



for virtue and so potentially even for salvation. At the same time its vulnerability reflected that of the human person in their dependence on God, and keeping this in view required establishing limits to ascetic practice, which, when violated, were liable to lead to madness. The sources W. considers include John Chrysostom's warnings against drunkenness and luxury and Augustine's use of the rhetoric of insanity in his campaign against the rigorist and heretical Donatists.

Chapter 7, 'Humanising the Brain in Early Christianity', concludes the book with an especially thought-provoking discussion, which takes as its starting point the fact that, while Christian authors routinely compare various other parts of the human body to their animal counterparts to argue that human anatomy is uniquely fitted to support rational governance, they never compare human brains with animal brains. Describing this absence as 'challenging to explain' (p. 173), W. proceeds to explore how Christian authors invested in the brain as a conceptual tool in their arguments for human exceptionalism and hegemony and thus paved the way for cerebral subjectivity understood as a post-Enlightenment political ideology whose effects are still very much with us today.

A clarification regarding Evagrius: W. describes vainglory as 'a passion linked to hallucinatory perceptions of God and of oneself' (p. 157), but for Evagrius episodes involving hallucinations of God are only one of the many forms that vainglory can take (cf. e.g. *Praktikos* 30–2), and the perceptions of oneself it involves are fantasy images rather than hallucinations. It can also be noted that, unlike Augustine and despite being no stranger to metaphor and allegory, Evagrius took scriptural references to the heart literally by associating the *nous*, the locus of personhood and agency, with the heart (cf. *Kephalaia Gnostika* 6.84) and only the derivative faculty of *dianoia* with the brain.

This is a valuable study, carefully and comprehensively researched, beautifully written and well produced, of importance to many fields including the history of science, psychology, western culture and Christianity. It deserves a wide readership.

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## INTERPRETATIONS OF VIRGINITY

LILLIS (J.K.) *Virgin Territory. Configuring Female Virginity in Early Christianity.* (Christianity in Late Antiquity 13.) Pp. xvi + 273. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023. Cased, £80, US\$95. ISBN: 978-0-520-38901-4.

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Virginity might at first glance seem to be a straightforward matter: something one either has or does not have, much as one either is or is not pregnant. But as L. shows in this carefully researched study, the reality is far more complex. Female virginity turns out to be an elusive entity whose resistance to a clear definition, whether verbal or anatomical, makes the moral and social significance with which it is still all too often invested singularly problematic.

The introduction begins by drawing attention to the semantic vagaries attaching to the notion of virginity both in today's world and in antiquity. 'Few concepts', L. notes, 'are spoken of with as little precision and as much confidence' as that of virginity (p. 1). Her first exhibit is the document *Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago*, a document published by the Vatican in 2018 to update the guidelines for the Roman Catholic practice of consecrated virginity. A key passage states that 'physical integrity' is not a necessary prerequisite for such consecration, an assertion that elicited fury from the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins who responded by issuing a statement that stressed the importance of 'physical virginity'. As L. notes, both the Vatican document and the USACV response, along with much of the news coverage that followed, treat 'virginity' and 'physical virginity' or 'physical integrity' as terms requiring no definition. This confidence in their perspicuity is echoed in the fact that, while scholars have fruitfully studied the significance that ancient authors assign to virginity, they have seldom questioned what those authors mean by it. When, as in the present study, this question is attended to, virginity emerges as 'not a singular concept so much as a plurality of concepts' (p. 3).

The main text is divided into three parts. Part 1, 'Virginity with and without Virginal Anatomy', begins by considering with reference to Greek, Roman and Jewish writings how virginity was tested for, demonstrated and perceived in antiquity. One of the many things we learn is that, while today it is commonly believed that a membrane called the hymen covers or partially covers the opening of the vagina and is ruptured during initial penetration, the hymen is absent from classical Greek discussions of female reproductive anatomy, the first reference to it being in the second-century CE physician Soranus of Ephesus, who mentions it only to argue against its existence. Only in the seventh century does the hymen first appear in medical literature. The emergence of what L. calls the 'perceptibility turn', the idea of virginity as an anatomical state whose presence and absence can reliably be perceived through physical examination, was common to pagans, Jews and Christians, with its impetus among the latter being owed in part to reflections on the virginity of Mary. The *Protovangelium of James* is an early example of this new trend, describing how a midwife examines Mary after she has given birth and declares her to be still a virgin, and we see how Clement of Alexandria takes up this episode. We notice too how Tertullian and Origen define virginity in different ways and how Jerome deploys Mary's virginity in his polemics against Jovinian's view that marriage and celibacy are equally meritorious Christian paths. Starting in the fourth century and continuing into the fifth and beyond, the belief that virginity has perceptible anatomical features gained traction across the late antique Christian world as theologians sought further to define and clarify the nature of female virginity in order to exalt Mary, defend both Christ's divinity and his humanity, circumscribe the conduct of female virgins and inform scriptural exegesis.

Part 2, 'Christian Conceptualizations of Virginity in the Fourth Century', explores, through the writings of Basil of Ancyra, Gregory of Nyssa, Ephrem of Nisibis and Ambrose of Milan, how virginity came to be constructed as a state of both body and soul as well as the imagery with which it was symbolised. Reminding us that, for all the perceptibility turn's conceptual and practical difficulties, it affirmed the essential interconnectedness of soul and body, L. rightly notes that the body-soul relation as conceived by patristic writers 'is not a Cartesian dualism with fully distinct mind and body, but a Neoplatonic duality in which soul and body have an intimate and immediate impact on one another' (p. 105).

Part 3, 'The Cost of Anatomised Virginity for Late Ancient Christians', begins by considering the usefulness and consequences of the idea of perceptible virginity. While

the belief that female virginity is a clearly definable and measurable anatomical state brought certain theological gains to those who promoted it and practical advantages to virgins who stood to gain from purportedly being able to prove their status, it threatened other women and girls by justifying and intensifying existing pressures upon them and also posed the vexed questions of whether the true essence of virginity is physical or moral and how to respond to those cases, such as rape, where the physical and the mental do not align. Taking up this theme, the final chapter considers the problem of double integrity in Augustine of Hippo. Augustine, L. argues, locates chastity in the soul alone but virginity in both soul and body of a kind such that ‘a raped virgin’s damaged body can remain pure, chaste, and holy’, but lose its virginity (p. 212). Whatever merits this view might have, it is also, as L. explains, gravely problematic in disregarding the bodily trauma of rape, threatening the social and ecclesial status of its survivors and creating a ‘rift between virginity and the virtue of chastity it was meant to embody’ (p. 216).

The conclusion, ‘Variety Persists’, summarises the study’s findings and highlights the variety of ways in which virginity was configured in Christian late antiquity and their implications. Noting that the ‘overarching picture that emerges from this study is one of ongoing synchronic variety coupled with significant diachronic change’ (p. 220), L. cautions against seeking predictability in the ways in which thought and practice relating to virginity continued to develop through the medieval period and into the modern scientific era and reminds us that ‘virginity discourses of the twenty-first century remain diverse’ (p. 222). Two recent developments that came to my notice while writing this review underline this conclusion and highlight the pertinence of this study. The first is the publication in British Vogue of an article entitled ‘It’s Time To Retire The Concept Of “Losing Your Virginity”’ (Faye Keegan, 28 July 2023, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/virginity-myths>). The second is the current description of consecrated virginity on the website of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark, according to which ‘Consecrated virgins today are women who have never married or are no longer married due to widowhood, and are consecrated to perpetual virginity’ (<https://www.rcsouthwark.co.uk/vocations/is-god-calling-me/consecrated-life/>, accessed 9 August 2023). Since no reference is made to virginity being somehow restored after marriage, the clear implication is that true virginity resides in the soul rather than in a body that has never experienced sexual activity, however such activity be defined. While this description of consecrated virginity builds upon *Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago*, it goes beyond it in directly affirming the compatibility of consecrated virginity with previous chaste sexual activity, and in doing so it exemplifies the vigour with which the concept of virginity continues to evolve.

This book is consummately well conceived, researched, written and produced. The footnotes are sufficient without being excessive and the bibliography extensive. Its greatest virtue is the thoroughness with which it debunks the pretensions to clarity that attach to the concept of virginity. For this above all it deserves a wide readership.

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