveted role not only for young women hoping for a career on the stage, but also for those seeking employment as nurses, teachers, ministers, and homemakers. And Christians of all stripes celebrated when one of "theirs" won the coveted crown.

This celebration of secular beauty seems odd, especially for more conservative Christians who prided themselves on being otherworldly. In the chapters that follow, I explore the complex, unexpected intersection between Christianity and the Miss America pageant. From a Catholic priest who encouraged a parishioner to compete to a Unitarian minister in training trying to pay for seminary, the story is full of ironies. Along the way, I highlight four themes that offered incentive for participants: prizes,

pleasure, performance, and purpose. The next chapter, "Purpose-Driven Pageantry" investigates the support Christian winners received from their church communities.

3. Purpose Driven Pageantry

As a church, we see the sovereignty of God in her selection as Miss America. We believe that, as with Esther, Erika has been called to the kingdom for such a time as this.

Gary W. Grogan, Pastor of Urbana Assembly of God, 2003¹⁰⁷

Introduction

Pageants provoked controversy. On September 7, 1968, the Atlantic City Boardwalk experienced the best-known protest against the Miss America Pageant. The women's movement was not, however, the first or the last group to criticize the nation's premier beauty contest. The competition faced critics almost from its inception. Religious and women's groups alike admonished participants, sponsors, and casual supporters, believing the competitions detrimental to the young women participants as well as to society at large. Many argued that their constituents should stay away from these tawdry flesh shows and some worked to shut pageants down altogether.¹⁰⁸ But this adversarial relationship between churches and pageants did not last forever.

¹⁰⁷ John W. Kennedy, "Erika Harold: Miss America for Such a Time as This," *Pentecostal Evangel*, February 23, 2003, accessed January 29, 2014, http://pentecostalevangel.ag.org/Articles2003/4633_missamerica.cfm.

¹⁰⁸ "Attacks Bathing Review: Preacher Says Atlantic City Event Endangers Youthful Morals," *The New York Times* (11 September 1923): 15; "Criticism Well Deserved," *The New York Times* (21 April 1924): 16; "Attack Beauty Pageant: Philadelphia Women Sign Protest to Atlantic City Authorities," *The New York Times* (1 March 1927): 3; "Women Open Fight on Beauty Pageant: Tell Atlantic City Officials That Contests Harm Entrants and Commercialize Shore," *The New York Times* (18 November 1927): 12; "Bishop Condemns Beauty Pageant," *The New York Times* (20 November 1927):10; A.R. Riverol, *Live From Atlantic City: A History of the Miss America Pageant* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992) and Frank Deford, *There She Is: The Life and Times of Miss America* (New York: Viking Press, 1971).

Beginning in 1935, changes to the Miss America contest prompted an almost genial relationship between Christians and the Miss America program. As time marched on, the harsh religious critiques of the early years seemed a thing of the past. To be sure, the relationship between religion and beauty contests was never a monolithic one. A general shift, however, from taboo to acceptable did occur among evangelicals as the competition sought to rebrand itself as a respectable enterprise. As noted, the rising social status of contestants, which made exhibition tolerable, allowed evangelicals' growing acceptance of it. In addition, a watershed moment in 1965 seemingly sealed the fate of the organization and conservative Christians forever. The Miss America pageant got religion. When Miss America 1965 spoke about her Bible in response to an onstage question, she encouraged contestants after her to do the same. From that point on, it became not only accepted, but also common that Miss America would both possess and profess her faith. The broader cultural respectability achieved by the competition made this phenomenon possible.

Miss America 1975, Shirley Cothran (Baptist), Miss America 1980, Cheryl Prewitt (Pentecostal), Miss America 2001, Angela Perez Baraquio (Catholic), and Miss America 2007, Lauren Nelson (United Methodist) were just four of the many winners that saw pageantry as a religious opportunity. Just as telling, pageantry became increasingly accepted within Christian communities as leaders, laypeople, and the Christian media celebrated Christian winners. When the Miss America Pageant mandated that

contestants adopt a platform for their year of service (1989), the link between church and pageant grew even stronger as contestants used the opportunity to live out their faith on the national stage.

In this chapter, I inspect the correlation between the institutions of church and pageant. First, I outline the shifting relationship between religion and the Miss America competition from 1921 through 1965. Second, I document an amicable relationship between them post-1965, showing how religious communities supported “their” contestants. Third, I cite three broader cultural trends that offer context for understanding this unlikely relationship. They help explain the overwhelming support that Miss America participants received from a segment American Christians. Finally, I consider the continued critique of pageants by some voices within the Christian community.

Making Pageants Palatable: Miss America and Religion, 1921-1965

In the early years, controversy plagued the pageant and its contestants. As noted, Miss America began in Atlantic City in 1921 in an effort to keep tourists in the city past the Labor Day holiday. The pageant groomed, promoted, and celebrated idealized femininity in its contestants and, by extension, celebrated that ideal within the culture at large. Yet many disapproved of its mission. Many complained that the contest was

immoral and that it encouraged women to make poor choices.¹⁰⁹ Others questioned the reputation of young women that entered such a contest or concluded that even “good girls” found themselves corrupted by pageantry.

Many religious groups published public statements denouncing beauty pageants. As the historian Sarah Banet-Weiser argued, “Although Victorian norms and conventions of womanhood and femininity more or less relaxed during the 1920s, other freedoms that women sought...led to a general nationwide anxiety over the apparently loose morals that middle-class women were adopting, and this anxiety extended to the Atlantic City beauty pageant.”¹¹⁰ For example, Southern Baptists passed a “Resolution on Beauty Contests” in 1926 that stated:

Whereas, The purity and sanctity of the home depends upon a proper respect for and safeguarding of our girls; and

Whereas, “Beauty contests” and so-called “bathing revues” are evil and evil only, and tend to lower true and genuine respect for womanhood, emphasizing and displaying only purely physical charm above spiritual and intellectual attainments,

Therefore, We, the Southern Baptist Convention do deplore and condemn all such contests and revues.¹¹¹

This sentiment was common among religious groups in the early decades of the twentieth century who declared the pageant “damaging to the morals of men, women

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., See also, Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

¹¹⁰ Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, 37.

¹¹¹ Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution passed at the Southern Baptist Convention, 1926,” *SBC Resolutions*, May 1926, accessed July 18, 2012, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=280>.

and children.”¹¹² Religious voices of disapproval joined those of women’s groups such as the Atlantic County Federation of Church Women. In a resolution to the City Commission and Pageant directors, they wrote, “We are persuaded that the moral effect on the young women entrants and the reaction generally is not a wholesome one.”¹¹³ As the historian Riverol noted, “For all its lucrative appeal, the Miss America Pageant of the 1920s became the center of criticism. It was condemned by civic and religious organizations for not only being indecent, but also because the contest exploited women for pecuniary purposes, while at the same time corrupting them through rivalry and competition.”¹¹⁴ Not surprisingly, these arguments sound similar to those made later in the century by feminists in their attack of the beauty revue. In contrast to the 1968 feminist protest of the pageant, however, these early critiques helped shut the pageant down for five years.¹¹⁵

The scandal that seemed to follow the competition and its winners failed to encourage the kind of support pageant organizers desired. When the Miss America contest took a brief hiatus from 1928-1932, it appeared that religious organizations and

¹¹² “Bishop Condemns Beauty Pageant.”

¹¹³ “Women Open Fight on Beauty Pageant: Tell Atlantic City Officials That Contests Harm Entrants and Commercialize Shore.” See also Deford, *There She Is*, 270.

¹¹⁴ Riverol, *Live From Atlantic City*, 24. See also “Bishop Condemns Beauty Pageant” and “Attacks Bathing Review: Preacher Says Atlantic City Event Endangers Youthful Morals.”

¹¹⁵ Deford, *There She Is*, 129ff; Riverol, *Live From Atlantic City*, 23-24. As noted, no pageant took place from 1928-1932. It was revived in 1933, but canceled again in 1934. It returned for a makeover in 1935 and celebrated its 90th anniversary in 2011. To be sure, the reasons for the cancellation of the pageant were numerous. Accusations that the pageant was not a respectable enterprise and loss of financial backing by Atlantic City businessmen were among the factors that led to its brief hiatus.

women's groups (and morality) had won.¹¹⁶ This victory proved short-lived as in 1933 many businessmen in Atlantic City rallied support to bring the pageant back. The contest continued to struggle amidst criticism that the young women were not of sound character or that the bathing attire was inappropriate.¹¹⁷ Indeed, Miss America 1933 Marian Bergeron, was "asked to leave her Catholic high school for getting 'entirely too much undue publicity.'"¹¹⁸

The year 1935, however, marked a new era in Miss America pageant history, one in which the pageant organizers sought to remake the contest into a reputable enterprise. Eddie Corcoran hired Lenora Slaughter, a member of the St. Petersburg Florida Chamber of Commerce staff (and the nation's only female pageant director) to produce the pageant. Allegedly, Slaughter's boss said, "Well, you ought to go up there and show those damn Yankees how to do a *real* job with a pageant!"¹¹⁹ And so it was that Slaughter moved to Atlantic City in 1935 determined to recreate the pageant into something of which the nation could be proud. Making pageants more palatable to

¹¹⁶ "Atlantic City to Drop Its Outdoor Pageant: Only Roller Chair Parade to Be Retained-Beauties Will Wear Evening Gowns," *The New York Times*, March 12, 1928.

¹¹⁷ Deford, *There She Is*, 129ff. The lives of early winners did not always fit the stereotypically harsh profile. To be sure, some of the winners, throughout its history, desired the glamour of Hollywood and stardom, but not all early Miss Americas fit this mold. Some eschewed makeup, taught Sunday School, and recited Bible verses. See "Most Beautiful Girl Avoids All Cosmetics: Mary Katharine Campbell Wins New Test in Fighting Off Effects of a Cold," *The New York Times*, September 13, 1922, 14; Deford, 121; "1920's Decade in Review," Miss America 1927, Lois Delander, Miss America website, accessed February 19, 2014, <http://www.missamerica.org/our-miss-americas/1920/review.aspx#>.

¹¹⁸ Michelle Tauber et al., "American Beauties: 80 Years," *People*, October 16, 2000, 143.

¹¹⁹ Ann-Marie Bivans, *Miss America: In Pursuit of the Crown, The Complete Guide to the Miss America Pageant* (New York: MasterMedia Limited, 1991), 12-13. Slaughter worked with the Miss America Pageant in some capacity from 1935-1967.

Christians required changes. A Southern Baptist, Slaughter knew the importance of image and worked to create a new, more wholesome Miss America.

Part of Slaughter's genius involved appealing to religious and women's organizations for support. She planned "to out-women's club the women's club," and she did.¹²⁰ Slaughter made the Miss America competition the social event with which everyone wanted to be associated. She convinced Mrs. Charles D. White, the mayor of Atlantic City's wife and a Quaker, to lead the new hostess committee that she instituted to "protect" the girls. "The Quakerest of Quakers," according to Slaughter, White worked with Slaughter to sanitize the pageant. As Slaughter stated, "My training had always been working with civic leaders and proper people and I realized that the best way to protect the Pageant was to protect the girls from scandal, and the best way to do that was to get the best people in town on my side."¹²¹ Slaughter managed to do just that, making it an honor to serve as a hostess, judge, or board member. The changes she instituted had the added benefit of ensuring few, if any, charges of misconduct.¹²²

In addition to securing sponsors for the national competition, Slaughter worked to make the local pageants less commercial and more community-centered. She believed

¹²⁰ Susan Dworkin, *Miss America, 1945: Bess Myerson and the Year That Changed Our Lives* (New York: New Market Press, 1987, 2000), 90.

¹²¹ Deford, *There She Is*, 270-71. Slaughter's first Quaker board member, J. Haines Lippincott of the Chalfonte-Haddon Hall Hotels, was the one who contacted Mrs. Charles D. White for Slaughter. White accepted the position as head of the hostess committee, provided she was allowed complete control of it.

¹²² Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, 39. Deford, *There She Is*, 270ff.

she could increase the respectability of the enterprise. She recalled the mistake of the director prior to her:

The director...was running these pageants all over the country in amusement parks, fairs, things like that. In the state contests they had the girls parading around in swimsuits in front of the theater before the pageant. It was awful. I wanted to throw out all the cheap promotions. I said I believe I can get civic organizations to run the pageants and we can get the class of girl that we should have.¹²³

Slaughter managed to do just that, rallying support in small towns across the country. In fact, she successfully promoted a relationship between the Jaycees and the local competitions. She quipped, "What better than to have the ideal men of America run a pageant for the ideal women?"¹²⁴ While this partnership between the "ideal" men and women did not catch on nationwide or continue to 2011, the beauty contest remained extricated from "commercial" ventures such as theaters and amusement parks. Owing in large part to Lenora Slaughter's vision, the national pageant secured a place within the hearts of rank and file Americans, religious constituents included.

Slaughter's reform efforts, however, involved more procuring new sponsors. She reworked the pageant from the inside out. During her tenure, she established a rule that banned contestants from visiting bars and nightclubs, instituted curfews, and forbade contestants to speak to any man alone. In an effort to emphasize the accomplishments of

¹²³ Dworkin, *Miss America, 1945*, 96.

¹²⁴ Deford, *There She Is*, 154.

the contestants, she also added a talent component to the competition.¹²⁵ Slaughter swapped the word “bathing suit” in favor of “swimsuit” in an effort to play up athleticism rather than sensuality and instituted scholarships for winners as women fought to gain a place in higher education.¹²⁶ Christians felt increasingly at home in the pageant, as Slaughter improved it. Many who once opposed the pageants became its strongest allies.¹²⁷ Under her leadership, it evolved from a struggling sideshow to a freestanding organization attractive to many American women, including Christian women. Slaughter’s vision rescued the competition and its participants from many of the earlier critiques of misconduct and salaciousness by providing greater structure. Miss America did not become a household name (or a saintly role model) overnight, but many of Slaughter’s “girls” as she called them worked toward making the role more than a pretty face during this transitional period.

Jean Bartel, Miss America 1943, promoted this new, upright image for the competition and its participants. A Christian Scientist, she encapsulated everything Slaughter hoped for in a pageant winner: moral, talented, civic-minded, a college student, and, of course, beautiful. As Bartel recounted, “There was a very low expectation of the girls in the contest in those years. We weren’t automatically

¹²⁵ Bivans, *Miss America: In Pursuit of the Crown*, 13-14.

¹²⁶ Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, 37-40.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 37ff.

respected—that took a long time.”¹²⁸ During her year of service, Bartel earned the respect she desired. Promoted as “The Girl Back Home,” during her tour to promote the war efforts she sold two and one-half million dollars worth of war bonds, mostly to women. People loved her. During this period of pageant history, specifics of one’s religion remained largely a private affair, opting instead for votes of more general morality. Even the press consistently deemed Bartel “wholesome.” As Deford recounted, “No matter how many times it happens, the press finds itself surprised every time a beauty pageant winner is something other than a classic dumb blonde. They wrote about and interviewed Jean endlessly...”¹²⁹ The United States Treasury Department honored her as the individual who sold the most Series E Bonds that year. The new face of Miss America was born.¹³⁰

Bartel’s “wholesomeness,” though remarkably good publicity, had its drawbacks. Because of her strict adherence to Christian Science teachings about the illusion of the sickness of the body, Bartel refused to see a doctor when she became ill with pneumonia. Slaughter, ever a savvy businesswoman, convinced a doctor to pose as a newspaperman in order to diagnose Bartel and coaxed Bartel to fulfill her duties to the

¹²⁸ Dworkin, *Miss America, 1945*, 98-99.

¹²⁹ Deford, *There She Is*, 157. “No matter how many times it happens, the press finds itself surprised every time a beauty pageant winner is something other than a classic dumb blonde. They wrote about and interviewed Jean endlessly. ‘Oh God,’ she says, ‘they would just all always call me *wholesome*.’ She was a hit everywhere she went, with everyone.”

¹³⁰ Dworkin, *Miss America, 1945*, 98-99; Deford, *There She Is*, 157-58. Deford also argued that Bartel was the first Miss America that really won the hearts of women. Women bought over eighty percent of the war bonds Bartel sold.

press even though sick. After receiving a prescription from the doctor-turned-journalist, Slaughter gave Bartel penicillin in her orange juice.¹³¹ Not surprisingly, she recovered. It appeared that the respect for Miss America's privacy, even her religious expression, had its limits.

Bartel's work during her year of service helped rebrand the Miss America program. In addition to sanitizing Miss America's image, she helped introduce the college scholarships for which the pageant became famous.¹³² In fact, according to the sportswriter and journalist Frank Deford, "she must be, in any ranking of Miss Americas, unquestionably declared the most important one. Everything changed because of her example." Slaughter offered Bartel equal praise, saying: "Every succeeding Miss America owes her the greatest debt."¹³³ Bartel's service as Miss America helped Slaughter realize that her vision for the pageant as a "rare entertainment venue for 'respectable' girls" was possible.¹³⁴ Slaughter's reform efforts curtailed the large number of religious critiques of the pageant and, with the help of "her" winners she, "picked the pageant up by its bathing suit straps and put it in an evening gown."¹³⁵ That is not to say that the pageant was free from scandal and controversy for the remainder of

¹³¹ Deford, *There She Is*, 275-76.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 303, 158-59. See also Miss America, "1943: Jean Bartel," accessed July 18, 2012, <http://missamerica.org/our-miss-americas/1940/1943.aspx>.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹³⁴ Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, 39.

¹³⁵ Bess Myerson, quoted in Michael Yockel, "Lenora Slaughter Fropart, the doyenne of the American Beauty Pageant," *New York Press*, January 31, 2001, accessed February 19, 2014, <http://nypress.com/lenora-slaughter-frapart-the-doyenne-of-the-american-beauty-pageant/>.

its history, of course, but Bartel represented a significant step in the direction of Slaughter's vision.

The first Miss America to benefit from the newly instituted scholarship program was also the first Jewish Miss America, Miss America, 1945. Bess Myerson, a New York contestant, entered the pageant because of the five thousand dollar scholarship. Though not necessarily credited with making the pageant more "wholesome," Myerson played a crucial role in making it more respectable. As the first college graduate to win, she represented a new era in pageant queens, one allured by the promise of education more than the temptation of Hollywood. When Slaughter met her, Myerson was competing in the Miss New York City Pageant. Slaughter liked what she saw, but she knew there might be a problem. She asked Myerson to change her name to something more suitable for show business like Beth Merrick. As Myerson noted in PBS's Documentary of Miss America:

Lenora Slaughter said my name was not a good name for show business. And I said well, you know I have no intention of going into show business...I said...the problem is that I'm Jewish, yes? And with that kind of name it'll be quite obvious to everyone else that I'm Jewish. And you don't want to have to deal with a Jewish Miss America. And that really was the bottom line. I said I can't change my name. You have to understand. I cannot change my name. I live in a building with two hundred and fifty Jewish families. The Sholom Aleichem apartment houses. If I should win, I want everybody to know that I'm the daughter of Louie and Bella Myerson.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ *Miss America: A Documentary Film*, DVD, Directed by Lisa Ades. (Brooklyn: Clio Inc. and Orchard Films, 2001).

She kept her name.¹³⁷ Anti-Semitism plagued the nation in 1945 and the pageant proved no exception. Many sponsors did not want a Jewish winner and some judges received anonymous phone calls threatening them if they continued voting for Myerson.¹³⁸

Myerson took home the crown and the scholarship, much to the delight of Jewish citizens across the United States.¹³⁹ Not everyone was pleased with Myerson as the face of American womanhood, however. She thought she would spend her year touring the nation and promoting pageant sponsors, as Bartel had done, “But after an obligatory four-week performance tour, where drunks in the audience demanded she play the piano in her bathing suit, there were few requests for her time. None of the sponsors wanted a Jewish girl – even a Jewish Miss America – posing with their products.”¹⁴⁰ Myerson experienced exclusion and hatred throughout the year from not being allowed in country clubs to not being allowed to visit war veterans. For example, one mother of a war veteran refused to let Myerson see her son, saying, “I don’t want you near him. Because of the Jews, we got into this war. Because of the damn Jews, my boy was maimed. We would have been better off if Hitler had killed every last one of your

¹³⁷ Dworkin, *Miss America, 1945*, 92-94.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 145-49.

¹³⁹ According to historian Vicki Gold Levi, “Bess was the answer to every Jewish woman's dream. Her win was such a multilevel symbol. It was a symbol of a certain statement against anti-Semitism. It was a symbol of a victory against Hitler. It was a symbol for women, and when she won there was great celebration in our house. It was like when Roosevelt won or something.” Previous quotation is from the documentary on the Miss America Pageant.

¹⁴⁰ Narrator, *Miss America*, DVD.

people.”¹⁴¹ Myerson handled this rejection and others with the poise expected of a Miss America, but her reign proved tumultuous.¹⁴² Nevertheless, Myerson represented an important moment in the pageant’s, and the nation’s history. In 2011, she remained the only Jewish Miss America, though others competed.

And so it was that the contest remained primarily a Christian, or at least culturally Christian, endeavor. Such affiliations went largely unacknowledged, however, until 1965. It is possible, of course, that no one spoke about the Christian identity of contestants because it was presupposed. For example, Barbara Jo Walker, a Methodist Sunday School teacher and Miss America 1947 sang and spoke at the Southern Baptist Convention in May 1948. However, in a newspaper article where she criticized falsies and called two-piece swimsuits a “matter of morals” her religious affiliation went unnoted by both her and the reporter.¹⁴³ But, as the social movements of the 1960s swept the nation, one contestant emerged to testify.

¹⁴¹ Dworkin, *Miss America, 1945*, 180-81.

¹⁴² Banet-Weiser offers a thorough and convincing argument that Myerson’s “white ethnicity did not threaten the nationalist hold that whiteness commands, and her Jewish identity justified and legitimated the presence of U.S. soldiers overseas” (163). Of importance here, however, is the impact that her difference exerted on her reign as Miss America. Myerson’s Judaism marked her and threatened the pageant as some pageant sponsors pulled their support. I see her as the exception that proves the rule. For more, see Chapter Five, “The Representational Politics of Whiteness and the National Body: Bess Myerson, Miss America 1945, and Heather Whitestone, Miss America 1995” in *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*. See also Dworkin, *Miss America, 1945*.

¹⁴³ C. E. Bryant, “Miss America to Sing on Convention Program,” *Baptist Press*, February 12, 1948, accessed February 20, 2014, <http://media.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/177,12-Feb-1948.pdf>; “They’re Not for Her: Miss America, Abroad, Gives Falsies a Frown,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 1949, 5.

As noted, Miss America 1965, Vonda Kay Van Dyke, was the first winner to speak about her faith publicly and the audience responded enthusiastically. When officials suggested that she had broken her contract, Van Dyke reminded them that Parks had broached the topic of religion. She agreed, however, not to talk about religion during her year of service unless someone brought it up. Her religion, however, became the characteristic for which Van Dyke was best known. Everywhere she went individuals asked her about her Christianity.¹⁴⁴ Van Dyke found herself with many religious speaking engagements including church events and Youth for Christ rallies.¹⁴⁵ Eventually pageant officials allowed contestants to speak openly about their faith during the contest and subsequent year of service.¹⁴⁶ Van Dyke paved the way.

An unlikely partnership: The Miss America Pageant and American Christians, 1965-2011

This collaborative (though largely unpublicized) relationship between mostly conservative Christians and pageantry remained past Slaughter's tenure and continued to 2011. To be sure, evangelicals were not the only ones who participated. The story, however, remained a largely conservative one. Other Christian traditions, especially Catholic, will be noted as appropriate. Participation in pageants was often not only tolerated, but also celebrated by many religious communities. In the latter half of the

¹⁴⁴ John W. Kennedy, "Miss (Christian) America," *Christianity Today International*, 2003.

¹⁴⁵ Deford, *There She Is*, 274.

¹⁴⁶ Kennedy, "Miss (Christian) America."

twentieth century and into the twenty-first, conservative denominations praised pageant participation far more than they condemned it. Instead, names of the women competing were placed on prayer lists, church members attended the pageants to support contestants, and churches sponsored ads in the pageant program books. Articles about the winners appeared in denominational publications and winners were invited to speak or share their talent at church events. Christian programs, both television and radio, interviewed participants, praising the young women for standing up for their convictions. Many in the Christian community pushed past former prejudices to join forces with this most unlikely organization. Chapter Four, "Pageant Prayers," focuses specifically on the contestants and their testimonies. Here I cast the net wider to consider the support for beauty contests, and especially pageant participants, among Christian faith communities.

At a very basic level, churches supported pageant participants with prayers, cards, and attendance at competitions. Like proud parents, they cheered for their contestants regardless of the outcome. Ads served as one venue for these messages. Stephanie Shelton's church, the congregation at Tuscaloosa, for example, confessed that they were "praying for [her] and wishing [her] the best at Miss Alabama!"¹⁴⁷ Likewise, Heather Hendrickson's church, The Living Word Church of Sylacauga, wrote, "Heather, We have watched you grow and mature into a vessel fit for the Master's use. You are a

¹⁴⁷ *Miss Alabama Program*, 2010, n.p.

blessing. We love you.”¹⁴⁸ Ads were not the only means of conveying church support, but they remained one of the most visible. More personal expressions of well wishes also took place. Julie Payne (Miss Oklahoma 1998) prayed with her parents before the Miss America competition. She also received a fax from her home church and a “prayergram” from First Baptist Church in Woodward, Oklahoma while away at the pageant.¹⁴⁹ Contestants experienced congratulations and support from congregations and school religious groups.

Indeed a look through state program books in an evangelical-saturated state such as Alabama surfaced myriad church advertisements. These pages offered scriptural admonitions to pageant supporters in addition to heralding their picks for the state crown. For example, First Baptist Church of Spanish Fort sponsored a one-page ad in the 2000 Miss Alabama program book that featured Christin Kelly, Miss University of Mobile. At the bottom of the page, they included Matthew 5:16: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven,” as well as a message of encouragement for Kelly that read, “We at First Baptist Church of Spanish Fort love you and wish you the very best.”¹⁵⁰ A 2003 ad from Bishop Jim Lowe and the Guiding Light Church offered Proverbs 16:3: “Commit to the Lord whatever you

¹⁴⁸ *Miss Alabama Program*, 1999, n.p.

¹⁴⁹ Dana Williamson, “Miss Oklahoma wants to spend year sharing faith with youth,” *Baptist Press*, posted September 29, 1998, accessed July 19, 2012, <http://www.sbcbaptistpress.org/bpnews.asp?id=2784>.

¹⁵⁰ *Miss Alabama Program*, 2000, n.p.

do, and your plans will succeed.”¹⁵¹ One 2007 church ad for Lauren Womble (Miss Clay-Chalkville) took the opportunity to list all of its Miss Alabama winners. It included no scripture passage, choosing instead to write, “North Park Baptist Church salutes all of our Miss Alabamas Julie Coons Williams, (1989) Resha Riggins Miles (1990), & Melinda Toole (2006) Congratulations Laurie Womble as you continue the winning tradition.”¹⁵² More important than the individual messages presented by church ads, however, was that numerous churches felt impelled to support their daughters in this way. Public praise of Christian participants represented a far cry from the 1926 Southern Baptist resolution condemning pageants.

In addition to the moral support given to contestants, Christians celebrated the crowning of their daughters. For example, Jamie Langley, Miss Alabama 2007, noted that she received a lot of backing from her fellowship at Trinity Baptist Church. “I got so many phone calls and letters and notes from people in my church. It’s been incredible, and I have felt very loved.”¹⁵³ The Baptist Church of the Covenant in Birmingham, where Deidre Downs (Miss America 2005) was a member, hosted a Miss America viewing party attended by fifty to seventy-five church members. Sarah Shelton, Downs’s pastor, remarked, “I think we all knew she was really good, but I think even she was surprised she won. We were all sitting on the edges of our seat – lots of cheering and lots

¹⁵¹ *Miss Alabama Program*, 2003, ad for Layla Carter, Miss Leeds Area, n.p.

¹⁵² *Miss Alabama Program*, 2007, n.p.

¹⁵³ Anna Swindle, “Roanoke Baptist wins Miss Alabama title,” *The Alabama Baptist*, June 28, 2007, 4.

of cell phones going. It was a lot of fun!"¹⁵⁴ Nearly 100 people gathered at Lawton-Centenary United Methodist Church to watch Miss America 2007, Lauren Nelson, compete.¹⁵⁵ Sometimes church members traveled to the Miss America competition. In 1996 Julie Smith, who would become Miss Alabama 1999, went to support fellow member Alison McCreary saying, "She's always willing to go the extra mile for people. We just wanted to be there for her."¹⁵⁶ *The Alabama Baptist* reported that "McCreary's public access as Miss Alabama is a great opportunity to share her faith."¹⁵⁷ Even the title of the article, "McCreary's faith shines bright even without top beauty crown," suggested God's hand in McCreary's remaining Miss Alabama instead of becoming Miss America.¹⁵⁸ Churches prized having someone represent them at the local, state, and national levels. They seemed to interpret their success and failure as part of God's perfect plan.

Partisans of other religions rallied to support their contestants too. One Jewish participant, Loren Galler Rabinowitz (Miss Massachusetts, 2010) competed at the 90th Anniversary Miss America competition in 2011. The granddaughter of Holocaust

¹⁵⁴ Bob Allen, "Miss America Member of CBF Church," *Ethics Daily Online*, posted on September 21, 2004, accessed July 19, 2012, <http://www.ethicsdaily.com/miss-america-member-of-cbf-church-cms-4741-printer>.

¹⁵⁵ Holly McCray, "God's Promises Guide Miss America," *The United Methodist Reporter*, posted on February 22, 2007, accessed June 20, 2012, <http://www.umportal.org/article.asp?id=1803>.

¹⁵⁶ Ann Maloney, "Back to work: McCreary has a year of Appearances to Come," *Times Daily*, September 16, 1996, 3A.

¹⁵⁷ Jill Lovett, "McCreary's faith shines bright even without top beauty crown," *The Alabama Baptist*, October 3, 1996, 7.

¹⁵⁸ A contestant kept her state crown and continued her year of service as Miss [State] Title if she did not win Miss America. If she won Miss America, the runner-up at the state pageant assumed the role of state representative with all the privileges and responsibilities it afforded.

survivors, Galler Rabinowitz was also a Harvard graduate and a former ice dancer. Like her Christian pageant sisters, she embraced her faith, fielding questions about “keeping kosher and her Conservadox Jewish lifestyle.”¹⁵⁹ As with Bess Myerson (Miss America, 1945), Galler Rabinowitz’s participation elicited comments and well wishes from Jews across the country. As Detroit rabbi Jason Miller noted, “While all of us from Metro Detroit will be hoping for another Miss Michigan to win the Miss America contest, Jewish people across the country will be pulling for Galler Rabinowitz.”¹⁶⁰ To be sure, these well wishes did not necessarily represent all Jews any more than Christian supporters of their contestants did. Of importance here, however, is that both groups organized encouragement for their daughters. Galler Rabinowitz failed to reach the finals, but she won the Miracle Maker Award for raising the most money for The Children’s Miracle Network, and, it seemed, the hearts of Jewish people across the country.¹⁶¹

Sometimes Christians took things a step further than merely supporting their daughters’ choice to participate. Some actively encouraged their youth to see the contests as an evangelism opportunity. Among the young women urged to compete by religious mentors was Miss America 2001 Angela Perez Baraquio (Miss Hawaii).

¹⁵⁹ Aimee Berg, “The Next Jewish Miss America?” *The Sisterhood: Where Jewish Women Converse on The Jewish Daily Forward*, posted on January 3, 2011, accessed July 19, 2012, <http://blogs.forward.com/sisterhood-blog/134400/the-next-jewish-miss-america/>.

¹⁶⁰ Rabbi Jason Miller, “Could there be a Jewish Miss America?” *Community Next Blog*, posted on January 5, 2011, accessed July 19, 2012, <http://www.communitynxt.com/blog/jewish-miss-america/>.

¹⁶¹ Loren Galler Rabinowitz also competed in the Miss USA pageant system, making the semi-finals in 2009.

Baraquio, a Catholic, recalled that her parish priest convinced her to enter the local preliminaries, which eventually led to Miss America. According to Baraquio, Father Maurice McNeely said, “You can do this. You need to do this. Catholics need to be in the forefront more so they can witness to Christ.”¹⁶² She heeded his advice and began competing in local preliminaries at age eighteen, finally winning Miss America at age twenty-four. Baraquio, a member of a large Catholic family and the product of the Church’s schools, embraced the opportunity to be a public witness for the Catholic Church and her faith.

As Miss America, Baraquio lived out her faith commitments on the national stage as her priest had hoped. She insisted on attending Mass the day after she was crowned before flying to New York for her interviews. She used the year to promote her platform: “Character in the Classroom: Teaching Values, Valuing Teachers.” Baraquio also denounced the swimsuit competition, confessing to Diane Sawyer of *Good Morning America* that she wished the pageant would do away with it.¹⁶³ Catholic publications rejoiced with their daughter, proudly claiming Baraquio one of their own.¹⁶⁴ Like any story of faith in action, they hoped her story would encourage other Catholics. More

¹⁶² Jay Copp, “A Catholic Miss America: Angela Perez Baraquio,” *St. Anthony Messenger*, September 2001, accessed February 19, 2014, <http://www.americancatholic.org/messenger/sep2001/feature1.asp>.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ See also Christopher Heffron, “Miss America Maintains Priorities During Whirlwind Year,” *AmericanCatholic.org*, posted on August 15, 2001, accessed July 21, 2012, <http://www.americancatholic.org/About/PressRoom/Magazine/prsamAug2001.asp> and Kathleen Bagg-Morgan, “She’s Got Character,” *St. Augustine Catholic*, June-July 2001, 16ff.

important, they used Baraquio's success to show Catholics' potential in America in the twenty-first century.

Christian participants and their supporters seized beauty contests as a venue for missions. They saw opportunities for evangelism not just when their contestants won, but also in how Christians conducted themselves in various phases of pageant competition as well.¹⁶⁵ After 1996, one of the most visible ways a contestant testified to the difference that her faith made was in choosing to wear a one-piece swimsuit.¹⁶⁶ For some, donning a one-piece swimsuit represented a theological choice with political implications. On the national stage, Mormon contestants remained the most consistent and vocal about opting out of the bikini and other immodest clothing. Miss Utah 2007, Katie Millar, chose costumes that met more modest standards. All of her dresses had sleeves, a high neck, a modest neckline, and a slit that came only to her knee. She also competed in a one-piece swimsuit, which many contestants (and judges) considered the kiss of death. Nevertheless, Millar proclaimed, "My message as Miss Utah expands beyond just the pageant world. I hope that I am an example to all young women that

¹⁶⁵ In 2011, there were five phases of competition on which a contestant was scored: talent (35%), lifestyle and fitness in swimsuit (15%), evening wear (20%), on-stage question (5%), and interview (25%).

¹⁶⁶ "Two-Piece Swimsuits Return to the Miss America pageant," *Kingman Daily Miner*, September 14, 1997, 5A. In 1947, contestants wore identical two-piece swimsuits. With the exception of that year, participants wore one-piece swimsuits until 1997. In 2011, most competitors chose to wear a two-piece. Those who donned the more conservative one-pieces stood out. As noted, even Christians that wore the competition two-pieces saw them as less revealing than most beachwear and certainly more tasteful than the lingerie worn by Victoria's Secret models. The assumption remained that Miss America trumpeted conservative values.

you can uphold traditional values and be successful at the same time.”¹⁶⁷ The Mormon press and other Christian news outlets praised her for achieving this goal.¹⁶⁸ Millar, who made it to the final ten, wore her one-piece swimsuit on national television. As noted, she was thankful for the opportunity to set an example for young girls.¹⁶⁹ She interpreted her actions, as did her religious community, as a way to witness to the convictions.

Some contestants communicated via their dress choices that they belonged to a certain religious community and that even in the pageant they must uphold its standards. Millar, Kylie Kofoed (Miss Idaho, 2010), and Anna Nelson (Miss Wyoming, 2009) were just three LDS pageant contestants to garner praise for their modest swimsuit choices.¹⁷⁰ LDS news outlets, and even some evangelical ones, poured accolades on

¹⁶⁷ Nikki Bohne, “Highland’s Modest Miss America Hopeful Finishes in the Top 10,” *Herald Extra*, posted on February 4, 2007, accessed July 20, 2012, http://www.heraldextra.com/news/article_12c748fd-6ff6-511e-bbf6-2ef40ecab85f.html.

¹⁶⁸ See, for example, Sharon Haddock and Amy Choate-Nielsen, “Miss Utah not afraid to be herself,” *Deseret News*, posted on February 15, 2007, accessed July 21, 2012, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/660194976/Miss-Utah-not-afraid-to-be-herself.html?pg=all> and Erin Roach, “Miss America contest promotes Modesty,” *Baptist Press: News with a Christian Perspective*, posted on February 21, 2007, accessed July 21, 2012, <http://www.bpnews.net/printerfriendly.asp?ID=25018>.

¹⁶⁹ Mary O’Hayes, “Miss Utah: ‘She Doesn’t have to Show a Lot of Skin,’” *Modestly Yours*, posted on February 7, 2007, accessed July 21, 2012, http://blogs.modestlyyours.net/modestly_yours/2007/02/miss_utah_she_d.html.

¹⁷⁰ Sharon Haddock and Wade Jewkes, “Two Mormon Contestants Compete in Miss America,” *Deseret News*, posted on February 10, 2010, accessed July 19, 2012, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700008602/2-Mormon-contestants-compete-in-Miss-America.html>. Nelson noted that there were some non-Mormon contestants in 2010 that chose one-piece swimsuits too, stating, “That was a nice little surprise, that it wasn’t just us LDS girls.”

church members who refused to back down.¹⁷¹ Their choice allowed them to stand out in the crowd. Pageantry became a means for conveying their uniqueness and their ability to succeed in spite of (or because) of it. The LDS church, and others, applauded their daughters for standing up for church teachings, holding them up as examples for integrating faith into one's everyday life.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the only two Mormon Miss Americas won before two-piece swimsuits reconfigured the swimsuit competition. Colleen Hutchins, Miss America 1952 and Sharlene Wells, Miss America 1985, did not face the same dilemma about attire that their Mormon sisters after them did. As two-pieces grew in popularity on the pageant stage, even Mormon participants found it hard to model modesty. By 2012, a move among contestants at the Utah state pageant to consider the swimsuit a "costume" enabled many to justify less modest attire than they would wear to the pool.¹⁷² They wanted to win Miss America and they realized that the one-piece was a liability. Participants wished to honor their church and their convictions, but also respect their equally strong ambitions for themselves and their church mission. This tension

¹⁷¹ See, for example, Tyler Hinton, "Wearing a Missionary Crown," *Universe*, posted on March 8, 2007, accessed July 20, 2012, <http://newsnet.byu.edu/story.cfm/63440>, Katelyn Beaty, "Miss America and the Bikini Question," *Her-meneutics: the Christianity Today blog for women*, posted on January 20, 2011, accessed July 21, 2012, http://blog.christianitytoday.com/women/2011/01/miss_america_and_the_bikini_qu.html, and Julie Dockstader Heaps, "Standing her ground on the national stage," *Church News: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, posted on January 26, 2008, accessed July 21, 2012, <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/51579/Standing-her-ground-on-the-national-stage.html>.

¹⁷² Jay Reynolds and Kylie Conway, "Miss Utah contestants choose less modest swimwear," *ABC4: Salt Lake City*, accessed July 18, 2012, http://www.abc4.com/content/news/top_stories/story/Miss-Utah-contestants-choose-less-modest-swimwear/jm--ScIC_0yNYzk1b0dwzQ.csp.

they faced was not a simple choice between belief and fame, but a choice between different kinds of belief and ambition.

The talent competition provided another opportunity for contestants to testify to their religious beliefs. Some, like Miss America 2007 Lauren Nelson, spoke generally about using their God-given gifts to honor God. Nelson, a United Methodist, asserted that her church in Oklahoma nurtured her love of singing.¹⁷³ Others, however, saw an opportunity to evangelize for God through their song choice. *The Alabama Baptist* praised Alison McCreary's decision to sing a Christian song, noting, "One of the most obvious testimonies of her faith came in the talent competition of the Miss America pageant when she sang, 'How Great Thou Art.'"¹⁷⁴ Miss America 1995, Heather Whitestone, and Miss America 2009, Katie Stam, chose Sandi Patti's rendition of *Via Dolorosa* as their talent song. Whitestone performed a ballet en pointe depicting the words of the song and Stam sang the piece. Both spoke of God's hand in their talent performance in particular and in their pageant participation more generally.¹⁷⁵ They joined the ranks of other competitors on every level who decided to make a faith statement with their performance choice. Of course, their selection also signaled their determination to mark their personal identity as a believer.

¹⁷³ Holly McCray, "God's Promises Guide Miss America."

¹⁷⁴ Jill Lovett, "McCreary's faith shines bright even without top beauty crown."

¹⁷⁵ See Heather Whitestone with Angela Elwell Hunt, *Listening with My Heart* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) and "Katie Stam: More Than a Pretty Face" *The 700 Club*, The Christian Broadcasting Network, July 9, 2009, accessed 23 July 2012, http://www.cbn.com/media/player/index.aspx?s=/vod/SUB65_KatieStam_070909_WS.

If the talent competition gave Christians a stage for evangelism, the platform component offered them the world. Beginning in 1989, each contestant at every level of competition chose an issue as “her” cause.¹⁷⁶ This community service requirement seemed tailor-made for Christians. Young women advocated for character education, abstinence, and literacy to name a few. Beginning in 2007, the new Miss America also served as the goodwill ambassador for the Children’s Miracle Network (CMN). For Christians, the introduction of the platform and the work with the CMN further legitimized the program, distinguishing the Miss America competition from other beauty events. In fact, the pageant hosted a second competition based solely on a contestant’s community service. Finalists for the Quality of Life Award were announced each year during contest week, with the top three receiving scholarship dollars.¹⁷⁷

Christians used their platforms to live out their faith on the national stage, and their faith communities held them up as examples. For example, the Woman’s Missionary Union (WMU) of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) celebrated Deidre Downs, Miss America 2005 in a feature article.¹⁷⁸ Downs, a Baptist from Alabama, spent uncounted hours advocating for her platform, “Curing Childhood Cancer.” The story recounted her work with cancer patients at Camp Smile-A-Mile as well as the success of

¹⁷⁶ “FAQ,” Miss America website, accessed July 23, 2012, <http://www.missamerica.org/competition-info/faq.aspx>.

¹⁷⁷ “FAQ,” Miss America website, accessed July 23, 2012, <http://www.missamerica.org/competition-info/faq.aspx>.

¹⁷⁸ See Cindy Townsend, “Deidre Downs: A Women on Mission for Kid!” *Missions Mosaic: The Magazine for Women on Mission*, November 2007, 8-11.

Alabama's Curing Childhood Cancer license plate, which Downs designed. Downs and others obtained the 1000 people needed for the state to produce the tags. When the article was published in 2007, more \$250,000 had been raised for cancer research. The piece did more than list her accomplishments, however. It probed deeper to explore Downs's motivation for helping others, highlighting her childhood conversion and her desire to serve the "least of these" described in Matthew 25:40.¹⁷⁹ Townsend held Downs up as an example to be emulated by the Christian readers of *Missions Mosaic*. She hoped Downs's story inspired others "to find their mission in life, to discover their God-given purpose and wake up every day desiring to fulfill that purpose."¹⁸⁰ Townsend implied that being Miss America was God's mission for Downs.

Other religious group also held up Miss America as an example. Mormons reacted similarly to the crowning of Sharlene Wells. Wells, Miss America 1985, was the daughter of Elder Robert E. Wells of the First Quorum of the Seventy.¹⁸¹ The LDS magazine, *Ensign*, lauded her public witness, both spoken and lived.¹⁸² Wells spoke boldly to the press about abstaining from drugs, alcohol, and premarital sex. She said she wanted to be a role model. Her church applauded her decision to speak about her

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. Matthew 25:40 states, "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹⁸¹ Sheri L. Dew, *Sharlene Wells: Miss America*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1985), Preface.

¹⁸² Don L. Searle, "For Miss America, It's a Busy Life...and a Missionary Opportunity," *Ensign*, November 1984, accessed February 19, 2014, <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1984/11/news-of-the-church/for-miss-america-its-a-busy-life-and-a-missionary-opportunity?lang=eng>.

LDS affiliation and to stand by her religious convictions in the national spotlight. In fact, her father likened her year of service as Miss America to a year on mission, saying, “Personally, I look on it as any parent sending a missionary into the mission field.”¹⁸³ The LDS community celebrated Wells for maintaining her religious standards throughout her reign, seeing it as an opportunity for the world to learn more about the church.

The Christian example of some Miss Americas provoked critique. For example, Erika Harold faced opposition, including conflict with the Miss America Organization, when she promoted chastity before marriage as part of her platform.¹⁸⁴ Harold, Miss America 2003, garnered much praise from Christians for refusing to back down.¹⁸⁵ A member of Urbana Assembly of God, Harold enjoyed the support of her parents and her minister. All claimed to see God’s hand at work in her life. Her pastor, Gary W. Grogan, noted, “As a church, we see the sovereignty of God in her selection as Miss America. We believe that, as with Esther, Erika has been called to the kingdom for such a time as

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ See Lara Riscal, “Miss America’s Stealth Virginitly Campaign,” *Salon*, posted on October 28, 2002, accessed July 23, 2012, http://www.salon.com/writer/lara_riscal/ for one overview of the controversy. Harold’s official platform was “Preventing Youth Violence and Bullying: Protect Yourself, Respect Yourself.” She advocated sexual abstinence in addition to abstinence from drugs and alcohol.

¹⁸⁵ See, for example, Richard Daigle, “Spirit Filled Miss America Stands Firm on Abstinence Message,” *Charisma*, posted on December 31, 2002, accessed February 19, 2014, <http://www.charismamag.com/site-archives/154-peopleevents/people-and-events/815-spirit-filled-miss-america-stands-firm-on-abstinence-message> and “Miss America resists pressure to silence abstinence message,” *Baptist Press*, posted on October 9, 2002, accessed July 23, 2012, <http://www.sbcbaptistpress.org/bpnews.asp?ID=14407>.

this.”¹⁸⁶ Harold, and her religious community, understood her pageant journey and her faith journey as part of the same story.

When Harold failed to win Miss Illinois during the first two years she competed, she believed she was being punished for standing up for her faith.¹⁸⁷ Her Pentecostal tradition had a long history of both rejecting and embracing culture, and she reflected that paradoxical history.¹⁸⁸ Harold took a break from pageantry the next year before returning to, and ultimately winning, the competition. Faced with opposition to her participating in pageants as a Christian, she stated, “I am under no illusion that I won because of beauty or talent. God has creative ways of using people to make a difference. We should never limit Him to traditional ways we conceive of ministry.”¹⁸⁹ Her faith community, including her pastor, agreed. As Grogran said, “The Lord rewards those who stand for Him...It’s one thing to be bold in church; it’s another thing in the public arena. She’s reaching more lost people in a year than the average preacher will in a lifetime.”¹⁹⁰ Like so many others, Harold and her religious community believed her role as Miss America to be divinely appointed.

¹⁸⁶ John W. Kennedy, “Erika Harold: Miss America for such a time as this.”

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Edith L. Blumhofer, *Restoring the Faith: The Assemblies of God, Pentecostalism, and American Culture* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1993), Chapter 11 “Survival and Adaptation in the Modern Era, 1960-89.”

¹⁸⁹ John W. Kennedy, “Erika Harold: Miss America for such a time as this.”

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

In addition to print media, Christian radio and television programs interviewed Miss Americas past and present, praising them for making a difference through their examples and community service.¹⁹¹ Rather than disgracing a young woman, the Miss America title elevated her to a position of leadership. In many ways, it uniquely qualified her since she was used to being in the spotlight and leading by example. For instance, Miss America 1973, Terry Meeuwsen, became the co-host of The Christian Broadcasting Network's program *The 700 Club*, showing the heights to which a community would lift a pageant winner. In addition to her regular duties, Meeuwsen hosted Miss America winners on her show regularly, asking them about their Christian witness. She commiserated with them about the grueling duties of a Miss America. Once, she gathered with three other "formers" to wish Miss America a happy 90th birthday and to explore "why the pageant is far more than just a beauty contest."¹⁹² With local churches, pastors, and denominational publications, Meeuwsen validated participation.

The presentation of the Miss America Organization as a venue for evangelism provided the perfect justification for churches and church related publications to promote contestants. Some religious communities seized the opportunity to invite

¹⁹¹ For one example, see the archives of *The Bridge Christian Radio: A Cross to Truth* for interviews with Miss Americas 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011. Accessed July 23, 2012 at <http://www.bridgefm.org/eventsinterviews.asp>.

¹⁹² Terry Meeuwsen et al., "The 700 Club: Happy Birthday Miss America," *The Christian Broadcasting Network*, 2011, accessed July 23, 2012, http://www.cbn.com/media/player/index.aspx?s=/mp4/RR56v4_WS.

participants to speak and perform. Terry Meeuwssen, Miss America 1973, estimated that she spoke in churches about twice a month during her reign. Some contestants noted that hearing a Miss America (or Miss [State] Pageant) speak about her faith or reading a Miss America's story encouraged her to compete. To name just two examples, Tara Holland (Miss America 1997) credited the reading of Cheryl Prewitt's (Miss America 1980) biography and Rebecca Eileen Trueblood (Miss Idaho 1989) recalled the example of Kellye Cash (Miss America 1987) speaking at a youth festival.¹⁹³ The support of churches, Christian organizations, and Christian media provided a steady stream of contestants for pageants, all intent on making a difference.

At times, the praise of pageant contestants and of their high morals spread outside the Christian community. Rabbi Yonason Goldson used his blog to commend Heather Whitestone and Erika Harold for their beliefs on abstinence. In a post titled, "The Private Life of Miss America," he called their "nonconformity" "inspirational."¹⁹⁴ *The Chicago Tribune* ran a story about Erika Harold's abstinence message, noting the positive response she had received from America's youth at some of the schools that had invited her.¹⁹⁵ *Jet* magazine featured Debbye Turner on the front, arm stretched toward

¹⁹³ Rebecca Grace, "Miss America Crowns Purity as Priceless Message," *American Family Association Journal*, February 2005, accessed February 20, 2014, http://www.afajournal.org/2005/february/2.05miss_america.asp and Becki Trueblood as told to Rhonda Graham, *Best for Me*, (Boise: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1991), 7ff.

¹⁹⁴ Rabbi Yonason Goldson, "The Private Life of Miss America," *Torah Ideals: Seeking direction in a misdirected world*, no date, accessed July 5, 2012, <http://torahideals.com/essays-and-imaginings/the-private-life-of-miss-america/>.

¹⁹⁵ Amy E. Nevala, "Miss America Praises Abstinence for Youths," *Chicago Tribune*, November 24, 2002.

heaven, with the cover story “New Miss America Says, ‘Beauty is Content of Character.’”¹⁹⁶ Still, the Christian community accounted for most of the publicity. Christian Americans commended young women for their witness despite the seeming conflicts of interest.

I have shown that some Christian pastors, organizations, and denominations eventually joined forces with pageants. Pageants emerged as benign events that in their judgment could be used for good. The question remains: why?

I propose three reasons that religious communities supported the bids of their women in the Miss America competition and, as a result, encouraged other young women to compete. First, denominations and universities claimed their winners publicly because of the “proud parent syndrome.” Religious groups, no less than parents, wanted to publicize their daughters’ success. For example, when Samford University alumna Deidre Downs took the Miss America 2005 title, Samford published a piece in the campus newspaper, *The Belltower*. In addition, the Baptist school hosted a luncheon to honor Downs.¹⁹⁷ In essence, the Christian community celebrated pageant wins as they would academic, athletic, or altruistic accolades. They capitalized on the young woman’s fame, featuring “their beauty” in church publications, denominational literature, and campus newsletters. Smart, attractive, successful women were

¹⁹⁶ Cover photo, *Jet magazine*, October 23, 1989.

¹⁹⁷ “Alumna Crowned Miss America, 2005, Uses Platform to Fight Cancer,” posted October 2004, accessed February 20, 2014, http://www.samford.edu/pubs/belltower/Oct2004/miss_america.html.

commodities even in the religious world. Their presence provided churches credibility in the religious marketplace as they competed for members and students. Even churches and universities who refused to openly advocate pageants claimed their winners and sought to benefit from them.

Second, in the post war years, some Christians encouraged young women to participate because they saw pageantry as an avenue for evangelism. The pageant became yet another competition for claims on national identity and civic presence. Committed young women jumped at the chance to showcase their faith on stage. Even when pastors, churches, and religious mentors did not explicitly encourage young women to enter beauty competitions, they sanctioned the contests. With beauty an established commodity for evangelism, partnering with pageants seemed not only logical, but also desirable.¹⁹⁸

Third, post-1965 churches appeared to join forces with pageants to preserve traditional forms of femininity from the perceived threat of feminism. This was not an official alliance, of course, but evidence suggests that Christians united with pageants more in the wake of feminism than they had previously. In other words, churches saw pageants as purveyors of tradition. And, in many ways they were right. The Miss America contest adapted slowly to changes in the culture, maintaining its role of promoting the girl-next-door. In tumultuous times, pageants offered a taste of the

¹⁹⁸ Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*, 216-17.

familiar. Its ceremony harkened back to a simpler time that may have proved comforting to many conservative (mostly white) Christians in America.

Thus evangelicals invited young pageant participants to speak and perform in their churches, promoting them as role models. Though this happened prior to 1965, the shift in pageant culture that allowed women to speak more openly about their religious views made the arrangement more natural. Perhaps this new focus prompted some Christians, whether consciously or not, to see the Miss Americas as the type of American woman they wanted their daughters to be. Certainly Vonda Kay Van Dyke and Terry Meeuswen were less threatening (and represented them better) than Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem.¹⁹⁹ The Miss America ideal represented a kind of sanctified feminism.

These three reasons, and perhaps many others, go hand in hand. Conservative Christians rallied around their contestants, encouraging them to embrace the pageant and all of its benefits. Win or lose, all Christian pageant representatives seemed loved.

¹⁹⁹ Elizabeth H. Flowers, *Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power Since World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), especially pages 54-58 and 76-86. Flowers demonstrated that conservative Baptist publications as early as the 1970s were responding to the threat of feminism by marketing their own version of womanhood. I wonder if some viewed markers of traditional femininity such as the pageant as comforting in the wake of feminism as they struggled to respond. See also, Ann Braude, "Faith, Feminism, and History," in *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past*, ed. Catherine A. Brekus (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 243. Of course, the relationship between religion and feminism in the 1960s was not as fraught as sometimes portrayed. As historian Ann Braude demonstrated, "The Feminine Mystique was required reading for the 175 national leaders of Methodist women at their 1963 annual meeting, entitled 'Women in a New Age.'" Still, she noted that "polarized perspectives emerging in the 1980s" promoted the antagonistic view that remains dominant in public consciousness (234). Here it must be noted that most of the women participating in pageants in the 1960s-1970s held more traditional views of womanhood.

Making Meaning: Religion in the Public Sphere Post-1965

The religious landscape of America in 1921 differed greatly from that of 2011. Slaughter's careful crafting of the pageant into something respectable did not by itself lead to the moment when Vonda Kay Van Dyke spoke openly about her faith. Many factors prepared her (and others) to speak in new ways. At least three trajectories in American religious history paralleled some of the changes in the pageant and helped make them more palatable to Christian Americans.

First, beginning with the Cold War, religion gained an ever-increasing role in American public discourse. It became accepted that public figures would speak about their relationship with God, at least in general terms as a means of combating "godless communism."²⁰⁰ For example, "In 1949...President Harry Truman told Americans that 'the basic source of our strength as a nation is spiritual. ...Religious faith and religious work must be our reliance as we strive to fulfill our destiny in the world.'"²⁰¹ Then, at his inauguration in 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower offered a prayer. Evangelist Billy Graham helped rally the nation into churches, encouraging cooperation among American Christians to be united in their opposition to communism. Church attendance

²⁰⁰ Charles H. Lippy, *Introducing American Religion*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), chapter 14 "Quests for unity amid diversity," especially 205-07, 210-11. See also Molly Worthen, "How Billy Graham Became an American Icon," *CNN Belief Blog*, November 9, 2013, accessed February 20, 2014, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/11/09/how-billy-graham-became-an-american-icon/>; Grant Wacker, "Billy Graham's America," *Church History* 78, no. 3 (September 2009), 489-511. Of course, this was not true for Catholic Christians as evidenced by the treatment of John F. Kennedy during the 1960 presidential election.

²⁰¹ Worthen, "How Billy Graham Became an American Icon."

rose from 49% in 1940 to 65% in 1970.²⁰² These forces contributed to an increase in religious discourse, especially Protestant, Catholic, and Jew, in American life. The Miss America contest, experiencing its golden years in the 1950s, offered another venue for Americans to show off the success and character of their young women. When Van Dyke spoke about her Christianity in 1965, the country was prepared not only to accept her, but to praise her.

Second, the rise of the feminist movement in the 1960s affected the pageant and Christians' response to it. On the one hand, the women's movement authorized and accelerated the impulse for women to hold public roles. On the other hand, it induced fear that women would forget their place as the moral guardians of society. The Miss America competition offered an in-between space that allowed women greater public freedom even as it offered a buffer against an overly aggressive Gloria Steinem type of public presentation. Pageants provided a compromise. In a period when many women in society questioned traditional gender roles and demanded more access to education, jobs, and power, Van Dyke's espousal of conservative Christian values seemed an untapped resource. She modeled a "new woman" that Christian parents could

²⁰² Thomas Aiello, "Constructing 'Godless Communism': Religion, Politics, and Popular Culture, 1954-1960," *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture* 4: no. 1 (Spring 2005), accessed February 20, 2014, http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2005/aiello.htm. See also Worthen, "Holly Billy Graham Became an American Icon" and Wacker, "Billy Graham's America."

commend to their daughters.²⁰³ In other words, pageants provided women opportunities for advancement, but not in a way that threatened Christian patriarchy.²⁰⁴ America was not as united as they attempted to show in the 1950s and 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement and the rise of feminism prompted fear in many Americans. Controversy surrounding equal rights displayed America's disunity, and some would suggest hypocrisy, to the world.²⁰⁵ Christians found space in beauty pageants that allowed them to feel safe and secure in these turbulent times.

Finally, the prevalence of evangelicals in popular culture in the late 20th and early 21st centuries prompted them to talk about God and God's role in everyday activities in a way formerly untenable. While many forces made this alliance possible, the mainstreaming of evangelicalism allowed this once estranged religious group cultural power and influence. As such, these (largely conservative) Christians sought to enforce their worldview onto America at large, using all of the tools at their disposal to reach the world for Christ. Despite the presence of Jewish, Catholic, and LDS winners, most Miss Americas that paraded their faith down the runway and into the world beyond were

²⁰³ See chapter four, "Pageant Prayers," for further discussion of Van Dyke's influence on Christian youth culture in the 1960s-1970s.

²⁰⁴ Again Elizabeth Flowers's careful study of gender in the Southern Baptist Convention is useful here, especially Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. Her work described the threat of feminism as experienced by one conservative Christian denomination and highlighted some crucial organizational responses to it. Though not a planned attack, I contend that pageants offered another way for conservative Christians to trumpet their values over and against the new womanhood being touted by feminists.

²⁰⁵ Lippy, *Introducing American Religion*, chapter 14.

evangelical. These contestants and their communities embraced the idea of pageant participation with the larger purpose of evangelism in mind.

Of course, this newfound freedom had its limits. So, what about pageants made them acceptable in the eyes of many contenders and supporters? Pageants offered enough respectable aspects (talent, community service, scholarship) to outweigh its questionable ones (commodification of female bodies, self-promotion). As evangelicals flooded the political arena in the form of Jimmy Carter's presidency and the rise of the Christian Right, previously unthinkable alliances emerged as evangelistic opportunities. Evangelicals Christianized rock music, romance novels, and movies so why not pageants? These Christian additions to popular culture provided vehicles for evangelism just like the Miss America contest. For conservative Christians in general and evangelicals in particular, popular culture was neither good nor bad. Within American popular culture were neutral events, objects, and spaces that could be used for Christ when evangelicals were intentional about their goals and took action to achieve them. The following chapters offer a fuller explanation for this unlikely partnership.

Multiple Voices: A Test Case

Not all Christians supported pageants and pageants did not always welcome Christians. Multiple voices contributed to the conversation about this unlikely match. One example from the 2009 Miss USA pageant highlighted the complexities well. Though different in some respects from the Miss America Organization, the Miss USA

pageant was similar enough to justify comparisons regarding Christian-pageant interaction. The underlying issue of women's beauty display and the marketing of their bodies existed in both and provide the basis for some comparisons to be made. To be sure, the difference between the Miss USA and Miss America competitions matters greatly to those who participate in them. Most notably, Miss America contestants performed a talent, advocated a community service platform, and underwent a more substantial interview than Miss USA contestants. Most pageant viewers, however, conflated the two pageants in their minds. The distinctions so important to Miss America contestants sometimes went unnoticed by their supporters. Carrie Prejean's story received so much publicity that ignoring it in a dissertation about pageants seemed irresponsible.

Carrie Prejean, Miss California USA 2009 and first-runner up to Miss USA 2009, sparked commentary throughout the blogosphere for her answer to an on-stage question about same-sex marriage. Celebrity blogger Perez Hilton asked Prejean, "Vermont recently became the fourth state to legalize same-sex marriage. Do you think every state should follow suit? Why or why not?"²⁰⁶ She answered:

Well, I think it's great that Americans are able to choose one or the other. We live in a land that you can choose same-sex marriage or opposite marriage. And you know what, in my country, in my family, I think that I believe that marriage should be between a man and a woman, no offense to anybody out there. But

²⁰⁶ Carrie Prejean, *Still Standing: The Untold Story of my Fight Against Gossip, Hate, and Political Attacks* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2009), 2.

that's how I was raised, and that's how I believe that is should be—between a man and a woman.²⁰⁷

Hilton later confirmed that Prejean's answer cost her the crown.²⁰⁸ Reactions to the chain of events that eventually cost Prejean the Miss California USA crown as well were as diverse as judge and contestant.

On one side of the aisle stood Prejean's supporters. She became a hero in the evangelical community seemingly overnight. *Focus on the Family's* James Dobson praised her for preaching a sermon with her life, her pastor Miles McPherson compared her to Esther, and the National Organization for Marriage hired her to appear in an ad called "No Offense."²⁰⁹ On the other side Prejean experienced attacks because of her stance on marriage, dodged insults regarding her breast enhancement surgery, and endured a firestorm over some photos of her scantily clad. Rumors (later confirmed) of a sex tape added fuel to the fire.²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 4.

²⁰⁸ "Gay Marriage Row at Miss USA Show," *BBC News* website, posted April 20, 2009, accessed February 20, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8009359.stm>.

²⁰⁹ Bob Allen, "Conservatives Divided over Miss USA Controversy," *Associated Baptist Press* blog, posted May 12, 2009, accessed February 20, 2014, <http://www.abpnews.com/archives/item/4070-conservatives-divided-over-miss-california-usa-controversy#.UwbRaYXqjSw> and Brian Brown, "National Organization for Marriage and Carrie Prejean Launch New Ad Showing Intolerance of Gay Marriage Activists, Illustrating Threats to Religious Liberty," National Organization for Marriage blog, posted April 30, 2009, accessed February 20, 2014, <http://www.nomblog.com/80/#sthash.2zFYFQ6f.dpbs>.

²¹⁰ Kate Harding, "Carrie Prejean threatens to storm off 'Larry King Live,'" *Salon* website, posted November 12, 2009, accessed February 20, 2014, http://www.salon.com/2009/11/12/prejean_larry_king/; Alan Duke, "Miss California USA Prejean Dethroned," CNN website, posted June 10, 2009, accessed February 20, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/06/10/prejean.dethroned/>; and Melissa McEwan, "Miss Anti-Gay USA: Homophobia and misogyny collide in one delightful beauty pageant car-crash, starring Perez Hilton and Miss California," *The Guardian* website, posted April 21, 2009, accessed February 20, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2009/apr/21/miss-california-gay-marriage>.

Christians and non-Christians weighed in on both sides of the debate. Since the support of Christians in pageants has already been established, it remains only to parse some of the opposition. Some Christian bloggers posed questions about whether Prejean should have been competing in the pageant at all, criticizing beauty pageants in general. For example, in a blog post titled, "The Other Miss California Controversy," Katelyn Beaty pinpointed the crux of the issue:

What has surprised me about the Christian media's response is a seemingly inconsistent sexual ethic at play: Celebrating Prejean as the lone voice for biblical convictions in a public square where it's now bigoted to oppose same-sex marriage, while never questioning if a Christian woman like Prejean should be participating in the Miss USA pageant in the first place.²¹¹

Others shared Beaty's concerns. Warren Throckmorton queried, "Is anyone else puzzled by the response to our new family values spokeswoman?" Though mild in his criticisms, he concluded: "But unless religious conservatives have some kind of answer to our girls about how they can lionize a Miss USA contestant and stress modesty at the same time, I do not see the virtue in giving her the platform."²¹² Their voices joined others asking for a closer inspection Christian pageant culture.²¹³

²¹¹ Katelyn Beaty, "The Other Miss California Controversy," *Her.meneutics* blog, posted April 2009, accessed February 21, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2009/april/other-miss-california-controversy.html?paging=off>.

²¹² Warren Throckmorton, "Carrie Prejean to appear in traditional marriage ad; gets Liberty U scholarship offer," *Patheos* blog, posted April 30, 2009, accessed February 21, 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/warrenthrockmorton/2009/04/>.

²¹³ See, for example, Sharon Hodde Miller, "Should Christians Participate in Beauty Pageants," *She Worships* blog, posted July 11, 2009, accessed February 21, 2014, <http://sheworships.com/2009/07/11/should-christians-participate-in-beauty-pageants/>; Bob Allen, "Conservatives Divided over Miss California USA Controversy;" and Dave Welch, "Is Carrie Prejean Really a Hero?," *WND Commentary*, posted April 29, 2009, accessed February 21, 2014, <http://www.wnd.com/2009/04/96305/>.

Of course, the Miss America contest also received criticism from evangelical Christians. For example, in a brief essay by Marc Gibson, he condemned Christian participation in beauty pageants. "Over the years, Christians have been teaching their children how to live holy lives in an unholy world. Our young folks learn that there are many activities in this world that are not fit for Christians to participate in," he argued. "One of those things is the ever-popular beauty pageant."²¹⁴ The problem with such competitions, he continued, was that "The physical form and beauty of a female girl or woman's body is put on display as an object to be judged. Clothing, or lack thereof, is worn to immodestly highlight the attractive features of the female body for all to observe."²¹⁵ "Faithful Christians," he intoned, eschewed associating with such "worldly" pursuits. Gibson felt compelled to write because Jennifer Berry, a member of a church of Christ, had recently been crowned Miss America 2006. As Miss Oklahoma, one of Berry's traveling companions was a deacon's wife. Both had received positive press from *The Christian Chronicle*, another churches of Christ publication. Gibson lamented this encouragement, claiming, "In the past, brethren would have been ashamed to report such a thing."²¹⁶ He cited Scripture as he asked, "Has a love for this present world turned our ears deaf to the divine standards of morality and godliness?"²¹⁷ Promises of evangelistic opportunities or free publicity for the churches of Christ failed to lure

²¹⁴ Marc W. Gibson, "Can a Christian Be Miss America?," *Truth Magazine L*, no. 8, April 20, 2006, 225, 249.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 225.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 249.

Gibson from his quest for holiness. He urged others to beware the traps of immodesty and worldliness.

Others offered a more nuanced critique. For example, after Vanessa Williams lost her crown, Tom Minnery of *Focus on the Family* defended the pageant against accusations that “Penthouse poses differ[ed] only in degree from the sexual titillation of the swimsuit competition.”²¹⁸ While he praised the pageant “for standing fast and acting decisively,” he also urged contest officials to consider the relationship of enterprises like the Miss America Organization to publications like *Penthouse*.

While we do not necessarily endorse swimsuit competitions, the efforts to compare them with clinically explicit lesbian sex pictures are feeble and ridiculous. There is cause for the pageant executives to consider how much they, like Guccione, use sex to sell their product, but the pornographic Penthouse is worlds away from the beauty and talent pageant in Atlantic City.²¹⁹

In the end, he blamed Williams, not the pageant for the missteps that occurred.

Comparing her to Eve, he noted, “There is always a price to pay for perverting God’s purposes and the beauty of his created order. Miss Williams learned the price quickly.”²²⁰ These examples demonstrated the cacophony of voices surrounding Christian pageant participation.²²¹

²¹⁸ Tom Minnery, “The Tarnished Crown of Miss America,” September 7, 1984, 13.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ See also, Melody Maxwell, “Christians and the Miss America Competition,” *Associated Baptist Press*, January 20, 2011, accessed March 16, 2014, <http://www.abpnews.com/opinion/commentaries/item/6052-christians-and-the-miss-america-competition#.UyX14oX6-w4>; Margaret O’ Brien Steinfels, “Here she is! Miss America!” *Christianity and Crisis*, September 17, 1984; Hodde, “Should Christians Participate in Beauty Pageants?”

For Such a Time as This: The Esther Narrative

As demonstrated, Christian pageant contestants were sometimes compared to Queen Esther in the Bible. This seemed particularly true of contestants who faced controversy, whether it was with pageant or secular culture. Evangelical assertions that God placed them in their positions “for such a time as this” gave credibility and solidarity to their struggles. Both Erika Harold (Miss America 2003) and Carrie Prejean (Miss USA 2009) were compared to this biblical queen. At times, evangelicals used the rhetoric to justify beauty pageants, claiming that the book of Esther narrates the first beauty pageant ever held. The language of election was also applied to evangelical women outside of pageants. Notably, evangelical Christians used the Queen Esther story to validate their support of Sarah Palin for Vice President in the 2008 election.²²² Though not usually in favor of women holding such a high public office, the nation, some Christians asserted, needed Palin’s gifts and God had set her apart to serve. If such verbal gymnastics sounded like special pleading, looking at the *actual* story of Esther in Scripture confirmed it. Indeed, the biblical account highlighted different, often overlooked, similarities between modern day beauty competitions and King Ahasuerus’s pageant.

²²² See, for example, Alex Koppelman, “Sarah Palin, Anointed by God,” Salon, September 18, 2008, accessed April 23, 2014, http://www.salon.com/2008/09/18/palin_email/. For more on evangelical use of this narrative for their own purposes, see Rachel Held Evans, “Esther and Vashti: The Real Story,” accessed March 16, 2014, <http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/esther-and-vashti>.

While a deep exegesis of the text was neither possible nor desirable, it remains important to note three thorny issues for evangelicals that appeared in Esther. At the least, these ideas make comparing positions like Miss America to that of Queen Esther undesirable. In addition, recounting some of the darker themes of the story might prompt some consideration of the dangerous parallels between the two. First, the story in Esther was one of male control of women's bodies under the auspices of national security. Queen Vashti lost her position as queen because she refused to dance naked before the king and his drunken guests at a banquet. Second, women did not choose to participate in the king's beauty pageant. "Beautiful virgins" were brought to the king from throughout the kingdom and he chose his queen from among them. Again, this was not an innocent parade of beauty. Each virgin slept with the king and he selected the one that "pleased" him to be queen. The rest remained in his harem. Finally, in this biblical narrative, the power derived from pleasing men with one's body proved limited. The women in the story, both Vashti and Esther, were at the mercy of King Ahasuerus. Any control they possessed came through him and thus could be taken away at any time. Again, the dangers of evangelicals using this scriptural text as a template for women to follow were numerous.

The comparison of this text to the modern day pageants by conservative Christians was a good one, but not for the reasons they supposed. Esther was chosen "for such a time as this," but she did not choose her exploitation. One could argue that

women involved in beauty pageants actively participated in their objectification. Women involved in beauty pageants also found national ideals mapped onto their bodies. They became commodities with men as the consumers. One final similarity should be noted. In beauty pageants, the power granted to women was limited. It was not necessarily limited by men, but certainly women found their pageant credentials did not unlock every gate, as occasionally asserted.

Conclusion

After a rocky start, the relationship between evangelicals and pageants enjoyed praise in denominational publications from *The Alabama Baptist* to *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*. In many cases, the religious media ignored or justified the apparent contradictions between their conservative theology and pageant participation. Most notably, many failed to comment on conservative Christian notions of modesty with regard to the body and the seeming incompatibility of participating in an event in which women were judged on their bodies. Many Christian leaders and other religious pageant supporters behaved as if the religious opportunities and rewards of pageantry outweighed any costs. Almost all of them that noted drawbacks focused on issues of display and exhibition with few questioning the commodification or commercialism also inherent in the contest. One issue dominated their vision and drove their conversations, making it easier to justify any surface contradictions between church teaching and pageant preaching.

However, not all Christians agreed. Some called Christian pageant participants out on what they determined to be hypocrisy. Others merely raised questions about the benefits of pageantry. A media explosion surrounding the ethics of pageantry led to articles on the blogs of *Associated Baptist Press*, *Her.meneutics*, and *GetReligion.org* among others. The fact that these Christian media outlets felt compelled to weigh in on this issue testified to the public appeal of pageants among Christians. Their voices indicated that the story of Christians and the Miss America pageant was not a monolithic one. It also showed that pageants were important enough to warrant their hostile attention.

As this chapter has shown, however, many Christians who once opposed the Miss America competition came to sing its praises. The organization once targeted as a source of corruption for America's young women became seen as a celebration of Christian ideals such as hard work, helping others, and honoring God-given gifts. Christian communities increasingly saw the Miss America competition as a source of empowerment and religious opportunity for their daughters. The benefits were so great that it seemed a natural fit for many Christian young women even as some struggled to make sense of the seeming contradiction between teachings of their church and expectations of the pageant. The approval of Christian communities not only celebrated current pageant contestants, but encouraged other young women to seek accolades through pageantry as well. In other words, Christian churches ensured a steady stream of Christian competitors who sought to fulfill their God-given purpose through

pageantry. And, on the face of it, it appeared that many Miss Americas post-1965 saw pageantry as a religious opportunity, providing them a platform from which to preach the goodness of God's love and faithfulness through even the most trying of circumstances. The next chapter examines this story from the participants' point of view.

4. Pageant Prayers

Could this, I wondered, be the answer I'd been praying for? Could trying for the title of Miss America be what God wanted me to do with my life; that is, if my purpose was to use the position as a means of witnessing for Him on a world-wide scale? The more I thought and prayed about it, the more certain I became that it was. [emphasis in original]

Cheryl Prewitt, Miss America 1980¹

Lord, if You want me to win, I know You can make it happen.
And if I do win, I know You have a plan for me in pageants. If I don't, that is fine with me because it's what I deserve.

Tara Holland, Miss America 1997²

Introduction

The singer crooned, "there she is, Miss America, there she is, your ideal," and America's newest sweetheart pointed her finger to the peaked vaults of Planet Hollywood's domed ceiling. In so doing, she expressed her commitment not only to be a saintly beauty, but also an ambassador for God and America. Caressa Cameron, Miss America 2010, struggled to position the crown on the new Miss America, Teresa Scanlan, who rejoiced in her victory by gesturing heavenward. The repeated motion from announcement to crowning to emotional first walk down the winner's runway was

¹ Cheryl Prewitt with Kathryn Slattery, *A Bright-Shining Place: The Story of a Miracle* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1981), 210.

² "Pageant Story," Tara Dawn Christensen website, accessed January 29, 2014, <http://www.taradawnchristensen.com/03pageantstory.html>.

difficult to ignore. Miss Nebraska, newly crowned Miss America, wanted the world to know that she attributed her victory to God. Scanlan, a 17-year old with plans to attend Patrick Henry College – not incidentally, one of the most politically conservative colleges in America – credited God with her pageant participation. As she noted on her blog the day before she left for the contest, “When I found pageantry, I realized that God had prepared me for this competition by creating me to love diversity, and here was the place I could use the talents He had given me.”³ Scanlan stood in a long line of young women who sought the crown for spiritual reasons. This chapter presses beyond a simple acknowledgement that Christian women participated in pageants to explore their religious motivations for competing. Why were conservative Christian women attracted to pageantry? What spiritual values did they anticipate? How did they interpret their actions in light of their faith? This chapter seeks to explain and understand their stories.

In 2003, *Christianity Today International*, American evangelicalism’s flagship periodical, published a piece about the large number of Christian Miss America contestants. The author, John Kennedy, spoke with Christian Miss America participants as well as numerous winners who were willing to share their stories. He concluded, “the Miss America pageant attracts an inordinate number of born-again Christian women

³ Teresa Scanlan, “Miss America is Here: Why Am I Competing?,” *Miss Nebraska 2010: Promoting Positive Body Image and Self-Acceptance, One Person at a Time Blog*, January 4, 2011, accessed January 29, 2014, <http://teresastravelsandtidbits.blogspot.com/2011/01/miss-america-is-here-why-am-i-competing.html>.

vying for the title.”⁴ While one could question what constituted an “inordinate number,” his article provided sufficient evidence that many participants and winners used the competition as a platform for expressing their religious beliefs both on the stage and in their careers post-competition. Winners spoke of God’s direction and design in different ways, interpreting their unique circumstances in light of, or as part of, God’s plan. This link between Christianity and pageantry does not explain itself. It merits analysis.

Some statistics on the contestants in the 2001 Miss America pageant illustrate the high percentage of Christians involved. The crowning of Miss America 2002 took place on September 22, 2001, less than two weeks after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States. After the competition, the contestants compiled a book of “fifty-one stories documenting the quest of the Class of 2001 to impart hope and healing during a year of service like no other.”⁵ The book revealed that 35 of the 51 contestants (68.6%) alluded to their faith in their three to four page “testimony.”⁶ Participants wrote of praying together, “God [creating] us all for *such a time as this*,” and God choosing “the perfect woman to be Miss America.”⁷ Chapter titles included “Renewed Faith” and

⁴ John W. Kennedy, “Miss (Christian) America,” *Today’s Christian*, 2003, accessed January 29, 2014, <http://www.christianity.com/11622493/?p=0>.

⁵ Katie Harman with the 2001 Miss America Contestants, *Under the Crown: 51 Stories of Courage, Determination and the American Spirit* (Seattle: Milestone Books, 2002), xix.

⁶ In surveying the book, I looked for key words like prayer, God, faith, church, or Christian. Some contestants mentioned the words almost as an aside, but faith featured prominently in pieces written by others. The percentage of “probably Christians” increases from 68.6% to 70.6% with the inclusion of Miss Alabama. Kelly Jones did not discuss her faith in her essay, but the essay by Miss Georgia indicated that Jones, too, professed Christianity.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 163, 45, 70.

“Blessings in Disguise.”⁸ Such a cursory look at each individual’s reflection does not offer conclusive evidence that she was a Christian, but it does at least intimate that contestants perceived faith to be an advantage.⁹

The lives of the pageant winners revealed a similar story. Of the forty-seven Miss Americas from 1965-2011, more than half referenced their faith in their official Miss America biography or on their personal website (Appendix B). While much changed in the nation and in the pageant from 1965-2011, one thing stayed the same: the consistency with which pageant winners discussed their purpose in seeking the title. Many wrote their stories in autobiographies or authorized others to write their biographies. These works recorded information about the winner's Christianity and how her faith affected her pageant participation. Many more included religious explanations in newspaper interviews, magazine articles, and blogs. Likewise, the talents chosen, answers given in interviews, and responses to on-stage questions often suggested an affiliation with Christianity and a desire to impart one’s faith through performance. Christian Miss Americas, just like born-again Christians, had a story, or perhaps two stories, to tell.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23, 77.

⁹ Teresa Scanlan’s experience ten years later paralleled that of the 2001 contestants. In an interview with *Home School Heartbeat*, she noted that “the majority of contestants, believe it or not, [were] Christian conservatives.” Mike Smith, interview with Teresa Scanlan, “Facing Criticism,” *Home School Heartbeat*, Volume 116, Program 63, accessed March 16, 2014, <http://www.hslda.org/docs/hshb/116/hshb11663.asp>. Likewise, Heather Whitestone, Miss America 1995, indicated that she “met about a dozen women who told [her] they follow[ed] Christ as their Lord and Savior.” They “had Bible studies” and “prayed together and encouraged one another” during the week of competition. Heather Whitestone McCallum with Carolyn Curtis, *Believing the Promise: Daily Devotions for Following Your Dreams* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 186.

As part of their narratives, these pageant participants provided explanations of the merits of beauty competitions. The contests offered more than the hope for a crown. They gave them a venue to develop confidence, practice community service, and celebrate women's scholarship. Pageants provided an outlet for living out their faith and, at times, a springboard into full time Christian ministry. Many contestant stories followed a predictable outline, one in which they overcame some kind of trial to receive glory as Miss America and then used their newfound fame to give the glory back to God. This configuration echoed common tales of conversion experiences, following the classic model in which testimonies were delivered in churches, moving from crisis to faith to reward.¹⁰ This chapter examines that pattern, highlighting contestants' prayers and testimonies to argue that participants often saw pageantry as an opportunity that could be a test of faith, or a platform for personal growth, or an opportunity for evangelism. God directed, God led, or God commanded, it was always God-ordained.

Throughout the chapter, I employ the term testimony as used by homiletics professor Anna Carter Florence: testimony acts "as both a narration of events and a confession of belief: we tell what we have seen and heard, and we confess what we believe about it."¹¹ Like others compiling religious autobiographies, evangelical pageant contestants wished "to know the self better in order to know God better" and "to help

¹⁰ See chapter 3 on testimony in Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 58-69.

¹¹ Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), xiii.

others follow a similar path of liberation and salvation.”¹² All conversion stories were inherently normative, pageant testimonies included. Participants narrated two conversions. They testified to the power of both God and of the pageant in their lives. Lines blurred when trying to separate the two confessions. The Miss America competition and God’s purpose intertwined.

To be sure, not every Christian contestant articulated a “call” to pageants or interpreted their experience in Christian terms. Some saw a disconnection between their participation and their faith. Others did not think much about it. In addition, some Christian women dropped out of pageantry all together. Many contestants, if not most, interpreted their forays in retrospect. Consequently, they may have superimposed religious language to validate their participation or denied incentives in light of rewards (or, the lack thereof). Their prospective orientation was assumed below with special indications given when a contestant utilized religious language before or during the competition. As much as possible, the multiplicity of motives and testimony timelines of Christian Miss Americas were folded in throughout the chapter. The “Other Voices” section examines alternate explanations Christians had for the relationship between their faith and the pageant.

¹² Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., *Memoirs of the Spirit: American Religious Autobiography from Jonathan Edwards to Maya Angelou* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), xv.

Christianity and “Our” Miss Americas

Perhaps no one was more convinced that God was directing her pageant heels than Miss America 1980, Cheryl Prewitt. A Pentecostal from Mississippi, Prewitt claimed the healing of God allowed her to participate and eventually win. Not only that, she believed that her healing happened in order that she might testify on the national stage to God’s goodness and power. She remained so confident that she would win that reflecting upon her crowning moment, she declared, “I wasn’t shocked. I didn’t cry. But oh, I was happy. Happier than I’d ever been in all my life.”¹³ Prewitt used her story as evidence of God’s power.

After an automobile accident at age eleven, physicians told her that she might never walk again. While further medical intervention enabled her to walk, Prewitt possessed a decided limp because her crippled leg healed two inches shorter than the other. She later learned that her injuries meant she might not be able to have children. Soon after, she attended a Kenneth Hagin healing meeting in Jackson, Mississippi. There, according to her, she experienced the miracle for which she had been praying and believing. As she described it:

Soothing warmth, as though I’d been immersed in a hot tub, enveloped me. For a moment I seemed to lose track of time. I was aware in my mind that Mr. Hagin was still by my side, but somehow I no longer heard a word he was saying. It was as though I had slipped away to some faraway bright-shining place—a private place inhabited only by myself and Jesus. I felt overwhelmed, filled to

¹³ Prewitt, *A Bright-Shining Place*, 245.

overflowing, with His Presence—with His power, compassion, and love. More than anything else, His love.¹⁴

After falling to the floor “as though in a deep sleep,” Prewitt sat up to find that her left leg now extended as far as her right. She believed that God healed her for a “bigger reason” than just her desire for healing. As she wrote, “The ultimate reason for answered prayers of any kind (especially miracles) is to serve as a sign to others (especially nonbelievers) of God’s existence and love.”¹⁵ Her healing, as she understood it, proved crucial to her testimony and, later, to her mission to become Miss America.

Prewitt recounted a similar revelatory encounter about her pageant participation. She believed that God called her to compete for a higher purpose than the mere hope of a crown or the benefit of scholarship money (one of her initial reasons for entering). Shortly after praying that God show her what He wanted her to do with her life, she was “struck with the realization that my involvement in pageants could, in fact, be a means to an end—that is, if my ultimate goal was to win the title of Miss America!”¹⁶ She questioned, “Could trying for the title of Miss America be what God wanted me to do with my life; that is, if my purpose was to use the position as a means of witnessing for Him on a world-wide scale? The more I thought and prayed about it, the more certain I became that it was.”¹⁷ Prewitt asserted that becoming Miss America was part of God’s

¹⁴ Ibid., 127.

¹⁵ Ibid., 131.

¹⁶ Ibid., 209-10.

¹⁷ Ibid., 210.

perfect plan for her. In her mind, she confessed her belief and worked hard to make it a reality. Once crowned Miss America, she used the opportunity (and all doors it opened) to testify to God's healing power. She, like many pageant contestants both before and after, embraced the crown as her anointing, an ordination to a ministry.

Other scholars cited Prewitt's story as evidence of a relationship between religion and pageantry. As historian Charles Reagan Wilson noted, "In Prewitt's persona, the beauty queen has become an icon of religious edification."¹⁸ Karen Tice came to similar conclusions, arguing that Prewitt offered "another noteworthy example of a Miss America who has successfully merged pageants and preaching."¹⁹ Both, like *Christianity Today's* Kennedy, saw a blossoming relationship between conservative Christian contestants and the pageant (and, in the case of Wilson, a relationship between beauty culture and the South). They observed that contestants testified to their faith in the midst of the secular pageant and showed how that language bore out in the public sphere. Neither, however, dissected the predictable and repeated pattern used by evangelical Miss Americas in pageant "testimonies" to discern the characteristics of evangelicalism that made this unlikely relationship possible.

¹⁸ Charles Reagan Wilson, *Judgment & Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 158.

¹⁹ Karen W. Tice, *Queens of Academe: Beauty Pageantry, Student Bodies, and College Life*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 166. Tice quotes Wilson at length when writing about Prewitt, 167. My work overlapped with Tice's study of beauty contests on college campuses. More specifically, her chapter "Flesh and Spirit: Bibles, Beauty, and Bikinis" explored similar trends in the relationship between Christianity and pageants. Beginning my research in the summer of 2006, sometimes I built on her work, sometimes we reached the same conclusions independently, sometimes we drew different interpretations from the same data, and sometimes we simply differed.

When Wilson published his essay in 1989, he focused on how the expectations for a beauty queen such as purity fit well with “evangelical morality” in the South. He concluded that “Prewitt’s example [was], of course, an extreme case of southern religiosity validating the beauty culture.”²⁰ It appears true that religious justification for pageantry was less common in 1989 than it was in 2011. However, even if some of her religious claims were “extreme,” Prewitt was not alone in her religious defenses of beauty competitions. Miss America 1965, Miss America 1973, and Miss America 1985 all spoke or wrote about God’s directing their pageant steps too. And as noted, the validation of pageantry became almost second nature among religious communities across the nation after Vonda Kay Van Dyke’s on-stage answer in 1965. Increasingly, evangelical contestants described their participation in starkly religious terms. Tice pushed Wilson’s argument further, acknowledging that the relationship between religion and beauty pageants once unthinkable became normalized in the second half of the 20th century. She stopped short, however, of exploring the shape of their narratives.²¹ Examining participants’ words alongside those of their religious communities proves crucial for understanding their motivations and more important how they represented their faith traditions.

²⁰ Wilson, *Judgment & Grace in Dixie*, 158.

²¹ This is not intended as a critique of Tice’s important work. Her chapter “Flesh and Spirit: Bibles, Beauty, and Bikinis,” was part of a larger project examining the relationship between beauty pageants and higher education. The religious lives of the contestants were secondary.

Pageant stories resembled conversion narratives. One Miss America wrote about her “baptism into the Miss America routine.”²² At the same time, their testimonies went beyond a simple conversion into the Miss America program. Contestants also spoke of being called in a religious sense. As one Miss America declared, “As some people are called to be missionaries, some are called to be pastors. And then some are called to do pageants. And I was one of those that was called to do pageants.”²³ Many claimed that the experience gave their life new meaning, delivered them from undesirable circumstances, or provided opportunities for spiritual growth. Conservative Christian women across the nation embraced the organization whole-heartedly, seeing the competition as a way to communicate their faith. Pageants offered a tool just like radio, television, or rock music – all productive public venues for twentieth century evangelicals – for communicating the gospel.²⁴ Evangelicals maintained a strong presence in this purportedly secular enterprise. Among the winners (and even some of the losers) religious language of divine direction and purpose enveloped the arena.

²² Heather Whitestone with Angela Elwell Hunt, *Listening with my Heart* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 90.

²³ “Focus on the Family Transcript,” Tara Dawn Christensen website, accessed January 29, 2014, http://www.taradawnchristensen.com/Focus_on_the_Family_Transcript.htm.

²⁴ Many scholars have made this point about the flexibility of evangelical culture. Like Randall Balmer, “I wanted to show variations within a subculture generally regarded as monolithic.” Randall Balmer, *My Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, Third ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7. See also Brenda E. Brasher, *Godly Women: Fundamentalism & Female Power* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Elizabeth H. Flowers, *Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power Since World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Charles H. Lippy, *Introducing American Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 236ff.; Tice, *Queens of Academe*, 180.

Consider again Cheryl Prewitt, who moved from a physical disability to restored health. Her strengthened faith in God led her to see pageants as a venue for evangelism. Despite skepticism encountered along the way, she stayed true to her convictions, crediting God with her healing and her ministry as Miss America and beyond.

Using Prewitt's story of triumph over adversity as a template, a testimony pattern emerges. Participants encountered a crisis, expressed a resurgence of faith (often in the form of a "call" to pageantry), and experienced an outpouring of rewards. They then testified to God's goodness even as they endured tests of faith. Finally, they received affirmation that their witness made a difference. God's will was done. Many evangelical winners' narratives took similar form in their biographies and autobiographies. Their testimonies and prayers relayed much about their theology. This paradigm offers a clearer picture of how evangelical women talked about God's work in the world they inhabited. Likewise, their stories illustrated how religion functioned in the everyday life of conservative Christian pageant participants. Testimony marked them as part of a unique community even as participants strived to broaden their experience to others.²⁵

²⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), especially chapter 6 "Christ the Transformer of Culture." Evangelicals, unlike Fundamentalists, were happy to work in the world to change it. In Niebuhr's "Christ transforming culture" paradigm, believers assumed that their faith could change the world. For pageant contestants, that meant that they should take their faith with them to the stage. For a helpful discussion of evangelicals' engagement with Niebuhr's five types, see John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "In the World, But..." *Christianity Today*, April 22, 2002, accessed February 22, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/april22/8.80.html?paging=off>.

Crisis and Call

Like evangelicals describing how they found Jesus, Christian Miss America contestants spoke of “converting” to pageantry in almost salvific terms. While the extent of their crises pre-pageantry differed, many described their life pre-Miss America as lacking in purpose and direction. Competition gave them a reason to push past their obstacles – physical and otherwise. The pageant often offered the formation and affirmation one would expect from a religious community. The call to pageants became a turning point or touchstone that evangelical Miss Americas felt the need to describe in detail. Perhaps because some of the mores associated with the contests seemed to contradict those of conservative Christianity, many participants sought to justify their participation. Though often articulated in retrospect, the event gave them a renewed vision and, for many, became a part of their conversion story as well. For many more, the experience represented the overcoming of an impediment or provided an escape from a directionless life. While contestants were clear that Miss America was not what “saved” them, many recognized it as a crucial component of their faith journey and a ministry.

This pattern held for Terry Meeuwsen, Miss America 1973. Before competing, Meeuwsen traveled as a folk singer with The New Christy Minstrels, believing her life

“glamorous and exciting.”²⁶ And yet, her existence felt empty. Despite achieving her dream of singing professionally, she was headed down a path of destruction. Her life was in shambles as she struggled with days on the road, a time full of drugs, sex, and alcohol. Thanks to some new friends, however, Meeuwsen’s life gained a new direction and took on a whole new meaning:

My life was a little like a mountain stream. It was moving along swiftly and steadily, but the hills were so steep and the trees so thick that I couldn’t see where I was going. I couldn’t see where I would come out. And then suddenly, the trees were fewer, the sun began peeking through, and there in the distance, in the bright sunlight, I saw the end: my reason for being. It was Jesus Christ and I found Him in Plainview, Texas, which was our next stop.”²⁷

With a little help from some “Jesus Freaks,” Meeuwsen experienced a conversion that led her away from time on the road and, eventually, back to the way of beauty contests that she thought she had left behind.²⁸ In pageants, she found her ticket to a different life. “The Miss America pageant,” she later reflected, “is one of the few platforms available for young Christian women to win significant educational scholarships while gaining incredible exposure to realize their dreams without compromising their beliefs.”²⁹ Her story bore a striking resemblance to those told by many of her colleagues.

²⁶ Shirlee Monty, *Terry* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982), 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁸ Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003). In chapter 4, “Superstar,” Prothero discussed the spread of this movement in the 1960s and 1970s, arguing “they brought to the United States another evangelical revival, and another conception of Jesus tailor-made for its time” (126).

²⁹ Kennedy, “Miss (Christian) America.”

The organization, they believed, offered them a mission in the midst of their uncertain futures.

One young woman who seized the opportunity to change her fortune was Heather Whitestone. She was first runner-up to Miss Alabama twice before finally clinching the title. Her persistence paid off when she was crowned Miss America 1995. Her failed attempts made an interesting side story, but the crux of her pageant testimony was the bigger obstacle she overcame: deafness. A childhood illness left Whitestone unable to hear at the age of eighteen months. She worked to be part of the hearing world, relearning how to speak and discerning how to read lips. Whitestone found an outlet in ballet and began dancing at the age of five. While at one time she dreamed of being a professional ballerina, she eventually found a new dream in pageants and imagined the thrill of dancing on national television before millions. Beauty contests offered her proof that she could belong. The Miss America crown also gave her “a bigger voice to encourage people to follow the dreams God had given them.”³⁰ However, even in this arena of performance Whitestone remained acutely aware of her deafness. Trying to hide her deafness, she struggled with the interview portion of the competition the most. Even though Whitestone was an excellent lip reader, sometimes judges spoke too quickly or their lips were hidden, making it difficult for her to answer their questions. Not until she confronted the judges about her inability

³⁰ Whitestone, *Listening with my Heart*, 77.

to hear did Whitestone find success. Like other Miss Americas who overcame struggles, she understood her win as proof that with God one could overcome even the toughest of circumstances. Whitestone claimed her hard work and determination resulted in her becoming the first Miss America with a disability.

Another first for the Miss America Organization took place when Nicole Johnson received the crown in 1999. Johnson, who was diagnosed with Type I diabetes in 1993, became the first Miss America with a chronic disease. Before her diagnosis, she pushed through nausea, dizziness, and lapses of consciousness to complete one preliminary pageant (she finished second runner-up).³¹ After her diagnosis and treatment, she hoped such medical scares were a thing of the past. However, she continued to struggle to keep her blood sugar consistent. Her first year competing in the Miss Virginia pageant, Johnson experienced a severe insulin reaction that left her collapsed on the floor of her hotel room. Johnson, who had managed to hide her disease from her competitors and judges, was most concerned about everyone finding out. As she wrote, "My greatest fear was that people would think badly of me, that I would lose my chance to become Miss Virginia, that because of this disease I would lose my chance to achieve *anything*."³² Many people instructed her to give up her pageant dreams as well as her career ambition and choose something less stressful. But Johnson believed that her diabetes

³¹ Nicole Johnson, *Living with Diabetes: Nicole Johnson, Miss America 1999* (Washington, D.C.: Lifeline Press, 2001), 3-12.

³² *Ibid.*, 57-58.

gave her a new sense of direction and urgency.³³ Now, more than ever before, she saw the opportunity that pageants presented to her:

Trying to hide my diabetes had almost cost me my life. I had to learn that being a person with diabetes is nothing to be ashamed of. Now, with the pump, I vowed to compete again, and do my best to see that people were educated about diabetes: not because it was my platform, but because it is my life and because there are more than sixteen million people across the United States with the same condition...many unaware...most embarrassed...all needing a voice.³⁴

Johnson seized the opportunity to become an advocate for diabetes research and education, dedicating her year of service to raising awareness and convincing Americans to get tested. For her, success in pageantry was not just about her but also about every individual who felt the constraints of that disease. Her battle gave new purpose. As she confessed on the Miss America stage, "The biggest mistake I have ever made was being angry at God and turning my back on Him when I was diagnosed with diabetes...I have come full circle and am now in great control, but it was very difficult at first."³⁵ Like Whitestone, Johnson came to see her difference as an opportunity and not an obstacle, one that could inspire her and others to greatness. The first step, as she learned, was facing the "crisis" and working through it.

Other Miss Americas had less serious crises that prompted their pageant performances. Still, there remained a need to explain one's pageant participation. For Vonda Kay Van Dyke, Miss America 1965, the obstacle was her attitude. After a couple

³³ Ibid., 20-21, 51, 59-61.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 89-90.

of loses, Van Dyke believed her pageant days were over. As she recounted in *That Girl in Your Mirror*, “I was through with pageants or any other kind of competition. I didn’t have enough talent, or enough poise, or whatever else I needed. I didn’t have anything! How foolish I must have looked!”³⁶ Eventually, she surmised that she had lost because she “hadn’t done her best” and because she “was aiming for the wrong goal and for the wrong reasons.”³⁷ As Van Dyke recounted, “The prize was the only thing I could see. I didn’t really appreciate the competition or the opportunity it offered me. I had to have it and I wanted it all for myself. I had never even asked myself whether I was doing the right thing – and I had never asked God how He felt about it.”³⁸ Van Dyke discerned that God wanted her to compete again. “‘All right,’ I said, when I felt that my prayers were answered, ‘I lost when I did things my way. Now we’ll try Your way—but I don’t see what difference that’s going to make. If I’m not good enough, I’m not good enough.’”³⁹ Van Dyke dedicated herself to pageant preparation. She worked especially diligently on her talent, practicing and perfecting her ventriloquist act with a job at Legend City Music Hall. With a newfound focus on doing her best, Van Dyke determined that “I was going to try to please God by making the most of a good

³⁶ Vonda Kay Van Dyke, *That Girl in Your Mirror* (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1966), 111.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 111-12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

opportunity to share my talents.”⁴⁰ Like so many others, she realized that a crown was not the only reward that pageantry had to offer.

Contestants claimed the competitions afforded them a multitude of opportunities for growth and advancement. Some contestants, like Meeuwsen, saw pageantry as a way out of their previous disillusionment, a new endeavor to match their new Christian lifestyle, a new chance at success. Others, like Prewitt, understood pageants as a mandatory response to God’s goodness in their life. For Prewitt and Meeuswen, the crisis was a spiritual one tied in part to an experience that deepened their faith. Others, like Johnson and Whitestone, faced physical crises that their faith helped them overcome. For these contestants, their physical restrictions made winning Miss America seem an impossible dream. Nevertheless they felt compelled to overcome the obstacles and compete for themselves and others. Still more, like Van Dyke, saw an opportunity to trust God’s guidance and share God-given talents. They believed that God’s hand extended into every aspect of their lives, pageantry included.

To be sure, their self-understanding was not the only way to interpret their experiences. All five of the Miss Americas discussed above (1965, 1973, 1980, 1995, and 1999) had all participated in pageants prior to their “call.” Though they articulated an encounter with God that gave them a renewed vision for competing, it did not spark their initial entry onto the stage. Rather, it provided them an explanation – whether

⁴⁰ Ibid., 113.

before, during, or after their crowning moment was up for interpretation – that helped explain their continued attempts at the crown. What some might call an obsession, these Miss Americas labeled as a religious commission.

Faith: Answering the Call, Committed to the Process

According to evangelical contestants, they launched or continued their competitive careers with renewed fervor after experiencing their “call.” Like a new Christian “on fire for Jesus,” these contenders ate, slept, and breathed pageants and contest preparations. Some were true pageant converts, novices who had to learn the ropes. Others had grown up on the pageant circuit and now saw the competitions with fresh eyes. All worked hard to accomplish their goals, believing God would bless their efforts. Of course, since people interpret their lives retrospectively, it was probable that many of their interpretations drew in factors – like faith – not in play originally. In their testimonies, however, they claimed their call gave their pageant careers a greater sense of purpose. These Christian young women approached the events with a belief that their participation was for the greater good. Some competed one year and won Miss America. Others persisted for seven without ever winning. As they sought the crown (or crowns) it took to work their way to the top, they used religious language to describe their experience. They acknowledged that God used even their defeats to teach them life lessons and further sharpen their faith (and, their skills). For some young women, pageants provided a unique test of faith and perseverance in the face of obstacles, as

they trusted God's perfect plan. Evangelical contestants felt compelled to testify about their participation. Even though their individual testimonies reflected the particularities of various faith traditions, the consistency with which the narratives appeared confirmed a common tendency to ascribe religious meaning to this secular event.

Debbie Turner, Miss America 1990, received many lessons in patience during her years of participation. "It all happened in God's timing," she said. "I wouldn't have been ready if I had won sooner."⁴¹ Though she began competing in pageants to finance her education, she later confessed, "I do a lot of motivational speaking now, and I tell people I didn't win Miss America because I was the prettiest or most talented girl there. I believe it was God's design for my life. So He gave me the favor and the grace that I needed. That's why I won."⁴² She worked for seven years, competing in two different states before winning a state title. After three failed attempts to secure the Miss Arkansas crown, Turner entered the pageant circuit in Missouri where she was attending veterinary school. She won Miss Columbia, the state crown and, eventually, the Miss America title. Like any Christian waiting on God to answer one's prayers, Turner hoped she would get her heart's desire. And, like many pageant contestants her reasons for participating were complex and varied. Turner offered some insight into the many layers of her pageant journey during the national competition:

⁴¹ Kennedy, Miss (Christian) America.

⁴² Linda Nees, "Miss America 1990," *Pageantry*, Winter 2000, accessed January 29, 2014, <http://www.pageantrymagazine.com/magazine/features/2000/d00/debturnerd00webint.html>.

Well, you know I've tried to win a state title for seven years now. I guess I just don't give up easily! I also wanted to do it for the scholarships. Veterinary school is very expensive. But most of all I wanted to be Miss America because I want to show that a girl who had nothing can become something. I want to use it as a chance to share my faith in God.⁴³

Scholarships, a desire for upward mobility, and an opportunity for religious testimony: all of these reasons enticed Turner to compete and each of them played a role in her success. That she admitted her desire to win money should not negate her commitment to share her faith. Turner's record of talking about God and performing Christian rap (even, on occasion, in public schools) bore testimony to her sincerity.⁴⁴

Other contestants invoked similar reasons for competing and equal dedication to accomplishing the task. They recounted submitting themselves to harsh criticism and grueling schedules; following God demanded hard work. On approaching the pageant, Terry Meeuwsen, Miss America 1973, said she "felt like a racehorse that had been exercised, fed and groomed for a year. I was ready to go."⁴⁵ Cheryl Prewitt, Miss America 1980, also endured a rigid training plan. She dedicated herself to rid herself of "two small paunches of ugly fat" on her thighs. She read newspapers and magazines to

⁴³ Becki Trueblood, as told to Rhonda Graham, *Best for Me* (Boise: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1991), 72.

⁴⁴ Kennedy, Miss (Christian) America. On at least one occasion, Turner was reprimanded for performing her Christian rap in a public school setting. The original press releases indicated that Turner agreed not to perform the Christian rap in those venues again. See "Christian Rap's Out, Pageant Decides," *Deseret News*, posted March 14, 1990, accessed February 21, 2014, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/91593/CHRISTIAN-RAPS-OUT-PAGEANT-DECIDES.html?pg=all>. In contrast, Kennedy's piece noted, "Complaints to pageant officials and threats of lawsuits didn't stop her. 'I wasn't going to be ashamed of my beliefs,' she says. 'I told them I lived in a country where I could express my views freely.' This revisionist history suggests a shaping of the story to better fit evangelical ideals regarding standing against cultural pressure.

⁴⁵ Monty, *Terry*, 33.

prepare for the interview. The Mississippi pageant board held mock interviews with Prewitt, videotaping her “performance” so that she could study and perfect every word, sentence, and gesture. They even helped her tame and groom her accent.⁴⁶ Both of these young women (and many more) felt God wanted them to compete, and neither of them left anything up to chance. They worked as if their life depended on it, taking on the time commitments and lifestyle changes required of student athletes or interns. Their faith demanded that they put forth their best effort since they served as God’s representatives to the world. Drawing on scriptural teachings that all of life offered an opportunity to bring glory to God (Colossians 3:23), these young women embraced pageant preparation as they would any demanding job. They then testified to working with God to achieve God’s purpose.⁴⁷

In the midst of all of the focused hard work, Prewitt also turned to God for guidance. She developed a pageant prayer during her second year vying for the title of Miss Mississippi. As she sought to live into God’s purpose for her, she found herself praying, “Lord, this is Your pageant. If I can do more good for You-reach more people-as Miss Starkville than as plain old me, then let me win. Otherwise, don’t.”⁴⁸ She

⁴⁶ Prewitt, *A Bright-Shining Place*, 233ff.

⁴⁷ This idea of working with God was endemic in the Reformed/Wesleyan evangelical tradition, where most of the women came from. As far back as the Puritans, Christians saw their role as one that demonstrated God’s goodness and worked for God’s purpose. See Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (New York: Longman, 1999) and William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), especially chapter 3 “Marching to Zion: The Protestant Establishment as a Unifying Force.”

⁴⁸ Prewitt, *A Bright-Shining Place*, 213.

repeated that prayer at the Miss Mississippi Pageant, changing only the titles. While preparing for Miss America, Prewitt did more than pray and prep. She drew on scripture to confess. Referring to her confessions as “positive talking,” she pointed to Mark 11:23 as her evidence that “not only do you have to believe, you’ve got to *say* what you believe. Confess it to others.”⁴⁹ She continued, “The way I figure it, confessing with your mouth helps your mind to become convinced. It also serves to surround you with continual positive vibrations-like a protective screen-that prevent Satan from sabotaging your mind with negativity.”⁵⁰ Another scripture passage that took on new meaning was Hebrews 11:1. In seeking to receive comfort from this text, she accepted that she would win Miss America and presented that notion as fact to more and more people. Her “positive talking” led to “positive knowing.” As she wrote later, “It was almost as though I had already won the title-it just hadn’t happened yet in time and space.”⁵¹ Prewitt drew on everything she knew about God, faith, hard work, and pageants to ready herself for competition.⁵²

She recited her prayer at Miss America too. Shortly after praying, “Lord, this is Your pageant. If I can do more good for You-reach more people-as Miss America than as

⁴⁹ Ibid., 214.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 214-15.

⁵¹ Ibid., 238-40.

⁵² Kate Bowler’s work on the American Prosperity Gospel offered useful insights for understanding Prewitt’s Pentecostalism. Prewitt’s testimony bore out Bowler’s argument that individuals in faith movement churches “preached a gospel of triumph” and her work to win Miss America mirrored the techniques of triumph Bowler described. Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), especially Chapter 5 “Victory.”

Miss Mississippi, then let me win. Otherwise, don't," Prewitt received the crown and entry onto an even broader stage.⁵³ She believed God meant for her to win Miss America, but she did more than just believe it in the abstract. In her mind, belief fostered action. She knew that she must offer the best testimony of God's grace, love, and healing possible and worked hard to represent herself, and her God, well. As she noted when faced with a difficult diet and exercise plan, "If the press picks up on the story of my healing, I've got to have the best looking legs in town!"⁵⁴ Conservative Christians like Prewitt felt extra pressure to do well because they represented not only themselves but also their church, and ultimately, God.⁵⁵ Prewitt was willing to do whatever it took to testify to God's goodness in her life. She saw God's hand every step of the way, drawing comfort from her expectation of God's presence and perfect divine will. Pageants offered her the platform.

Heather Whitestone approached the competition with the same focus and determination as Prewitt even if she lacked the same certainty of success.⁵⁶ Indeed, after placing first runner up twice at Miss Alabama, Whitestone almost stopped competing.⁵⁷ The disappointment of defeat made her many sacrifices, especially the large amount of

⁵³ Ibid., 245.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 236.

⁵⁵ Prewitt's body work mirrored that of other Protestants seeking to perfect their temples for Christ. See R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2004), especially Chapter 4 "Pray the Weight Away: Shaping Devotional Fitness Culture."

⁵⁶ This is one place where you can see evidence of individual traditions. Prewitt's Pentecostalism mandated that she confess and believe that she would win while Whitestone's more general evangelical background belied such a certainty of outcome.

⁵⁷ Whitestone, *Listening with My Heart*, 64.

time she invested, seem pointless. Her support system, however, refused to believe that her pageant career was over. One family gave her an airplane ticket to Atlantic City in hope that she would leave inspired to try again. Whitestone confessed that God spoke to her in Atlantic City and through hundreds of others who believed in her mission when she had given up hope.⁵⁸ Later, she recounted some of these events, highlighting one transformational moment.

Whitestone found herself in the convention hall shortly after the conclusion of the Miss America 1994 pageant. She asked one of the workers who was cleaning up if she could walk on the stage. She climbed on the runway with her mother “and suddenly felt confident and relaxed.”⁵⁹ In this moment, Whitestone rededicated herself to the pageant with renewed fervor.

In an instant, all my old insecurities vanished. I felt the presence of God right there beside me, and he spoke to my heart: *Go back and continue with your hard work, this is the time for you, this year.* I didn’t know then if I would be Miss America, I just knew I was supposed to work toward Miss Alabama with renewed energy. I thought God wanted me to witness for Jesus on whatever stage I found myself. In his wisdom, I don’t think God wanted me to know I would be Miss America. If I’d known, maybe I wouldn’t have worked so hard, or maybe I’d have become snobby. God wanted me to depend upon him completely, to have complete trust in his plan.⁶⁰ [emphasis in original]

⁵⁸ Ibid., 72.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁰ Ibid. Again this contrasts with Prewitt’s certainty. Prewitt believed that testifying to God’s promises ahead of time pointed to her trust in God’s promise. Whitestone worried that knowing would result in human error. Again, Bowler’s work on the America Prosperity Gospel offered help in understanding the particular ethos in which Prewitt’s beliefs gestated. Bowler, *Blessed*.

Whitestone returned to Alabama confident that God wanted her to compete. She thrust herself into pageant preparations. In the midst of exhausting mock interviews, community appearances, and talent rehearsals, she maintained her focus “to witness for Jesus on whatever stage” she found herself. For Whitestone, part of answering the call meant enduring the threat of possible defeat, trusting that God would use her, win or lose. Like a Christian returning to church, she recommitted her life to pageants. As she saw it, she took solace in the knowledge that God’s plan would prevail, convinced that she would understand the purpose later.

Vonda Kay Van Dyke (1965) was also unsure what the outcome would be, but she later claimed that after she adjusted her attitude, she approached the pageant with new eyes. She embraced this newfound view, seeing it as an avenue to share her faith, grow as a person, and entertain others. In other words, she lived for the process, not just the outcome. As Van Dyke recalled, “Maybe I would find the opportunity that meant more to me than any of the others-it could happen during a beauty pageant as well as anywhere else on this earth. I just might be given a chance to share the most important gift of my life—my faith in God.”⁶¹ She did not give up the hope of winning, but she valued the adventure, looking for ways to minister along the way. Like Christian in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, completing the journey well was as important as the destination.

⁶¹ Van Dyke, *That Girl in Your Mirror*, 114.

By focusing on what God wanted and how she could impact others, Van Dyke testified that she received more blessings and affirmation than when she was only in it to win.⁶² Like so many others, she later claimed that prayer offered her comfort and direction. She wanted an onstage question about her faith so she prayed before walking out for her interview questions. She prayed, "Father, give me confidence and help me to perform to the very best of my ability, and if there be any way that I can witness, give me the words to say. Amen."⁶³ Her chance came in the form of her second question. Bert Parks said, "I understand that you always carry a Bible with you as a good-luck charm. Tell us about your religion."⁶⁴ Van Dyke believed God provided both the question and the answer when the words came so easily.

I do not consider my Bible a good-luck charm. It is the most important book I own. I would not describe my companionship with God as a religion, but as a faith. I believe in Him, trust in Him, and pray that even tonight His will may be done.⁶⁵

Van Dyke had the chance she wanted. Her bold statement of faith changed the face of the pageant.

Young women sought to live an exemplary pageant life. They had faith in the pageant, or, more specifically, faith that God could work through it. Just as conversion narratives were offered retrospectively, contestants usually recounted their pageant

⁶² Ibid., especially chapter 19, "Enjoy Yourself!," 115-19.

⁶³ Ibid., 117-18.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 118.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

testimonies when their stages days were over. They narrated their pageant career as one describes a faith journey, acknowledging that it was important to allow themselves to grow and not expect to achieve “perfection” all at once. For some, like Prewitt, their Miss America story was inextricable from their faith story. For others, the pageant enhanced their faith. Still more found the competition provided an outlet for them to put their faith in action. They described pageantry as a rewarding experience that deepened their faith and expanded their influence.

Rewards: Of Crowns and Causes

Becoming Miss America changed my life forever. I hope I also changed the role of Miss America forever—from passive beauty queen to social activist. I was able to see beyond the glamour of winning the titles and into the reality of what the title could accomplish. But I’ve always believed that “to whom much is given, much is required.” I was given much, now I was destined to reach out. The crown was my passport to travel and touch others. The crown was my microphone. The crown was a representation of hope. And I did my best to spread that hope wherever I went. I still try to do so.⁶⁶

A religious testimony always ended with evidence that one reaped benefits from her conversion. Pageant narratives proved no different. Converts extolled the benefits of the competition both tangible and intangible. Winners and losers alike spoke fondly of their time on the circuit, using their narratives to invite and spur on new initiates. They encouraged other young women to join them on the runway, heralding the scholarships and professional opportunities participation afforded. This capital, both cultural and spiritual, coupled with a penchant for performance and a desire to make the world a

⁶⁶ Johnson, *Living with Diabetes*, 128.

better place appealed to many. While disappointment often followed a failure to earn the crown, competitors still noted the value of friendships begun, doors opened, and differences made.

Pageantry offered young women an opportunity to earn heavenly rewards in addition to earthly distinction.⁶⁷ Of course, accepting that pageantry was God's will for them was easier when one won a contest and received the accompanying accolades. Winners pointed out that they gained more than a title; the Miss America crown opened doors and provided opportunities not available to the vast majority of 18-24 year olds. The Miss America crown served as an ordination of sorts, offering young women credentials and influence that rivaled seminary degrees in many church cultures.⁶⁸ After a woman received the Miss America crown, she represented all of the competitors just as a minister represented a congregation. Winners felt a responsibility to use the crown they had been given to glorify God. Just as in traditional conversion narratives, the testimonies were intended to point beyond themselves. They served as inspiration to others to "go and do likewise."⁶⁹

Other than scholarships, the crown represented the most obvious reward. More than the physical crown, contestants competed for what the crown represented: access to a grander stage. For Nicole Johnson (1999) and many others, the crown provided a way

⁶⁷ The "persecution" necessary for true refinement also played a role in pageant preparation and success (at times limiting that success) and will be discussed in the next section.

⁶⁸ This is discussed more in chapter 5, "Pageant Preachers."

⁶⁹ More on how pageant testimonies served as inspiration to others in the identity section below.

to advocate for a cause. Johnson adopted diabetes education as her platform and rejoiced that she had the chance to spread awareness of this disease during her reign. Reflecting on her work at an American Diabetes Association event, she noted, “For the first time as Miss America I was doing the work that I believe God had been preparing me for all along. One of the most difficult things, I think, is trying to figure out God’s plan or purpose for your life. Many people search their whole lives for it. Well, with God’s grace, I had found my purpose—or at least an important part of it.”⁷⁰ Johnson, who suffered from Type I diabetes, enjoyed sharing about how God had given her the grace to continue living her life. She educated others of the warning signs of diabetes, raised money for diabetes research, and promoted early detection and prevention of this vicious disease. The crown gave her entry to work with many organizations already tackling these issues and gave them a spokeswoman with name (and brand) recognition. Johnson’s claim that she sought the crown to advocate a cause was not unique. Since the competition began requiring contestants to choose a platform in 1989, many aspiring philanthropists made their way to the runway. Miss Americas Debbye Turner, Tara Dawn Holland, Erika Harold, and Teresa Scanlan were just some of the many looking for a louder microphone.⁷¹ As Holland remarked, “No other program gives such a voice to a woman...I realized that this was my opportunity to make a difference for

⁷⁰ Johnson, *Living with Diabetes*, 121-22.

⁷¹ The community service platforms chosen by these four Christian winners were: Turner: 1990 Motivating Youth to Excellence, Holland: 1997 Literacy Advocacy and Tutoring, Harold: 2003 Preventing Youth Violence and Bullying and Sexual Abstinence, and Scanlan: 2011 Dangers of Eating Disorders.

everything from literacy to abstinence. There is something about the crown that makes people listen to what you have to say."⁷²

In addition to their platforms, many Miss America hopefuls claimed another cause: evangelization.⁷³ In a blog posted the day before she left for the Miss America competition, Teresa Scanlan wrote, "Why am I competing in the Miss America competition over the next ten days? Because God has placed me in this position to show His love."⁷⁴ She knew that God wanted to use her, praying "I am clay in your hands, your humble servant, willing to do whatever you wish for me in your perfect plan."⁷⁵ She understood that God worked in mysterious ways, including pageants. Scanlan went on to claim the 90th Anniversary Miss America crown and with it, a national stage to be a witness. She was not the only one to laud pageants as an opportunity to evangelize. Even those who failed to receive the top prize expressed delight. For example, Miss Oklahoma 1998 rejoiced that she was able to share her faith with other contestants.⁷⁶

⁷² Kennedy, Miss (Christian) America.

⁷³ Southern evangelicalism, which influenced many of the pageant contestants, placed a powerful emphasis on witness. See, for example, Samuel S. Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis Revisited* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), especially Chapter 5 "The Central Theme;" Wayne Flynt and Gerald W. Berkley, *Taking Christianity to China: Alabama Missionaries in the Middle Kingdom, 1850-1950* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997).

⁷⁴ Teresa Scanlan, "Miss America is Here: Why Am I Competing?," posted January 4, 2011, accessed January 29, 2014, <http://teresastravelsandtidbits.blogspot.com/2011/01/miss-america-is-here-why-am-i-competing.html>.

⁷⁵ Scanlan, "Miss America is Here: Why Am I Competing?"

⁷⁶ Dana Williamson, "Miss Oklahoma Wants to Spend Year Sharing Faith with Youth," *Baptist Press*, posted September 29, 1998, accessed January 29, 2014, <http://www.sbcbaptistpress.org/bpnews.asp?id=2784>.

This call to testify often mingled with a contestant's official platform. Christian contestants chose issues ranging from abstinence to character education to autism awareness. Like their foremothers in 19th century reform movements, Christian contenders sought to make the world a better place because of their commitment to Christ.⁷⁷ They found this work a privilege, a reward that allowed them to be useful.⁷⁸ Prior to the advent of official platforms, Van Dyke, Meeuswen, Prewitt, and others spoke of their desire both to witness for Christ and to make a difference in the world. Their testimonies made clear that the advent of pageant as mission field preceded the Miss America Organization's focus on volunteerism. Participants found their reward in the form of opportunities to stand for Christ and also at the same time realize their personal identity.⁷⁹

For others, the rewards of pageantry proved more personal and even intangible. Some fell into their roles, seeing God's design in retrospect. Jane Jayroe (Miss America 1967) noted the amount of personal growth she experienced during the pageant,

⁷⁷ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 43. Banet-Weiser notes that most platforms "can be characterized as 'women's issues,' or rather, issues that are relegated to the private sphere and that entail nurturing, emotionality, and morality." For more on women as moral guardians in the 19th century see, Nancy A. Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd edition (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1999) and Lacey Warner, *Saving Women: Retrieving Evangelistic Theology and Practice* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007).

⁷⁸ It was a reward because it allowed them to go into all the world and it was rewarding because they could see they were making a difference (or feel as if they were).

⁷⁹ Of course, the mission field existed both inside and outside the pageant. The pageant itself was a mission field because of unsaved, as they put it, participants. Christian contestants sometimes formed communities to pray throughout the pageant.

claiming that it prepared her for a life of ministry. Her story of God's involvement differed a bit from many of her Miss America peers, but she considered her win no less ordained. A Methodist from Oklahoma, Jayroe attended Oklahoma City University, believing that "it was God's calling for me to pursue a music degree at OCU."⁸⁰ While at the Methodist University, Jayroe auditioned for a spot in the Surrey Singers and found herself distraught when she was not chosen. She questioned God's plan in bringing her to OCU. She recalled, "I thought singing and performing was my calling. God replaced the desire to sing with the Surrey Singers quickly. Looking back, the admonition, 'Oh ye of little faith,' certainly applied to me. I had no idea what plans God had in store for me."⁸¹ Within the month, she won the Miss Oklahoma City pageant, which secured her a spot in the Miss Oklahoma competition.

From agreeing to participate in the Miss Oklahoma City contest to her eventual arrival in Atlantic City, Jayroe never believed that she could capture the crown on the first try. Indeed, when she won Miss Oklahoma City she claimed she was "the most surprised girl in the audience."⁸² While Jayroe wanted to become Miss America, she believed her initial foray into the system was merely about gaining experience. She felt it would take multiple years of competing to launch her to the Miss America runway. As she noted, "My hopes of performing and winning pageants were alive and well.

⁸⁰ Jane Jayroe with Bob Burke, *More Grace than Glamour: My Life as Miss America and Beyond* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 2006), 57.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 62.

However, my goal was to somehow convince OCU music officials to allow me to sing with the Surrey Singers, have many performing opportunities, and someday later, when I was older, enter the Miss America pageant. I was only 19 and had no idea that 'someday later' would come much sooner than I ever dreamed."⁸³ Jayroe went on to become Miss Oklahoma 1966, all the while protesting, "I knew I would not win."⁸⁴ For her, this was further evidence of God's masterful plan.

Later, Jayroe expressed many of the same feelings as she faced the Miss America competition, stating, "I was prepared to lose. Winning was out of the realm of my thinking. Winning the Miss America crown happened to perfect people and even in my most confident moments I was not even close to perfect."⁸⁵ She considered her shy disposition an impediment. Yet she noted, "I was determined to do my best and that was always my prayer. I never prayed to win."⁸⁶ Ultimately her best proved good enough as she found herself the talent winner, a top ten finalist, a top five finalist, and finally Miss America.⁸⁷ Her doubt that she could win followed her even into the final moments of competition. Jayroe recalled, "When the judging got down to just Miss California and me, I was still okay with the fact that I now had won the coveted first

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 66.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 72.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 72, 74.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 75-80.

runner up spot.”⁸⁸ As she walked down the Atlantic City runway with the crown on her head, she claimed, “I was so stunned I could hardly breathe. I was not supposed to win.”⁸⁹ Jayroe began her year-long reign in a state of disbelief, sobbing in the hotel room the night of her coronation as she considered what she had gotten herself into.⁹⁰

Jayroe soon accepted her responsibility as Miss America as God-ordained. After the luncheon the next day, she received a phone call from her childhood pastor, the Reverend Leonard Gillingham. As she recounted:

To this day, I do not remember any part of the actual conversation with Leonard, but what I experienced was grace...I knew that when my parents left me in a few hours to return home, I would not be alone in New Jersey, New York, or any other place on earth...I had the ultimate friend, God. I did not have to be everything to everybody...It was enough for the moment just to belong to God and experience His power and grace. Even though I was not prepared on the external for this big role, God had been preparing me internally for years...⁹¹

Like so many Miss Americas before and after her, Jayroe found solace in God’s perfect plan. During her year of service, she did not overcome her shyness, but she knew that God used her in spite of it. She hoped her foray in the pageant world had benefited others, but *she* knew she had benefited tremendously.

Pageants provided ample room and opportunity for growth. Many relished the journey, talking of friendships made, charities started, and personal goals achieved. However, Christian pageant winners described their rewards as not only earthly, but

⁸⁸ Ibid., 79.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 80.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 83.

⁹¹ Ibid., 84-85.

heavenly. While crowns, scholarships, and camaraderie offered abundant reasons to enter pageants, they were not the only motives contestants cited for their participation. Spiritual capital in the form of church invitations and other opportunities to minister also contributed to the incentives. Many commented that the crown provided the key to a bigger stage, one on which they could make a difference beyond the walls of the convention center and thus one which allowed them to grow spiritually. As noted, contestants may have recognized the opportunity for Christian service only in retrospect. Common experience suggests that their motives were mixed, like all human action, but in their minds the most compelling motive centered on evangelism. They claimed that the chance to evangelize launched them to careers of service after Miss America and their faith helped them cope with tests and trials.

Tests and Trials:

No evangelical testimony would be complete without confirming God's faithfulness through the trials and temptations along the way. Most conversion narratives, including biblical ones, included a trial: the whale swallowed a disobedient Jonah, Hannah suffered infertility, and Job endured sickness and loss of wealth. Contestants interpreted their life experiences in light of this pattern, modeling the customary narrative with which they were intimately familiar. Pageant winners felt overwhelmed with their responsibilities and often found their faith tested as much or more during their year of service as they did en route to the crown. Almost without

exception, Miss America winners described some kind of conflict or disappointment either with the Miss America organization, the American public, or with their overcrowded schedule. Some relished the opportunity to stand strong in their beliefs against cultural (or pageant) expectations. Others struggled to maintain their faith in the face of loneliness, reporters, and the public spotlight. Still more faced disillusion about their effectiveness. Most, it seemed, tried to balance a belief that the opportunity came from God with the frustration of their new job. Put differently, Christian Miss Americas did not express regret at being Miss America because doing so could be interpreted as questioning God's sovereignty. Yet all realized, at some point, that being American royalty was not all roses and parades.

For Erika Harold (2003), this realization came early in her reign. Harold, whose official platform was preventing youth violence, endured a conflict with pageant officials when she decided to advocate sexual abstinence as well. Less than a month into her year of service, they instructed her to stick to the teen violence platform only. Harold refused to back down, telling *The Washington Times*, "I will not be bullied."⁹² While the two parties resolved the conflict quickly, the scuffle appeared in the media for months. Christian publications praised Harold's bravery. Mainstream media offered varying accounts. Some defended Harold's right to free speech while others accused her of

⁹² Mona Charen, "Pageant Tries, but Miss America won't be Silenced," *The Baltimore Sun*, October 14, 2002, accessed January 29, 2014, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2002-10-14/news/0210140284_1_miss-america-pageant-abstinence-erika-harold.

having a secret agenda since she did not compete with an abstinence platform.⁹³ Harold spoke boldly about her decision to stand for sexual purity, but tried to keep her message positive rather than denigrating those who disagreed with her. After crowning her successor, Harold spoke about her decision not to speak harshly of those who told her to keep her views about sex to herself.

Well, I knew that God wanted me to stand firm in what I believe in, but I also knew that He wanted me to carry myself in a gracious and dignified way. It would have undermined my testimony if, while I was saying, "I'm going to stand up for what I believe in," I was behaving at the same time in a manner that appeared un-Christian to the people in the Miss America organization. God puts us in places to be able to witness to people who may oppose us. During the course of the year they had opportunities to see me present the abstinence message and to see that it's something that's received well by young people. It gives them hope. And I think that may have changed the way the Miss America organization views the abstinence issue.⁹⁴

Harold took pride in her ability to stand firm. She told *Pentecostal Evangel*, "If you're a Christian it needs to be manifest in every aspect of your life. If you encounter any adversity in life, God can use it."⁹⁵ Harold presented her pageant career as proof, believing that God had worked through her to reach countless youth with her message "Protect Yourself, Respect Yourself." The concept of premarital virginity, however irregularly practiced, represented a deep-seated ideal in evangelical culture. Miss

⁹³ For an example of negative press, see Lara Riscal, "Miss America's Stealth Virginity Campaign," *Salon* website, October 28, 2002, accessed February 22, 2014, http://www.salon.com/2002/10/28/miss_abstinence/. For an example of positive press, see "Miss America resists pressure to silence abstinence message," *Associated Baptist Press*, October 2, 2002, accessed February 22, 2014, <http://www.sbc Baptist Press.org/bpnews.asp?ID=14407>.

⁹⁴ Jim Bennett, "Miss America Unmuzzled," *WorldNetDaily (WND)*, October 5, 2003, accessed January 29, 2014, <http://www.wnd.com/2003/10/21102/>.

⁹⁵ John W. Kennedy, "Erika Harold: Miss America for Such a Time as This," *Pentecostal Evangel*, February 23, 2003, accessed January 29, 2014, http://pentecostalevangel.org/Articles2003/4633_missamerica.cfm.

Americas like Harold who advocated abstinence were embracing and replicating part of their culture, which strengthened their position as icons and role models.

Other Miss Americas experienced reproach for their political views. An AP reporter asked Nicole Johnson (1999) if she thought President Clinton should resign or be impeached. She responded that she believed he should resign because of his “shameful” actions. As she noted later, “Needless to say, I wasn’t invited to the White House as is customary for Miss America. I quickly learned that this ride was going to be a bumpy one.”⁹⁶ Her brief statement led to a “barrage of verbal insults” from her “media trainer” who told her she needed to be nonpolitical during her year of service and that she needed speech training. Johnson submitted herself to his instruction, but committed to being “Nicole Johnson, someone with strong moral character and someone who knew what she stood for and wasn’t afraid to say it.”⁹⁷ Still, she struggled with the constant criticism and suggestions for improvement that she received on this point and uncounted others. She described her year as Miss America as one during which she felt like “a caged bird” even as she acknowledged the power of the crown “to make a difference in people’s lives.”⁹⁸ The crown provided opportunities that were simultaneously burdens and blessings.

⁹⁶ Johnson, *Living with Diabetes*, 101.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102-03.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 104, 126.

The knowledge that someone was always watching alongside the fear (and reality) of criticism haunted other Miss Americas. Heather Whitestone (1995) faced disapproval from some in the deaf community because of her commitment to speak instead of using sign language. She felt her platform message was overshadowed by this controversy and considered resigning her title. Instead she turned to God. "I poured out my heart to him and gave him the responsibility of my new job...his dream for me."⁹⁹ Whitestone believed God answered her prayer. "He reminded me that he allowed trials in my life for his reasons, and he wanted me to learn to depend upon him completely." As a result, she continued her mission as Miss America, noting that doing so "enabled me to handle difficult situations gracefully instead of with anger and bitterness. I heard the criticism, but I continued to offer a positive message..."¹⁰⁰ She ended her speeches by addressing some of the controversy head on and tried to focus on the positive responses she received.

Still, at times Whitestone lamented her new role in the spotlight. She felt smothered by the press, numerous appearances, and adoring fans. She found the pressure to always be "on" and never make a mistake difficult. Whitestone recalled one occasion when she lost her temper. At the governor's inauguration in Alabama, a group of women swarmed her asking for autographs. When she slipped away to the bathroom,

⁹⁹ Whitestone, *Listening with my Heart*, 94.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

one pushed a piece of paper under the stall! As she walked to the sink to wash her hands, women continued mobbing her. She turned and yelled, "Stop it!" She was not the only Miss America to lament a lack of privacy even in the bathroom.¹⁰¹ Guilt and even sadness at one's failure to be gracious and fulfill unrealistic expectations accompanied many Miss Americas. For Christian Miss Americas like Whitestone, the stakes seemed even higher.

Many found their year as Miss America to be quite isolating as they realized they had few people in whom they could confide about their frustrations. Even though Miss Americas often found themselves lonely, they were rarely alone. Their schedules sometimes had them making multiple appearances a day and boarding multiple planes a week. Even winners who had close friends and family found little time or energy to keep them informed. As Jane Jayroe (1967) related, "Being Miss America was a lonely existence. Even when I experienced a thrilling occasion there was no one to share it with personally or even by phone. Oklahoma was in a different time zone and my family and friends were already in bed by the time I arrived at my hotel."¹⁰² Caressa Cameron agreed. Like many of her sisters, she turned to God for companionship. In an interview with Terry Meeuwsen, she confessed, "There's just sometimes that you're just by yourself and to know that God is there and to be able to pray and to have these

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 134.

¹⁰² Jayroe, *More Grace than Glamour*, 109-10.

conversations with him – it’s less lonely.”¹⁰³ Angela Perez Baraquio (2001) decided to rely on God from the start. She remembered seeking comfort throughout the competition, praying, “Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful.” After winning, she insisted upon attending Mass the next day before flying to New York for her appearances. She wanted to “keep her connection with God in the forefront of her year as Miss America.”¹⁰⁴

As Whitestone reflected, “During July and August, the last two months of my Miss America year, I was too tired to think. God was carrying me, still helping me make a difference, and I was too numb to even realize it. I was too tired to read my Bible, too tired to pray. But fortunately for me, the spirit of God helped in my distress.”¹⁰⁵

Whitestone was not alone in describing her year as Miss America as exhausting. Terry Meeuwsen (1973) described one event where she “almost collapsed” because she was “emotionally drained.” Both she and Nicole Johnson (1999) spent some of their reign in the hospital.¹⁰⁶ Even though most Miss Americas avoided the hospital (as patients), many battled other minor illnesses and learned to live on little sleep. Sharlene Wells (1985) testified that being Miss America was akin to “spending a year at boot camp,”

¹⁰³ Caressa Cameron, interview by Terry Meeuwsen, *The 700 Club*, CBN, April 2010, accessed January 29, 2014, <http://www.cbn.com/tv/1427724405001>.

¹⁰⁴ Jay Copp, “A Catholic Miss America: Angela Perez Baraquio,” *St. Anthony Messenger*, September 2001, accessed January 29, 2014, <http://www.americancatholic.org/messenger/sep2001/feature1.asp>.

¹⁰⁵ Whitestone, *Listening with my Heart*, 155.

¹⁰⁶ Monty, Terry, 56. Johnson, *Living with Diabetes*, 106-09.

adding, “Physically, the pace is a killer. Mentally, it’s an obstacle course.”¹⁰⁷ Heather Whitestone recalled: “Like a car gasping on gasoline fumes, I was running on empty...I wanted to rest.”¹⁰⁸ Jane Jayroe agreed. “I’ve lost all enthusiasm for these things. I’m not a person to these people—and when I get off a Piedmont puddle-jumper at 7:30 after starting at 11:00 that morning, I don’t look like the person they expect to see. I’m ready to go home and go to work...to accomplish something...to do something besides smile! These people deserve more than me.”¹⁰⁹ Contestants expressed a deep felt need to push to make a difference for God in spite of their tired, fragile bodies. Even the stamina of youth had its limits.

Winners clung to any and all evidence that their sacrifices were worth it. When Jayroe lamented the constant smiling required of her and longed to do something more important, a letter put her seemingly trivial job in perspective. A Navy officer reminded her that even a smile could be a big thing. “I have seen and spoken to you at least five times since you came aboard the ship and each time you spoke and smiled back. You seem to be just as happy to be here as the crew—there seems to be a smile upon each and every face since you arrived.”¹¹⁰ Though a small action, this assurance that her work mattered helped Jayroe and other Miss Americas continue their work as goodwill ambassadors. Jayroe, Whitestone, Meeuwsen, and Wells were some of the many Miss

¹⁰⁷ Sheri L. Dew, *Sharlene Wells: Miss America* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1985), 183.

¹⁰⁸ Whitestone, *Listening with my Heart*, 154-55.

¹⁰⁹ Jayroe, *More Grace than Glamour*, 110.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

Americas who gained strength and encouragement from letters that praised their morals, their platform, or their message. Raising awareness and monetary contributions also contributed to their feelings of success. Nicole Johnson remarked: “One of my primary goals as Miss America was to campaign for greater investment in diabetes research and prevention. While money is certainly not the only measure of success, I think it says a lot that during the time I held the title, more money was raised for diabetes research than had—or has—been raised for the cause of any other Miss America.”¹¹¹ Miss Americas craved the reassurance that their hard work was not as pointless as it sometimes felt. Like votes for a politician or laughter for a comedian, pageant contestants sought palpable evidence of their success.

Perhaps most affirming for the winners was when they received confirmation that others saw Christ in them. Cheryl Prewitt (1980) shared the story of William Stephens, an admissions counselor at Mississippi State University who helped her prepare for the Miss Mississippi pageant. During a church appearance where Stephens served as Prewitt’s accompanist, he joined the church. Prewitt rejoiced with him.¹¹² Prewitt also recounted the response of one journalist who heard her testimony about God’s healing in her life. Just as she wondered whether “any of them had felt just a touch of truth” and if “God had somehow been glorified” she heard one reporter

¹¹¹ Johnson, *Living with Diabetes*, 156.

¹¹² Prewitt, *A Bright-Shining Place*, 219-20.

comment, “You know, it’s the darndest thing. To hear her speak, she could almost make a believer out of me!”¹¹³ Moments like these made up for the many hours of long rehearsals and countless appearances. Sacrifices and trials paled in comparison.

In addition to sharing their faith with others, participants argued that their faith grew in the process. Like many Miss Americas, Katie Stam (2009) traveled 20,000 miles a month and thus could not always attend church. Most likely, her travels meant that she rarely attended. She claimed that her “personal time with God,” including phone devotionals and prayers with her boyfriend allowed her relationship with God to grow.¹¹⁴ Others asserted that they gained strength from appearances in churches and other religious groups where they felt freer to share. Christian Miss Americas also cited the positive examples of other Christians, Miss Americas and otherwise, who found themselves in the public eye as inspirational. Many felt compelled to describe how they managed their personal piety in the land of rigorous schedules, pageant officials, the media, and personal doubts. Being “on” seemingly round the clock presented a special trial for these women thrust into the public eye.

A year of service required much energy, commitment, endurance, and, Christian Miss Americas argued, faith. It was not unusual for Miss Americas to long for and even

¹¹³ Ibid., 257.

¹¹⁴ Katie Stam, interview by Terry Meeuwsen, *The 700 Club*, CBN, July 10, 2009, accessed January 29, 2014, <http://www.cbn.com/tv/1412503079001>.

celebrate the end of their reign even as they acknowledged that it had forever changed them. As Sharlene Wells wrote:

Halfway through the year, I found myself feeling anxious for the year to end so I could slip back into the woodwork. After a little soul-searching, I realized that this was totally unrealistic and would be very ungrateful of me. The Lord has given me much more than I deserve...For those of us who have the truth to guide us, who understand what life is about...it is inexcusable for us to sit back and let others carry the load. I believe we must all be willing and prepared to share our beliefs with others.¹¹⁵

Winners felt their crown came with enormous responsibility. They recounted not only their increased faith in God, but faith and assurance that some good was being accomplished through their efforts regardless of how frazzled they felt or how much controversy they faced. Confronted with the pressure to perform their expected roles on cue, winners sought solace and direction in times of distress. In fact, this insistence that God worked through all circumstances extended even to pageant participants who did not walk away with the Miss America crown.

Those that Lost and the Pattern

I listened and believed. From my very first memories, I'd been told that if two or three people pray together, God will answer their prayers. I knew people all over the world prayed for me, and I believed God would respond to those prayers. I also prayed that if I didn't make Miss America, God would help me handle it. But I felt that with all the people I had praying for me, together with my own hard work and the signs that had led me into the pageant world, I was destined for the Miss America crown.

Rebecca "Becki" Trueblood, Miss Idaho 1989¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Wells, Epilogue in Dew, *Sharlene Wells: Miss America*, 185-86.

¹¹⁶ Trueblood, *Best for Me*, 41.

Many times those who felt “destined” for the Miss America crown walked away without it. Rebecca Trueblood, Miss Idaho 1989, was one such competitor. Pageant losers, however, also experienced a keen sense of God’s sovereignty. They spoke of praying for God’s will and many who struggled to accept their loss still acknowledged that God was working through the winner. Some clung to their pageant prayers and pageant testimonies, noting that they too had been called to compete for a higher purpose, reinterpreting their calls in light of their new circumstances. Others named what God accomplished through their pageant participation. Indeed statements made by Miss America contestants who failed to win the national crown emphasized God’s hand in the pageant and in their lives through the process of competing. For example, Julie Payne, Miss Oklahoma 1998 joined hands with Miss Maryland to pray for the new Miss America just moments after the announcement. She had prayed that “God would use her to glorify him” and felt her prayer was answered. “I had opportunity to share with some girls who aren’t Christians. I hope there were some seeds planted there,” Payne noted.¹¹⁷ Payne was not the only individual who felt fulfilled despite losing the title. Katie Millar, Miss Utah 2006, relished her opportunity to take a stand for modesty on the Miss America stage. When chastised by a man for blowing Utah’s shot at a Miss America, she responded, “I’m sorry, sir, I can’t change who I am. I guess no crown is

¹¹⁷ Williamson, “Miss Oklahoma Wants to Spend Year Sharing Faith with Youth.”

worth it.”¹¹⁸ Millar believed God had used her and felt no shame that the crown did not follow.

One of the most intriguing of these testimonies is that of Miss Idaho 1989, Rebecca Eileen Trueblood. As many individuals competing for the crown, Trueblood believed that God wanted her to be Miss America. Indeed she had a conversion experience that highlighted God’s involvement in her decision to participate. Trueblood outlined in some detail her call to pageants even going as far as to name the first chapter of her book, “The Calling.” After hearing Kellye Cash (Miss America 1987) speak of God using her during her reign, Trueblood wondered if God had been preparing her for the contest. The feeling that she was meant to try for the title kept coming back to her so she prayed, “Lord, if You want me to run for this thing, please give me a sign. A *big* one! I don’t want any questions in my mind.”¹¹⁹ A few months later a woman approached Trueblood while she was getting a haircut and said, “I’m with the Miss California Pageant board, and I’ve been watching you today. I really feel you should enter a pageant. I’ll give you any amount of help I can. I don’t know what it is, but I just really felt I needed to tell you that.”¹²⁰ Trueblood acknowledged this as a sign, but soon realized that most of the preliminaries had already taken place. She put thoughts of

¹¹⁸ Julie Dockstader Heaps, “Standing Her Ground on the National Stage,” *Church News*, January 26, 2008, accessed January 29, 2014, <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/51579/standing-her-ground-on-the-national-stage.html>.

¹¹⁹ Trueblood, *Best for Me*, 9.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

competing aside until a newspaper article noted that her hometown pageant, Miss Treasure Valley, was the very last preliminary of the year in Idaho. She decided to enter, praying as she filled out her application, “Lord, help me not to offend anyone with this. Help this to be the right thing to do. I don’t want people to think I’m doing this for my glory. Help them to see You through me.”¹²¹ Trueblood narrated her pageant journey as one with a mission.

That mission resulted in her winning the Miss Treasure Valley crown and, eventually, the crown of Miss Idaho 1989. Reflecting on her win at the state pageant, Trueblood noted, “I felt that all of my life had been a preparation for this. All the experiences I’d had growing up, all the rough times in my life, everything led up to this moment. And I wondered, as I looked forward to the challenge of Atlantic City, could God want me to be the next Miss America?”¹²² She accepted that God’s hand directed her pageant participation, believing that God wanted to use her to make a difference in people’s lives as Miss America. Whenever she got discouraged by all of the hard work and tight schedules, she remembered all of the people praying for her and cheering for her success.¹²³ She logged numerous runs, appearances, and practice interviews just like her fellow contestants from other states. She considered her call from God to be unique, however, until confronted by the accounts of other Christian contestants.

¹²¹ Ibid., 11.

¹²² Ibid., 34.

¹²³ Ibid., 38.

Trueblood discovered that many of the other Miss America contestants were Christians who “had felt called to enter the pageant. Many of them had people praying for them. Any one of these Christian girls would use the office of Miss America to witness for God.”¹²⁴ As the practices drew to a close and the competition began, Trueblood prayed that she would remain focused on God, reflecting on how “strange to know that the other Christian girls in the pageant were probably praying the same prayer.”¹²⁵ She wondered whether she would win, praying to at least make top ten so that she could sing “God Bless America” on television, but when the names of the finalists were called, Rebecca Eileen Trueblood’s was not among them.

When Trueblood lost, she grieved. She received the award for the best interview, but that did little to soothe her pain. At first she continued to pray, but her prayers had changed. She questioned God, “How could You let this happen? How could You have brought me so far and now nothing?” Trueblood felt that she had not only let herself down, but that she had disappointed her family, friends, and her entire state as well. She wondered how she had misinterpreted God’s will for her and felt deserted by God, believing that her prayers reached no higher than the ceiling.¹²⁶ With time, the pain

¹²⁴ Ibid., 73.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 111-12.

faded and Trueblood accepted that God's will had been accomplished even though it had not been what she wanted.¹²⁷

Trueblood reinterpreted her loss as an important life lesson. She recounted her dream of singing professionally and her fear that she would have nothing to say during a concert because her life had been so good. Before losing the pageant, Trueblood questioned how she could relate to someone with hurt in their lives.

But now, after losing the pageant, I felt I could instantly relate to people who had worked with all of themselves for something and lost. Maybe everyone hadn't experienced Miss America, but many, *many* people had experienced the loss I felt. I knew I could take in their feelings and experiences, and people would have a connection with me. For the first time since the Miss America Pageant, I felt at peace. The hurt remained, but I knew I'd be able to keep it in a tiny corner of myself. I had a reason. I could heal. 'Thank You, Lord,' I whispered. 'Thank You.'¹²⁸

For Trueblood, this life altering experience caused pain and disappointment, but she considered herself no less called than Debbye Turner, the Christian who won Miss America the year Trueblood competed. She claimed that God used the experiences of competing for the Miss America crown to prepare her for future ministries.

Trueblood was not alone in seeing God's hand at work even when it resulted in a pageant loss. Marti Sue Phillips, Miss Florida 1979, had a similar experience. When she placed fourth runner up to Cheryl Prewitt, her disappointment faded quickly. After hearing Prewitt share part of her testimony with the media, Phillips approached Prewitt in tears, saying:

¹²⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 121.

‘Oh, Cheryl,’ she cried, throwing her arms around me, ‘I prayed tonight to God that I’d win—but that if He could be better glorified by someone else that she would win. It was such a noble prayer,’ she laughed, ‘and to tell the truth, when I didn’t win, I wasn’t much comforted by it. But now, after seeing the way you handled that press conference, after hearing your testimony—now I know why you’re the one who won! Oh Cheryl, I’m so happy for you—and for all the good that’s going to come from your reign as Miss America!’¹²⁹

Responses like this propagated the belief that everything in the world happened because it was God’s will. This belief in the sovereignty of God was popular among evangelical Christians, and informed the worldview of many young pageant contestants. Many who admitted confusion about why they were called to pageantry only to lose found or invented explanations for how God used their participation. They confessed other values that they gained from pageants. They noted that competition made them better people by helping them grow in their faith and in other areas. Indeed pageants were often credited with things usually attributed to God – changing their lives and giving them newfound purpose. For God to call multiple people to compete, there had to be more to it than the crown.

A Place to Belong: One among Many

Many women remained dedicated to the Miss America Organization even after they “aged out.” They sponsored and organized pageants, recruited contestants, hosted fundraisers, and trained a new generation of contestants. The stage, like a baptistery, initiated them into their new life. They belonged. They were “pageant girls.” Their

¹²⁹ Prewitt, *A Bright-Shining Place*, 247.

stories testified. Even losers recognized the importance of the competition in their formation. Former contestants joined around the positive features of pageantry, regaling others with examples of its formational role in their lives. The pageant saved them. The pageant provided for them. The pageant encouraged them. Of course, most acknowledged that it was God working through the pageant, but this did nothing to diminish their devotion to the Miss America program. Women, young and old, had faith in the pageant process and faith that God's will was being done in it. In short, the pageant provided them a community. It gave them a place to belong and they wanted to share that comfort, security, and acceptance with others.

However, their testimonies and pageant prayers did more than connect contestants to the pageant community. They served a dual purpose. Testimonies not only tied contestants to the pageant community, but also united them to the evangelical one. Their testimonies linked them to a long history of individuals who recounted their religious experiences in scripted ways. As Grant Wacker noted in *Heaven Below*, testimony was intricately related to identity. Pentecostal testimonies "strengthened personal identity by narrating God's wondrous handiwork in individual lives," "strengthened collective identity by sealing the link between the individual and the group," and "clothed individual lives with timeless significance."¹³⁰ Pageant testimonies did all of these things on multiple levels, giving participants assurance that they

¹³⁰ Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 68-69.

belonged and that their lives mattered.¹³¹ The written accounts served as a part of their testimony, further solidifying the narratives' importance.

The stories were important for the communal and individual identities that they affirmed for young women, but also for their ability to recruit others to the organization. Several Miss Americas recalled hearing a former winner speak (or reading her autobiography) before they had even considered pageantry. Indeed some credited that moment as instrumental in their own decision to pursue the crown.¹³² Just as details of religious conversions often sparked additional ones, hearing the testimonies of those who allowed God to use their pageant experience encouraged other Christians to participate. This form of evangelism was fundamental to evangelical culture. To be an evangelical was to evangelize. Judaism was not known for its missionary zeal, but it drove evangelicals. Conservative Christians promoted new life in Christ and the pageant. They had to.

In addition to these traditional functions of testimonies, pageant testimonies fulfilled (at least) one other role. They offered a religious justification for participation in the Miss America contest. On the one hand, this is not surprising since evangelicals saw God in all aspects of their life and expected God to use their gifts and talents to serve. On the other hand, as noted, pageant participants engaged in behavior and activities not

¹³¹ Again, this harkens back to the 19th century ideal that women should be "useful." See Hardesty, *Women called to Witness*.

¹³² For example, Rebecca Trueblood (Miss Idaho 1989) heard Kellye Cash speak (Miss America 1987) and Tara Dawn Holland (Miss America 1997) read the autobiography of Cheryl Prewitt (Miss America 1980).

usually sanctioned by the evangelical community. The testimony provided evidence of God's favor in an attempt to reconcile the seeming disconnect between evangelical teachings and pageant participation. The story of one's call to compete demonstrated that God continued to work in unexpected ways and through unexpected avenues. Still, the unusual circumstances demanded an explanation much like those given by the extraordinary women called to preach in the nineteenth century.¹³³ In both circumstances, a gifted individual was called to use those gifts in service to the kingdom despite contradicting either religious or cultural mores. The use of the testimony by pageant contestants sealed its destiny as a pageant formula. The competitions were commemorated by many evangelicals as events in need of evangelists. To those who participated it served as both a reassurance of their devotion and as inspiration to those looking for a similar experience.

Pageant testimonies, like traditional conversion stories, offered feelings of belonging and evidence of God's favor and intervention. Christian contenders infused their narratives with spiritual significance, conflating religious testimony with a secular enterprise. Their words both set them apart and joined them together as they proclaimed the good news that you can achieve anything God has for you. Pageants might not be your mission field, they implied, but God has a mission field for you. Contenders saw

¹³³ I am struck by the similarities between pageant confessions and those by individuals running for public office. In politics, as with pageantry, Christians (particularly evangelicals) often felt compelled to describe their vocation in religious terms like calling. Christian politicians wanted to reform the world too.

their experience as unique even as they demonstrated that it could be mapped onto others. Even more important and more simply, these testimonies confirmed that pageants constituted an acceptable mission field.

Other Voices

To be sure, not all Miss Americas presented themselves as straight-laced “goody-goody.” For example, Miss America 1976 Tawny Godin shocked pageant followers when she admitted to smoking marijuana and confessed socially progressive views such as having “nothing against homosexuals.”¹³⁴ Miss America 1982 Elizabeth Ward purportedly slept with Bill Clinton and later posed for *Playboy* (though both happened after she handed over her crown).¹³⁵ And, most famously, Miss America 1984 Vanessa Williams gave up her crown owing to nude pictures later published in *Penthouse*.¹³⁶ Then there is at least one “goody-goody” who did not want to be Miss America. Bette Cooper, Miss America 1937 decided to deny her win ever happened. She was crowned Miss America, but failed to show up to her first official appearance the next morning. Rumors abounded as to why, but Cooper claimed, “It was all my father’s decision. He thought I

¹³⁴ Mary Vespa, “Miss America, Tawny Godin, Puts a Ring on Her Finger and Steps on Some Toes,” *People*, March 26, 1976, accessed February 22, 2014, <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20066274,00.html>.

¹³⁵ Michelle Tauber et al. “American Beauties,” *People*, October 16, 2000, 170.

¹³⁶ Rick Hampson, “Vanessa Williams Gives up Her Miss America Crown,” *Gettysburg Times*, July 24, 1984, 4.

should go back to school.”¹³⁷ Only seventeen years old when she won, Cooper escaped back home to live her quiet life free from the demands of Miss America duties. When *People* magazine contacted her for a 2000 story she replied, “There is no Miss America here.”¹³⁸ These stories highlight some of the diversity among the winners.

Equally important, not all Christians interpreted their Miss America experience in the same way. As shown, some contestants claimed a call to pageantry. They maintained that competing strengthened their faith and allowed them to minister. Others admitted that Christianity and beauty contests were compatible, but noted more mundane reasons like scholarship funds for competing. They embraced the opportunities for ministry along the way, but viewed them as an added benefit. Still more acknowledged their Christianity, but did not discuss their year as Miss America in religious terms. Some quit competing, disillusioned or disheartened by the messages received from participating.¹³⁹ Finally, some evangelical contestants were eventually disquieted about their participation and sought to understand their motivations and explain their uneasiness. One example makes this point.

Shelli Yoder, Miss Indiana 1992 and second runner-up to Miss America 1993, described the complexity of her pageant memories: “Talking openly about the good, the

¹³⁷ Frank Deford, *There She Is: The Life and Times of Miss America* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 144. For the fuller story of Cooper’s win, disappearance, and denial see pages 139-146.

¹³⁸ Tauber, “American Beauties,” 144.

¹³⁹ For one example, see Amanda Angelotti, “Confessions of a Beauty Pageant Drop-Out,” *Generation Progress* (formerly *Campus Progress*), posted January 25, 2006, accessed March 16, 2014, <http://genprogress.org/voices/2006/01/25/13893/confessions-of-a-beauty-pageant-dropout/>.

bad, and the in-between is like reuniting with an old friend. My pageant past is multilayered and peculiar-complete with big hair and oddly enough, a significant amount of gratitude."¹⁴⁰ Yoder experienced tremendous support from her small town of Shipshewana, Indiana. She described how its "500 citizens, predominately Amish and Mennonite," celebrated her win with "welcome home parades...exquisitely handcrafted gifts, horse and buggy rides...and homemade Amish peanut butter."¹⁴¹ At that point in her life she found her Mennonite tradition and her pageant participation surprisingly compatible. "There was no gray ambiguity...Legalism stood firm. Religion and Miss America seemed to embody the pursuit of perfection. To become Miss America was to become America's ideal, God's ideal, or so I thought."¹⁴² With the distance of time, however, Yoder expressed concern about what the pageant taught her.

"But what cannot be ignored or denied" she wrote, "is the objectification imbedded in the phenomenon of Miss America, a reflection of the broader culture."¹⁴³ In reading her reflection, it became clear that analyzing her experience ten years later was painful. Yoder internalized the mixed messages sent by pageants and expressed guilt at the role she played in perpetuating them. She summarized the tension well:

The inherent danger in this violation is that it is couched in terms of women's liberation...Miss America is now marketed as the world's leading provider of

¹⁴⁰ Shelli Yoder, "Pursuing a Crown of Perfection: A Journey from Atlantic City to Vanderbilt University Divinity School," *The Spire* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 23.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 23.

scholarships for women, but Miss America's relationship with education creates mixed messages of women's liberation and sexual objectification. As long as women are able to name and claim the conditions, the misogyny is no longer labeled as objectification but earns the dangerous label of women's liberation via empowerment.¹⁴⁴

Yoder's pageant "testimony" stands in stark contrast to many of the others, but she too experienced a conversion at the hand of the pageant. The pageant changed her, and in many ways, her faith. And what is religious autobiography if not a mixture of success and failure, unbridled praise and suspended disbelief? Interspersed with Yoder's frustrations with the pageant was a layer of thankfulness for the experience and what it taught her. The pageant was formational. She simply questioned the extent to which that formation was good.

Perhaps Yoder's account would be different had she won the coveted crown of perfection or had she never received theological education. Perhaps Van Dyke's would be different if she had not taken top prize. Perhaps the "truth" however elusive lies somewhere in the middle. Or, more simply, maybe one's religious tradition set the parameters within which they experienced and recounted their participation.

Evangelicals like Van Dyke might have felt compelled to justify or narrate every experience in terms of their Christianity. Mainline Christians like Yoder (who was preparing for ministry in the United Church of Christ when she wrote her piece) may have been influenced by new knowledge (for Yoder, feminism) rationally and critically

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 23-24.

to explain them. Regardless, the spiritual journey of Christian beauty queens existed in tension just as stories of religious conversion, attempted conversion, and de-conversion did. There was no one way to narrate experience.

Conclusion

Christians found a welcome home in pageants, employing the language of their religious traditions to describe the competition's impact on their lives. Their testimonies followed a predictable pattern that moved from crisis to faith to reward, echoing the conversion accounts so popular among evangelicals. These narratives allowed room for the particularities of one's tradition to be incorporated, but the basic pattern of God redeeming seemingly unredeemable circumstances always emerged. God called individuals to the pageant and then worked through them to accomplish much good. In the process, contestants gained many rewards, both spiritual capital and cultural capital. In short, Miss America contestants saw pageantry as a religious opportunity that was at times a test of faith, a platform for personal growth, or an opportunity for evangelism.

Likewise, these pageant narratives served a purpose similar to their religious counterparts. They marked the individuals testifying as set apart and gave the young women a sense that they belonged to a unique community. Talk of rewards and newfound direction also offered incentive for others to join. Miss America competitors longed to bring new members into the fold even as they reached beyond their target audience of potential converts to make the world better for everyone. Contestants

needed the pageant. It was part of God's plan and therefore inescapable. These accounts and the actions they represented linked competitors to a long line of evangelicals who used the tools at their disposal to reach others with the gospel.

Christian contestants used pageant testimonies, including their pageant prayers, to explain and validate their participation. In telling their stories, Christian Miss Americas narrated their pageant involvement and their year of service as one laden with God's direction. Even in the midst of confusion, conflict, loneliness, and exhaustion they articulated God's hand at work, noting small and large ways they made a difference in the lives of others. For Christian competitors, the process formed a religious opportunity. For many, their time as Miss Americas served as the beginning of their ministry. The pageant runway launched former competitors on career in fields as diverse as politics, medicine, and full time Christian ministry. Even those outside traditional fields of "missions," however, often described themselves as ministers or representatives of the gospel, crediting not only God but also pageants with preparing them for their vocations. The next chapter explores these "Pageant Preachers" in their newfound post-crown roles.

5. Pageant Preachers

It's more than a job to me. To me, the Miss America experience is the opportunity to be part of a ministry.

Caressa Cameron, Miss America 2010¹

It's been 21 years since I was crowned. Everything that I do today, I'm able to do better because of the preparation of being in this program.

Debbye Turner, Miss America 1990²

Introduction

What happened to pageant contestants when they were no longer eligible to compete? The simple answer is “once a Miss America, always a Miss America.” Just as a former president remained a president, one was always a former queen. Some have described the coronation of the new Miss America as a graduation of sorts.³ The previous Miss America matriculated to other roles: student, public servant, wife, and mother as the new one took her place. Last year's Miss America begins again. She must decide what to do with the training and opportunities she received. This chapter explores these “pageant preachers” in their roles post-crown.

¹ “Miss America 2010: Caressa Cameron” *The 700 Club, The Christian Broadcasting Network*, accessed 1 March 2014, <http://www.cbn.com/tv/1427724405001>.

² Terry Meeuwsen et al., “The 700 Club: Happy Birthday Miss America,” *The Christian Broadcasting Network*, 2011, accessed 23 July 2012, http://www.cbn.com/media/player/index.aspx?s=/mp4/RR56v4_WS.

³ Heather Whitestone with Angela Elwell Hunt, *Listening with My Heart*, (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 176.

For many contestants the ministry did not end when they handed over their tiara. After they ordained the newest Miss America ambassador, some discovered that their work had just begun. They remained part of a community that at times functioned like a priesthood in which they worked together and separately. Debra Dene Barnes, Miss America 1968, worked as a church music director. Terry Meeuwsen, Miss America 1973, served as a co-host of *The 700 Club* on the Christian Broadcasting Network and founded a nonprofit dedicated to helping orphans worldwide. Kellye Cash, Miss America 1987, pursued a career in Christian music. Heather Whitestone, Miss America 1995, wrote numerous inspirational books. Nicole Lamarche, Miss California 2003, became a pastor in the United Church of Christ. Pastor, preacher, music minister, singer, author, speaker, talk show host, teacher, and politician: Miss America contestants held these titles and more when they finished competing.

As noted, some participants claimed God's hand had directed their pageant steps. Many continued their "ministry" far beyond their stage careers though what counted as "good news" varied. For some, it was the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sometimes, however, a gospel of self-help, self-improvement, beauty, or pageants also took a turn in the spotlight. This chapter examines the cultural significance of their paths and what they said about the construction and perpetuation of evangelical womanhood. How did these women continue to serve after they left the spotlight? How did pageants groom

them for evangelism of all kinds? Some viewed their experience as Miss America as their ticket to a larger ministry and greater cultural capital. This chapter tests that assumption.

First, I consider the history of women in ministry and link contestants to the host of religious women who found creative ways to use their gifts with or without formal ordination. Second, I suggest that, for many women, Miss America served as a kind of ordination to a larger stage. Third, I present Vonda Kay Van Dyke's career as a prototype that many Miss Americas after her emulated whether consciously or not. I offer three models for evangelism that correlated with the word written, spoken, and enacted. Fourth, I consider how these contests prepared young Christian women for evangelism and how the women preached multiple messages. Finally, I present some dissenting voices that questioned the value of pageants and the testimonies of its competitors.

Throughout I argue that pageants offered a parallel space in which women could minister without challenging the status quo even as these strong women sometimes broke gender boundaries. In addition, I suggest that the title of Miss America (or even Miss America contestant) credentialed these young women such that many Christians in America accepted their message and contributions. I conclude that the competition provided hands on pastor training and experience. The crown offered many women a key to some pulpits and audiences that even seminary degrees could not.

Women, ordination, and the quest to minister

Women have long been the primary churchgoers in America, but they never comprised a majority of the leadership. For much of America's history women remained shut out of pulpits in most Christian denominations. According to the findings of the 2006-2007 National Congregations Study, women constituted 60% of church membership in the United States, but served as lead pastor in only 8% of congregations.⁴ Ann Braude made this point in her now famous piece, "Women's History *is* American Religious History," a work that pushed academics to attend to women's religious contributions with greater care. Braude urged scholars to view women's experience as normative and to consider how their stories challenged, redefined, or solidified the dominant narrative(s) of American religious history.⁵ Her approach coupled with a penchant for exploring lived religion changed how many scholars approached women's religious history.⁶ By shifting the focus from men to women, she offered further validation for looking at religion outside the church walls. "We cannot expect to

⁴ Chaves, Mark and Shawna Anderson. 2008. *National Congregations Study*. Cumulative data file and codebook. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University, Department of Sociology, Table 2: 2006-07 National Congregations Study Basic Frequencies.

⁵ Ann Braude, "Women's History *Is* American Religious History," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 87-107.

⁶ See, for example, the essays in Catherine A. Brekus, ed., *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007). Though all of the essays contribute much to the field of both religious studies and women's history, readers may be especially interested in the Introduction, Chapter Four "Sarah Osborn's Enlightenment: Reimagining Eighteenth-Century Intellectual History" (Brekus), Chapter Five "Beyond the Meetinghouse: Women and Protestant Spirituality in Early America" (Janet Moore Lindman), and Chapter Nine "Faith, Feminism and History" (Ann Braude).

understand the history of religion in America," she argued, "until we know at least as much about the women who have formed the majority of participants as we do about the male minority who have stood in the pulpit."⁷ Put simply, Braude's work took seriously women's presence in church.

Pageant preachers remained largely outside the bounds of denominational leadership. In addition, many wrote, spoke, or performed for predominantly female audiences. As such, some might question how their work affected American religious history. Braude's argument confirmed pageant winners' beliefs that their lives of nontraditional ministry mattered for the church and for Christianity in America. These women also demonstrated much about what the church taught about gender, evangelism, modesty, and more. By shifting the focus beyond the pulpit, one gained insight about how faith was received and lived out and not just what was said.⁸

The findings of sociologist Mark Chaves and historical theologian Lacey Warner confirmed this trend of women ministering regardless of church rules limiting their involvement. In his book *Ordaining Women*, Chaves wrote about the "loose coupling" of

⁷ Braude, 107. See also Michael S. Hamilton, "Women, Public Ministry, and American Fundamentalism, 1920-1950," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 171-196. Hamilton encouraged historians to look at women's stories, arguing that "scholars have elbowed women to the margins of the histories of Fundamentalism far more thoroughly than men ever pushed women to the margins of the movement itself."

⁸ Again Hamilton's essay on women in Fundamentalism proves instructive. He discovered that women had greater authority than their exclusion from ordination suggested. In other words, restrictions placed on women did not necessarily result in a total lack of influence.

rules and practice that he found in churches.⁹ He noted, “denominational policy regarding female clergy often fails to correspond to the actual practice of women in ministry.”¹⁰ Instead, outside factors such as the women’s movement influenced congregational opinions on women’s ordination. What happened on the ground in denominations that denied ordination to women was less rigid and more pragmatic. Women were called upon to fill a variety of roles because there were not enough men willing to serve.

At the same time, denominations that granted ordination to women were not the bastions of equality that they claimed. Women remained less likely to serve as senior pastors and more likely to work part time.¹¹ They negotiated boundaries even in churches that claimed to be open to women serving. According to historian Barbara Brown Zikmund, “this is because in many ecclesial structures, although formal regulations have changed, informal traditions presume that only men should serve as pastors, as teachers of Scripture, and as overseers of religious life and practice.”¹² To be

⁹ Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1997), especially Chapter 2 “The Symbolic Significance of Women’s Ordination.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹ Chaves, Mark and Shawna Anderson. 2008. *National Congregations Study*; Barbara Brown Zikmund, Adair T. Lummis, and Patricia Mei Tin Chang, *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), Appendix 4.2.

¹² Barbara Brown Zikmund, “Women and Ordination,” in *In Our Own Voices: Four Centuries of American Women’s Religious Writing*, eds. Rosemary Radford Ruether & Rosemary Skinner Keller (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 307.

sure, “formal rules granting full equality matter[ed],” but they did not ensure fair and equal treatment of women clergy.¹³

Warner approached the topic of women in ministry from the study of the practice of evangelism, arguing for a more inclusive definition of evangelism that made room for the work of women. Though she did not use the language of “loose coupling,” she observed it in action. She investigated the lives of seven women, discovering that “women have contributed significantly to the spread of Christianity and the nurture of individuals in the faith throughout Christian tradition.”¹⁴ Because evangelism was typically used to denote just preaching, however, women’s contributions went largely unacknowledged. Her book began to reclaim the work of women for the church by expanding the definition of evangelism to include practice and not only verbal proclamation of the Bible. I employ her wider definition to talk about the evangelistic efforts of Miss America contestants and winners.

One final example that parallels the lives of pageant preachers even more closely undergirds the point. Catherine Allen and Lydia Hoyle have both written on Baptist women’s mission groups and their role in denominational life.¹⁵ Southern Baptists

¹³ Lacey Warner, *Saving Women: Retrieving Evangelistic Theology and Practice* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007), 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵ Catherine Allen, “Shifting Sands for Southern Baptist Women in Missions,” in *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers: Missionary Women in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Dana L. Robert (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 113-26. Lydia Huffman Hoyle, “Queens in the Kingdom: Southern Baptist Mission Education for Girls, 1953-1970,” in *Ibid.*, 101-12.

offered gender segregated missions training for girls, boys, teens, and adult women. These programs provided similar lessons for young Baptists in terms of scripture memory, missionary study, and denominational polity. However, these events were also highly gendered complete with a coronation ceremony for girls and boxcar races for boys. Girls Auxiliary (G.A.s, grades 1-6) and Acteens (grades 7-12) offered girls and young women opportunities for leadership in a single gendered arena. In some ways, these organizations paralleled secular groups like Brownies and Girl Scouts. Participants learned self-discipline through the completion of mission workbooks, acquired self-confidence through speaking engagements, and developed friendships through weekly meetings and group projects. They practiced community service, learned about other cultures, and gained knowledge about their own religious tradition. Many Acteens were quick to note the spiritual growth they experienced.¹⁶

The gendering inherent in the coronations did not negate all good work done by the program. These rituals of recognition, and, more important, the work required to earn them, proved powerful and life changing. It offered leadership training in a church culture that excluded young women from many other forms of religious training. The same claims can be made about pageants. Beauty contestants represented another iteration of women negotiating the boundaries of their religious traditions.

¹⁶ Hoyle, 110-12.

Women found or created space to work within their respective religious traditions.¹⁷ Even in many conservative denominations, women fulfilled similar responsibilities to their male counterparts. The difference was not in job description, but job title. More women worked part time than men. Women taught rather than preached and received less money than their male peers for services rendered.¹⁸ Some seminary degrees were also gendered. For example, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary excluded women seeking a Master of Divinity degree from their preaching classes. In lieu of the preaching and pastoral studies courses, female students took classes such as “Women’s Ministries in the Local Church.”¹⁹ Despite these limitations, women continued to seek opportunities for service in the local church and in their communities.²⁰ Pageant winners discovered a freedom to share testimonies, lead Bible studies, and speak at Christian retreats. Most spoke out of their experience of God working in their lives and not from specialized theological training. Though they did not recognize it, their work mirrored that of evangelical women in the nineteenth century

¹⁷ Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry From New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 435.

¹⁸ Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, especially Chapter 2. Barbara Brown Zikmund, Adair T. Lummis, Patricia Mei Yin Chang, *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), Appendix 4.2.

¹⁹ “Master of Divinity,” Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary website, accessed March 8, 2014, <http://catalog.swbts.edu/school-of-theology/master-of-divinity/>.

²⁰ Elizabeth H. Flowers, *Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power Since World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), especially her discussion of Southern Baptist women in ministry in Chapter 3.

who drew authority from personal religious experiences such as prayer and Bible study.²¹

As the work of Braude, Chaves, Warner, and others has shown, the exclusion of women from the office of ordination did not mean that they were not engaged in ministry. Women remained the most consistent attendees and workers in churches in America. They contributed time, money, talents, and their children to the church. The same could be said of pageant participants. They stood in this line of witnesses. And, since ordination was historically reserved for men, many women with gifts for ministry did not even consider seminary or professional ministry an option.²² One might suggest that on some level women with gifts for ministry were funneled into pageants. This was not necessarily a conscious decision. Rather, pageants attracted the kind of religious, strong willed, opinionated, driven, socially engaged, friendly, attractive young women whose male counterparts often headed into careers in the church. These women then found themselves, like Baptist mission queens, deciding how many gender boundaries to bend or break to continue the ministry they began as Miss America.

²¹ Nancy A. Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd edition (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999) and Warner, *Saving Women*, especially the Conclusion.

²² Hoyle noted that "Because the opportunities for ministry were extremely limited for women, it is probable that most Baptist girls who had *any* sense of calling understood it as a missionary calling," "Queens in the Kingdom," 111, emphasis in the original. See also Julie Pennington-Russell, "One Woman's Response to the SBC," in *Putting Women in Their Place: Moving Beyond Gender Stereotypes in Church and Home*, eds. Audra and Joe Trull (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2003), 21-30. Pennington-Russell went to seminary, but "without any notion of where seminary might lead and without any clear sense of a 'call' to a particular ministry." She recounted praying for "all of the poor, misguided women in [her] classes who thought God was calling them to be pastors," noting that her "conservative religious upbringing never allowed for that possibility."

At the same time, the limitations and commitments of pageantry sometimes stunted its influence. Thus, to argue that the competitions effected only positive change in the lives of its participants, religious or otherwise, would be to overstate the case. At times, the means employed by the contest did not seem to coordinate with its aims. Some competitors noted these inconsistencies. Others sought to explain them away. A third group never seemed to notice. None of these responses changed the reality that pageants promoted, for example, the commodification and the objectification of women's bodies. Though not the narrative of pageants often told by the *winners*, this corner of the history also impacted their lives and will be considered below.

Go ye into all the world...

When a Miss America received the crown, she accepted the role of ambassador for the Miss America Organization. During her year of service, she represented them in appearances at schools, churches, hospitals, and more. In addition, more recent Miss Americas also advocated for their platforms and for the Children's Miracle Network. These women were set apart to act on behalf of the thousands of women across the nation who competed in the system. The crown marked their initiation into the Miss America sorority, an elite group of individuals chosen for their commitment to excellence in the four points of the crown: style, scholarship, service, and success. It gave them unique privileges and responsibilities and symbolized a beginning just as much as

the end. They left the stage as Miss America to start a new journey on behalf of the pageant and all that it represented.

In some ways, the coronation mimicked rites of ordination. As historian E. Brooks Holifield noted, “Most clergy in America have begun their ministry with a ritual whose origins can be traced to the earliest churches, which commissioned leaders with an imposition of hands that signified and bestowed a special gift of charisma.”²³ Miss America received a similar charge when last year’s winner laid hands (and a crown) on her head. When the new queen completed her runway walk other contestants crowded around her to add their touch and words of encouragement. They, too, sent her into the world. Just as America’s clergy relied on (at least) three modes of authority: “charisma of office,” “charisma of person,” and “rational authority,” pageant winners possessed a variety of credentials that gave them a new identity.²⁴

If the Miss America coronation can be compared to an ordination, handing over the crown can be likened to a commissioning service. Last year’s Miss America initiated another member into the sorority of service, but her mission continued. The former winner was also being sent out into the world. No longer was she *the* ambassador for the Miss America Organization. Her probationary period over, the pageant appointed her to

²³ E. Brooks Holifield, *God’s Ambassadors: A History of the Christian Clergy in America* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

continue the work on her own. Miss America Heather Whitestone captured the sense of relief mingled with responsibility that she felt when she crowned the next Miss America:

A chapter was about to close, but the book was far from finished. As I walked out on the runway to say good-bye to the crowd, I was mentally ready to go home and resume my normal life. I paused at the end of the runway, recalling how just a year before I had heard God assuring me that he would go with me every step of the way. *Thank you, Father.* I breathed a prayer. *It's over.*

My heart stilled when I heard the voice of God again speaking to my heart: *It's not over. I'm not finished with you yet.*

Why not? I turned and began my walk back to the stage, eager to surrender my title. What could God possibly have for me to do now? And why couldn't he use someone else? I was tired, I was emotionally drained, I wasn't a fit instrument for anything...²⁵

Whitestone was not the only Miss America to rejoice that her year of service was over. Many longed to get back to business as usual. Trouble was that was not really possible. They had been set apart, marked as special, and few escaped the call to continue making a difference. Some grew to embrace it. The Miss America title became part of their identity.

As noted, this induction into the Miss America sisterhood paralleled that of someone entering the ministry. Likewise, trying to distance oneself from the organization could be difficult or even painful. Even if a minister left the church, one's priesthood remained part of their identity because a sacramental divide had been

²⁵ Whitestone, *Listening with my Heart*, 175.

crossed.²⁶ Ordination introduced an individual to a different order of life. Barbara Brown Taylor's experience of the Episcopal priesthood mirrored the exhaustion expressed by Whitestone above. "My tiredness was so deep that it had seeped into my bones...The demands of parish ministry routinely cut me off from the resources that enabled me to do parish ministry," she wrote.²⁷ Still, she, like Whitestone and other Miss Americas, felt an obligation to her title.²⁸ The story of pageant preachers was as diverse and multi-layered as that of clergy serving churches. They experienced and pronounced blessings, but just as frequently they endured stress, fatigue, confusion, and self-doubt. Like pastors, winners wrestled to reconcile their competing identities with their competing motivations and obligations.

And preach the gospel: The prototype, Vonda Kay Van Dyke

As noted, Vonda Kay Van Dyke became the first Miss America contestant to speak about her faith on national television. Her remarks and the nation's response to them seemed to connote a shift in how faith and pageantry mixed. While there were still rules governing what contestants could and could not say when speaking on behalf of the organization, Van Dyke opened the door for more individuality in the role. She demonstrated that part of the all-American girl being promoted by the pageant included, for many in the American public, a belief in the importance of Christianity for

²⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 164. Taylor noted that even when she no longer served a church, she "was still a priest."

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

ordering one's life. The public nature of Van Dyke's faith propelled her into a host of religious opportunities after her reign. Examining her career trajectory offers a template for understanding the paths chosen by those after her.

Following her time as Miss America, Van Dyke found opportunities to serve elsewhere. In her farewell speech she noted her plans to continue ministering.

I ascended my throne last September with two statements: that my biggest responsibility was to live up to my Christian testimony, and that the Bible was the most important Book I owned. Tonight, I descend from my throne with the same thoughts... So, you see, I won't be stepping down. I'll be stepping up—to a new year, a new life, a new challenge!"²⁹

Van Dyke moved to California to study radio and television at The University of California, Los Angeles, but she continued to make public appearances, speaking and singing in churches across the country. She later wrote, "Much more than living up to the 'Miss America' image was the responsibility to live up to my Christian testimony."³⁰ She knew that her onstage confession "alerted both Christians and non-Christians to watch and see if [she] would live up to what [she] had said" and she felt pressure to fulfill that role.³¹

More specifically, Van Dyke worked to influence young people. Many teenage girls reached out to her during her tenure through letters and in questions at various

²⁹ Vonda Kay Van Dyke, *That Girl in Your Mirror* (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1966), 122-123.

³⁰ Vonda Kay Van Dyke, "What's Your Problem?," *Christian Life*, March 1968, 39.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

venues. Van Dyke seized the authority her former title presented her to dialogue with these young women (and sometimes young men). Though she certainly answered some notes individually, she also published a book in which she offered replies to a sampling of the numerous letters she received. *Dear Vonda Kay*, released in 1967, fielded diverse subjects including family, college, beauty, relationships, and religion. As she responded to teens, she seemed effortlessly to point them back to the church for answers. In a time of uncertainty in American culture, here was someone offering definitive, traditional answers to American youth. Understandably, her book sold handsomely. It offered a still point in a turning world.

Dear Vonda Kay was one of five books Van Dyke published between 1966 and 1975. In each, her faith figured prominently. It was an inseparable part of her life and she presented it as such. She also encouraged others in a way that seemed strangely attractive and persuasive. Van Dyke provided both advice for daily living and practical guidelines for sharing one's testimony. When confronted by a young man who found his mind wandering during church services, she wrote:

When you say your mind wanders and you feel it's a waste of time, there are other people who feel the same way but don't have the nerve to admit it. Sometimes I will come away from church wondering if I really got anything out of the service that morning. But one thing I do have is the satisfaction of knowing that I took an hour out of my week to worship God...

I believe it would help, too, if instead of just one hour on Sunday, you would get interested in the youth group activities. Other Christian activities in a Christ-

centered atmosphere are important. The fun and fellowship with other young people will carry over into your attitudes toward church.³²

When faced with a young woman reared in a Christian home who was experiencing doubt about her faith, Van Dyke tried to offer hope:

I'd be the last person to criticize you for raising the questions you do. I too have found myself questioning what my parents taught me and the things I learn at church—or even why I went to church. The wonderful thing about questioning is that it leads you to seek answers...³³

In these situations and many more, Van Dyke counseled young people as though they were her best friends. She shared her heart with them, doubts included. And, she used her experiences to give them tools for engaging the culture.

For example, in her book, *Reach Up*, Van Dyke dedicated a whole chapter to exploring the basics of a Christian life. Perhaps in direct conversation with secular culture, she asked: “Are we really Christians who are finding our true answers and meaning for today in Jesus Christ? Or are we just nice people who, through choice or habit, find it pleasant to spend our Sunday mornings in church?”³⁴ Christians, she insisted, needed to engage in “meaningful worship” if they hoped to impact the world. “In making God and our faith an everyday reality we bring the sacred and secular together and translate joyful, meaningful worship into joyful, meaningful lives.”³⁵ Van Dyke described the ability to tell others about Jesus as “one of the most joyous aspects of

³² Vonda Kay Van Dyke, *Dear Vonda Kay*, 118.

³³ *Ibid.*, 124-25.

³⁴ Vonda Kay Van Dyke, *Reach Up* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1971), 112.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

our Christian experience."³⁶ She described two scenarios for how to approach witnessing: one on one versus in a large group.

Van Dyke's approach to witnessing seemed to grow directly from her experience as Miss America. During her tenure, she was instructed not to talk about her faith unless someone brought it up. Religion became one of the subjects she was asked about the most. Van Dyke urged her readers to do the same:

Sometimes it's hard to restrain our enthusiasm in witnessing for Him but in my experience we're apt to be most successful if we don't try to force our belief on others. If we wait until we're asked, we can be sure the other person is at least curious about our philosophy. And we can be sure we will be asked if, instead of apologizing for our faith, we show in our daily lives that we have something extra special to be happy about.³⁷

In addition, Van Dyke encouraged Christians not to do too much "mouth witnessing" without enough "ear listening." This left room for nonbelievers to ask questions, express doubts, and discover "our philosophy."³⁸ Her urge to share Christ and the implication that Christians needed to be trained in evangelism remains a central tenet of evangelical culture. One did not keep one's faith a secret for that was no faith at all.³⁹ As evidenced

³⁶ Ibid., 117.

³⁷ Van Dyke, *Reach Up*, 117.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4. Balmer recounted the weight that the term Christian carried among evangelicals. It meant, among other things, "hewing to strict codes of personal morality...establishing a daily 'quiet time'...witnessing, 'sharing your faith' with non-Christians" and "feeling very guilty if you failed to do any of the above, or if you failed to do it with sufficient rigor or enthusiasm."

here, witnessing proved so integral a part of evangelical culture that some pageant winners structured their writings to teach others a simple method.

While living a life that invoked questions presented a good model for one-on-one evangelism, Van Dyke admitted there were times when another method worked better. She addressed how to share a public testimony in a church or other gathering. Most important, she noted, “[We] have to channel our enthusiasm into a few effective, concise statements that says it all as far as we’re concerned. If we’re not prepared to do this our witness is confused and confusing.”⁴⁰ She gave readers a template to help them offer their witness in a way that was “honest, straightforward, relying on your sincerity and fact rather than emotionalism.”⁴¹ Through her writings, Van Dyke gave them courage to face difficult situations and tactics for engaging in “kingdom work.” She met them where they were, invited their questions, took their concerns seriously, and spoke a language that many were able to hear.

Van Dyke also recorded four albums, using music, both sacred and “pop,” to propel her message. In addition, she worked with the Billy Graham Crusades and other evangelistic efforts. She aided Youth for Christ, the National Sunday School Association, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the North American Christian Convention. She also shared her testimony in numerous churches across the nation.⁴² In a time when

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 121.

⁴² “Vonda Kay Van Dyke Plans to Sing at Manatee Church,” *St. Petersburg Times*, July 31, 1971.

many questioned religion's ability to address current issues, Van Dyke answered with a resounding yes. She noted, however, that the Miss America title was not always an asset. Sometimes it caused people to take her less seriously or meant that she had to work harder. She delighted in upsetting people's assumptions and in earning her position of influence.⁴³

At times, Van Dyke acknowledged the ambiguity of her authority. For example, when asked to contribute a counseling column to *Christian Life* magazine, Van Dyke wrote, "I'm not trying to pose as an authority or counselor, but I was offered this opportunity...I believe that God gives me such challenges for my own growth as well as to be of service to others...So many coincidences (or was it God at work?) seemed to lead up to this column."⁴⁴ Like other evangelicals, Van Dyke claimed her credibility came from God. Sometimes she went so far as to state explicitly that she was no theologian.⁴⁵ Her answers stemmed from her experience. She put her pageant training to use post-pageantry as she engaged culture as a public figure.

And Preach the Gospel: Sharing the WORD: Written, Spoken, and Lived

Vonda Kay Van Dyke opened the floodgates for other pageant preachers. Some followed her into the publishing industry, the recording studio, or the evangelistic

⁴³ "Beauty Queen Aided By Title But Career Success Not Guaranteed," *Toledo Blade*, 1972.

⁴⁴ Van Dyke, "What's Your Problem?," 39.

⁴⁵ Van Dyke, *Dear Vonda Kay*, 125.

circuit, but others took on even more public roles. After 1989, contestants were required to own a platform that increased the possibilities for ministry. Miss Americas offered examples of creative evangelism. I will define and name only three models that built on Van Dyke's example. Roughly these models correlate with the word written, spoken, and enacted. In each, multiple layers of meaning abounded.

WORD written

Evangelicals long employed popular print media as a tool to engage culture. As historian Candy Gunther Brown argued, by 1850, "self-identified evangelicals had forged a burgeoning print culture with a dual mission: *purity* and *presence* in the world." Evangelicals believed in "the power of the Word to transform the world."⁴⁶ Many Miss America winners stood in this tradition, believing their words could help others live a more devoted Christian life. Their autobiographies highlighted the testimonies that Miss Americas felt compelled to share. They also suggested how pivotal an individual's Miss America experience was to their life.⁴⁷ In addition to publishing memoirs, Miss America winners and, sometimes, State winners produced books ranging from children's books to beauty books to devotional books. They wrote blogs and magazine articles, book chapters and songs. Each of these projects functioned as testaments to the pageant's

⁴⁶ Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 1.

⁴⁷ I discovered six autobiographies written by Christian Miss America contestants who competed between 1965-2011 (1965, 1967, 1980, 1985, 1995, and 1999).

power. Winning a beauty contest provided a platform not only during one's year of service, but also after that year ended. The title credentialed the novice authors.

The pageant autobiography took on a life of its own as contestant after contestant noted how God worked in their life. While each volume possessed a unique flair, most offered individual testaments to the joys and sorrows of life. They also recounted, in greater and lesser detail, the hardships of life as Miss America. The most important fact, however, is simply that these volumes exist. Miss Americas believed their stories had something important to convey to the American public. Publishers agreed that there was a market for this kind of uplifting, inspirational literature. They assumed that the American public, or, at least a subset of it, would be interested in reading these narratives. Even works not specifically billed as autobiographies contained large portions of reflection based upon the author's experience. Many openly admitted their lack of qualifications. "As I told you in the beginning of this book," Whitestone wrote, "I am not a theologian nor a Bible scholar. But I can read (just as you can), and I can pass along my experiences to you according to my understanding and daily attempts to live the Gospel of the New Testament."⁴⁸ Taken as a whole, these works highlighted the personal piety and world engagement endemic to conservative Christian culture.

⁴⁸ Heather Whitestone McCallum with Carolyn Curtis, *Believing the Promise: Daily Devotions for Following Your Dreams* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 179.

Sharlene Wells wrote openly about how the pageant allowed her to witness for the Mormon faith. She was proud of her Mormonism and sought to correct misinformation. She used her title and subsequent success as a sports commentator to write one book about stepping outside her comfort zone and one about living according to Mormon standards in the world. *Kissing a Frog: Four Steps to Finding Comfort Outside Your Comfort Zone* offered practical guidelines for overcoming nervousness and encouragement to take “calculated risks.”⁴⁹ *Living In But Not Of The World* drew on Wells’s success living the standards away from Zion. In both books she spoke honestly about the fears, obstacles, and criticism she faced as Miss America and afterward. Like Van Dyke, she utilized her experience and the experience of others she knew to minister to her readers (presumably especially other Mormons). As a Mormon, however, she also drew on the teachings of the church, noting, “What I especially appreciated were the thoughtful responses the Church had already prepared for addressing common doctrinal misconceptions.”⁵⁰ The gospel as shared by the Mormon Wells proved more stringent than the one presented by Methodist Van Dyke twenty years earlier who had acknowledged the usefulness of “questioning” even the act of “going to church.”⁵¹ Miss Americas remained part of their respective traditions despite a shared formation by the pageant. There was not one set Miss America gospel.

⁴⁹ Sharlene Hawkes, *Kissing a Frog: Four Steps to Finding Comfort Outside Your Comfort Zone* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 2002).

⁵⁰ Sharlene Wells, *Living In But Not Of The World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1997), 121.

⁵¹ Van Dyke, *Dear Vonda Kay*, 124-25.

Despite the particularities of the traditions represented in these volumes, similarities remained. Three messages mimicked evangelical literature more broadly. First, pageant writers addressed the importance of a positive attitude and hard work. They stressed their obligation to use their talents. Second, they drew on scripture to address life's problems. Finally, and perhaps ironically, these written works trumpeted inner over outer beauty. Throughout they acknowledged the centrality of their faith in negotiating dueling commitments. Pageant preachers heralded these messages to all who would listen.

Winners promoted a can-do attitude. They described the steps they took to succeed in pageantry, applying them to life in general. Miss America 1995, Heather Whitestone, developed a five-point program she called "The Daily Prescription for Life" (TDPFL). She described the five principles by which she tried to live: 1) "Take time to be quiet" 2) "Don't forget to dream" 3) "Populate your life with positive people" 4) "Forgive the hurt and anger of the past" and 5) "Love yourself as God loves you."⁵² Any goal was achievable, they argued, if one simply worked hard enough and had enough drive. "You're a talented girl, so don't waste your abilities on a goal that won't make demands on you... You need something big in your future, something that will use every gift you have, and even show you some undiscovered ones!" wrote Vonda Kay Van

⁵² Whitestone, *Listening with My Heart*, 200-02.

Dyke.⁵³ Of course, faith in God was also credited with allowing them to make a difference and achieve their dreams. “I knew that I was not a hero. My strength came from God, as did my simple good fortune,” recalled Nicole Johnson.⁵⁴ Miss Americas drew on their stories and the stories of others to demonstrate the power of hard work and faith in God. They encouraged readers to expect big things.

Their “positive thinking” and practical advice mirrored that prescribed by Norman Vincent Peale since the 1950s. If Peale “traded precision for anecdotal evidence and warm reassurances” by presenting “the peppy advice of homemakers, baseball players, American presidents, and traveling salesmen” alongside “the wisdom of William James, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Ralph Waldo Trine,” then Miss Americas took his work one step further.⁵⁵ They told their own “peppy advice.” They drew on their personal narratives, study of scripture, and knowledge of the Christian tradition. With no need for the religious professional, they embraced their authority to speak for God. As historian Kate Bowler so aptly put it, “It was faith they could put to work.”⁵⁶

This work, however, proved overwhelming at times. As Miss Americas preached the gospel of self-reliance, some found themselves battling exhaustion, depression, and eating disorders. The guilt associated with these negative feelings meant that many

⁵³ Van Dyke, *That Girl in Your Mirror*, 106.

⁵⁴ Nicole Johnson, *Living with Diabetes: Nicole Johnson, Miss America 1999* (Washington, D.C.: Lifeline Press, 2001), 94.

⁵⁵ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 57.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

women failed to talk about them until they conquered them. Then, when they spoke of them, they emphasized their own shortcomings and urged others not to make the same mistakes. For example, Heather Whitestone remarked that “the main reason” for her “book [was] to encourage others to look for positive things.” “I missed too many priceless opportunities as Miss America,” she confessed, “when I closed my eyes and decided to nurse my own hurt, anger, and depression. I shouldn’t have done that – and neither should you.”⁵⁷ Jane Jayroe also agonized over her inability to meet high expectations: “I was so disappointed in myself – I had always been something – and now I was nothing. After having been given such a great gift of Miss America, how could I provide an encore that would not disappoint people?” “Nothing went right,” she recalled, “I was a desperate housewife...But I did not believe in divorce, regardless of the circumstances. I continued to vacillate between hope and depression.”⁵⁸ Miss Americas struggled to reconcile their feelings of emptiness with their belief in positive thinking. Many attributed their hard times to a lack of trust in God or a failure to work hard enough. Such reasoning sometimes led to continued or deeper struggles. Still, in the literature published, Miss Americas rushed readers through these difficult times, promising solutions in the form of God’s grace and guidance.

⁵⁷ Whitestone, *Listening with My Heart*, 199-200.

⁵⁸ Jane Jayroe with Bob Burke, *More Grace Than Glamour: My Life as Miss America and Beyond* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 2006), 150.

Positive thinking, the women admitted, possessed limits. Miss Americas noted the importance of scripture and prayer in ordering their lives and offered them as tools for others. In their autobiographies and devotional literature, they discussed faith head on. No subject was off limits: relationships, church attendance, peer pressure, and temptations. They wrote about sin and grace alongside gifts and responsibility. Implicit in their message was the belief that all are called to do something and that Jesus Christ was critical to the discernment process. Through Jesus Christ, sin could be forgiven and obstacles overcome. Through Jesus Christ, Christians were invited to be a witness in the world. In a devotional titled "Set the Example" Lauren Nelson (Miss America 2007) and co-writer Robin Marsh proclaimed, "God calls you to be holy—which means being set apart. Your life should be a reflection of biblical values—not the values or priorities of the world. Your actions may look odd to those who don't believe in Christ."⁵⁹ In another, "Grace and Forgiveness," they noted, "God, in the midst of our times of sin, offers us grace and forgiveness. He is a God of mercy, and those mercies are new each and every day (Lamentations 3:22-23). He offers it even if you feel like you don't deserve it."⁶⁰ Teens were not the only audience for pageant preachers. Jane Jayroe offered words of encouragement for those striving to be content and advice for those struggling to be

⁵⁹ Robin Marsh and Lauren Nelson, *God, Girls, and Getting Connected: Spiritual Apps for a Teen's Life* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers), 98.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

thankful.⁶¹ Heather Whitestone wrote more than one hundred devotional readings to motivate Christians to chase their dreams.⁶² Together their brief reflections about scripture highlighted the importance evangelicals placed on “quiet time” spent with God. Miss Americas echoed other conservative Christians by placing prayer and Bible study at the center of the Christian life.

One of the most delicate messages that pageant winners dealt with in their written word was addressing notions of beauty. Inevitably they were faced with unrealistic expectations of their own beauty as well as how to negotiate the boundaries between inner and outer beauty. Many acknowledged unhealthy ideals or diets in their writings. Some referenced their struggles. At least one devoted an entire book to this tricky subject. Nancy Stafford, Miss Florida 1976, confessed, “I’m writing this book because beauty has been a big part of my life. I’ve experienced both its pain and its promise. As a homely young girl, it eluded me. As a model in New York, it seduced me. As an actress in Hollywood, its importance distresses me. And as a woman who loves God, the power of true beauty staggers me.”⁶³ Stafford noted that her book was not a “how-to” book. Rather it was “a book about freedom from the bondage of our culture’s unattainable standards, freedom from lies of the past that have told us who we are, and,

⁶¹ Jane Jayroe et al., *Devote 40 Days* (Mustang, Oklahoma: Tate Publishing & Enterprises, LLC, 2010), 59-62, 101-103.

⁶² McCallum, *Believing the Promise*.

⁶³ Nancy Stafford, *Beauty by the Book: Seeing Yourself as God Sees You* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2002), 13.

yes, even freedom from the lie that outward appearance means nothing.”⁶⁴ She encouraged her readers to embrace their body and to accept the beautiful gifts God had given them. Stafford hoped her book would help others “discover and embrace the beauty within” and “delight in the unique beauty He has reserved for [them] alone.”⁶⁵

She offered testimony to the control beauty had on her life. When the doctor who diagnosed her severe skin cancer counseled her to “have an alternative career in mind,” she “was horrified by how important [her] face and body had become.”⁶⁶ Not surprisingly, Stafford spiritualized the void she felt from constantly trying to achieve unrealistic beauty standards.

The very source of ridicule and rejection in my life – my physical self – had become the basis of my affirmation. Having grown up feeling insecure, self-conscious, and rejected, I now made my profession in the most insecure, rejection-prone industry on the planet. The irony didn’t escape me. Maybe my bottom-line problem was masochism! Or...maybe I had just been searching for the kind of absolute acceptance that only God could give, trying in vain to fill the emptiness that only He could fill.⁶⁷

She stood in a long line of pageant winners who sought comfort through faith in God. In the midst of a demanding beauty culture, God, they claimed, offered security and contentment.

This reinterpretation of beauty to entail character development harkened back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when feminists contended that every

⁶⁴ Ibid., 11-12.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 38-39.

woman could be beautiful “if she followed the proper ethical path.”⁶⁸ “When girls in the nineteenth century thought about ways to improve themselves,” historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg argued, “they almost always focused on their internal character and how it was reflected in outward behavior.”⁶⁹ Girls risked being labeled vain if they spent too much time considering their looks. “Becoming a better person meant paying *less* attention to the self, giving more assistance to others, and putting more effort into instructive reading or lessons at school.”⁷⁰ Similar admonitions to “clothe yourself in God’s fashion choices” and “study the biblical traits of a wife of noble character” permeated the devotional literature written by Miss America contestants.⁷¹ Inner beauty, they trumpeted, mattered most.

The irony, of course, was that Stafford, Whitestone, and others downplayed the importance of the world’s conceptions of attractiveness and yet subjected themselves to being judged by them. That they won a pageant in part because of their looks added a layer of difficulty in translating their message to those not measuring up in the looks department. In other words, it was easy for contestants to write about how outward appearance was less important because they themselves had achieved some success according to the world’s standards of beauty. Though many claimed that physical charm

⁶⁸ Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 16, 206.

⁶⁹ Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), xxi.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, xx-xxi.

⁷¹ Marsh and Nelson, *God, Girls, and Getting Connected*, 62. McCallum, *Believing the Promise*, 130.

never resulted in fulfillment, one might imagine that their confessions sometimes rang hollow for women who failed to meet societal norms. Writing about the futility of beauty as beautiful women highlighted only the pervasiveness of cultural demands on women. Young women might conclude that if pageant winners did not feel pretty despite their titles, there was certainly no hope for them.

Also ironic was the number of women who offered fashion tips and diet regimes in the same breath that they preached the danger of the beauty industry and the importance of finding one's worth in God. For example, Sharlene Wells noted:

What's on the outside doesn't count for more than 15 percent of the total score – and that's in a beauty pageant. So why should it count for more when you are taking a look at yourself in the mirror? What matters, obviously, is what's on the inside. Take the time to comb your hair and style it a little. Take the time to add a little bit – and I'm talking about a *little* bit – of color to your eyes, your cheeks, and your lips. When you feel good about yourself, your inner beauty all comes out in your smile. And that's the start of outer beauty.⁷² [emphasis in original]

Though not her intention, Wells's statement could make women feel worse about their lack of attractiveness. One's appearance became simply another thing to overcome. As long as one tried, they could achieve beauty. In this system, only the individual was to blame for ugliness. Of course, a young woman might also read Wells's words as empowering. She might claim control of her destiny by cultivating an inner strength that would shine from the inside-out.

⁷² Barbara Barrington Jones with Sharlene Wells Hawkes, *The Inside-Outside Beauty Book* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989), 68.

As Marie Griffith discovered in her work on Christian diet culture, the language surrounding beauty was couched in terms of health.⁷³ Pageant preachers proclaimed a gospel of fitness, emphasizing the importance of body care as a theological exercise. Mixed in with the advice on clothing choices and makeup, some addressed far more serious concerns like eating disorders and unrealistic expectations. Stafford argued, “We are sacrificing our identities, our health – and even our lives – by embracing starvation diets, exercising fanatically, or gobbling little herbal accelerator pills or funny liquid drinks...When we obsess about being skinny, we not only worship a false god, but we also often miss what is truly meaningful and beautiful.”⁷⁴ Writers sought to articulate the fine line between celebrating a healthy body and worshipping a sick one. They admitted their own struggles, failures, and recoveries. As we will see below, the importance of one’s body as a former Miss America competitor impacted their identity and self-perception perhaps more than anything else.

Pageant preachers employed the written word. The presence of their prose testified to a general acceptance of the pageant winner as a credible source for evangelism. It also reinforced evangelicalism’s belief in the importance of everyone’s story. God could use anyone anywhere; all it took was a willing vessel. For evangelicals, culture was neutral. Television, radio, sports and even pageants were tools that could be

⁷³ R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2004), 62.

⁷⁴ Stafford, 110-11.

used to reach the world for Christ. The written word, too, served as a tool. As noted, this mode of engaging the culture through popular literature has a long history among evangelicals. “Participation in the world of print did not represent an inevitable compromise as much as a proactive choice: to make the gospel more accessible by appealing to popular tastes while appropriating means of grace from extra-Christian sources.”⁷⁵ Pageant contestants thus employed a well-known practice in evangelical life to convey cultural values and create meaning. They wrote to convince their readers and themselves that the call to serve God was one worth embracing. They spiritualized everything including negative feelings and discouragement. Evangelicals expected this struggle – they knew God required sacrifices and allowed trials. They were more than willing to endure them.

WORD spoken

Former Miss Americas also ministered through the spoken word. They shared their testimonies, preached, and taught. Some did this kind of evangelistic work on the side, but others chose a career in public ministry. Their presence and popularity in pulpits, on television, and in women’s ministries across the nation highlighted their competence as public figures. In addition to telling their stories, former Miss Americas explicated scripture, interviewed others, and encouraged Christian living. This mode of evangelism, in particular, demonstrated the success of beauty contest winners in a male

⁷⁵ Brown, *The Word in the World*, 14.

dominated field. Their crowns gave them an advantage that helped level the playing field, or, at the least, gave them a chance to get in the game. While some Miss America contestants completed seminary degrees, others drew on life experience. The Miss America title (or even Miss America contestant) opened doors to launch evangelistic careers. Here I focus on three: church ministry, inspirational speaking, and television ministry.

Some pageant participants worked as actual preachers in American churches. Former Miss California 2003, Nicole LaMarche, served as an ordained minister in the (mainline) United Church of Christ, belying the image that only evangelicals entered the field. Erin Moss, Miss Michigan 2003, worked as a pastor of adult ministries in a Church of God congregation. Megan Torgerson, Miss Minnesota 2003, ordained in the (mainline) Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) tradition, ministered as an associate pastor. When asked how ministry and pageants fit together, Torgerson answered:

It's actually easy to do. When I look at my call to ministry, I realize that I've been given gifts, talents and abilities that are valued by organizations beyond the church. I consider this to be another form of ministry...And when I speak, my message to them will not be just as a woman in pageants but as a person in the ministry.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Robert Smith, "Luther Seminary Student Crowned Miss Minnesota," *Story Magazine*, Third Quarter 2003, accessed March 1, 2014, http://www.luthersem.edu/story/default.aspx?article_id=56.

LaMarche remarked on how the pageant helped her finance her seminary education.⁷⁷

Moss noted the same, adding that her work as Miss Michigan helped propel her toward her goals of writing, speaking, and preaching by giving her multiple opportunities to hone those gifts.⁷⁸ These women were among those who found a home in the pulpit post pageantry. Even if and when they acknowledged disconnects between their calling and the pageant, they accepted that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. Their pageant experience enhanced their seminary training, opening doors for them to practice many of the skills needed to be an effective minister, especially public speaking. For these three Miss America contestants who were already studying for ministry when they participated in the pageant, the competition did not inspire their career in the church. Neither, however, did it hinder (in any substantial way) their career in the church. Indeed, it gave them further training for engaging and ministering to a wide variety of people.

Evidence does not show a former Miss America serving as a pastor, though Miss America 1948, BeBe Shoppe, served as a Lay Minister in the Episcopal Church and Miss America 1968, Debra Barnes, worked as a music director in a nondenominational church. As evidenced above, at least some Miss America contestants went on to careers

⁷⁷ LaMarche noted, "I still owe \$40,000 in student loans. That's more than I earn in a year. If it hadn't been for Miss America, I would owe \$70,000." Paul Gauvin, "Church Land Model Pastor, So To Speak," *The Barnstable Patriot*, April 24, 2007, accessed March 14, 2014, http://www.barnstablepatriot.com/home2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12990&Itemid=5.

⁷⁸ Mercy Hope interview of Erin Moss, *Faith Talks* website, accessed March 14, 2014, <http://www.faithtalks.com/posts/erin-moss/>.

as ministers and pastors. The absence of a Miss America serving as lead pastor was significant in a different way than originally thought. If pageant credentials did not hinder future ministers, one wonders if plans for the pastorate hampered one's pageant chances. Such plans did not prevent them from making it to the national pageant, but would seminary credits on the interview sheet give judges pause? Though only one example, Nichole LaMarche's fourth runner-up finish suggested that a divine calling was not incompatible with the kind of spokesperson the pageant desired.

Other pageant preachers found ministry opportunities beyond the walls of the church. Jane Jayroe (Miss America, 1967), Shirley Cothran (Miss America, 1975), and Cheryl Prewitt (Miss America, 1980) offered inspirational ministries that varied in formality and scope. These women spoke in churches, led women's retreats, hosted faith-building events, and entertained at community banquets. While all mentioned the influence of the Miss America pageant on some level, Cothran's website credited it as the beginning of her speaking career. Like so many other winners, she sought to use her crown professionally, "As a former Miss America, I have found that God has given me a wonderful platform from which to speak."⁷⁹ She also noted, "I have prayed that God might allow me to use the title of Miss America as a springboard for His glory."⁸⁰ She was not the only one. Jane Jayroe hosted Esther Women, a monthly luncheon series

⁷⁹ Shirley Cothran, "Welcome: A Personal Letter From Shirley," accessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.shirleymissa.com/welcomeletter.htm>.

⁸⁰ Shirley Cothran, "Speaking Topics," accessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.shirleymissa.com/speakingtopics.htm>

designed to “encourage and inspire women who already serve their families and communities.” This program featured Christian women telling their stories. “God has a purpose for each season of our lives.”⁸¹ Jayroe hoped the program promoted “bonds of friendship and the strengthening of faith.”⁸² She and Cothran used stories to promote the gospel and its effectiveness for daily living.

The most well developed evangelistic ministry led by a former Miss America was the one Cheryl Prewitt shared with her husband, Harry Salem. Together they founded and ran Salem Family Ministries, which sought “to take this unique, tag-team style of ministry into churches, two by two, to reach families for God, one by one.”⁸³ Cheryl and Harry worked together around the world “telling people of the love of God, His restoring power, His healing hand and His imminent return!”⁸⁴ In addition to their preaching and speaking ministry, the Salems co-wrote more than thirty books and Cheryl recorded several CDs of inspirational music. Her affiliation with the Miss America pageant was noted on the ministry’s website as were the many obstacles God helped her overcome to win the coveted crown.⁸⁵ Prewitt “used this distinction as a springboard to launch the Gospel of Jesus Christ into churches, schools, women’s

⁸¹ Jane Jayroe, “About Esther Women,” *Esther Women: Real Women; Real Faith, For Such a Time as This*, accessed March 17, 2014, http://stlukesokc.org/index.php/esther_women/page/about_esther_women.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ “Bio,” *Salem Family Ministries* blog, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://salemfamilyministries.org/resources/bio/>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ “Women’s Ministry/Cheryl’s Bio,” *Salem Family Ministries* blog, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://salemfamilyministries.org/resources/womens-ministrycheryls-bio/>

retreats, television appearances, etc.”⁸⁶ Both referred to themselves as ministers and partners. For Prewitt, her Miss America status served as both a springboard and a source of legitimation. In other words, the title of Miss America launched her into the public eye. Likewise, her on the job experience in this public role lent credibility to her eventual ministry.

Finally, some pageant preachers, like Terry Meeuwsen took to the television screen. Meeuwsen served as a co-host of *The 700 Club*, interviewing countless individuals. In this role, she also highlighted the many other Miss Americas who shared her commitment. She interviewed many of them on her show, including Caressa Cameron, Katie Stam, and Heather Whitestone. Meeuwsen also promoted the pageant as an organization with the good of women in mind. They even produced a special video to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the pageant. While she noted that the Miss America Organization was not an explicitly Christian program, she commented on the large number of Christians every year that participated.⁸⁷ Meeuwsen saw it as valuable to the women involved as well as to society. In addition to her role as a television personality on the Christian Broadcasting Network, she founded an organization known as Orphan’s Promise that “is committed to promoting the well-being of orphans and vulnerable children around the world by providing food, shelter, medical help,

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Terry Meeuwsen et al., “The 700 Club: Happy Birthday Miss America,” *The Christian Broadcasting Network*, 2011, accessed July 23, 2012, http://www.cbn.com/media/player/index.aspx?s=/mp4/RR56v4_WS.

academic opportunity, life training skills, mentoring, career placement, and health programs.”⁸⁸ In both of these roles, she served as a minister, drawing others into the life of faith with word and deed.

Most likely, the winners who entered various forms of public ministry shared similar motivations and gifts with non-pageant women entering the profession. In addition, they faced similar criticisms. For example, most of these women experienced expectations about how they should look. These external pressures added to internal quests to conform to beauty standards. At the same time, those in the pulpit knew the danger of being “too attractive.” This irony points to a unique struggle for Miss Americas. They could not escape their title or their swimsuit photographs. When Nichole LaMarche became pastor of United Church of Christ church in Massachusetts, a local newspaper article focused primarily on her title of Miss California and how it affected her work. A blog post by PeaceBang (Victoria Weinstein of *Beauty Tips for Ministers*) criticized the author of the piece for failing to engage LaMarche on a deeper level.

Of course there’s nothing in the article at all about Lamarche’s theology, her vision of ministry, or anything else substantive at all about her as a human being and religious leader. Just as in a beauty pageant, we are invited to objectify and judge her, to hear ABOUT her from other people, while she remains almost entirely silent except to defend herself: “I needed the money.”⁸⁹

⁸⁸ *Orphan’s Promise* website, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.orphanspromise.org/>.

⁸⁹ Victoria Weinstein, “This Just In: Beautiful Woman Becomes Pastor and Does a Good Job,” *Beauty Tips for Ministers*, posted March 10, 2009, accessed March 21, 2014,

LaMarche responded to Weinstein in the comment stream:

...I hated the article and I am sure you all can imagine how my words were not given voice at all. I did talk about my theology, my faith, what God is doing in my life and the life of my congregation. She didn't include any of that. Maybe a better news story would have been about the outrageous cost of seminary and the fact that had I not competed in the Miss America Organization I would owe more than \$70,000 in student loans instead of \$40,000...⁹⁰

Whenever a Miss America contestant attempted something new, their previous identity as a beauty queen often overshadowed their current endeavor, potentially limiting or undermining their ministry. Articles like the one cited by Weinstein evidenced that not everyone took pageant credentials seriously. Even as a crown opened doors, it sometimes resulted in a limited public identity.

Pageant preachers employed the spoken word to testify. Some of them had set topics and speech titles from which interested parties could choose. Others saw their primary ministry as explicating how to follow Christ. Whether interested in gaining converts or encouraging believers (or both!), these pageant figures drew on skills honed competing in pageants. On the circuit, they learned to adapt, to listen, and to communicate. In their various pulpits, they performed their message of good news in its

<http://beautytipsforministers.com/2009/03/10/this-just-in-beautiful-woman-becomes-pastor-and-does-a-good-job/>.

⁹⁰ Nichole LaMarche, comment on This Just In: Beautiful Woman Becomes Pastor and Does a Good Job."

various forms. Churches, women's groups, and marriage retreats invited them to speak, where Miss Americas served as a counterpart or counterbalance to the football player standout that often won the keynote. Despite these public roles, contestants sometimes found that their pageant participation also undermined their authority.

WORD enacted

Pageant preachers also sought to put their faith in action. With the introduction of the community service platform in 1989, contestants came to the competition with a cause dear to them. Participants advocated on behalf of literacy, character education, and breast cancer awareness among other concerns. When they won a State contest or Miss America, they spent the year working to raise support for their cause and to educate others. By the time their year of service ended, they had amassed quite a number of contacts and clocked a lot of volunteer hours. As a result, transitioning to a life of nonprofit work whether in education, advocacy, or fundraising made a lot of sense. Others sought to better society through work in politics and policy. Many who chose these paths used the language of calling and vocation. Just as they believed God set them in their role as Miss America, they believed God opened doors for them to make a difference in these other venues.

Miss America 1999, Nicole Johnson, was the first woman with diabetes to win the crown. She increased education about the disease and its effects during her reign.

She also raised money to fund research and treatment. She did not give up her cause when she gave up her crown, however. As she wrote in her autobiography:

Becoming Miss America changed my life forever. I hope I also changed the role of Miss America forever—from passive beauty queen to social activist. I was able to see beyond the glamour of winning the title and into the reality of what the title could accomplish. But I've always believed that "to whom much is given, much is required." I was given much, now I was destined to reach out. The crown was my passport to travel and touch others. The crown was my microphone. The crown was a representation of hope. And I did my best to spread that hope wherever I went. I still try to do so.⁹¹

Johnson continued her work "promoting awareness, prevention, and early detection."⁹²

According to her website, she helped raise more than \$26 million for diabetes research and told her story in 47 states. Johnson worked with established organizations, and also organized her own foundation through which she "worked to communicate messages of aggressive care, informed decision-making, leadership, advocacy and optimism."⁹³

Kirsten Haglund, Miss America 2008, also determined to use her personal struggles for the public good. A survivor of an eating disorder, Haglund claimed that faith and pageants helped her recovery. "Furthermore, it was during my year as Miss America that I reconnected with God and my faith, and realized that my identity was found in Christ alone, and not in what others may have thought, or how the world

⁹¹ Johnson, *Living with Diabetes*, 128.

⁹² "Welcome," The Official Nicole Johnson Website: Miss America 1999, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://nicolejohnson.com/>.

⁹³ "Public Speaking," The Official Nicole Johnson Website: Miss America 1999, accessed March 17, 2014, http://nicolejohnson.com/?page_id=12.

wished to define me. That finally gave, and has given me, peace.”⁹⁴ She spoke openly about her struggles with anorexia, educating others about the dangers of this condition. Haglund also held out hope that individuals could overcome eating disorders with the right support system. In 2009, she started the Kirsten Haglund Foundation “to provide hope, networking and financial aid to those seeking treatment and freedom from eating disorders.”⁹⁵ In 2011, she began working as a Community Relations Specialist at Timberline Knolls Treatment Center.⁹⁶ Haglund’s testimony and advocacy ministered to others in need of help. As a pageant preacher, her actions spoke for themselves.

As noted in another context, some former Miss Americas decided a career in law or politics was the best way to reform society. Two of the most notable individuals who chose this route were Erika Harold, Miss America 2003, and Teresa Scanlan, Miss America 2011. Harold finished in the top four for the Republican nomination for Congress in 2012.⁹⁷ Harvard Law degree in hand, she announced plans to run again on the 2014 Republican ticket in her home state of Illinois in 2013. In addition to pursuing her political goals, Harold remained an active volunteer. For example, she served on the

⁹⁴ “Springing Back in the Lovely Fall,” The Kirsten Haglund Foundation blog, posted November 10, 2010, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://misskhaglund.blogspot.com/2010/11/springing-back-in-lovely-fall.html>.

⁹⁵ “About KHF,” The Kirsten Haglund Foundation, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://kirstenhaglund.com/about-khf/>.

⁹⁶ “About Kirsten,” accessed March 17, 2014, <http://kirstenhaglund.com/about-kirsten/>; “Former Miss America and Eating Disorders Awareness Advocate, Kirsten Haglund, Joins Timberline Knolls,” *TK Cares* website, October 26, 2011, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.timberlineknolls.org/former-miss-america-and-eating-disorders-awareness-advocate-kirsten-haglund-joins-timberline-knolls/>.

⁹⁷ “Home page,” Erika Harold for U.S. Congress, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.erikaharold.com/home>.

board of director's for *Prison Fellowship* as a spokesperson for their *Angel Tree Ministry*, "a program that provides Christmas gifts to children who have an incarcerated parent."⁹⁸ Another Miss America with political aspirations was Teresa Scanlan. After her reign, Scanlan enrolled at Patrick Henry College pursuing a degree in government.⁹⁹ In 2014, Scanlan was finishing her second year of college. Other Miss America winners or contenders who delved into the political arena included Heather French (Miss America 2000, Kentucky Democrat), Shelli Yoder (Miss Indiana 1992 and 2nd runner up to Miss America 1993, Indiana Democrat), and Sarah Palin (2nd runner up to Miss Alaska 1984, Republican).¹⁰⁰ Many of these individuals saw politics as a way to fight for issues they cared about or promote ideals they esteemed.

Former contestants who chose politics found that they could not hide from their pageant titles either. As noted in the last chapter, Shelli Yoder trained for ministry at Vanderbilt Divinity School before entering into politics. She presented a critique of the Miss America Pageant ten years after her participation. It was particularly telling that when Yoder ran for office in Indiana, she invoked her title. Perhaps she thought it best to control the information, to put a positive spin on it before someone used it against her. Yoder focused on her working class background, noting how she utilized the

⁹⁸"Meet Erika," Erika Harold: U.S. Congress, assessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.erikaharold.com/about>.

⁹⁹ Wendy Griffith, "Teresa Scanlan: From Miss America to College Student," CBN News, November 1, 2012, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2012/October/Teresa-Scanlan-From-Miss-America-to-College-Student/>.

¹⁰⁰ Eun Kyung Kim, "Ex-Miss America Latest to Trade Pageant for Politics," June 6, 2013, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.today.com/news/ex-miss-america-latest-trade-pageants-politics-6C10212450>.

competitions to pay her way through college. Of course, Yoder could have changed her mind about the validity of pageants in the intervening years between her Vanderbilt studies and her political campaign. Yet another possibility was that she felt drawing attention to her pageant career would make her more likeable and less threatening. As a Democrat, perhaps she hoped the role of beauty queen softened her image, making her more relatable (and, traditionally feminine).

These former Miss Americas lived their faith in significant ways. They put their beliefs into action through reaching out to the hurting, sick, and marginalized in society. This mode of evangelism seemed a natural transition. Used to serving as a spokesperson, many Miss Americas used their contacts to continue being the voice (and the face) for a cause. Happy to be in the spotlight, this form of “evangelism” allowed them to travel, to perform, and to seek a modicum of fame, feeding a need for validation once serviced by the pageant and its sponsors. For many, it proved a seamless shift. They drew on scripture to validate their decisions, demonstrating their faith as a liberating force capable of changing the world. Many of these young women saw their vocation as God-ordained even though it was not church work per se. They stood most closely aligned with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frances Willard who saw the world as a home in need of reform.

I'd like to thank God...and the pageant

Pageant preachers often spoke of God and the pageant in the same breath. At times, it proved difficult to distinguish which narrative contestants found more formative—that of their faith or that of the pageant. Many saw both as instrumental in their preparation for and success in their chosen fields. Indeed, religion and the pageant were seen as mutually beneficial, not antagonistic. Pageant preachers benefited from this relationship in tangible and intangible ways too. The question remains: what did they each contribute and how did they work together?

To be sure, Christian pageant contestants spoke about the importance of faith in their lives. This insider language that was second nature for evangelicals allowed them to interpret the competition as a religious event. In other words, they looked at their participation in the Miss America Organization through the same church tinted glasses they viewed the rest of the life. Both functioned as total worlds. These young women were predisposed to see and describe the world in religious ways. Why would pageants be any different? Their church formation had taught them to take their faith into the world and beauty contests encouraged a gospel of good works (and good looks). The traditions blended and reinforced one another.

The pageant, of course, seemed an odd partner for the church, but the two worked together. Through the organization, women learned to engage a variety of people in a number of settings. They practiced articulating their thoughts on subjects as

diverse as education reform and the budget crisis. They participated in community service. They fostered community through shared meals and conversations. Pageants offered young women a safe space in which to develop these skills and many more. Locked into the Miss America sorority, women explored gifts and developed leadership skills at their own pace.

The pageant seemed to provide Christian young women with some opportunities that their churches did not. Perhaps then it pointed to a hole in church training of young women. For example, how many churches spent large resources on the leadership development and ministry discernment of young women? For many evangelical pageant participants, ordained ministry was either not an option and/or job prospects were less enticing for female ministers.¹⁰¹ At its core, the Miss America Organization provided scholarship money and leadership training. This capital proved enticing to many young women. The competition encouraged women to excel, but it did not stop there. It gave them tools and encouragement. The church, with its history of a male dominated clergy, often overlooked the ministry potential among its daughters. The pageant polished them. Indeed the pageant valued a lot of the gifts that proved desirable for ministry.

¹⁰¹ Women in ministry faced the reality of less full time jobs, less pay for those jobs, and more controversy than their male peers. See Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*, and Zikmund, *Clergy Women*.

In some ways the very organization that kept women apart by rewarding the perfection and performance of gender norms gave them the tools to engage the wider culture in the form of interview skills and grooming. These advantages were not unlike those garnered from attendance at a single sex college or participation in women's sports. Women in single-sex environments were more likely to develop confidence, implement leadership skills, and enter into traditionally masculine occupations.¹⁰² Studies demonstrated the validity of single sex enclaves like women's colleges. Women gained more leadership opportunities, developed deeper friendships, and made higher grades.¹⁰³ Pageant preachers, too, seemed marked for success. It sounds trite perhaps, but the bonds of sisterhood gained in pageants set these women ahead. Or, at the least, some women claimed they were advantageous.

Of course, contestant claims cannot always be taken at face value. On some level, their lack of self-criticism with regards to their pageant participation was better understood as self-presentation and perhaps even self preservation. The women had been trained to put on a good face to inspire others. To look too closely could have meant the crumbling of an entire way of life. In addition, many evangelical participants felt compelled to look for the positive effects the competitions. Trained to speak of God's blessings, they interpreted their pageant "rewards" in that language. If they spoke too

¹⁰² Heidi Brown, "Why Women's College Are Still Relevant," *Forbes*, August 12, 2009, accessed April 24, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/2009/08/12/womens-colleges-student-forbes-woman-leadership-graduate.html>.

¹⁰³ "New Evidence Bolsters Women's Colleges," <http://www.womenscolleges.org/story/evidence>, accessed April 24, 2014.

negatively of the process, it could implicate God in ways with which evangelicals would not be comfortable. It was doubtful, of course, that contestants would see this interpretation of their speech and behavior as valid, but their advice to “fake it until you make it” and to “act as if” indicated an awareness that much of their role was performed.¹⁰⁴

Self-promotion also seemed critical throughout the pageant process. Women “sold” themselves by telling their story in compelling ways. That women retained the language of self-promotion after their reign ended suggested both the advantages it brought them and the far reaching impact the process had on their habits and sense of self. Somewhere along the way they became the title, an icon that represented something bigger. That identity drove their decisions. As noted, these women also promoted the pageant. Both forms of advocacy fit a larger pattern of evangelical unself-critical advocacy. Some evangelical teaching praised the loss of self for a cause. To take up the cause of Christ, to allow the banner of Christ to determine one’s actions, was the very definition of discipleship. Surrendering one’s will for the sake of the community seemed natural to many conservative Christians who participated. What outsiders saw as self-promotion, they understood to be evangelism. They wished to share the good news with

¹⁰⁴ Sharlene Hawkes, *Kissing a Frog: Four Steps to Finding Comfort Outside Your Comfort Zone* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 2002), 90 and Penny Pearlman, *Pretty Smart: Lessons From Our Miss Americas* (Bloomington, Indiana: AuthorHouse, 2009), chapter 11.

others and to present it in the most compelling way possible. Very few considered, and fewer still articulated, the selfish ambition that also drove them to do particular things.

This intense advocacy and lack of self-criticism highlighted the control the pageant had over contestants' lives. For winners, in particular, they risked losing a sense of belonging if they spoke out. This performance of their role was safe and it worked for them. To step outside it was to risk isolation and loss of support. It might mean accusations of ingratitude and, for losers, sour grapes. Evangelical culture executed a similar control over its constituents. Those individuals who questioned evangelical teachings, but still wished to claim the label evangelical, could be ostracized.¹⁰⁵ Likewise pageant participants risked having their experience tossed aside as abnormal if it did not authenticate the standard narrative. In both cases, it remained simpler to parrot the testimony expected and rewarded. That participants also intensely advocated their chosen path of pageantry seemed to suggest a need to validate their own experience and to offer justification for others who followed in their footsteps. Thus their advocacy helped ensure the success of the program. To critique it was to critique themselves as well as the person they became. To encourage it was to confirm their self-understanding as good role models and evangelists.

¹⁰⁵ For example, Rachel Held Evans's blog, www.rachelheldevans.com/blog and Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company).

As will be demonstrated in the next section, not everyone found the inescapable nature of promoting oneself and the pageant desirable. It was, however, difficult to escape. Contestants, whether consciously or not, were performing gendered expectations in order to gain cultural capital. Once one realized the rewards available, it was harder not to participate. These women reflected their culture. Many of their remarks lacked self-criticism and reeked of self-promotion, but they did not articulate it in that language.

Other Voices

Not everyone spoke of their pageant participation as positively as the individuals discussed above. Not surprisingly, individuals who failed to capture the illustrious crown were more willing to speak about the drawbacks of participation and its negative impacts on their lives and careers. Their stories, however, were not as ubiquitous since, as with all history, the winners' stories took center stage.¹⁰⁶ The presence of one study offered a helpful corrective for this dearth of underdog stories. Debra Deitering Maddox (Miss Iowa 1984) wrote her MA thesis on how the contestants from the 1985 Miss America pageant constructed and continued to construct their identities. Her data stood in stark contrast to the evidence presented in the bulk of this dissertation and offers a

¹⁰⁶ One would think similar stories would emerge within the Miss Alabama surveys I conducted. While some negativity was present, contestants remained largely positive. Perhaps it was because most of the individuals who filled out a survey had an opportunity to participate again. For Miss America contestants who failed to receive the top prize, their quest was over. There were no repeats.

fuller picture of contestant experience. Maddox found that contestants felt a “post-pageant void” that they struggled to fill. She also noted that the pageant produced both positive and negative effects on its participants. She concluded that, “of the many benefits contestants say they received from competing in the Miss America Pageant, validation and professional opportunities [the two main reasons given by her respondents for entering] were not two of them.”¹⁰⁷

A couple of examples from her research will suffice. As noted, participants spent numerous hours training for the national competition. When they walked away without the crown, every respondent in Maddox’s study “grieved.” For example, Donna Cherry (Miss California 1984) reported, “I hurt so much, I couldn’t straighten my body.” Maddox recounted that Cherry, “slept in a fetal ball between her mother and sister in a double bed” after the pageant and that “the physical pain...continued for six weeks.”¹⁰⁸ Without the grueling preparation schedule, contestants faced a lot of unstructured time, which made depression all the more likely. Joanne Caruso (Miss Connecticut 1984) “went into a deep funk.” “For four months, she laid around a lot, not doing much of anything but re-living the pageant experience.”¹⁰⁹ This huge sense of loss was a refrain

¹⁰⁷ Debra Deitering Maddox, “The Miss America Pageant’s Influence on the Self-Construction of Its 1985 Contestants,” (MA Thesis, University of Nebraska, 2001), 37, 69-70, 85. Positive effects that her respondents reported included “the experience of partaking in such a large, mass media event; the opportunity to perform before such a large audience; travel; the meeting of celebrities; scholarship monies gained; the discovery of previously unknown talents; acquisition of fashion sense and make-up skills’ the learning of good presentational skills.” 85-86

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 46, 49.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

among the contestants. That they had tried and failed proved debilitating, at least for a time.

Many of the negative effects that Maddox isolated involved self-esteem and body image. Kathy Manning (Miss Mississippi 1984), who won one of three preliminary swimsuit awards, confessed, "My body was my identity and it isn't anymore." Now overweight, Maddox reported, "Manning said her self-esteem has suffered and that she has had to do a lot of searching and redefining of self."¹¹⁰ Another common response was to dwell on things one could have done better. Participants marveled over the competition's continued influence in their lives. Even those who did not return to Atlantic City for reunions, admitted that they often comported themselves as Miss America contestants. They performed the expected role.¹¹¹ Many former contestants in Maddox's study distanced themselves from the pageant even as they wrestled with its continued impact on their lives. At least one noted that she hoped her daughters would not participate and several indicated that they would not participate again if afforded the opportunity.¹¹² Unlike the pageant preachers who claimed the pageant gave them a newfound purpose, these contestants attested that the pageant left them feeling purposeless.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 61.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 75.

¹¹² Ibid., 66-68.

Even among the “winners” (those who made it to Miss America or became Miss America), there were times that they sought to distance themselves from the organization. Cheryl Prewitt (1980) one who wrote most blatantly about God’s role in the competition, noted that she had not been back to Atlantic City and that she did not want her children to know about it.¹¹³ Sharlene Wells (1985) claimed that she might not do it again, stating “The pros outweigh the cons and I’m glad I did it, but I would not want to do it again.”¹¹⁴ Shelli Yoder (Miss Indiana 1992) missed the ten-year reunion of her pageant experience “to compose an essay on the violence of pageantry” and Erin Moss (Miss Michigan 2002) spoke of the complexity and layers of participating “for each person.”¹¹⁵ Each of these individuals had played the “pageant card” at some point in their career. Indeed, of these four, only Moss, now a minister, failed to note her title in her professional bio or book jacket cover. Thus most contestants continued to use their experience of pageants to “get ahead” when applicable.

In the end, pageants, like all life events proved full of contradictions and mixed results. For some, the experience was overwhelmingly positive, but this was not the case for all. It seemed clear that these rituals could not be described as universally liberating or oppressive. A better descriptor appeared to be formational.

¹¹³ Michelle Tauber et al., “American Beauties: 80 Years,” *People*, October 16, 2000.

¹¹⁴ Maddox, 67.

¹¹⁵ Yoder, “Pursuing a Crown of Perfection,” 23. Moss e-mail correspondence with the author March 2014.

Conclusion

Many Miss Americas saw their pageant experience as instrumental in their life post-pageant, crediting God and the competition for their success both on and off the stage. Some women, like Teresa Scanlan (2011), entered beauty contests with a desire to use the event for evangelistic purposes. Others discovered this enlarged influence as an added bonus and used it to further work they were already doing. For some, such as Jane Jayroe (1967) and Shirley Cothran (1975) the organization opened their eyes to ministry possibilities they had not entertained previously.

As shown, Miss America contestants used their title to launch them into a variety of gospel endeavors. The work of these women, like that of the creative women who came before them, expanded the definition of evangelism to include more than preaching. Pageant Preachers testified through the Word Written, the Word Spoken, and the Word Enacted. Miss America enabled five avenues for evangelism in particular: 1) traditional church ministry, 2) inspirational writing, 3) motivational speaking, 4) music ministry, and 5) a life of public service through law or non-profit work. Miss Americas made a name for themselves in each of these fields. While some of these arenas required additional degrees, the title was credential enough in others. Women found themselves breaking, bending, and accepting gender boundaries in order to do the work they felt “called” to perform.

To be sure, a participant's particular religious tradition inspired her response before, during, and after the competition. In other words, one's denomination often inscribed or proscribed boundaries that dictated how individuals reacted to their experiences. To cite an extreme example, it is difficult to imagine that Angela Perez Baraquio, a Catholic, would feel called to be an ordained priest or that Heather Whitestone, a Baptist, would be prompted to become a nun as a result of their Miss America year. The religious possibilities were not limitless. Rather, contestants interpreted their pageant experience in light of their religious tradition. In some ways their title served as an ordination for them. These young women acted as unconventional evangelists. The scope of their influence can be questioned, but the presence of it seems clear.

Most notable, many women denied ordination and other forms of pulpit ministry found viable vocational alternatives through their Miss America experience. The capital made available through their association with the organization launched many of them into their post-pageant careers. Through the competition, they gained knowledge, practiced discipline, engaged in community service, honed their physical fitness, and had a cause to support. The rewards, both spiritual capital and cultural capital, proved abundant for many. Pageant culture gave them purpose and made them feel useful. It offered a template that many young women used to map their life in meaningful ways. Other women, perhaps especially those who lost, found this template

burdensome and even detrimental to their identity. Beauty contests offered a space where the competing ideologies of church and pageant could co-exist and inform one another. Despite the rigidity of its rituals, the flexibility of individual experience allowed a range of contestants to be formed by the pageant and their faith (or, lack of faith).

Pageant preachers preached to all who would listen. Just beneath the surface, however, lay the message that the pageant, not the church, gave them the means to do so. The pageant offered them capital. It rewarded their good work. This is not to say that the church played no role in these women's spiritual formation. On the contrary, many of them pointed to the importance of the church and its teachings. However, many of their traditions had not carved out enough space for women to discern a call to ministry. The pageant provided them that arena, one in which they were no longer competing with males for the training, titles, or positions. Women controlled the stage and the microphone.

The pageant provided an outlet for "women's ministry" and more. Some, however, found parts of it distasteful and launched an implicit critique in the form of similar programs with slightly different governing principles. Still others sought to separate themselves from the pageant and its influence altogether, voicing explicit critiques of pageant ideals, starting parallel organizations to empower women, and noting its direct contradictions with Christian teachings. The epilogue highlights some of these responses as it explores the lasting influence of pageants on American Christian

culture and the limits of pageant power. Love them, tolerate them, or hate them, in many parts of the country, ignoring pageants was not an option.

Epilogue

On Sunday, August 11, 2013, my husband, Chad, and I wrestled our children into church clothes and made our way from the hotel to Park Road Baptist Church (PRBC) in Charlotte, North Carolina. I worked at PRBC for two summers while in seminary, but this was no homecoming visit. The pastors had contacted me about participating in their Summer Sunday School series to talk about my dissertation research in conversation with their niece.¹ I agreed to join Ali Rogers to discuss “Faith & Beauty in America: The Church’s Ongoing Relationship with The Pageant.” Now that the big day had arrived, I was nervous. I would share the stage with Miss South Carolina 2012, who also happened to be first runner-up to Miss America 2013. No longer a protected member of the audience, I had been asked to offer an academic talk alongside a practitioner, a practitioner related to those paying my hotel bill. The potential for awkwardness seemed clear.

By the time I met Rogers in August 2013, she had already passed on her Miss South Carolina title and was experienced at public appearances. She enjoyed everything one might expect in a beauty queen: blonde hair, long legs, flawless face, and a brilliant smile. In a word, she was gorgeous. She also held more surprising tastes: love of softball,

¹ A husband and wife team, Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, served as pastors at Park Road Baptist Church. Not connected to the Southern Baptist Convention, PRBC affiliated with the Alliance of Baptists, the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (national and state of North Carolina). Its tag line was “Progressive Theology. Traditional Worship. Southern Hospitality.” “About Us,” Park Road Baptist Church website, accessed March 3, 2014, <http://www.parkroadbaptist.org/about-us/>.

four wheelers, and biscuits and gravy. Most important, Rogers possessed a multitude of characteristics I had grown to expect in pageant winners: kind, generous, intelligent, and an evangelical Christian faith. I knew all of that long before I met her. I would have known that even if I had not watched the January 2013 pageant or spoken with her at PRBC. Her aunt's proud Facebook posts ensured that I knew all about Rogers's quest for the crown. I was eager to meet Rogers.

The plan for the morning was simple. Rogers would speak, I would present a brief overview of my work, and then I would interview her, leaving time at the end for questions from the audience. Both of us delivered what must have been our standard speeches and then settled into chairs for the interview. Most of our conversation consisted of boilerplate material, but a couple of Rogers's remarks surprised me. For example, when talking about why she chose to participate in the Miss America organization, she referenced the challenge and thrill of it in addition to scholarship funds. It was almost like a game to her. In a word, fun. Rogers also confessed that she saw the potential for missions and evangelism in pageants only in retrospect. Like Jane Jayroe (Miss America 1967), she took full advantage of each opportunity, but she did not enter the contest with ministry in mind. Rogers had been involved in community service long before she began competing and wanted to continue serving children with disabilities far beyond her pageant career. She saw the opportunities to speak in churches, at Fellowship of Christian Athlete rallies, and in schools as added benefits.

Rogers took her observation a step further. She suggested that some individuals, especially in southern states like South Carolina, played the “God card” because they thought it gave them an advantage. She thought it suspicious when women claimed that God called them to compete. It might happen, but she doubted if it was ever the sole driving force. That she articulated one of the very things I had been afraid to say forced me to consider other connections and motivations.

After Rogers’s comments, I reevaluated some of my claims about conservative Christians in the Miss America pageant. Trained to look for how evangelical contestants experienced conflict with the competition or with non-Christian participants, I had failed to consider the depths to which evangelical principles may have been ingrained in the organization itself. Perhaps the blending of church and contest was not, as I thought, merely one of Christian capitulation to “secular” culture. Maybe, especially in areas of the country where evangelical culture reigned supreme, church and pageant were more intimately entwined. This was not to suggest that the church sought to promote an alternate moral order through a pageant takeover. Much more simply: Christians ran the pageants, so they helped set the agenda. The large percentage of people who professed Christianity in the parts of the country where pageants were popular meant that the two could not help but be connected. The realization that Christians impacted the pageant and were not merely acted upon deserves more attention than I was able to give it in this dissertation.

During my research, I realized that the amicable relationship between conservative Christians and the Miss America Pageant was more assumed than I initially thought. “Outsiders” to both pageantry and conservative Christianity saw the relationship between the two as natural. When Michelle Anderson (Miss Santa Cruz 1988) decided to “draw attention to what she and many other feminists regard[ed] as the exploitive nature of beauty pageants” by participating in the contests herself, she took on a whole new persona. In addition to tanning bed visits, voice lessons, bleached hair, and weight loss plans, Anderson presented herself as a fundamentalist Christian.² Somehow, she saw the two “oppressors” (pageants and Christianity) as intimately connected, obviously believing that possessing (or even claiming) faith in Christ would be beneficial on the runway. As noted in Chapter One, she managed to win a local title, Miss Santa Cruz, the second year she competed and staged a protest during the crowning moment of the state program. Anderson’s ability to study, perfect, and perform the identity of a beauty contestant demonstrated Butler’s thesis that gender is performed and performative.

I also found that beauty ideals and pageants infiltrated evangelical culture in deeper ways than mere support of Christian participants. Two examples suffice. First, some conservative Christians found parts of traditional pageantry distasteful and

² Michael Neil with Dirk Mathison, “Pageant Officials Are Calling Michelle Anderson Every Name in the Book Except Miss California,” *People*, July 4, 1988, accessed 18 February 2014, <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20099348,00.html>.

launched an implicit critique in the form of similar programs with slightly different governing principles. In other words, they adopted the format of the competition but put an explicitly Christian spin on it. For example, Pure American Pageants, “founded on Christian beliefs,” hoped “to transform lives, advocate Christian lifestyles, and aid individuals in growing a relationship with Christ.”³ These competitions featured evening wear, interview, on-stage introduction, and modeling, but no swimsuit or talent. They considered themselves a “natural” pageant and possessed strict rules about the age at which, and the amount of, makeup that could be worn by participants. Virtue International Pageants, another system that sought to promote Christian principles, required a contestant to “submit a character reference from her pastor, be a member of a Christ-centered church, and ‘confess a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.’”⁴ Despite the adjustments to the design, these Christian copycats also crowned an ideal. The question remained: what was the point of competing for, and earning, a crown? Here, as in the Miss America pageant, women perfected and performed the roles expected of them thereby ensuring the continuance of those prescribed ideals.

³ “Our Mission Statement,” Pure American Pageants website, accessed March 4, 2014, <http://www.pureamericanpageants.com/index.html>.

⁴ Karen W. Tice, “The After-Life of Born-Again Beauty Queens” in *Mediating Faiths: Religion and Socio-Cultural Change in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Michael Bailey and Guy Redden (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2011), 110.

Second, conservative Christians encouraged young women to achieve exacting body standards through makeovers, diets, and exercise programs. In other words, most, if not all, evangelical women were impacted by the beauty ideals that drove pageants even if they never stepped foot on a stage. The same regimens that drove conservative Christian contestants to perfect their body for the swimsuit competition paralleled those that their mothers followed to take care of “God’s temples.” In both instances, the quest for attractiveness promised women valuable effects. Marie Griffith highlighted the pervasiveness of body regimes among Christians, chronicling Christian teachings on the body and the advent of Christian diet culture.⁵ Karen Tice enhanced Griffith’s work, noting the large number of former beauty queens who “effectively market[ed] Christian makeovers for the flesh and spirit.”⁶ Former queen Cynthia Culp Allen and her daughter Charity Allen Winters, a professional fashion model, wrote a book that encouraged women “to embark on their own ‘makeover miracle’ and ‘soul surgery.’”⁷ Tice contended that “corporeal gospels such as those proclaimed by Allen and Winters help[ed] to reshape constructions of evangelical feminine worthiness as well as buttress[ed] the belief that slim and fashionable bodies serve[d] sacred purposes.”⁸ As noted in Chapter Five, many other beauty pageant participants sought to minister in

⁵ R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2004).

⁶ Tice, “The After-Life of Born-Again Beauty Queens,” 111.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

non-traditional ways. Influenced by the gospel of the pageant, many of them touted the importance of physical appearance not just for one's health, but for Christ as well. The pursuit of beauty, often presented as a quest for health, was a gospel entwined with the pageant that pervaded wider evangelical culture.

Throughout my research, I fielded many inquiries about the history and the implications of Christian involvement in pageants. Perhaps the questions that came up most often regarded my personal feelings toward beauty contests. Did I think pageants were good or bad? What did I make of this Christian engagement with the Miss America Organization? Much of the time I diffused such requests for my opinion by noting that I was a historian; it was not my job to adjudicate whether or not this represented good Christian practice. Rather, I wanted to present the stories of these young women and strive to understand *their* motivation(s) and justification(s) for participating in pageants. Likewise, I hoped to discover some of the factors that contributed to church support of the competitions. I argued that Christians cited numerous reasons for entering beauty contests and that examining those factors offered insight into evangelical womanhood.

I concluded that beauty, decorum, and a penchant for service provided valuable assets to women within the evangelical subculture. This cultural capital also positioned these women well for success in the Miss America organization (and thus, increased capital). At the same time, the competition groomed contestants to become America's ideal, an ideal that shared (at least) these three traits with evangelical womanhood.

Beauty, decorum, and service were doubly advantageous to evangelical contestants. In other words, many women found pageant expectations and those of their faith mutually reinforcing. Becoming better at one naturally meant they experienced greater “success” at the other. As noted, contestants, churches, and the pageant benefited from this relationship. All cultivated and spent various forms of capital.

My work suggests that scholars of evangelicalism will find it fruitful to look for other arenas in which evangelical womanhood constructed itself outside the walls of the church. Where did evangelical women find affirmation of their beliefs and help for achieving evangelical ideals? Where did they find freedom to express their evangelicalism differently and what components did they add, subtract, or contest? Certainly a growing number of evangelical women (and men) who found a home in politics might offer one avenue for exploration. Christian colleges also offered a site rich for investigation. In many ways, they functioned as extensions of the church by policing gender norms. Finally, evangelical bloggers and authors provided an untapped resource for research. The work presented by evangelicals (even if one only compared women) on the roles of women differed greatly. Quite likely, the range of women’s experiences would shift narratives about the role(s) of women in evangelicalism. Even the diversity within the stories recounted here suggests that American evangelicalism was as much about the individual’s experience as it was about their stated beliefs. Evangelicalism taught that each person possessed a personal relationship with God and thus could read

and interpret Scripture on her or his own. Any interaction with the church or the community of believers was filtered through an individual's experience. Individual and community helped one another evolve to face an ever-changing culture. Including more voices of women living their faith would further enrich this field.

I discovered that conservative Christians participating in the Miss America Organization claimed that the pageant offered them pleasure, prizes, performance, and purpose. From the thrill of competition to the exhilaration of making new friends, these women made clear that they found the contests a rewarding form of play, of what they commonly called, simply, fun. Winners received clothing, jewelry, and scholarships, but more importantly a title that granted access to other positions of power. Contestants who did not win the big rewards benefited from less tangible incentives, including interview practice and increased confidence. Participants also enjoyed opportunities for performance. From competing in the talent competition to singing in churches, women developed confidence and skills for engaging a wide audience. Finally, some evangelicals discovered a sense of purpose through pageantry. The events provided them an outlet for their faith, giving them opportunities to work in the community, speak to church groups, and more generally minister to others.

Much of my research focused on the final category of purpose and suggested that evangelical women used their newfound positions to act as evangelists. Scholars in evangelical studies might consider the limits to creative evangelism like that practiced

by pageant contestants. Evangelicals believed that all Christians were called to evangelize and testify to God's power in their lives. These conservative Christian women found agency to do that through the influence and access granted by the pageant crown, but their power was limited. They did not possess the same authority as clergy. Perhaps "allowing" young women to minister in non-traditional venues prevented some from seeking traditional ordination. In addition, male religious leaders might have encouraged talented women to chase the crown instead of the pulpit. If so, the freedom experienced by pageant preachers really served as another boundary that limited traditional religious authority to men. Many women in the stories depicted here indicated that the advantages of pageant participation outweighed the disadvantages. Perhaps this simple acknowledgement provides a model for understanding how women work within religious structures seen by outsiders as oppressive. Rather than discounting or ridiculing expressions because they conflict with stated beliefs (or societal expectations), scholars should strive to understand why women felt compelled to remain in seemingly restrictive positions. In other words, scholars must listen to the women's voices.⁹

⁹ Many recent works in religious studies do take seriously the diversity of women's voices and experience. Two in particular were instrumental in shaping my own study of conservative women. R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000) and Elizabeth H. Flowers, *Into the Pulpit, Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power Since World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

My work also acknowledges an underexplored category for scholars of pageants, women's history, and religious scholars interested in ritual performance. Though much concerned with the impact of America's beauty culture on women, few have explored the interplay among beauty, pageants, and religion. I showed one way Christian views about women's bodies played out (quite literally) on the stage as they helped construct evangelical womanhood. Much of my findings, however, referred to the process that surrounded the actual pageant competition and not what took place during the contest. I analyzed preparations, community service, and women's testimonies concerning their participation and their performances. I did not consider what contestants did on stage as performances in a theoretical sense. Yet pageants are performances. By employing performance theory, scholars might discover how, if at all, pageants performances functioned as religious ritual. As noted by religious studies scholar Catherine Bell, "performance terminology analyzes both religious and secular rituals as orchestrated events that construct people's perceptions and interpretations."¹⁰ The most obvious and long-standing rituals of the Miss America Competition were the posing of contestants in swimsuits and the coronation of a winner. Both offered an opportunity to display and admire beauty in an aesthetically bereft religious culture. Perhaps the contests also provided sites for communal reflection. By employing a more theoretical approach,

¹⁰ Catherine Bell, "Performance," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 208.

scholars might discover how the “script” of the contest “*create[s]* culture, authority, transcendence, and whatever forms of holistic ordering are required for people to act in meaningful and effective ways.”¹¹ Focusing on the stage, the costumes, the gestures, the speeches, and the acts, opens a new dimension to the work I presented here.

Finally, though I do not present my work as theology or ethics, it is ripe for theological inquiry. My research highlights how belief and practice worked together to assign meaning to evangelical women’s lives. I hope pastors and other Christian readers might examine the religious implications of pageant participation and pageant support even as they honor the intentionality of the women involved. My work encourages conservative Christians to embrace a more morally responsible view of gender, urging the culture to consider the costs of the current system. Churches might offer women greater leadership development and ministry training, alternatives to exacting beauty standards, and financial support for education. They might decide, however, to encourage more evangelical women to compete in pageants, to be more intentional about preparing them for the competition, and to offer greater support to those women who feel called to ministry through pageants. I imagine my work could be used to justify both.

On that Sunday in August, Rogers and I entertained multiple sides of this conversation. We fielded questions about mundane things like family and church

¹¹ Ibid., 205, 208.

support and complex ideas about the objectification and commodification of women's bodies. We spoke openly and honestly about benefits and drawbacks contestants felt. We agreed that even when Christian participants did not articulate a call to pageants, they often interpreted or reinterpreted their experience in religious terms. Those like Ali Rogers showed that some contestants openly acknowledged the intricacies of navigating one's faith on the runway and in the public eye. Her experience demonstrates further that evangelical contestants expressed their beliefs to varying degrees while participating and highlights the probability that not all those who claimed Christianity compelled them to compete did so with pure motives. My analysis, which has surfaced patterns among conservative Christian women who participated in pageants merits additional exploration by historians, ethnologists, and theologians, as it is suggestive of the density and complexity of the construction of evangelical womanhood, especially in the South. Christianity will always interact with culture. Pageants offer a rich space to examine this interplay.

9. If you are a member of a religious organization at your school, does that organization support your participation in the MAP? Are they...?

Very unsupportive Moderately unsupportive Neutral Moderately supportive Very supportive

10. If your school religious organization supported your preparation for and participation in the MAP, how did they show their support? Please check all that apply.

- Sponsored a prayer service for you _____
- Placed you on the prayer list _____
- Had a send-off party for you _____
- Sponsored a page in the MAP program book _____
- Supported the MAP golf tournament _____
- Printed congratulations in the bulletin or newsletter _____
- Other (please indicate how) _____

11. How many preliminaries did you compete in this year?

1-3 4-6 7-9 10-12 More than 12

12. What did you hope to accomplish through your participation in the MAP? Circle or check all that apply. Feel free to explain any of your answers.

- Gain scholarship money _____
- Promote my platform _____
- Have fun _____
- Meet new people _____
- Make a difference _____
- Be a witness to my faith _____
- Gain interview skills _____
- Improve my talent _____
- Other (please specify) _____

13. Approximately how much scholarship money have you won since becoming involved in the MAP system?

Less than 1,000 1-5,000 5-10,000 10-15,000 More than 15,000

14. If you do not win the MAP this year, do you intend to participate again next year?

Yes No Maybe

15. How many public appearances have you made since winning your title?

None 1-5 5-10 11-15 More than 15

16. What percentage of your public appearances were in churches or for religious organizations?

None 25% 50% 75% 100%

17. What do you most like about the MAP pageant or about being a MAP contestant?

18. What do you like least about the MAP pageant or about being a MAP contestant?

19. What, if any, religious opportunities have you gained from being in the MAP?

20. Do you feel or sense tensions between your religious tradition and the MAP? If so, what are some of them?

21. How would you describe the relationship between religion and the MAP?

22. Would you be willing to talk further with me about your participation in the MAP?

Yes No Maybe

If so, please list your contact information below, indicating the method by which you prefer to be contacted.

Name _____
E-mail _____
Phone _____

Thank you for your time and help. Please return completed surveys and signed consent forms in the enclosed envelope. My contact information is below should you need to contact me.

Mandy McMichael
[address]
[phone number]
[e-mail]

Appendix B: Miss America, Religious Affiliation

Year	Contestant	State	Religious Affiliation
1965	Vonda Kay Van Dyke	Arizona	Christian
1966	Deborah Irene Bryant	Kansas	Christian
1967	Jane Anne Jayroe	Oklahoma	Methodist
1968	Debra Dene Barnes	Kansas	Christian
1969	Judith Anne Ford	Illinois	Undetermined
1970	Pamela Anne Eldred	Michigan	Undetermined
1971	Phyllis George	Texas	Undetermined
1972	Laurel Lea Schaefer	Ohio	Undetermined
1973	Terry Anne Meeuwsen	Wisconsin	Christian
1974	Rebecca Ann King	Colorado	Undetermined
1975	Shirley Cothran	Texas	Christian
1976	Tawny Elaine Godin	New York	Undetermined

Year	Contestant	State	Religious Affiliation
1977	Dorothy Benham	Minnesota	Christian
1978	Susan Yvonne Perkins	Ohio	Undetermined
1979	Kylene Barker	Virginia	Undetermined
1980	Cheryl Prewitt	Mississippi	Pentecostal
1981	Susan Powell	Oklahoma	Christian
1982	Elizabeth Ward	Arkansas	Undetermined
1983	Debra Sue Maffett	California	Christian
1984	Vanessa Williams	New York	Undetermined
1984	Suzette Charles	New Jersey	Undetermined
1985	Sharlene Wells	Utah	Mormon
1986	Susan Diane Akin	Mississippi	Christian
1987	Kellye Cash	Tennessee	Christian
1988	Kaye Lani Rae Rafko	Michigan	Undetermined

Year	Contestant	State	Religious Affiliation
1989	Gretchen Carlson	Minnesota	Lutheran
1990	Debbye Turner	Missouri	Christian
1991	Marjorie Vincent	Illinois	Undetermined
1992	Carolyn Sapp	Hawaii	Undetermined
1993	Leanza Cornett	Florida	Christian
1994	Kimberly Aiken	South Carolina	Undetermined
1995	Heather Whitestone	Alabama	Baptist
1996	Shawntel Smith	Oklahoma	Pentecostal
1997	Tara Dawn Holland	Kansas	Christian
1998	Kate Shindle	Illinois	Undetermined
1999	Nicole Johnson	Virginia	Christian
2000	Heather French	Kentucky	Undetermined
2001	Angela Perez-Baraquio	Hawaii	Catholic

Year	Contestant	State	Religious Affiliation
2002	Katie Harman	Oregon	Christian
2003	Erika Harold	Indiana	Pentecostal
2004	Ericka Dunlap	Florida	Christian
2005	Deidre Downs	Alabama	Baptist
2006	Jennifer Berry	Oklahoma	Church of Christ
2007	Lauren Nelson	Oklahoma	Methodist
2008	Kirsten Haglund	Michigan	Christian
2009	Katie Stam	Indiana	Lutheran
2010	Caressa Cameron	Virginia	Christian
2011	Teresa Scanlan	Nebraska	Christian

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Biography

Mandy Ellene McMichael was born in Montgomery, Alabama on November 5, 1979. From 1998-2002, she attended Judson College in Marion, Alabama, where she earned her Bachelor of Arts in religion (summa cum laude). Mandy then matriculated in the Divinity School at Duke University, where she earned the Master of Divinity degree (magna cum laude, 2005) and her Master of Theology (2006). While there, she received the James O. Duncan Scholarship. In 2006, she began study for the Ph.D. in The Graduate School at Duke University, and during her studies she has been generously supported with a Summer Research Fellowship (2009) and the Kearns Summer Research Fellowship (2011). She was also awarded a dissertation fellowship from The Louisville Institute for the 2011-2012 academic year. A licensed minister in the Baptist tradition, McMichael currently serves as assistant professor of religion at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama.