Vernacular Abstinence:  
Teenagers, Purity Rings, and Rites of (Blocked) Passage  
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ABSTRACT  

In the past ten years, public ceremonies in which teenagers pledge to remain sexually abstinent until marriage have surged in popularity. One such, “The Silver Ring Thing” program, aims to teach sexual morality by means of drama, theatrics, and symbolism, employing elements and trappings of rites of passage, and culminating in the purchase of a “purity ring.” In this study I question whether this public event does not in fact function as what I call a “rite of blocked passage.” Further, what I call “vernacular abstinence” reveals the contested meanings of the symbolic ring: according to my research, young people’s perceptions and articulations vary widely regarding the power of the ring to motivate moral behavior, not to mention the multiple interpretations of the exact rules of “abstinence” mandated by the Silver Ring Thing. Through observation and interviews, I examine the public performance, the expectations of adults, and the diverse personal meanings that teenagers articulate about sexual abstinence.  

Over the past decade, a growing tide of American teenagers has flowed into school auditoriums and gymnasiums and—amidst a storm of music, video, pyrotechnics, and prayers—has absorbed warnings about the consequences of sexual activity. After several hours of exhortation, many of these students agree to pledge their allegiance to abstinence. They are fitted with a ring to wear on their finger until their wedding day, when their future spouse is to receive it.
as a symbolic gift of purity. With the exhibition completed, the captive audience is released back into the adolescent wild.

Such public ceremonies (and related “purity balls”) have surged in popularity since their emergence in the 1990s, developed by evangelical Christian organizations representing themselves as underdogs in the moral battle for adolescent souls. These ministries have constructed intense, dramatic events, employing elements and trappings of rites of passage, to showcase the purchase of a “purity ring.” The events feature compelling displays of emotion and spectacular effects that are intended to create a sense of social support for the decision to resist sexual temptation. Chaste teenagers purportedly need such encouragement because they feel they are an embattled minority, heroically fighting powerful social and media pressures to have sex.

This article focuses on the abstinence-promotion program “The Silver Ring Thing,” which aims to teach sexual morality to teenagers by means of drama, theatrics, and symbolism. According to its charismatic founder Denny Pattyn, it is the fastest growing abstinence program in the United States. Based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the elaborate production has toured the country since 1996, led by Pattyn and an enthusiastic crew of young adults who help him put on his show and spread the message of sexual purity. The high-tech, concert-style event incorporates music, video, and laser effects, filling high school auditoriums and gymnasiums with crowds of hundreds of students often bused in from surrounding communities. The performance culminates with an abstinence pledge, with teenagers invited to buy $20 silver-plated rings signifying their commitment to refraining from sex. The official silver ring is inscribed with a reference to the biblical verse “1 Thess. 4:3-4,” which reads “God wants you to be holy, so you should keep clear of all sexual sin. Then each of you will control your body and live in holiness and honor.”

As a folklorist and ethnographer, I have taken a qualitative approach to the Silver Ring Thing phenomenon, using multiple methods in order to better understand both the public performance and the diverse personal meanings that participants articulate. I have attended several Silver Ring Thing events in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Maryland over the past few years, and have noticed how those who or-

Photo by Montana Miller

Two young women display purity rings they have just purchased, after a Silver Ring Thing show held at a Methodist church in Herndon, Virginia.
chestrate the proceedings strive to create a collective rite that engages and appears to transform its audience. Based on my observations and interviews with participants, I suggest that Silver Ring Thing events, unlike public rituals that may serve as rites of transition to adulthood, instead represent the *ideal of postponing* that coming-of-age, at least sexually. Thus I have come to think of the Silver Ring Thing as an attempt to prevent, or *block*, the classic rite of passage—losing one’s virginity—that so many youth anticipate and parents dread. (Whether the ring ceremony in fact blocks that passage, or simply appears to block it, is not necessarily evident, but the show seems largely aimed at reassuring parents who observe the display of pledged abstinence through the donning of the ring.) Further, I suggest in this article that the relationship between the public performance and teenagers’ private interpretations is more ambiguous than is often publicly recognized by adults.

My academic training is not in religious studies, and my intention is not to address theological conceptions in this article. Rather, I am looking at the Silver Ring Thing as a social rite performed in American public life. As an ethnographer of education practices, I have long been concerned with eliciting the ostensibly unspoken views of students who participate in adult-sponsored programs. I hope to bring a clearer understanding to the dynamics of such events through my observations of the collective rites and through my attention to some of the voices that are not heard in the readily available literature on the program.

The emblem of this celebration of purity, the silver ring itself, is increasingly perceived as being trendy and commodified as a fashion accessory. Teen pop stars Miley Cyrus and the Jonas Brothers wear purity rings, a factor that has certainly increased the rings’ visibility and coolness. This modest piece of jewelry publicly flashes the image of purity yet privately carries diverse and fluid interpretations.

In my analysis of this “vernacular abstinence,” I focus on the contested meanings of the symbolic ring. Young people’s perceptions vary widely regarding the power of the ring to motivate moral behavior. More important, there are multiple interpretations of the exact rules of abstinence mandated by the Silver Ring Thing. The program presents the abstinence pledge, embodied by the ring, as an effective method of instilling and influencing values. But how do the audience members interpret and practice those values after the staged event? The intended meanings of performances and symbols are not always the received, personal, or applied meanings. In this case a forceful religious discourse launched at teenagers to change their attitudes, explodes into fragmented individual interpretations and adaptations in terms of everyday choices.

Among the many symbolic and theatrical aspects of the Silver Ring Thing show, the ring itself shines as a powerful yet polyvalent sign of sexual purity. Through email interviews with several dozen young adults across the country who have attended Silver Ring Thing events and come away bearing rings, I have documented a range of expressed beliefs about the significance of this symbol.
The Debate Over Abstinence-Based Sex Education

Surveys reveal consistently that abstinence pledges only delay sexual activity; most teenagers break their pledge before marriage. In a 2002 review of several abstinence-based sex education programs and their reported results, Melanie Toups and William Holmes concluded that these programs “were effective in changing teenagers’ attitudes, understanding, values, and future intentions regarding their involvement in sexual behavior.” The authors cited Center for Disease Control statistics that showed a decline in percentage of teenagers who had ever engaged in sexual intercourse, from 54 percent to 48 percent between 1990 and 1997, as further evidence that “teenagers have rediscovered abstinence.” But the results of surveys relying on self-reported beliefs and behaviors—whether administered by the CDC on a national level or by researchers who descend on groups of teens who have just been through an intensely moralistic curriculum with the clear message that premarital sex is wrong—are inherently suspect, as scholars such as John Santelli and Bill Taverner have recently noted. Findings may easily be skewed by the participants’ desire to give the right answer to please the researchers, and over time the participants’ opinions and attitudes may change as they become more distanced from the ceremony they have just performed.

Arguably more objective surveys have shown that abstinence pledges may be far from foolproof in achieving the prevention goals of program organizers. Sociologists Peter Bearman and Hannah Bruckner recently conducted the most comprehensive study ever done on adolescent health and sexuality. Their interviews with more than 20,000 young people who took virginity pledges revealed that 88 percent of them broke their pledge and had sex before marriage, and that pledgers were just as likely as non-pledgers to contract sexually transmitted diseases. This may be because pledgers, when they did eventually break their vows, were less likely to use condoms; further, they were less likely to seek treatment for STDs and therefore risked more severe health problems. The reluctance of pledgers to use condoms and to obtain health care is linked to their perceptions of sexual activity as sinful and stigmatized.

On a segment of 60 Minutes that aired on CBS in May 2005, Peter Bearman asserted that “[a] doelastics who take virginity pledges – who remain virgins, that is, who don’t have vaginal sex, who technically remain virgins, are much more likely to have oral and anal sex.” Silver Ring Thing founder Denny Pattyn was the featured guest on the program, expressing his conviction that health educators are lying to kids about the effectiveness of condoms for preventing disease, and that “condoms aren’t the answer.” Asked what counsel he would give to his own teenage daughter, Pattyn replied, “I would not tell her to use a condom. Because I don’t think it’ll protect her. It won’t protect her heart, it won’t protect her emotional life, and it’s not going to protect her.” (60 Minutes 2005). Footage of a Silver Ring Thing performance followed: a crowd of teenagers yelling, “Sex is great!” at the urging of an on-stage cheerleader who ardently adds the qualification “—in the context of marriage!” CBS commentator Ed Bradley closed the segment by informing viewers, “As recently as 1988, just one in 50 junior and senior high schools taught abstinence-only-until-
marriage programs. Today, those programs are in about one third of schools in the US, reaching some eight million students.”

Most rigorous surveys have questioned the benefits of abstinence-based sex education programs. In his book that aims to “take an extended look into the real lives of American teenagers and to document whether religious faith affects—if at all—how they think about sexuality and the practices in which they choose to either engage or refrain,” sociologist Mark D. Regnerus investigates teenagers’ attitudes and decision-making by combining interviews with 250 teenagers nationwide with a review of several national quantitative surveys. Regnerus acknowledges that abstinence pledges do not achieve their explicitly stated goals, but he asserts that evangelical teenagers, while they are just as likely to be sexually active as any other teenagers, do feel much more guilt and embarrassment about it. Abstinence pledges are idealists, he writes, with high expectations for their future sex lives within marriage relationships; but “adolescents often act out of step with their religious ideals, in ways they themselves would call inconsistent…people may not do what they want to do…people may not put into practice what they say they believe.” According to Regnerus, teenagers are most likely to act on their stated beliefs regarding sexual activity when they are solidly ensconced in close friendship groups that create shared norms and define religion as very important in their lives; teens belonging to such groups seem to draw strength from the self-conscious perception that they are fighting the good fight against dominant cultural forces of moral decadence.

**Performing a Rite to Block the Passage into Sexuality**

Rites of passage are ceremonies intended to effect a change in status upon participants. Societies have their formal rituals, and these can usually be seen to be discrete events with obvious beginnings and endings, as folklorist Arnold van Gennep discussed in his seminal work *The Rites of Passage*, first published in 1909. Yet the virtuous status that teenagers take on publicly through the Silver Ring Thing ceremony is a performance for an audience whose agenda is preventing and
postponing transition to adult status. On that stage, donning the purity ring is a gesture of resistance to the carnal temptations of growing up—a gesture of blocking the passage to sexual maturity.

For those who keep their pledge, the ring represents a brake on the progression toward adulthood. And it can denote a transition backward for those who have already crossed the sexual threshold and wish to return, becoming what the abstinence movement refers to as “second chance virgins.”

The Silver Ring Thing organization defines itself as a “non-denominational parachurch ministry.” Para-church organizations are generally understood as means of collaboration among Christians across different denominations, through which they can engage in community welfare projects as well as evangelism. Such organizations can be non-profit corporations, businesses, or private associations. They generally operate without the sponsorship of any particular church or association of churches, while attempting to avoid encroaching on roles traditionally belonging to churches alone. They offer centralized efficiency of mission and operation to accomplish specialized ministry tasks that independent churches without denominational or associational strength are not able to accomplish on a larger national or international scale.

The extensive web site of the Silver Ring Thing presents statistical information on its spread and attendance:

Over the past 10 years, SRT has held over 650 Live Events in many different cities across the United States and around the world. To date, SRT has brought the abstinence message to over 325,000 students and parents, and nearly 110,000 students have put on a ring as a symbol of their commitment to wait until marriage. In addition, through this program, over 70,000 young people have made decisions to follow Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. (www.silverringthing.com/whatissrt.asp, last accessed 6/9/09)

This program is not simply promoting chaste sexual behavior: it is a proudly evangelical organization, as evidenced by the Abstinence Study Bible sold at the shows and quoted frequently by Silver Ring Thing disciples. The stated “first priority of the Silver Ring Thing is to lead children to make a commitment to Christ,” and putting on the ring is only the first step; according to the Silver Ring Thing rhetoric, “God has a plan for your sex life! His plan is awesome.” The plan, laid out in
the first prefatory pages of the Abstinence Study Bible, includes email follow-ups, mentoring, and “abstinence saturated communities,” which are “hub cities” hosting at least twenty shows a year. As they develop their personal relationships with Jesus, teenagers are urged to spread the word to their peers, and “join the team” through internships with the program “to get some real-life ministry experience and consider whether God may be calling you to a career in ministry.”

The day after each Silver Ring Thing show, the organization’s web site is updated with photos of the performance and of smiling participants displaying their newly adorned ring fingers. After one show I attended in Pennsylvania, this official report was posted:

It was nearly a full house!! Over 550 students, leaders, and parents came out for the SRT Event where 323 students got rings to symbolize their abstinence commitment and 51 students made first-time or re-commitments to Christ!! Congratulations to all those who decided to take a pledge and stand up for what is right.

The spectacle had clearly been the biggest thing happening in town that day, as the quiet leafy town was ruffled only by the commotion surrounding the high school. The parking lot was full of cars, including the colorful Silver Ring Thing tour bus, which seemed to convey visiting rock stars. Teenagers gathered in animated groups, parents hovering nearby with wallets open to pay for admission fees, snacks, and souvenirs. Inside, the adolescent crowd packed the auditorium; there were slightly more girls than boys, ranging in age from about twelve to eighteen years old, acting largely docile and agreeable but not visibly pious. Many were dressed in revealing, tight-fitting party attire. The audience included a smattering of adults who sat in awkward silence, having chosen not to attend the special parents’ information session in an adjacent lecture hall.

The ambience of hype and frenzy in the room was fed by the loud pulsing music (mostly dance songs, chart rap, and hip hop), the large video screens mounted on either side of the stage, laser lighting effects, pyrotechnics, and flaming barrels on stage. The Silver Ring Thing cast consisted of half a dozen young adults of varied ethnicity, dressed in hip urban garb: T-shirts, washed out or ripped denim, Converse sneakers, shades. The cast members threw free T-shirts into the crowd, prompted the audience to scream their approval, and even invited kids to come dance in front of the stage in a gyrating, undulating line. All this cultivated an atmosphere that was anything but prudish. “This feels like a rave,” remarked a girl behind me to her friend.

Throughout the show, the Silver Ring Thing incorporates popular culture trends and references, revolving around a theme that changes every year. In the past few years, these themes have included Star Wars and the Lord of the Rings. The 2008-2009 “Mythbusters Tour” borrows images and motifs from the popular Discovery Channel television series; beakers filled with colored liquids and elaborate scientific contraptions garnish the stage. The presenters refer to four “myths” they set out to prove wrong: “Sex has no consequences,” “You can’t date and wait,” “I can do this on my own,” and “It’s impossible to start over.” These myths are addressed through the personal narrative of a young woman who relates her struggles with issues of relationships, sexuality, and drugs. After having sex with her first boyfriend, “my heart grew hard on the inside,” she says, and
only God could make her whole again, through Jesus. She asks the audience to consider whether they “talk one way and live another lifestyle,” as she once did. She challenges them: “What have you been looking at online? What’s on your MySpace or Facebook?”

Other ubiquitous elements in the show attempt to tap into the young audience’s familiar pop culture references. Video spoofs of well-known commercials (Macintosh, Time-Life, Geiko gecko, MasterCard, eHarmony) turn the original messages into warnings about pregnancy, herpes, and syphilis. Clips from favorite teen films evoke cheers and laughter; kids in the audience sing along with bits from popular songs; and recently, the show has (somewhat clumsily) included allusions to social networking sites such as MySpace, YouTube, and Facebook. Mixed into this multi-media extravaganza are numerous skits acted out by members of the Silver Ring Thing cast, in which they impersonate Saturday Night Live characters (including Catholic schoolgirl Mary Katharine Gallagher and the desperately peppy Spartan Cheerleaders). A new skit added in 2008 draws on the hit video game Guitar Hero as an obvious metaphor for sex. A teenaged boy, hesitant to play, is taunted by friends at a party: “Why do you want to wait? By the time you get started, you’ll still be in beginner mode!” He complains that “scoring a bunch of points” is all they can think about, and leaves the party, resisting peer pressure. Innuendos such as “thinking about rubbing my hand up and down that neck” elicit big laughs from the audience throughout the scene.

Another skit demonstrates the destructive effect sex can have on a young relationship. A boy and girl encounter each other months after their breakup and argue about what went wrong. “After we slept together you got all weird! It was like we were married—you had to know where I was 24 hours a day,” says the boy, and when the girl concludes, “We can’t even be friends,” they stomp away from each other.

One of the key components of the show is an extended skit in which audience members are selected to participate. A Silver Ring Thing lead performer chooses a boy and three girls from the crowd, and walks them through a romantic pantomime in which the boy dates each girl in succession, but then loses a piece of his heart to each one as a consequence of “crossing some lines” and “taking things to the next level,” which causes things to “get weird.” (These euphemisms are repeated throughout the program, with no specific explanations of what sexual behaviors are forbidden. The only clear guidelines I noted were to “avoid the horizontal position” and to “dress appropriately.”) No direct comment was made regarding the audience members’ typical casual attire of low-rise jeans and tank tops.) Emotional experience and sensations seem to be deliberately built into this aspect of the show; the teen actors are made to hold hands and look into each other’s eyes while the narrator describes their first date and eventual parting. The narrator then uses a chainsaw and sledgehammer to destroy the wooden heart the boy must hold, while each girl is sent away with a sharp splinter wedged of the broken heart. Through these tactics, I believe, the organizers have constructed a multi-media folk drama that serves to engage the audience on a deeper level than as mere spectators.

The show goes on at length, with alternating skits, videos, and speeches by cast members who
tell emotional personal narratives illustrating themes of redemption, loneliness, and peer pressure. Watching the audience reactions, I have observed a sense of fatigue setting in as the hours go by. A remarkable decline in energy takes place. The show begins on such a frenetic note with the dance-club ambience and the screaming call-and-response (“Sex is great!”) led by the cast members. But the lasers disappear and the free T-shirts stop flying; the testimonials become more depressing and take on a patterned style with repeated themes. The mood is further dampened when the parents—finished with their own separate session—creep into the auditorium and try to discreetly find empty seats among the kids. Denny Pattyn’s final lecture and his closing prayer, rather than providing a climactic end to the program, are delivered almost in a monotone.

Pattyn’s prayer ends the show, and then everyone is urged to go out and buy rings. Released from their seats, the kids descend on the tables of paraphernalia for sale—T-shirts, keychains, stickers, buttons, etc., with slogans such as “Don’t Drink and Park,” “STD Treatment: Abstinence Until Marriage,” and “How to have the best sex ever!” The hallway teems with parents buying rings for their kids, kids putting the rings on each other and snapping pictures. A voice emerges from a group of girls posing for a photo: “This shows that we’re all together.” Each ring-buyer is given an Abstinence Bible and instructed to choose an “accountability partner” (of the same gender) who will monitor her behavior and warn her if she appears to be straying from her abstinence pledge. Much excitement seems to surround the choosing of accountability partners as it affords an opportunity to establish and display exclusive friendship bonds in the competitive social arena of adolescence.

America has a history of embracing charisma and creativity; our culture values the freedom to invent new twists on old traditions, and today’s churches capitalize on modern ways of packaging theology. Denny Pattyn’s theatrical, multimedia vehicle for his religious rhetoric echoes a tradition that celebrates personalities such as Aimee Semple McPherson (1890–1944), a star of the early Pentecostal movement in America. McPherson’s flamboyance contributed to her fame, but she (like Pattyn) succeeded in aggressively promoting a return to stricter standards of morality. “Sister got ahead by rebelling against the impulse to rebellion—an interesting paradox,” writes literary historian Stephen Cox.7

Pattyn calls his audiences of teenagers to arms against the moral decline of their generation, employing every special effect he can muster; he, like McPherson, plays (in Cox’s...
terms) a “role as an artist of the American religious vernacular.” His program is a fascinating blend of mixed messages incorporating comedy, melodrama, and horror. Paradoxically, it builds up the importance and mystification of sex (“You’ll ruin yourself for your future spouse if you do it now!”), but easily welcomes those lost sinners who wish to re-commit to abstinence (“Tonight can be the night you start over!”). In anguished testimonials, speakers tell of using promiscuous sex to fill a void inside; yet they do not advocate building up one’s self-esteem, instead arguing that only God can fill the void and ease one’s insecurity.

The male-centered nature of the program’s ideology is difficult to ignore, as dramatic scenarios repeatedly portray violence against women. According to these representations, the sure consequences of having sex go beyond pregnancy and disease: in addition, sex causes women to become possessive, smothering, and even mentally unhinged, thus driving men to strike out in frustration. For example, in one scene a harried boyfriend throws his clingy girlfriend in front of a truck; a dummy is used for the stunt, but the lesson is clear. The Silver Ring Thing drives home a consistent theme of sex as the cause of violence, drugs, and despair, and promises that a relationship without sex will be safe and free of emotional heartache. There is no acknowledgement of the complexity of communicating with a partner, and no acknowledgement that sex may not be simple and fabulous on that long-awaited wedding night. Masturbation, homosexuality, and divorce are not mentioned at all, but this is perhaps not surprising given the young age of many of the audience members.

The Silver Ring Thing event is a performance, a display, and a spectacle of tribute to the values of sexual purity. But is its meaning as simple as its promotional material implies, or is the reality more nuanced? Why does this show survive and thrive? It affirms its own power not through behavioral statistics (which the studies I cited previously show are unconvincing at best) but through its commercial success. The sale of rings apparently brings substantial profit; in order to increase sales, the program uses the force of peer culture, tapping into it with savvy pop culture trappings. In addition, a noticeable decrescendo of energy over the course of the show leaves the audience deflated at the end. Might the show be intentionally constructed to leave its participants unfulfilled, unless they buy something? Might peer culture work to achieve a significant outcome and goal—the ring purchase—which comforts and appeases the parents? After all, brisk sales seem to show that all the kids buying and wearing their new rings subscribe to the symbolic pledge of sexual abstinence that the performance emphasized. This may calm parents’ anxieties and convince them that their children have just experienced a rite that blocks passage into the feared realm of sexual activity.

Whether the teenagers themselves experience this as a rite of blocked passage is a more elusive question. For the individuals in the audience, receptions and responses will vary. Van Gennep reminds us that a single rite may be interpreted in several ways: “Sacredness as an attribute is not absolute; it is brought into play by the nature of particular situations.” In contrast to most rites of passage, which result in moving to a more advanced level of experience and maturity, the Silver
Ring Thing ceremony uses elements of drama, displays of peer solidarity, and material symbols to mark a new social status that manifestly rejects the process of growing up.

**Vernacular Religion: Belief, Practice, and Interpretation**

With the study I present here, I do not seek to prove or disprove the statistical effectiveness of the Silver Ring Thing program, but rather to document a range of expressed perspectives and observations of young people who have attended this program. As folklorist Diane Goldstein has noted, ethnographers today tend to “construct our definitions, our metaphors, and our models for analysis in ways which...secularize the study of religious groups.” That is, we are wary of drawing conclusions about what people really believe; we prefer to document their actions and expressions, hoping to discover meanings but afraid to plunge unguarded into the fervor.

I, too, hesitate to speculate on the faith and commitment felt or not felt by participants in the public performance and display of Silver Ring Thing rhetoric and adornment. Participants practice their beliefs in a context fraught with pressures from all sides; peers, parents, pastors, and policymakers all have positions to defend in a high-stakes cultural debate over teenage sexuality and morality, public health and private choices. Just as teenagers’ risk-taking and sexual behavior is a topic of endless concern in much of adult society, so too teenagers themselves are subject to manipulation and marketing at every turn. The interviews presented here reveal a sample of the great variety of local and personal responses to movements that seek to implement moral and character education on a national scale. Prevention efforts that use drama and symbolism to display and teach values have enjoyed increasing popularity and appeal in recent years, as I have discussed in my earlier work on drunk driving prevention programs in high schools. Yet there is little nuanced understanding of what lies behind and beyond the audience’s display of credulity and acquiescence. In fact, teenagers’ responses and behaviors regarding their silver rings exemplify the complex vernacular expression of religious belief and practice.

The following data represent a modest but illuminating survey of teenage folk meanings and interpretations of a symbol associated with an evangelical religious sponsor, Denny Pattyn and his organization. But as folklorist Diane Goldstein has pointed out, studies of folk religion have ne...
neglected “the ‘religious’ core of religious speech; the simple fact that such performances arise out of and constitute part of a discourse of faith, and as such are judged by fellow believers based on spiritual rules and norms.” Many of the young people who contributed to this study are immersed in religious communities. With their families and friendship groups, they may share social structures deeply founded on religious belief. When they refer to a passage from the Bible or mention their relationship with Jesus, I may glimpse those foundations, but a comprehensive look at the religious social structure behind the Silver Ring Thing is beyond the scope of my study. I limit myself here to the scaffolding erected by these teens’ explanations of sex and the ring. Goldstein uses the term “scaffolding” to refer to the social milieu or folklife surrounding religious events—the practices and performances through which people express ideals and values. We can observe the form of the scaffolding without being certain how, or how well, it functions.

Through the study of symbolic objects, imagery, rituals, and communicative forms, we document the elements of folk religion, defined in 1974 by folklorist Don Yoder as “those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion.” Yoder noted that comparative studies of religion had suffered from “the common failure to distinguish between philosophical religion and practical religion,” and he pointed out that the “folk” aspect of religion is disorganized and “exists in a complex society in relation to and in tension with the organized religion(s) of that society.” As Leonard Primiano and other folklorists went on to develop the concept of vernacular religion, the definition of what “folk” included was stretched; for example, institutions and official people also possess and express vernacular elements, asserted Primiano. Thus even the adult-generated Silver Ring Thing show, with its slogans, scripts, and constructions of right and wrong, can be seen as a vernacular creation in itself.

Within the field of folklore studies, the notion of vernacular religion has proved useful for understanding a range of phenomena including Americans’ popular infatuation with angels and angel imagery, homosexual Roman Catholics, and online apocalyptic discourse. Scholars in fields other than folklore have explored the vast range of individual experiences within religious culture, as well; for example, the focus on lived religion and religious practices has created an important shift in religious history studies, exemplified in the work of authors including Robert Orsi, David Hall, and Leigh Eric Schmidt.

In another example of vernacular religion, anthropologist Ganamath Obeyesekere studied the symbolic locks of matted hair worn by Hindu-Buddhist religious ecstatics in Sri Lanka. In his 1981 book Medusa’s Hair; Obeyesekere emphasized “three interrelated problems: the origin and genesis of the symbol; its personal meaning for the individual or group; and the socio-cultural message it communicates to the group… In the case of matted hair the symbol is a public one, but it is recreated each time by individuals.”

Like a head of matted hair, a chastity ring is a symbol that publicly displays religious devotion. Yet, as Obeyesekere has illustrated, symbols are multivocal; even when they carry meanings
that are culturally shared, they take on personal meanings as well, as individuals invest them with their own emotions and experiences. In light of this, I propose the term “vernacular abstinence” to conceptualize these diverse understandings and lived practices as teenagers (individually and in groups) interpret the moral codes of sexual behavior they receive through official, authoritative, and mass-media conduits. That is, vernacular abstinence stands in contrast to the official top-down notion of abstinence as an uncomplicated ideal. In speeches, slogans, and public policy, the word “abstinence” is rigid, inflexible—often phrased as “abstinence-only,” and wielded as the one reliable weapon against STDs and pregnancy. But in attempting to understand the vernacular expression of this concept, I am asking what counts as abstinent or non-abstinent when young people are turning the idea over in their minds, talking with their friends and lovers, or tossing in their beds.

It is important to allow the individual voices of the teenagers wearing these rings to emerge, giving their personal translations of the common text they wear around their fingers. “What people believe and how they practice their religion in their everyday lives must be taken seriously,” Primiano reminds us; as he found with perceptions of angels, individuals’ interpretations are nuanced, sophisticated, and often eloquent. Having observed the Silver Ring Thing show and noted the wide range of apparent levels of enthusiasm in the audience of teenagers, I suspect that they are not all as swept up in the devotion as the promoters claim. However, it has not been practical for me to obtain informed consent and conduct on-the-spot interviews with the students at these events, as getting their parents’ consent would not be feasible, and the crowded, noisy, hyped-up event is not an ideal interview setting.

Therefore, the research findings I present here are based on email interviews I have conducted with students over the age of 18—now in college—who participated in the Silver Ring Thing program when they were in high school. That is, they attended the show, took the virginity pledge, and bought and wore the ring. Publicly, they still affiliate themselves with the idea of sexual abstinence—at least enough to have joined one of several groups on social networking sites such as Facebook that reference the Silver Ring Thing. But what can they tell us about their private and practical definitions of chastity, and what are their observations of their peers’ behavior?

I sent emails or Facebook messages to about 100 Silver Ring Thing alumni, asking them for their consent to participate in my research, introducing myself and the purpose of my study: “I’m interested in learning about how teenagers interpret the values and rules the ring represents, after the staged performance is over. Would you be interested in sending me your opinion on this subject?” After explaining how confidentiality will be protected, I posed these questions:

In your opinion, do people have differing perceptions regarding the ring’s power and meaning? That is, do you know of people who wore the ring but had differing definitions of what it means to be “abstinent,” or who sometimes took off the ring and behaved differently, or who wore the ring in order to present a chaste image even though in private they were sexually active?

Several dozen young people replied to my email questionnaire. There is little doubt that this
sample is selective and skewed: My respondents likely constitute an enthusiastic subset from among the thousands of teenagers who have sat through the shrill spectacle and gone home wearing a ring. Not surprisingly, almost every response I have received includes a reiteration of the importance of having a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Keeping in mind that the ring-bearers I am interviewing at least tacitly accept the program’s message, I believe that they can be keen observers of their peers regardless of their ideological bias. In fact, they may have more communications with their classmates than typical students, due to their motivation to influence others to join their faith. In emailing these students, I emphasized that I was interested in hearing their perceptions of the ways other teenagers defined appropriate sexual boundaries; I asked them no personal questions, and I asked them not to tell me names or identifying details about other people. Their responses to my questions are intriguing.

**Vernacular Abstinence as Explained by Teenagers**

Several key themes stood out: the ring as a tool or strategy used by parents; the ring as a means of displaying or “showing off” values; the ring as a “second chance,” to make a fresh start after a mistake; the ring as a token of an abstinence pledge that may be temporarily repealed when the ring is taken off; and the ring as a symbol of a word, “abstinence,” that holds different meanings for different groups and individuals.

I am not arguing that any of these themes suggests a trend; this study is neither quantitative nor comprehensive. However, the responses I have received from college-aged students around the country do reveal a sense that even among those who support abstinence, multiple and contested meanings abound.

Having observed hundreds of kids herded into gyms for the extremely lengthy Silver Ring Thing show—the entire program can take over four hours—I was not shocked to learn that some parents may impose the purchase of the ring on reluctant children. “I know that there are students who are forced to go to the program, who are told by their parents they have to wear the ring. I think this is so parents don’t need to do anything annoying like PAY ATTENTION to their child,” wrote one girl. Another cited “friends receiving promise rings from their parents on their 13th birthday.”

Even when parents don’t explicitly require it, the ring is a gesture to a judgmental audience. Naturally, some teens want to maintain a clean public image and their rings are worn as a display that may not correspond to their actual practices. “There are definitely people who will wear the ring for the image it provides. I know people who will wear the ring only to church related activities and not wear it at any other time,” wrote one boy. Another boy commented: “Sadly, not everyone who wears the ring is serious about it just like not everyone in church on Sunday morning is serious about it.”

A young woman recalled, “I do think that they kind of scared the youth into wanting to pur-
chase the ring and wear it. I’m pretty sure almost everyone purchased a ring at the event. Before it started, people in our youth group had said that they didn’t really want to purchase the ring because they thought it was a waste of money and that they had already chosen to remain abstinent. After the show, everyone in our youth group bought one including me. I think that some of the people were too young to understand exactly what the ring signified. They thought sex, not oral sex or other acts, was what the ring signified. I actually work with girls who are in the 10th grade now and went to this event in the 8th grade and none of them wear their rings and all have admitted to doing sexual acts.”

One girl expressed concern that some people use the ring as a kind of shortcut: “A lot of the people I knew who got the ring claimed to be Christians, even though their lifestyles said otherwise. After they went through the program and received the ring, their lifestyles didn’t change, and some of them got worse. So they basically thought that wearing the ring made them moral, and they didn’t need to portray purity because they already had the symbol. Simply wearing a symbol does not make you what that symbol stands for, and I believe that’s what these people thought it would do for them.”

For some, the display can be a way to conform, or they may be swept along in the excitement: “UNFORTUNATELY this happens a lot,” complained one girl. “Students get caught up in the whole drama and the skits and the fact that there are ‘tons of other teens’ putting on the ring, and they aren’t quite sure why they are doing it too. Then you find out that they are wearing it as a ‘piece of jewelry’ and not so much as the symbol of their decision to be abstinent.” And one boy revealed, “I will admit that being seen as a chaste and moral person is what you could call a ‘turn-on.’” However, he noted, “Often in the world of teenagers, people gain reputations and any sexual immorality would probably be revealed, leaving the symbol of the silver ring void even if that person continued to wear it.” Motivations for wearing or removing the ring range from the profound to the superficial: a girl noted that “Personally, I still wear the ring but not all of the time...not because I decided to become sexually active but because it’s not high quality and it was turning my finger colors.”

Even if one has lost one’s chastity, the moral high ground can be regained through the power of the Silver Ring, according to the program’s ideology. “The ring is also a symbol of ‘renewed virginity’ and someone who has had sex can make or remake the commitment exactly as a virgin would make the commitment,” explains one girl. Another points out, “Just by simply wearing it does not mean that the person has removed all temptation from having sex.” That is, one can break one’s pledge and then renew it. “I have failed many times but the ring and infinitely more importantly my relationship with God and other Christians has helped me become a more pure man,” writes one young man. And another girl elaborates: “There are people all over America who break their promises. The only difference between the breakers are those who actually keep breaking the promise, as opposed to those who realize they’ve made a mistake and try to right it.”

For some, the promise may be a contract that applies *only* when the ring is on the finger.
One girl observes, “There have been times in which people have removed the ring and suddenly ‘changed their mind’ until they put it back on.” A young man reflects: “I have taken my ring off before engaging in questionable activity as if that made some kind of difference… The times I have removed it were times where I fell to the temptation of pornography. Removing the ring was a way of me trying to remove myself from this covenant… An example would be for a married sailor to remove his wedding ring before going on liberty in a foreign port. Obviously his status as married has not changed but there is a lot of power in our symbols.” And another girl’s comment speaks to the awareness of symbols: “There are several people who ‘take off the ring to behave differently.’ But that is the EXACT POINT. They are aware that the ring stands for something and they are BREAKING that commitment. By taking off the ring, they feel somewhat ‘liberated’ to make other poor decisions that might not sit so well if there was a reminder of something else that they ‘believed in.’ It’s like a married man who takes off his ring to cheat on his wife. He is taking off the SYMBOL of that commitment so that he feels as though he is UNINHibiTED to make choices that might not be the ‘best for his marriage.’”

Finally, my respondents testify to a wide range of interpretations of the ring’s mandate, due to personal and cultural definitions of what it means to be abstinent in the first place. “I would say that the physical boundary crossed when you have absolutely passed the limit (that the ring signifies for me) is true intercourse,” says one girl, specifying that for her personally, “abstaining from sex means no vaginal or oral sexual contact at the least. I do know that this definition varies for people who agree to abstain from sex but everyone agrees that it is not having vaginal sexual contact until they are married, not engaged but married.” She remains vague as to what qualifies as “contact.” Another young woman is more explicit: “I cannot speak for everyone but it seems to me that oral sex is deemed acceptable by a lot of people I meet who wear the ring. I also consider oral sex acceptable as well. I am also well aware that the Bible verse says that is unacceptable but I choose to live this way on my own.”

“Some people have different definitions of what sex is[,] some say oral is not sex or petting isn’t sex[,]” one young man remarks. “The worst definition I’ve ever heard was that it is not sex if it didn’t mean anything or if they were now broke up. It’s really weird because people try to use different words for sex almost as if it makes it not sex.”

Does the ring have power to strengthen moral resolve? Some teenagers appear to use it to this purpose. One girl wrote, “Personally, I refrain from having actual intercourse but proceed to do other sexual acts. I think that the ring has a different meaning to everyone even though the actual meaning is to refrain from all sexual acts before marriage. I have the ring but I don’t usually wear it unless I think that I might be extremely tempted.”

For one boy, sexual “purity” means “not only abstinence from intercourse but other things including not looking at pornography, not dwelling in lust and keeping my relationships with girls from becoming a self-serving way to gratify sexual desires… something as innocent as a hug if done for the wrong motive could be crossing the line.” Another boy writes, “I can still say that I
haven’t had physical sex yet but I’ll admit that I’ve slipped up a few times in the mental part of it. I get tempted very easily but I feel that I am forgiven no matter what although I will still remember what I’ve done.”

One girl wrote to explain that among her friends, several wore different varieties of promise rings, in addition to holding diverse attitudes toward sex. “Many who put on the ring do not keep their promise,” she informed me. “Some choose to allow themselves a very loose definition of abstinence. I know several people in this category. The ‘loose definition’ does not include anal sex for any of these cases, though in one instance a friend has allowed herself to get into situations which she could have avoided that led in two instances to date rape. She kept her ring. Others draw the line at anal sex being too far, taking clothes off being too far, and some at the horizontal position being too far. I recently heard a speaker at a Christian retreat refer to his own experience in which he drew the line at French kissing based on strong temptation to ‘go all the way’ every time they French kissed.”

With This Ring…

This thing, the silver ring, is a dazzling example of a polyvalent symbol. Even my limited, anecdotal study reveals a great variety of local and personal responses to a faith-based movement seeking to implement moral and character education on a national scale. I believe that by examining this phenomenon not only as a public performance of a symbolic rite but also in terms of vernacular religion, we can better understand the popularity and the implications of prevention efforts that use drama and symbolism to display and teach values.

I have observed the intensity and ambiguity of the messages being conveyed through the Silver Ring Thing, but I have also documented discrepancies in the ways teenagers receive these messages, interpret them, and respond to them. These questions call for further exploration, as my present study reveals a range of vernacular conceptualizations of abstinence.

When public school gymnasiums are packed with obedient throngs of students who fidget and yawn through a two- to four-hour spectacle of faith-based cheerleading for chastity, and at the end most of these students purchase a ring, something significant is transpiring. Primiano suggests that “spiritual traditions and a love for sacred materiality remain the cement of even a seemingly secular U.S. society.”18 Leigh Eric Schmidt’s Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays includes a discussion of the feasts and rituals of the Christian church. Schmidt illustrates how “the familiar theological and liturgical ideals” fail to fully represent the complexity of vernacular experience: “In practice, the drawing of a sharp line around Sundays and holy days in order to insulate them from economic pursuits and to ensure their solemnity was invariably hard to achieve, and neat boundaries between the sacred and the profane were in the quotidian world of lived religion hard to come by.”19 Schmidt describes examples of the convergence of fair and religious festival, and perhaps it is natural that evangelism and material culture should be marketed
to the public in the same physical and spiritual space.

The moral entrepreneurs behind the Silver Ring Thing have created an inspired, innovative, participatory event to impart their values to the next generation. For their part, the teenagers leave the auditorium bearing material artifacts whose meaning must be individually manufactured: Each ring can be decoded, and re-coded, endlessly. And for the attentive adult community—concerned parents, educators, and activists—the enactment of the performance climaxes with the reassuring immediate transaction. Purity rings are distributed, and the Silver Ring Thing tour moves on to the next town, promising “the best sex ever!”—but not before marriage.

Notes


8 Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, 12.


10 Montana Miller, “‘Every 15 Minutes Someone Dies’: How People Play in a Staged Drunk Driving Tragedy” (PhD diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 2003).


