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Version 1.1, 20 February 2019



Christian Beauty Pageants: Beauty is in the Eye of the Creator

Podcast with **Chelsea Belanger** (4 March 2019).

Interviewed by **Kristeen Black**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/christian-beauty-pageants-beauty-is-in-the-eye-of-the-creator/>

Kristeen Black (KB): *We're all aware of the [Miss Universe](#) Pageant, [Miss USA](#) Pageant, [Miss America](#) pageant. There's various systems of beauty pageant but each are uniquely identifiable, different in some way. And my guest today is going to talk to us about [Miss Christian America](#). Please welcome Chelsea Belanger.*

Chelsea Belanger (CB): Hello.

KB: *Would you like to introduce yourself? Tell me a little bit about your research background and what brought you to this topic.*

CB: Sure. So my name is Chelsea Belinger. I'm a second year doctoral student at the University of Central Florida. I got my Bachelors and my Masters at the University of Texas at San Antonio. And my master's thesis encompassed race, religion, gender and behavioural health. It was a qualitative study examining the relationship between religiosity and sexual health among devout African American college women. And so . . .

KB: *Fascinating.*

CB: It was fascinating research, which I take a lot of pride in. It was a lot of fun but what was really interesting is the creative way in which these women used their religious beliefs to navigate through their sexual decision making. One of the main kind-of key points that emerged from this research, with respect to autonomy over our bodies, is that while these women that I interviewed were devout Christians, they expressed that they have supportive views of women deciding what is best for their

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body – especially with respect to abortion. So while they supported abortion they expressed or articulated that they themselves would never have an abortion, because of their religious beliefs.

KB: *I see. So that's the way that they negotiated that space.*

CB: Absolutely. That space in terms of their religion, their views, their practices, but also being a woman. Being an African American woman and having those rights. It was fascinating. It was just a fascinating study.

KB: *And do you see that same kind of synchronicity coming about with the beauty pageants? That there's this national sense of beauty or gender as well as individual . . . but then again, collective, on a religious basis?*

CB: Right. So what we've seen with respect to beauty pageants is that there's a lot of religion being done. Unfortunately there's scant research on Christian beauty pageants. But beauty pageants overall, now I will say there's a lot of research on the Miss America pageant. But what's interesting here is that there's a multitude of different pageant systems, such as Miss USA and Miss Christian America, where this research has encompassed . . .

KB: *And to be honest, I didn't realise there was a Miss Christian America pageant.*

CB: Me neither, before this research!

KB: *Who knew?!*

CB: Indeed. But that's what makes it so fascinating. It's that there are different pageant systems that can really accommodate to anybody's needs, so to speak. So I think that's what . . . there's a major misconception in American Society that there is just Miss America pageant. And that's not the case.

KB: *OK. So which came first for you in your research question: the theory that you were looking at of, for instance, Christian Smith and maybe even Judith Butler; or this kind-of noticing the different types of pageants going on, and the religiosity associated with that?*

CB: Well certainly this research is going to encompass a lot of what I'm doing for my dissertation. So, being a frequent viewer of beauty pageants, American beauty pageants, I was really inspired to focus on this area. Because there's such limited research on beauty pageants and not just Miss America. So I really wanted to focus on . . . Ok – what is it about beauty pageants and gender that I want to focus

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on? And religion is something that I love studying. So I really wanted to look at how religion was being used in these beauty pageants. So that was the foundation of the study. And then looking at what theoretical frameworks are most appropriate for the study. And that's where I came across the cultural identity theory. Now I will say I had a lot of help with Dr John Borkowski who helped me along this, who was also my thesis advisor.

KB: *A great shout out! So tell me little bit more about that theory and how that helps.*

CB: So I'm working on [Christian Smith's](#) cultural identity theory, where religious subcultures balance the demand of cultural distinction and social engagements. So, in other words, looking at this negotiating mainstream values and religious values (5:00). So, with respect to this work, looking at Miss Christian America, it's a beauty pageant. Women are competing in this pageant, very similar to mainstream secular pageants. But what makes it uniquely different are the structure but also the requirements for this pageant, as well. In terms of the structure, there is no swimsuit portion in the Miss Christian America, but rather a sportswear competition. So that's kind of deviating from the mainstream. Whereas the mainstream pageant like Miss USA has a swimsuit portion of the competition. And with respect to the pageant requirements, for Miss Christian America we see that contestants in this pageant must be active in ministry. They also have to have reference letters from one pastor and a media ministry leader as well. Which makes them stand out significantly from the mainstream pageant. So we see with respect to the subcultural identity theory how religion is being practised in these pageants that may exhibit mainstream characteristics.

KB: *So, for my ear, it sounds like it's evangelically focussed because women in ministry is not available in every denomination.*

CB: Yeah. Right. Right. And that's what's interesting about this particular pageant, it's that . . . the way in which I was studying this beauty pageant, it seemed as though as long as the contestants identified as being a Christian – that was also kind of this requirement to represent this particular pageant – whereas the mainstream pageant, Miss USA, there is no religious component whatsoever, where you're actively driven by your faith or not.

KB: *So, one of the things that I found interesting is that I seem to hear this core relationship between fitness – so, having to wear sports attire and then being judged physically fit in that sense, but no pictures – but then also being judged as spiritually fit, being inner beauty. You mentioned something about this inner type of driven-ness, and religiosity. So is that something that you've found, this idea of fitness in some way . . . ?*

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CB: Right. So I saw in terms of physical fitness, this particular Miss Christian America really reinforces the characteristics of a “godly woman”. And so with this idea of a sportswear, it's just really maintaining modesty and you know foregoing any kind of cleavage that you might see in the swimsuit competition. So really reinforcing this inner beauty. What’s really interesting about the Miss Christian America is their mission statement. And it says “no” to swimsuits and vain beauty; “yes” to the word of God, prayer, praise worship and inner . . . it really reinforces that evangelical component.

KB: *Ok, Great. Also, you mentioned seeing this type of religiousness, or godly woman being reflected in some way throughout the pageant. Tell me more about that.*

CB: Yes. So again, what makes this pageant so unique is kind of the requirement, if you will. So for these contestants application form, contestants for this pageant have to name their church, the numbers of years in which they've attended this church, and attend weekly Bible study – so that was like a yes or no response. Also the competition categories that vary vastly with the mainstream pageants are outreach ministry presentations, Biblical question and answer . . .

KB: *Oh, interesting!*

CB: Which is like the onstage questions that you see in the mainstream. But this, particularly, is a Biblically-based question . . . and, again, the sportswear competition. Also what's interesting is the title holder responsibilities that are encompassed. And again we see this comparative component where both pageants have responsibilities for their title holders. But what's interesting about Miss Christian America is the Evangelicalism that she must partake in as a title holder, representing Miss Christian America. And in addition to that, that encompasses missionary work, upholding the morals and standards of Miss Christian America pageant. So again, maintaining or exuding those characteristics of a godly woman (10:00).

KB: *So, do you see the part of that being a godly woman encompasses idealised gender roles and things like . . . with the Miss America pageant, you have to be never married, never given birth. Is that the same type of thing reinforced here?*

CB: Yes, so we certainly see, in this research, we see a lot of comparisons with mainstream and secular pageants and this particular pageant, Miss Christian America. We see that both pageants, Miss USA and Miss Christian America really promote women’s confidence and self-esteem and the importance of community involvement. In addition to that we see a lot of overlap between the two competitions, such as the pageant interview with the panel of judges, the opening number which is

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commonly done in the beginning of the pageant: this is when you're first introduced to the contestants on stage. There's no talent competition in either one of these pageants. Whereas, in Miss America you see that there's a talent competition. Now, going back to what you were saying in terms of never married, single, never given birth, those are two requirements of both pageants, Miss USA and Miss Christian America. The contestant has to be single, never married and the contestant also has to be natural born female. In addition to that, she cannot have given birth at any point. So those are really, those are just similar characteristics between the two. In addition to that, community involvement is very much reinforced in both these pageants. Title holders or the winners of these pageants win a crown and sash. And oftentimes you'll see on their sash the title which they're representing. So Miss USA, Miss Christian America. And again the title holder responsibilities which, as we talked about before, varies but still maintains those responsibilities.

KB: *And you just mentioned a sash, and I had kind of this question In the Miss America pageant we're used to seeing like Miss Texas and Miss South Carolina, do they identify in that type of way? Is it like Miss Lutheran? [Laughs].*

CB: That is a great question. From what I saw, no. Again, and I can only go on what I've seen of the Miss Christian America pageant. I did not see if there were women that identified. . . if they identified as Lutheran, that's what the sash would say as they competed. I didn't see that, so I'm going to assume no. I could be corrected. But again, as long as you identify as being Christian and being involved in the Christian faith.

KB: *So it's really more of an umbrella type of identification.*

CB: Exactly. That's how I interpreted it.

KB: *OK. And how is race represented in there?*

CB: That's an excellent question. So we've seen . . . historically, in an American beauty pageant, we've seen this pattern of white women typically competing, but also winning these pageants. What's unique about this particular pageant is a large presence of African American women competing in Miss Christian America, from what I've seen on their website. And so there's also kind of this difference between the two. Now certainly we've seen, over time, recently, the crowning of diverse women and really reinforcing diversity in mainstream beauty pageants. But this particular pageant, I'd say that there's a larger population of African American women competing and representing in this pageant.

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KB: *Great. OK. And then, do you think that there is some kind of reflection going on in the pageant of what's going on in mainstream society, about the rising Evangelicalism? Is that contributing? Do you have any sense of how big the pageant is? Has it been growing lately?*

CB: Right. Over all, that's a really good question that I don't think I'm prepared to answer just yet.

KB: *OK, that's good!*

CB: But my assumption is, is that you know . . . unfortunately, American society may view beauty pageants negatively. And I hope my research reinforces some sort of shift in perception of how we view beauty pageants. So I don't know in terms of the enrolment or participation of these beauty pageants over time. But certainly, hopefully there's a shift that shows that beauty queens are not just a pretty face. They're so much more than that regardless of the beauty pageant that you're competing in. There's that community involvement. But also within the pageant it's this sisterhood that's being created. These bonds of relationship. But also with respect to religion, how's religion essentially being done in these pageants (15:00)? And from my own experience, backstage is where you see a lot of these . . . of religion being practised. Whether you're competing in a secular pageant or a Christian-driven pageant, it wouldn't be uncommon to see competitors, just before getting on stage, praying with each other – regardless of your faith – but just praying that everything goes well, and praying with each other. Whereas, once you step out on stage, they're then your competition! But once you step off there's this sisterhood again. And I think that's the importance of just participating in a beauty pageant. And yes, there's the sash and the crown, but also the bond, the friendship, the confidence that can come your way. And competing in these pageants. I hope my work can really explore that.

KB: *And that's great, because I was kind of wondering about this idea of collective versus the individual. And religion is such a collective idea. And how could that be reconciled, or is that, like, just taken into account? Is there a way that that's negotiated, somehow?*

CB: Certainly, so we've seen, at least in the Miss America, it's not uncommon to see title-holders talk about their faith, even though Miss America's not a religious pageant. We've certainly seen over time how contestant representing their states may kind-of talk about their faith and how they practice their faith, so to speak. So certainly, I wouldn't say it's completely erased from secular pageants just because they don't have a religiously-driven component in these pageants. Who is to say these women aren't driven by their faith?

KB: *Right. But it's just not as apparent?*

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CB: It's not as apparent. But certainly, I guess, it's up to the contestant if they want to talk about their faith. And it certainly had been played in previous years.

KB: *What's the most interesting thing you've discovered?*

CB: With respect to this research?

KB: *Right.*

CB: So much. I think I've gained an even greater respect for pageants, just exploring a pageant. And I'm so intrigued by how religion is being displayed in the Miss Christian America pageant. Prior to this research I had never heard of the Miss Christian America pageant. But looking into it and seeing what they stand for, and just with the way in which they're promoting their faith, you know, it's intriguing. Especially for somebody that studies the sociology of religion. I'm intrigued by that. So and just seeing how they navigate through that negotiation of secular pageants. And what they're going to take from those secular pageants and how they're going to incorporate their unique component to facilitate their religion. It's fascinating.

KB: *Yeah. And I can imagine that some denominations might resonate differently. Like if you have a very idealised gender role type of model to follow, that might be a little different experience than one that's a little more fluid?*

CB: Right. Right. Certainly, you know, in beauty pageants, mainstream, what have you, you're going to have to exhibit these particular gender roles in terms of the makeup and, you know, heels, and hair spray, and what have you. So I certainly see that being practised here. But I think it's so much more than that. You know, in terms of this sisterhood that's being created. But also, what's being done for these contestants? Win or lose – which I don't think there's any losers in pageantry. You gain something. Whether it's self-confidence, or whether it's friendships, what have you, or just trying something new. Certainly there's definitely these generals that are in place. But there's so much more. So much more that can be taken out of this from this experience as well.

KB: *Would you say that this could be a faith experience for some of them?*

CB: I think so. I could be wrong. But in terms of the Miss Christian America, I think it could really reinforce, or it does reinforce that commitment to their faith and really strengthening their religious beliefs and practices with the outreach of ministry and, you know, one of the competition categories – like I said before – was this Biblical question and answer. So really preparing . . . because this is a

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competition. There's a panel of judges. You're going to be judged. So really just the preparations that are encompassed in this particular pageant. And how, you know . . . preparing for those categories, (20:00) but also strengthening one's faith.

KB: *And that's kind-of how I . . . Just listening to you talk about it, it seems like it could be a faith-enhancing or religious experience.*

CB: Indeed.

KB: *So maybe just going back to Christian Smith just for a minute: tell me a little bit about how you're applying that theory.*

CB: Right. So in looking at subcultural identity theory we're looking at religious subcultures balancing the demands of cultural distinction and social engagement. So, how is the Miss Christian America negotiating this cultural distinction and cultural engagement, compared to a more secular pageant, Miss USA?

KB: *So that's why you've compared both of those pageants. I see.*

CB: Yes. So this was really a comparative textual analysis between the two pageants. But in addition to that, we're kind of looking at the unique religious identity compared to the broader secular pageants. So looking at that religious identity and what's coming about that. But also looking at the Evangelicalism that's been brought forth in this research. So looking at the truthfulness of the Bible, so looking at values of scriptures, how is that being displayed in the pageant? The influence of human nature, so looking at the mainstream culture, so going back to the swimsuit competition, and so forth, and then finally, the “born again” experience that’s really the salvation of such faith.

KB: *Oh, interesting.*

CB: So it's really interesting how the pageant is negotiating these religious values and borrowing from mainstream beauty pageants. Something that I talked about in this presentation was this idea of this perception, or borrowing, of mainstream, and really using it and navigating through the religious values and the mainstream values. So again, that on stage question, right? But in the sense of the Biblical question and answer.

KB: *So these two are really being interspersed rather than juxtaposed, is that . . . ?*

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CB: I think so. Absolutely. So again, just going back to how they're very uniquely similar, but also vastly different. But in the end somebody's going to be crowned the title holder. So they're still similar in many ways but vastly different in other ways with respect to religion.

KB: *Fascinating. So if anyone had a question, is there a way that they could contact you? Do you have . . . is your work published somewhere?*

CB: Not as of yet. So this is actually going to be . . . this research is part of a larger research study that I'm doing to for my dissertation. So I'm really . . . not brainstorming. But I know I want to conduct this research into pageantry because when I began such scant literature was out there on pageantry. So I really want to change that. I'm inspired to change that. And I really want to maintain . . . I'm a qualitative researcher – so I want to look at kind of the motivations, why women choose to compete in beauty pageants.

KB: *Yes. Great question!*

CB: I want to explore that. Is it to make friends? Is it to gain self-confidence? Is it to get scholarship money? Or is it just to win a crown? And there are so many ways that that can be reinforced. So I want to explore reasons why women choose to . . . but as a researcher that's fascinated by religion I want to also look at, maybe, how religion is displayed. So I'm not really focussing on a particular pageant. But I really want to interview former title holders but also former beauty pageant contestants, as well. And just explore and investigate why they chose to compete. And then, were there any ways in which they used their religion through that experience? Whether it was praying right before going on stage, or carrying a cross, or wearing a cross while they competed? I really want to explore that.

KB: *And see what that means, yes. So this is a whole new way to think of lived religion and experiencing religion.*

CB: Indeed. And going back to your question before. Certainly, if anybody has a question they can reach out to me through email. My email is chelsea.belanger@knight.ucf.edu

KB: *Ok. And we'll post that on the website as well.*

CB: Thank you.

KB: *Thank you so much for joining me today. It's been a pleasure.*

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CB: Likewise. Thank you for having me.

KB: *We look forward to reading your book, once you turn your dissertation into a book (25:00).*

CB: (Laughs) Yes I look forward to that one day, too.

KB: *And I'll re-interview you then!*

CB: Yes. Sounds good. Thank you so much.

KB: *Thank you, Chelsea.*

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