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Cont. Soc. Prob.
The Beauty Myth Project
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The beauty myth has become a religion. It has a belief system in and of itself. Within this system there are cults and sects, just like many other religions. Let's first lay out this "religion" and then explore it by category.

The religion (belief system): The beauty myth is the idea that your body (your beauty) is not your own. It belongs to God. It is a divine thing that you must dedicate yourself to preserving it. This could be compared to the soul or spirit in other religions. Everything that is ugly about your beauty is yours and yours alone. The ugliness is proof of your "sin" and it is up to you to rid yourself of these evils.

The gospel: The guides to help get you through and maintain the purification of your beauty are magazines. Within the pages of beauty and fashion magazines you will find the key to salvation, with step by step guidelines to get you to where you need to be.

The holy elements: Beauty products like facial creams and oils (the holy oil), bath salts, perfumes, clothes, weight loss programs and products, mirrors (to constantly remind you of your current state).

Sin: Overeating, wrinkles, style (or lack of), not meeting the status quo of the gospel.

The judge: God and all the followers of the beauty myth (society).

The social problem with the religion of the beauty myth is that it is false. Women today feel so much pressure from the media and the world to look a certain way. They feel that they are expected to meet the highest standards of beauty, but who set these standards. The history of the world and a progressive society made the beauty myth what it is. The problem with this is that it leaves women feeling powerless. It decreases self esteem, causes much unnecessary stress, sometimes hinders intellect and self control, and it can ruin lives, all for the sake of vanity. It is not seen as vanity, however. It is divinity. It is a hoax created by society over time. The entire myth is problematic. The rules of the game (age, weight, sex, food, style) are supposed to lead one to self control. Ironically, self control is lost in the myth. Once you've taken the road of the beauty myth; it controls you.

The real consequences of this "religion" are both physical and mental (emotional). Physically, the body can be put through much stress. Women may lose too much weight by becoming obsessed with how they "should" look. It is a downward spiral that can lead to health problems. The stress alone from the expectations of the beauty myth can put the body in shock. Women may be constantly thinking about the way they look or the way people are looking at them. This stress and constant awareness can lead to a change in thought processes. The mentality of a woman may change. Although she may

be thinking that she is becoming an individual, independent woman, she is really becoming a slave to the myth. This results in a loss of individuality. It becomes a competition; but it's a new me, a better me! The obsession of becoming the beauty results in a changing of one's personality. It can ultimately lead to emotional and physical disorders (bulimia, anorexia, obsessive compulsive, egoism, depression, anxiety).

The perceived consequences may not come so quickly. Along with the gradual move toward the possible physical and emotional changes already mentioned, there are other things that can be affected by the beauty myth. If one falls victim to the beauty myth, she could lose relationships with family and friends. If one becomes so consumed, she may neglect things or people that are truly important in her life. She may also lose passion for certain pleasures that she once enjoyed. Guilt overcomes many of these pleasures. Guilt always lies on the back of the mind.

On the other hand, there are consequences to not becoming a follower of this religion. Jobs, relationships, even a way of life may be at stake if a woman doesn't meet the standards of a potential employee, boyfriend, or client. The pressures of society weigh down on the shoulders of women. It's as if they have to be a part of this trend in order to survive in the world. It can leave women fearing that they have no choice but to conform. Once they make that decision, it may be hard to turn back. They may even forget where they came from. To search for individuality within the beauty myth may devour all that is left of the beautiful individual that once was. It may have not been seen merely because everyone else (men, women and even children) were caught up in the myth themselves.

This issue has been in the making for centuries so there is no quick resolution. The media are getting progressively worse in their pushing of this ideal. The beauty myth is all around us. Look around and see for yourself. We are all blindly falling into its grip. We are voluntarily walking its realm. People as a whole must come together in order to invoke change. Information must be readily available. Men, as well as women, have to turn the other cheek to the myth. If women alone do it, there will be no hope because men hold many of the keys. It is a myth created by both sexes. Now women seem to have taken control of it when, in fact, it has taken control of them.

Wolf says that the rituals of the beauty myth do not simply echo traditional religions. She says they functionally supplement them. Many aspects of traditional religions are reconstituted into this new religion. By drawing off of old techniques of thought control, the beauty myth is as affective as any past evangelical wave.

Women may see these rites as liberation, when they are truly just another form of control. Expectations are higher than ever for a woman if she wants to be held in high regard. Girls and young women can never feel it is too early to worry about "the stains of female ugliness" as Wolf puts it. Older women cannot put these things behind them either. The female ugliness is original sin. No one can escape it. These things are invisible within a female from birth and are only waiting to be revealed.

Wolf uses analogies to compare Bible scripture to passages from women's magazines. She shows us how self-scrutiny once reserved for the soul is now used daily

for self-security. Weight Watchers magazine says “Always wear your makeup, even if you’re just walking the dog. You never know whom you might meet.” She compares this to what Jesus said, “Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning.” Traditional Christian advice from the son of God has become a nerve racking chore for women everywhere. There is a primal force at work here. While men die only once, women die twice. They first die as beauties and then their bodies die.

All the elements of the religion of beauty come together with the media and advertising. There are so many choices that not only do women stress over looking good enough for society, they must also worry about which product to buy and which ones are the most beneficial. The words used in advertisements are constantly assaulting women of today. Words like aggressors, defense, attacked, exposure, damaging, etc; are leaving women in fear. Wolf argues however, that there is an unseen or invisible enemy other than those attacking our skin or hair. That enemy is institutional discrimination in the work force. Words are used as a force to manipulate and control. Women live in fear of age, weight, style, beauty. None of these fears however, are the motivating force. Guilt is the true fear. Women are left so self conscious about the way they look, that they feel guilty if they do not act on it. It is another way that the myth controls them. What is worse than feeling guilty about something that only you have control over? But you do have control. You are merely led to believe that if you don’t conform to the trend and the expectations of society, you are not in control and therefore guilty. The real control lies in that false belief and the hands of advertising

In the end there are really no benefits to the beauty myth. Although success and social acceptance may be achieved, one’s identity may be changed, diminished or lost. The old saying goes, “practice what you preach”, but shouldn’t you also preach what you practice? In the case of the religion of the beauty myth, it seems only right to be proud of and support the word or the rites of the religion. This goes for all religions. So, not only are you living the myth, you are promoting it. It’s your duty. Have you not then, lost the identity you once had? Once again we are back to the very thing women are trying be freed from, control. This is the major sacrifice and consequence of the “rites of beauty.”

I believe that the beauty myth is a social problem, but I do not believe that this is the case for every single woman. Women are stereotyped and pressured not only in the working field, but also in many public domains. There are some women however, who turn the other cheek to the myth and still succeed. Even so, the myth is there. The pressure is there. It is a battle for all women in today’s world. The social effect of the beauty myth is ongoing fear. Women may not live their lives to the fullest if they are constantly conscious of their physical state. A woman may not be able to enjoy a meal because she is wondering if it will make her fat. She may be petrified in public if she feels her makeup isn’t perfect; and there is no mirror to check. Wrinkles are scars on her soul. Women today have much more freedom than they ever have in the past. But the beauty myth has them paralyzed in the midst of their new freedoms. It is, in a way, an institution, just another medium to control. It is very well organized and it has a powerful message. Beauty is a gift from God; but to neglect it in any way is a horrible sin. Wolf sums up the chapter with, what I feel, are words of wisdom: “It profits women little if we gain the whole world only to fear ourselves”.