

# Can True Love Wait? Christian Morality Meets Adolescent Sexuality in Teen Film

Elisha McIntyre

Teenage life is full of drama. It has provided ample inspiration for filmmakers, who have developed it into its own genre, complete with conventions and formulas that speak to everyone in the audience who has ever experienced the awkwardness of adolescence. Teenagers party, fight, and fall in love. They also have sex. Teen films frequently use sex as a source of comedy, drama, and even plot. Much of their narrative content comes from the characters' responses to sex and sexuality, and it is these responses that are the focus of this article, as demonstrated in four films that are a reaction to the presence of religious values within contemporary culture. This includes a mainstream secular response to Christian adolescence, in the films *Saved!* (2004) and *Everybody's Doing It* (2002), as well as two films produced by Christian film companies, *Second Glance* (1992), and *Hometown Legend* (2001). Essentially, a comparison can be made between secular representations of Christian teenagers and Christian representations of secular teenagers and vice versa in order to assess the impact that religious attitudes have on the filmic construction and depiction of teenage sexuality. These films illustrate the diversity with which Christian values are interpreted; from the satirical but ultimately benign (*Saved!*), and the critical but unacknowledged (*Everybody's Doing It*), to the normative and assumed (*Hometown Legend*) or the awkwardly preached (*Second Glance*). Through examination of each film's treatment of issues such as sex and virginity and gender and sexuality in the high school environment, this article considers how each film aims to construct, represent and convince us of the way Christian teens (and in comparison non-Christian teens) understand and behave in their world.

In secular film religious faith has become the last taboo after sex has achieved a normalised and often celebrated status amongst mainstream audiences.<sup>1</sup> Neatly enough, the opposite is true for the Christian film industry.<sup>2</sup> Faith is normalised or celebrated while sex is subject to repression and punishment. Of course the sex referred to here is that which occurs outside marriage, since in recent times there has been a move to embrace sexuality as it stands within the spiritually secure bonds of marriage.<sup>3</sup> Extra-marital sex, especially for young people, proves to be a primary threat to spiritual health and so is a matter of much concern not only for religious leaders and parents, but for youth themselves.<sup>4</sup> Popular cinema acts as an index of society's anxieties and concerns.<sup>5</sup> This equally applies to Christian cinema, which in part was developed in response to concerns raised largely by secular culture. Christians have created a system of "parallel institutions", including a sophisticated media industry that ensures the maintenance of Christian culture in a predominantly secular society, as well as providing effective means of communication and evangelism and, perhaps most notably for

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret R. Miles: *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1996, 109.

<sup>2</sup> Christian is here used for the most part to denote Protestant and evangelical forms of Christianity. While there are examples of films from other denominations, American evangelical Protestants are more commonly associated with what could be termed an 'industry'. See Heather Hendershot: *Shaking The World For Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> See for example titles such as Clifford and Joyce Penner: *52 Ways to Have Fun, Fantastic Sex: A Guidebook For Married Couples*, Tennessee, Thomas Nelson, 1994; Christopher and Rachel McCluskey: *When Two Become One*, Grand Rapids, Revell, 2004; Bill and Pam Farrell: *Red Hot Monogamy*, Eugene, Harvest House, 2006. It is interesting to note that a high number of these books are written by married couples together, perhaps as a reflection of evangelical belief in the authority of personal testimony.

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Gramckow: 'Parenting For Purity,' *CitizenLink*, July 10, 2003, formerly available at <http://www.family.org/cforum/fosi/abstinence/parents/a0026826.cfm>, now available at Internet Archive <http://web.archive.org/web/20051005222951/http://www.family.org/cforum/fosi/abstinence/parents/a0026826.cfm>; or 'Dear Susie' in *Brio*, <http://www.briomag.com>; and 'Hey Mike' in *Breakaway*, <http://www.breakawaymag.com>, last accessed 31/3/09.

<sup>5</sup> Miles, *op. cit.*, x.

our purposes here, as proof that evangelicals are no longer backward and separatist.<sup>6</sup> This last point is crucial in terms of Christian youth media, because it assures evangelical teenagers that their religion does not marginalise them from the cultural mainstream.<sup>7</sup> This means that the production of Christian films allows Christian teens to do what other teens do, they can hang out with their friends and go to the movies without worrying that the film they are watching is a bad influence or is irrelevant to their own lives. It also alleviates the concerns of Christian parents; by permitting their children access to Christian media that endorses their own values, parents can feel safe that their teenagers will be less likely to resent or resist parental restrictions because they allow an alternative culture that evangelical teens can claim as their own.<sup>8</sup> The films made under these proscriptions tend to follow similar conventions to mainstream teen films, so as to retain relevance. They often focus on a young persons' struggle with growing up, identity and negotiating pressures from peers and society.

Secular anxieties also exist in relation to the religious. Increasingly nervous about the closing gap between church and state, secularists feel threatened in similar ways to conservative Christians: they fear that their value system will be influenced, or even corrupted, by attitudes and judgments that are alien to their own. Anxiety over the rise of the 'religious right' is a common concern throughout secular media.<sup>9</sup> As a result, secular films rarely seek a sympathetic portrayal of religious individuals; when they do exist it is often as stereotypical assumptions, with a tendency to see religious as synonymous with fundamentalist, and hence as dangerous and deluded.<sup>10</sup> For example consider films such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore, 2004) and *If These Walls Could Talk* (Savoca and Cher, 1996) in which extremists are a threat to body and nation. Yet despite the generally negative depiction of the faithful, mainstream film is still obsessed with 'values'.<sup>11</sup>

*Saved!* distinctly illustrates this obsession in its disgust for extremism which is ultimately made benign by its collapse into a generic message of tolerance. *Saved!* follows the story of Mary, a Christian teen blessed with a good Christian school, good Christian friends and a good Christian boyfriend. However, after her boyfriend Dean admits he is gay, Mary, in a moment of concussion, mistakes the pool cleaner for Jesus, and believes He has instructed her to give her virginity to Dean to save him from homosexuality. But her plan fails, Mary falls pregnant and Dean is sent away to Mercy House for 'degayification'. Mary thus loses her faith and turns away from Jesus, despite unceasing attempts to recover her from her friend Hilary Faye, who is "a kind of mean girl for Jesus".<sup>12</sup> Hilary Faye represents all the excesses that satire requires for its comedic appeal. Leader of the Christian Jewels, 'Hay-Fay' is overzealous in her efforts to impress everyone with her love for Jesus and to make others obliged to feel the same. She focuses her proselytizing on all the outcasts of American Eagle High, notably the "only Jewish" Cassandra who smokes, drinks, cuts class and constantly abuses Hilary Faye's gullibility. Cassandra ends up falling for Hilary Faye's apostate brother Roland, who until Cassandra, had spent his life being pushed around (literally and figuratively) in a wheelchair by Hilary Faye. Mary turns to these social outcasts for support, forming a formulaic band of misfits who come together to expose the hypocrisy and prejudice of Hilary Faye, and in effect conservative evangelical Christianity in general. Hilary Faye's downfall is excruciatingly highlighted by a showdown at the prom, ending in the poetic justice

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<sup>6</sup> Eithne Johnson: 'The Emergence of Christian Video and the Cultivation of Videovangelism,' in Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage (eds.), *Media, Culture and the Religious Right*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 191.

<sup>7</sup> Heather Hendershot: 'Shake, Rattle and Roll: Production and Consumption of Fundamentalist Youth Culture,' *Afterimage* 22(7-8), Feb-March 1995, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Hendershot: 'Shake Rattle and Roll,' 19; Johnathon Cordero: 'The Production of Christian Fiction,' *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 6, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> See for example Jeremy Leaming: 'James Dobson: The Religious Right's 800 Pound Gorilla,' *Americans United For Separation of Church and State*, February 2005, <http://www.au.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=7195&abbr=cs>, last accessed 31/3/09; Cathy Young: 'The 'Values' Panic: The Right has no Monopoly on Morals – or on Moral Bullying,' *Reason* 36(9), 2005, 18; Frederick Clarkson: 'The Rise of Christian Nationalism in the U.S.: What do we do now?,' *Free Inquiry* 16(4), 1996, 30-33.

<sup>10</sup> Miles, *op. cit.*, 94.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> A.O. Scott: 'Film Review: In a Teenage Movie a Religious High School is High School Just the Same,' *The New York Times*, May 28 2004.

of her driving her car into an oversized cut out of Christ. Mary predictably goes into labour at the prom, but not before she has time to espouse a liberal message of tolerance, “why would God make us all so different, if He wanted us to be the same?”

The impotent ending of *Saved!* does not necessarily make its critique of conservatism any less potent. Instead it succeeds in illustrating the difference between conservatism and liberal, moderate belief; differences which are rarely shown on screen.<sup>13</sup> By juxtaposing Mary’s liberalism with Hilary Faye’s extremism, the effect is that each position is exaggerated through contrast, and we are left despising the extremist values and embracing the moderate because we are shown it is possible to have an alternative, reasonable version of Christian morality. In this version Jesus still loves sexual deviants; it is the institutional conservatives such as Hilary Faye that deserve punishment. *Saved!* uses teenage sexuality to reinforce liberal suspicion of conservatism and its stereotypical link to extremism (“There’s only one reason Christian girls come down to the Planned Parenthood”, “She’s planting a pipe bomb?”). *Saved!* denies Hilary Faye the formulaic reward of love and self-actualisation, since her realization is superficial at best; “this is not how I wanted to remember my prom. This is not how I wanted to remember my life...Do you think Jesus still loves me?” She does not end up with a boyfriend, nor is she reformed enough to be admitted into the new family that emerges around Mary’s baby. She is the only character that avoids all forms of sexuality despite her position as most popular girl in the school, aggressively rejecting it by associating the loss of her virginity with rape, shown through a shot of Hilary Faye firing a gun into the groin of a gun range target announcing “I’m saving myself for marriage and I’ll use force if I have to”. Hilary Faye’s rejection of sexuality does not make her a good Christian, and despite Dannelly’s construction of her as a strong female character, her lack of engagement in sexuality ultimately isolates her from the other characters who have reconciled themselves to their ‘sins’ and have actually gained something positive from their sexuality. Hilary Faye’s sexuality is instead displaced onto a love for Jesus, in the way that Randall Balmer had observed in his work on American evangelicals where “Jesus is the heartthrob of fawning adolescents”.<sup>14</sup>

If Hilary Faye is the victim of liberal fears, then *Second Glimpse* suffers from an opposing Christian apprehension toward the secular. Apprehension is perhaps too weak a term when one considers how this film borders on the hysterical in its depiction of the consequences of giving in to the temptations (in other words threat) of the secular world. Dan Burgess feels his commitment to Christ is preventing him from enjoying a normal, fun, teenage life. He cannot go to parties and Tamra, the girl of his dreams, rejects him because she is not “in the market for nice guys”. The ‘cool’ guys make fun of his faith, and his “stand for Jesus” does not seem to be influencing anyone. One night, out of frustration, Dan wishes he had never become a believer. Dan is granted his wish and, helped by the painfully obvious explanations of an angel called Muriel, he comes to understand that he now lives the life of an unbeliever. This means that he is popular, is going out with Tamra and gets to go to Randy’s party that night. He also wakes up with a hangover, his parents are divorced, his sister unborn, he gambles, cuts class, cheats on tests, has driven a teacher insane and has allowed his friend to get beaten up. This all builds up toward the revelation at the party that another friend has committed suicide and that he has been dating two girls at once, one of whom claims to be pregnant. This proves too much for Dan who exclaims “I need to pray!” and runs out of the party to the church in hysterics. When he collapses hopeless outside its doors, he is visited again by the angel Muriel who again unnecessarily explains away the non-linear narrative structure: “Everything is now back to the way it was...the Heavenly Father answered your prayer and gave you one day to see what your life would be like without Him”. Predictably Muriel spends ten minutes imparting his sermon, and then disappears, leaving Dan to wake up the next morning ecstatic to be a believer again. We then see all the scenes of his daily life that were set up in the beginning of the film repeated but with extra religious zeal: “You seem all pumped up – are things going better with Tamra?”, “No, things are going better with Jesus”.

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<sup>13</sup> Miles, *op. cit.*, 94.

<sup>14</sup> Randall Balmer: *Mine Eyes Have Seen The Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, 303.

*Second Glance* is worthy of analysis not because it is a quality film (by many standards it is of questionable entertainment value) but because it illustrates a response to teen life from the evangelical perspective. This is by no means conclusive, or representative of the Christian position in general, (for example, *Hometown Legend* and *Love Note* are evangelical films that present a subtle, normative position),<sup>15</sup> and while many a young Christian may be insulted by the patronising nature of *Second Glance*, it demonstrates how the (adult) filmmakers think teenagers behave, and more importantly how they wish them to behave; although neither intention is plausible in *Second Glance*. Despite evangelical media's open disclosure of its evangelical aims, Christian media rarely reaches those outside the Christian circuit.<sup>16</sup> Thus Christian media often has what Jonathon Cordero has called a "pastoral rather than evangelistic" role in Christian entertainment.<sup>17</sup> The conservatism of the culture that produces films like *Second Glance* makes depictions of adolescence problematic for filmmakers who wish to simultaneously expose the evils of the secular world and still hide such evils from impressionable young people. This results in scenes like that in which Tamra and Dan discuss getting to the party, shot in a typical side view of the two standing at their lockers. When Tamra goes to kiss Dan, they are strategically covered by the next locker door being opened. However, this only serves to highlight the kiss and emphasise its illicit associations, since it is impossible not to desire to know or think about what is being censored or prohibited.<sup>18</sup> The same logic applies in the way that Christiano deals with his characters' promiscuity. The discovery that he is dating two women, one of whom he has also supposedly gotten pregnant is a terrifying thought for Dan and for those in the audience that sympathise and identify with him. Christiano neutralises any real threat of promiscuity by showing Melanie to be a liar, and so assuaging any fear that Dan may have actually lost his virginity. *Second Glance* depicts secular teenagers inducing moral panic, and whilst Dan is allowed to dabble in the dangerous world of non-believers he is never allowed to engage to a full extent, in other words to lose his virginity. This is what Heather Hendershot refers to as the evangelical idea of being in the world but not of it.<sup>19</sup>

*Hometown Legend* constructs a world in which conservative norms, specifically of gender and sexuality, are reinforced through their representation in the everyday. This film lacks the hysteria and blatancy of *Second Glance* and presents us with characters and scenarios that are plausible in contemporary southern America. It gives the audience greater responsibility in understanding the evangelical message that is the basis of Christian film in general by presenting it through metaphor and character rather than literal moral instruction. Belief in God is a given, as is belief in football, and throughout the film it is difficult to tell which is given the highest priority in Athens, Alabama. *Hometown Legend* is much like any other football film. It is the story of an outsider learning that the team is more important than the individualism he cherished on his arrival in the small Alabama town of Athens. Twelve years ago the Athens High School Crusaders had been the envy of Alabama. Then an incident on the field left Coach Schuler's son dead and the team on a permanent losing streak. Coach Schuler retired the next day and ever since the small town has been slowly dying, in economy and spirit. The only thing left to bring people to Athens is a university scholarship established in memory of the death of the Coach's son and given to the player with the most promise. The scholarship has bred a destructive individualism that "grows like a weed on these fields; the curse that we call the Jack F. Schuler scholarship." All seems lost when the school is threatened with closure, until the return of Coach Schuler for one last season brings with it a nostalgic (messianic?) hope and a lot of sweat and tears. Coach Schuler finds echoes of his dead son in the gifted but arrogant Elvis Jackson who comes to town with his sights set on winning the scholarship. Coach Schuler breeds out the individualism in Elvis and in the team through a series of grueling training sessions and games. Alongside the football, the film follows the blossoming relationship between Elvis and Rachel Sawyer. Rachel is Elvis's designated Fellowship of Christian Athletes Prayer Warrior so her job is to mind his helmet and pray for him. She is also the only one who seems to care that the school will be closed, and her zealous passion for petitions is matched only by her deep love of God, something

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<sup>15</sup> Steve Grill: *Love Note*, 1987.

<sup>16</sup> Steven Bruce: *Pray TV: Televangelism in America*, London and New York, Routledge, 1990, 122.

<sup>17</sup> Cordero, *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Hendershot, *Shaking The World For Jesus*, 99.

<sup>19</sup> Hendershot, *Shaking The World For Jesus*, 10.

that the outsider Elvis cannot understand but becomes reconciled with at the end of the film, even after she announces her plan to use the scholarship money to save the school.

*Hometown Legend* maintains a rigid gender separation that ensures the characters, and by extension the viewers, are given only two options: play football or support those who play football, in other words be a 'man' or a 'woman'. In contrast to *Saved!* where the women fire guns and drive aggressively while the males are allowed to be soft spoken or disabled, *Hometown Legend* gives us categorical gender roles. Masculinity and femininity are explicitly tied to the sociology of football, specifically American football. Manliness is constructed through physical engagement with the game while womanliness is defined by exclusion from the game. Coach Schuler tells the audience of the first training session "I want anyone who is not wearing a jockstrap to get off my field", so despite a sophisticated understanding of the game Rachel and her friend Josie are unable to be present at this training session because they cannot wear a jockstrap, they cannot engage physically in the game and thus they are relegated to the roles of Prayer Warrior or petition writer. Within the film, the responsibilities that are allotted to female characters tend to be spiritual or religious; the exclusively female Prayer Warriors are open in their faith as if they must shoulder the town's spiritual responsibility while the men are totally absorbed in football season. This collective feminine duty is emphasised in the scene in which we are introduced to a meeting of the Prayer Warriors. Numbers are drawn out of a football helmet to allocate each member of the football team to a girl who will mind their helmet and pray for them throughout the season. The process is random and Rachel does not know the identity of the player she draws, however her faith in the traditions of Athens overrides any individual scruples. It has been argued that religiosity has been feminised throughout America's Protestant past, and the women of *Hometown Legend* seem to encourage this kind of argument by assuming the role of the practicing faithful.<sup>20</sup>

Out of this perceived feminisation of Christianity grew the response that came to be known as 'muscular Christianity'.<sup>21</sup> The construction of men and masculinity in *Hometown Legend* reflects this specific kind of Christianity, in which Jesus can be served by the body, most specifically the male athletic body, through the struggle for physical perfection and personal discipline. Muscular Christianity sees Christians in terms of an army or team, with Jesus as the boss or coach.<sup>22</sup> Such metaphors allowed a closer relationship between sport and religion to develop, a relationship that inherently makes acceptable the spirit of competition and winning. The idea of competition could be transformed from a social process of self promotion through which the individual or team is advanced at the expense of others, into an opportunity to prove oneself as disciplined and cooperative.<sup>23</sup> Most importantly muscular Christianity sees athletes as morally upright because they follow a strict code of behaviour that transcends the literal rules of the field into the realm of character, where lessons of fair play, self sacrifice and courage can be transferred to the world beyond.<sup>24</sup> It is not uncommon for Christian athletes to envision their struggles as akin to the struggles of Christ, and model their own response to physical burden on that of Jesus at Calvary, remembering that "Christ was not a quitter".<sup>25</sup> Coach Schuler sees little blasphemy in telling his team "you are a pack of pathetic, curse infested me-myself-and-I's and you are gonna have the worst season in the history of football unless Jesus Christ himself comes down and suits up". This is the ultimate in detrialisation of sport because to imply that Christ would actually 'suit up' for anything less than the most

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<sup>20</sup> See for example Sharon Mazer: 'The Power Team: Muscular Christianity and the Spectacle of Conversion,' *The Drama Review* 38(4), 1994, 169; Leslie J. Francis and Carolyn Wilcox: 'Religiosity and Femininity: Do Women Really Hold A More Positive Attitude Toward Christianity?,' *Journal For the Scientific Study of Religion* 37(3), 1998, 462-469; Tamara L. Anderson and M Elizabeth Lewis Hall: 'Introduction to the Special Issue on Gender and Christianity,' *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 33(3), 2005, 164.

<sup>21</sup> Tony Ladd and James A. Mathisen: *Muscular Christianity: Evangelical Protestants and the Development of American Sport*, Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Carol Flake: 'The Spirit of Winning: Sports and the Total Man,' in Shirl J. Hoffman (ed.), *Sport and Religion*, Champaign, Human Kinetics Books, 1992, 162.

<sup>23</sup> Shirl J. Hoffman: 'Evangelicalism and the Revitalisation of Religious Ritual in Sport,' in Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 114.

<sup>24</sup> Ladd and Mathisen, *op. cit.*, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Hoffman, 'Evangelicalism,' 120.

noble of causes would be a profanity. By engaging Jesus in mundane activity he becomes easier to emulate, and by highlighting the 'manly' traits of a muscular Jesus the Christian athlete can surrender emotionally without losing his manhood because his faith encourages and reinforces conservative gendered behavioural norms.<sup>26</sup>

Returning to the issue of sexuality amongst teens we can see that such specific gendered instructions on how to be a man or woman like those imparted in *Hometown Legend* are clearly directed by an all pervading heteronormativity. In *Saved!* and *Everybody's Doing It* a variety of sexualities form the basis for a message of tolerance. In *Hometown Legend* the message is the opposite; Elvis's character development involves his learning to become part of the team and part of the town. This means accepting their model of masculinity. Boys learn to establish their masculinity in opposition to femininity, and so the character of Rachel allows Elvis to test his manliness against her feminine religiosity and passivity and ultimately demonstrate his success in the formation of their heterosexual yet chaste relationship.<sup>27</sup> *Saved!* and *Hometown Legend* illustrate the difference between secular and evangelical notions of sexual activity and its relationship to manhood. In *Saved!* Mary tries to restore Dean's heterosexuality through sexual intercourse, and although this fails, the theme of acceptance that runs through the film allows Dean to keep his masculinity through other means, such as playing sport and being a father. In *Hometown Legend* Elvis has no need to prove his heterosexuality because there is no sexual 'deviance' within the film, his football exploits have proved him to be a man and therefore he is automatically heterosexual. The difference is in the physical response to that heterosexuality. Rachel and Elvis never engage in more than a single kiss at the end of the film. Unlike Dean, not having sex with a woman makes him more of a man, within the evangelical ideal. However, like Dean, he forms his masculinity through athletics. Sporting activity is a way for virgin boys to still be 'real men', and to channel sexual energy into other forms of activity.<sup>28</sup>

*Everybody's Doing It* provides clear examples of the way in which Christian morals and attitudes have become assimilated or normalised into American teen culture and explores the complex theme of sexual morality. *Everybody's Doing It* was produced by MTV and illustrates a contemporary secular criticism of the extent that Christian faith and morality is visible and influential in American teen life. *Everybody's Doing It*, like *Saved!*, uses exaggeration and caricature to critique conservative values and claims to be "a humorous look at a serious subject". That serious subject is abstinence education. The film begins with supposed facts, written thematically on notebook paper with the important sections ("federal government", "half a billion dollars", "contraception is prohibited", "drawn from real life", "based on fact") highlighted like a textbook. We are first introduced to Angela and Travis through a montage of their happy times together, ending on their decision to wait until senior year to lose their virginity. Forward in time to senior year, and their high school has implemented a new 'health program' that promotes abstinence-only education. After introducing virginity pledge cards that students are encouraged to sign, the entire student body, led by the clichéd and overzealous 'suck-up' Caroline, embarks on a crazed campaign to make Angela sign. Angela has refused on ideological grounds; she feels that her sex life is private and should not need public declaration, especially because the only rationale for signing the pledge is that "everybody's doing it", an empty reason that begins to grate against the audiences' understanding of peer pressure. However, everyone else, including her boyfriend Travis, believes she will not sign because she has cheated on Travis and has had sexual intercourse. The film escalates into a full blown witch hunt when it becomes clear that students are not keeping their pledge. After an outbreak of sexually transmitted infection, a general assembly is held where parents get into an argument that neatly falls on either side of the abstinence-only debate which can only be solved by Angela standing up in front of the assembly and summarising the film's anti-abstinence stance. Much like *Saved!*, we get an ending that is celebrative of tolerance with the principal announcing that there will be two classes, one that teaches contraception and the other teaching abstinence.

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<sup>26</sup> Flake, *op. cit.*, 162.

<sup>27</sup> Wayne Martino: 'Cool Boys, Party Animals, Squids and Poofers: Interrogating the Dynamics and Politics of Adolescent Masculinities in School,' *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 20(2), 1999, 244.

<sup>28</sup> Hendershot, *Shaking The World For Jesus*, 105-6.

## Can True Love Wait?

*Everybody's Doing It* bills itself as a genuine critique of abstinence education, yet the film succeeds only at a superficial level. Despite assertions of objectivity, this film becomes a depiction of mass hysteria, from both on screen characters and from the filmmakers. Much like *Second Glance*, the filmmakers are responding to the threat of an alien value system invading their own, in this case the revered American belief in the separation of church and state.<sup>29</sup> The most notable thing about this film is that this threat is never acknowledged, these abstinence ideas are never sourced to Christianity (or religion generally) and are thus never fully critiqued. The blame is placed squarely on the shoulders of the American government; the Principal constantly refers to the federal funding: "fortunately the federal government has set forth a great new program to help you in your decision making process, teaching the social, psychological and health gains of abstaining from sexual activity". Yet the film's treatment of the health concerns associated with sexual activity is simply a vehicle for loaded moral values. There are striking similarities between the abstinence position presented in the film, and the sexual purity values pushed by Christian groups supportive of these programs.<sup>30</sup> The best example is the inclusion of a scene from the "health class". To celebrate the first ever health class (a concern in itself) Mr Green (alarmingly trained only as a mathematics teacher) brings a pizza for the class to share. It is of course demolished in a symbolic frenzy of teenage hunger, with Mr Green telling them to "control themselves". A shot of the destroyed pizza is accompanied by Mr Green's lesson to the class:

Now, let's imagine it's your wedding day. And you're that pizza. And that's what it's all about (indicates a "no sex" sign on the board): saving your hearts and bodies fresh and whole for that one special person – your husband or wife.

Consider this message in relation to that espoused by Muriel to Dan in *Second Glance*:

You desired some physical pleasure from her...the Lord sees right through you. Let me ask you, the girl you want to marry, how many men would you like her to be intimate with before you marry? Wouldn't it be great to spend your life with someone who was untouched by anyone else? There's nothing wrong with building relationships, just save all the physical intimacy for your wife.

Also compare Mr Green's message to an opinion indicative of many pro-abstinence Christian websites:

If you're a virgin, you are so fortunate. I pray that you'll stay pure for marriage and that God will richly bless your marriage bed. And as much as you want sex now, remember that God has the right kind of woman in mind for you...Hold strong and give your future wife the gift of your virginity.<sup>31</sup>

The only difference between these comments is that the religious sources explicitly refer to God as their authority. Otherwise the sentiment is the same: teens should preserve their virginity, and by extension their worth, until marriage. *Everybody's Doing It* presents a more accurate picture of how abstinence programs work in schools than that shown in *Saved!* in which genital-less Ken and Barbie doll bodies are used as classroom resources to accompany Pastor Skip's 'comprehensive' lesson that "good Christians don't get jiggy with it until they're married". Yet the film still fails to expose the deeper liberal fear of the religious motivations driving these programs by acknowledging the governmental role but not the

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<sup>29</sup> John Whitte Jr.: 'Facts and Fictions about the History of Separation of Church and State,' *Journal of Church and State* 48(1), 2006, 15; Barry W. Lynn: 'Honk if you support the Separation of Church and State,' *Church and State* 58(8), 2005, 23.

<sup>30</sup> These groups are far too numerous to mention, but some examples include Sex Respect, <http://www.sexrespect.com/>; Teen Aid, <http://www.teen-aid.org/>; Wonderful Days, <http://www.days.org/>, all last accessed 31/3/09.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Ross, "Wait Training", *Breakaway*, February 2006, previously available at <http://www.breakawaymag.com/Girls/A000000197.cfm>, now available at Internet Archive <http://web.archive.org/web/20060506175216/http://www.breakawaymag.com/Girls/A000000197.cfm> last accessed 31/3/09.

religious involvement behind the push to teach abstinence-only programs in schools. As these above examples show, the film borrows heavily from Christian discourse, the film's language is that of the religious right, including obvious references to virginity pledges and teen programs such as Caroline's "Not Now" Chastity Party where she proclaims "pet your dog, not your date" echoing the Christian movement True Love Waits.<sup>32</sup> The result is that the audience is left questioning why the federal government has abruptly introduced these measures into a school that is shown as neither Christian or in crisis.

It seems that teenagers in film can be used to explore the presence of Christian values in society, and in particular their sexuality provides narrative and thematic material that is loaded with potential controversy. It must be acknowledged that this article does not have the scope to deal with the wider cultural issues surrounding teenage sexuality, in particular the politics of gender and homosexuality, both of which play an imperative role in the construction of adolescent identity in these films, as well as greater discourse on the interaction of the religious and the secular in political and social systems. Sex has, however, provided an ample source of analysis, since in the four films the audience is exposed to differing responses to teenage sexuality. All have been described as somewhat hysterical, but this is mainly to draw attention to the use of extreme exaggeration which is common to representations of issues that are opposed or confronting, different and therefore incorrect and threatening, to one's own beliefs. These films allow an understanding of values that is sociological rather than theological, and this article reads these responses as how rather than what teenagers believe. *Saved!*, *Everybody's Doing It*, *Second Glance* and *Hometown Legend* all indicate that sexuality is a source of questions, struggle and identity to teens regardless of which theoretical (or theological) framework they may choose to view themselves and their world.

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<sup>32</sup> See Lifeway: 'True Love Waits,' <http://www.lifeway.com/tlw>, last accessed 31/3/09.