

**Phallic Spirituality: Masculinities in Promise Keepers,  
the Million Man March and Sex Panic**

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*Introduction*

On 16 October 1995, 875,000 people gathered on the Mall in Washington DC for the Million Man March organized by Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, and former National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) executive director Reverend Benjamin Chavis, Jr. The majority of participants were African American men, and during the march, they heard speeches by Reverend Jesse Jackson, Rosa Parks and Maya Angelou stressing racial solidarity and empowerment. Participants pledged to love their brothers, respect their sisters, refrain from violence except in self-defense, refuse to poison their bodies with drugs, and 'to improve myself spiritually, morally, mentally, socially, politically, and economically for the benefit of myself, my family, and my people'.<sup>1</sup>

Almost exactly two years later, on 4 October 1997, 600,000 again massed on the Mall, this time for the 'Stand in the Gap' rally sponsored by the evangelical Christian men's group, Promise Keepers. Most participants were white men; they heard Promise Keepers founder and former University of Colorado football coach Bill McCartney call for a nationwide revival among men by the year 2000. Participants pledged to live godly lives through keeping seven promises, including building brotherly relationships with other men, loving and protecting their wives and children, supporting local churches, overcoming racial and denominational barriers, and evangelizing.

Both marches received wide media coverage, and many scholars have noted similarities between them. Both the Million Man March and Promise Keepers are directed by and composed of men, have

1. [Http://www.igc.apc.org/africanam/hot/pledge.html](http://www.igc.apc.org/africanam/hot/pledge.html), 18 March 1998.

religious foundations, and call for men's greater responsibility to their wives, children and communities. Both have been criticized by feminist and gay rights groups for promoting sexism, homophobia and 'benevolent patriarchy'.<sup>2</sup> Both have been accused of reasserting male dominance at a time when men are threatened by feminist and womanist critiques of male violence and masculine privilege. At the same time, many women have testified to the benefits to their marriages and families of their husbands' involvement in both; a complementary Million Woman March was held in 1997 and an evangelical group Women of Faith founded in 1996.

In this paper, we argue that the Million Man March, Promise Keepers and a third men's movement, Sex Panic, posit a masculinized theology that we call 'phallic spirituality'. These three movements, whose social locations and affirmations seem worlds apart, are part of a larger societal impulse with significant implications for identity, sexuality and gender. The paper begins with a brief comparison of the three movements, with most attention given to the least familiar, Sex Panic. Then we analyze four characteristics and corresponding theological implications of phallic spirituality. One disclaimer before we begin: our conclusions are based on primary and secondary literature only. We have not done empirical research on these movements, nor are we participants in them.

### *Background*

At first glance, Sex Panic would appear to have little in common with the Million Man March or Promise Keepers. With considerably less mainstream media fanfare than the other two, it emerged in 1997 in response to the work of gay activists such as Gabriel Rotello, Michelangelo Signorile and Larry Kramer.<sup>3</sup> These three argued that gay men's sexual behavior in circuit parties, bathhouses and public cruising areas endangered their health and destroyed gay culture. Noting the perception that with new drug therapies AIDS is now a manageable disease and the subsequent resurgence of HIV infection,

2. Ellen Goodman, <http://www.utne.com/cafe/13bestofmmm.html>, 18 March 1998.

3. See for example Gabriel Rotello, *Sexual Ecology: AIDS and the Destiny of Gay Men* (New York: Dutton, 1997); Michelangelo Signorile, *Life Outside: The Signorile Report on Gay Men: Sex, Drugs, Muscles, and the Passages of Life* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1997); Larry Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust* (New York: St Martin's, 1994).

they called for the end of anonymous sex, drug use and bare-backing (condom-free anal sex) through safer sex, monogamy and regulation of public sex venues, all for the survival of gay men and gay culture.

To others in the gay community, this message had nothing to do with survival; it was anti-sex, anti-gay and undermined a fundamental principle of gay liberation: sexual freedom. To these activists, the message of Signorile, Kramer and Rotello smacked of a 'sex panic', a 'moral crusade that leads to crackdowns on sexual outsiders', historically initiated from outside the target community, but in this case, spearheaded by gay men themselves.<sup>4</sup> To underscore this irony, these opponents of 'neocons' (neo-conservatives) or 'Monogamites' dubbed themselves Sex Panic and organized the first National Sex Panic Summit in San Diego, CA, in November 1997 and a second in Pittsburgh, PA, in November 1998.<sup>5</sup> The goal of these summits, according to organizer Keith Griffith, 'is to create a way for individuals to know they are not alone in standing up to the police, politicians, and indeed our own leadership in demanding respect for gay male sexual culture'.<sup>6</sup>

A loose coalition of gay men, lesbians and queer theorists, Sex Panic advocates the sexual liberation of gay men in two ways: by opposing the closure of gay sex clubs, cruising grounds, parks and bathhouses and by challenging monogamy as a restrictive single standard that sanitizes gay sexuality to make it more acceptable to mainstream America. The mission statement of New York City's group reflects these aims:

Sex Panic! is a pro-queer, pro-feminist, anti-racist direct action group. Our multi-issue agenda aims to defend public sexual culture and safer sex in New York City from police crackdowns, public stigma and morality crusades. We are committed to HIV prevention through safer sex, sexual self-determination for all people, and democratic urban space.<sup>7</sup>

Vehemently denying that they are conservative, neo- or otherwise, Rotello, Kramer and Signorile assert that their aims are to protect and

4. Eric Rofes, 'The Emerging Sex Panic Targeting Gay Men', <http://leatherpage.com/sexpanic.htm>, 25 February 1998.

5. [Http://www.managingdesire.org/sexpanic/sexpanicpressrelease.html](http://www.managingdesire.org/sexpanic/sexpanicpressrelease.html), 25 February 1998; 'Activists Call Second National Summit to Discuss Responses to Attacks on Sexuality', Sexummit@GayActive.com, 28 September 1998.

6. 'Activists Call Second National Summit to Discuss Responses to Attacks on Sexuality'.

7. Eva Pendleton and Jane Goldschmidt, 'Sex Panic!—Make the Connection', *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 5.3 (1998), p. 30.

strengthen gay culture in the age of AIDS.<sup>8</sup> Sex Panic organizer Eric Rofes disagrees:

We believe that sexual empowerment is healthier than sexual shame, and that gay men who value pleasure, sexual liberation, and community-building have been increasingly marginalized in the growing moral panic [therefore] we believe that—even in the midst of a deepening entrenchment of anti-sex values within gay male communities—gay liberation's commitment to gay men organizing their sex and relationships in a range of ways which might not fit the monogamous couple or nuclear family model is important to affirm and protect.<sup>9</sup>

Sex Panic debates have revealed deep fissures within the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community on two critical questions: (1) are there limits to sexual freedom? How far can and should it go?; and (2) how central is sexual behavior to gay identity? Does gay culture (and by extension gay rights) consist of anything more than fucking?<sup>10</sup>

Apparent from the foregoing, Sex Panic differs from the Million Man March and Promise Keepers in several ways. First, the demographic profile of Sex Panic is predominantly gay, urban, childless, white, young to middle aged, middle to upper middle class, and not necessarily religiously affiliated. Most Million Man Marchers and Promise Keepers are heterosexual (presumably), married, middle-aged, fathers, with a range of socioeconomic status and geographic locations. The primary difference between the two is in race/ethnicity and religious affiliation; most Million Man March participants were African American and either Christian or Muslim, while the overwhelming number of Promise Keepers are white and Christian.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, the three movements differ in their diagnosis of men's central problem and its solution. As discussed above, Sex Panic opposes those within the gay community whom they feel have

8. Gabriel Rotello, 'This is *Sexual Ecology*', *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 5.2 (1998), pp. 19-24; Michelangelo Signorile, 'Nostalgia Trip', *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 5.2 (1998), pp. 25-28.

9. 'Activists Call Second National Summit to Discuss Responses to Attacks on Sexuality'.

10. See articles in *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 5.2 (1998) on 'The New Sex Wars' and 5.3 (1998) on 'Sex Wars Redux'.

11. 'Million Man March Survey Report', <http://www.cldc.howard.edu/~blkpol/mmmrep.htm>, 18 March 1998; Ken Abraham, *Who Are the Promise Keepers? Understanding the Christian Men's Movement* (New York: Doubleday, 1997); Carlyle Murphy, 'Promise Keepers at a Prayerful Crossroads', *Washington Post*, 7 October 1998, p. B1.

sacrificed gay identity for social assimilation. In its 'Declaration of Sexual Rights', it denounces assimilationists and demands gay empowerment and self-determination through 'respect for sexual diversity', 'decriminalization of consensual sex practices', and 'an end to the prohibition and stigmatization of public sex', among other specifics.<sup>12</sup> Blaming internalized racism for fragmented and fractious relations between African American men, as well as historical and institutional racism, the Million Man March advocated intra-racial love, an end to black-on-black violence, and support of black-owned businesses, art and mass media. Marchers pledged themselves to uphold their family responsibilities and never again to abuse their wives or children.<sup>13</sup> Promise Keepers hold feminism largely responsible for emasculating men, making them feel ashamed of their God-given role as leaders of their households. At the same time, they fault men for shirking their duties as husbands, fathers and church leaders. They preach that men must reassert themselves as leaders in home and community, through prayer, Bible study groups, and rallies with other men. In this way, they believe, Jesus Christ will be honored, balance will be restored in Christian families, and both men and women will feel more satisfied.<sup>14</sup>

Thirdly, all three have ambivalent relationships with women and feminism, ranging from enthusiastic support to hostility. Sex Panic claims to be pro-feminist and counts women as 20 per cent of its members, especially those who experienced lesbian 'sex wars' over pornography in the 1980s. However, two female members of New York City's group note that although 'pro-sex lesbians have never refused to speak out', they 'have been denied access to the public debate' by male leaders.<sup>15</sup> Although the Million Man March had few women participants, Maya Angelou, Rosa Parks and Betty Shabazz powerfully endorsed it from the podium, and according to womanist scholar, Karen Baker-Fletcher, 'Most Black women in the community were positive about the March and were supportive of it as an opportunity for growth and healing.'<sup>16</sup> However, at least one prominent

12. 'A Declaration of Sexual Rights', <http://www.khsnet.com/pinkink/vol1-3/sexlib.htm>, 27 February 1998.

13. 'Million Man March Pledge', <http://www.igc.apc.org/africanam/hot/pledge.html>, 18 March 1998.

14. Abraham, *Who Are the Promise Keepers?; Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper* (Colorado Springs: Focus on the Family, 1994); Bill McCartney, *From Ashes to Glory* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995 [1990]).

15. Pendleton and Goldschmidt, 'Sex Panic!—Make the Connection', p. 31.

16. Karen Baker-Fletcher, ' "All God's Chillun Got Trabelin' Shoes": Womanist

activist was skeptical; Angela Davis declared, 'No march, movement or agenda that defines manhood in the narrowest terms and seeks to make women lesser partners in this quest for equality can be considered a positive step.'<sup>17</sup>

Like the Million Man March, Promise Keepers have received mixed reviews from women. Their wives are most enthusiastic, reporting that their husbands are more considerate partners, devoted fathers, and even helped do the laundry.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, most feminists, particularly the National Organization of Women, have been unstintingly antagonistic. In 1997 NOW formed a task force to expose what they see as the Promise Keepers' anti-woman political agenda; then NOW president Patricia Ireland stated, 'Feminists will not be fooled by the many recent public disclaimers about this feel-good form of male supremacy with its dangerous political potential.'<sup>19</sup>

### *Phallic Spirituality and its Implications*

Despite differences in social location and message, Sex Panic, the Million Man March, and Promise Keepers express phallic spirituality. 'Phallus' is a Freudian term that has been further developed by Jacques Lacan and those who debate with him, such as Jane Gallop who says, 'The penis is what men have and women do not; the phallus is the attribute of power which neither men nor women have.'<sup>20</sup> What is the relationship between the phallus and the penis? The relationship, like that of all language, 'needs to be taken in two directions—towards the fixing of meaning itself, and away from that very fixing to the point of constant slippage, the risk or vanishing-point which it always contains (the unconscious)'.<sup>21</sup> The phallus, according to Jacques Lacan, is a privileged signifier, historically

Wordings on the Million Man March', in Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher (ed.), *Black Religion after the Million Man March* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), pp. 79-87 (81).

17. [Http://www.igc.apc.org/africanam/hot/remarks.html](http://www.igc.apc.org/africanam/hot/remarks.html), 18 March 1998.

18. Ellis Cose, 'Promises...Promises', *Newsweek*, 13 October 1997, pp. 30-31; Abraham, *Who Are the Promise Keepers?*, pp. 99-122; McCartney, *From Ashes to Glory*.

19. Patricia Ireland, 'A Look at...Promise Keepers', *Washington Post*, 7 September 1997, p. C3.

20. Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 97.

21. Jacqueline Rose, as quoted in Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 140.

related to the penis, but potentially transferable to other structures of power and dominance.

We define 'phallic spirituality' as masculinized religion that functions in the everyday lives of people in a Christianocentric society, but which introduces certain paradoxes and ambiguities that reach crisis proportions in various historical periods. We believe that we are currently in the midst of a crisis which is calling out extraordinary efforts to re-fix relationships of gender, sexuality and structures of power, but which is also slipping under pressure from unconscious forces. What follows is our analysis of phallic spirituality's characterization of those relationships and its theological implications for this crisis.

#### *Characteristic 1. Phallic Spirituality is Apocalyptic*

We adopt this description from Lee Quinby, who uses it to analyze Promise Keepers; we extend it here to all three movements.<sup>22</sup> Sex Panic, Promise Keepers and the Million Man March are based on perceptions of crisis, of impending collapse of prevailing standards of masculinity. All three believe that manhood in their target communities is threatened by external and internal forces, and they prophesy cataclysm unless men meet these threats with drastic action. They preach jeremiads, calling men to immediate repentance and militant transformation, warning that if their message is not heeded, disaster will surely follow.

For Promise Keepers, man's role in the traditional nuclear family and the future of Christian civilization is at stake, and men must fight to restore masculinity to its biblically mandated responsibility and God-given glory. Their literature is full of warrior and athletic images, proclaiming the need to win and overcome sin. According to Randy Phillips, past president, 'the time has come for each of us [to] seize the moment'.<sup>23</sup> He continues, 'While we have been asleep in our routines, the enemy has attacked relentlessly, cutting away the spiritual heritage of America. If we don't respond now, time could run out!'<sup>24</sup>

The Million Man March was similarly apocalyptic. Calls to support it included grim statistics about African American communities: 1 in 3

22. Lee Quinby, 'Coercive Purity: The Dangerous Promise of Apocalyptic Masculinity', in Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn (eds.), *The Year 2000: Essays on the End* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), pp. 154-65.

23. Randy Phillips, 'Seize the Moment', in *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, pp. 1-10 (1).

24. Phillips, 'Seize the Moment', p. 9.

men aged 20–29 was in jail, 60 per cent of young men were under court supervision in some cities, 50 per cent of households were headed by women, upwards of 45 per cent of children were born into poverty.<sup>25</sup> March leaders preached that African American manhood is in crisis. If this ‘communal catastrophe’ is not averted, the result will be genocide.<sup>26</sup> According to participant Ruben Ayala, ‘we have to learn to be better fathers and husbands, and we have to start taking care of business’.<sup>27</sup>

Sex Panic prophesies the imminent destruction of gay male culture by stifling ‘the principles of sexual self-determination’ in the ‘name of “mainstream” acceptance’ and the ‘[denial] that effective HIV prevention must emphasize pleasure and the complexity of sex’ in the ‘name of fighting AIDS’.<sup>28</sup> The promotion of monogamy and safe sex imposes restrictive heterosexual norms on gay culture and stigmatizes diverse sexual practices. Sexual McCarthyism makes gay men feel shame and hopelessness:

you might love sucking dick through a glory hole or spending hours in the AOL dungeon chat room, but not only do you not want anyone to know about it, but you won’t ever take steps to fight for your right to continue to enjoy these activities.<sup>29</sup>

According to critic Jay Weiser, Sex Panic participants ‘have set themselves up as a kind of priestly class that wants to guide an unsophisticated flock’, preaching a ‘gospel of transcendence through transgression’ that ‘could prove irresistible—and fatal—to many gay men’.<sup>30</sup>

### *Implication 1. All Power Is Ideological*

This is a corresponding implication of phallic spirituality’s apocalypticism: it promulgates a sense of crisis and urgency without acknowledging a relationship to power. All three men’s movements seek to wield power without realizing their aims are ideological, benefitting themselves at the expense of others. Our assumption is that every

25. David van Biema, ‘Stand Up and Be Counted’, <http://mouth.pathfinder.com/time/special/million/tune.html>, 18 March 1998; Ruben Ayala, ‘The Million Man March’, <http://www.brudershof.org/ploughs/plough46/march.htm>, 18 March 1998.

26. Van Biema, ‘Stand Up and Be Counted’.

27. Ayala, ‘The Million Man March’.

28. ‘A Declaration of Sexual Rights’.

29. Eric Rofes, ‘Building a Movement for Sexual Freedom During a Moment of Sex Panic’, GLB-NEWS@listserv.aol.com, 17 November 1998.

30. Jay Weiser, ‘Sex Panic! as a Cult of the Outsider’, *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 5.3 (1998), p. 37.



rhetorical gesture or social action is a desire for power, whether promoting a group's ideas through pamphlets, books and websites, or through marches in Washington DC. Universal justice is an abstraction that has no referent in the practical lives of real people. Whenever we encounter an ideology or other power system, we must ask who benefits and who loses from such a system.

Promise Keepers, the Million Man March and Sex Panic all privilege men and their right to impose their sexuality on others. Having a penis means having access to other people in certain ways. The first two groups argue for access based on public but unenforceable pledges about benevolence and non-violence. In other words, they demand dominance in families and society because they are benevolent by definition. In Jane Gallop's words, 'Patriarchy is grounded in the uprightness of the father. If he were devious and unreliable, he could not have the power to legislate. The law is supposed to be just—that is impartial, indifferent, free from desire.'<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, there are few effective protections against fathers who are not benevolent, impartial and free from desire. Therefore, the result is a friendlier looking patriarchy in public without recourse for the victims who are silenced in homes and churches. Sex Panic shares the goal of such a phallic spirituality, but rejects the need to disguise its objectives.

Patriarchy is supported by the righteousness of the masculinized God and his son, Jesus. Because patriarchy has been criticized by feminists and womanists for its violence and violations of women and children, the kinder and gentler face of patriarchy is presented as the public face. The benevolent Father and the gentle Son ensure that men will be benevolent and gentle as they assert their dominance in families and in society. Silenced by such spirituality are the voices of all those who dissent from such arrangements—uppity women, cultures with other constructions of sexuality and gender, men who defect from this form of patriarchy. Promise Keepers and Million Man March rallies had no dissenting speeches, only songs, prayers and sermons to inspire the masses to repentance and obedience. And it offered men of different cultures the chance to be men without regard to race or color. All power is ideological.

### *Characteristic 2. Phallic Spirituality Is Millennial*

Against apocalyptic chaos, all three movements envision a millennial future that restores a perceived utopian manhood; all are actively involved in the work of transformation to inaugurate a Golden Age of

31. Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction*, p. 75.

Masculinity for their target communities. Opposing the threat of imminent destruction, they quest for an authentic, integrated sense of male identity. Promise Keepers seek to rehabilitate the pre-feminist Christian patriarchal family of the Bible. According to Randy Phillips, 'marriages are being restored, and children are being redeemed... churches are being renewed', and 'men are crossing the socioeconomic, racial, and denominational barriers that have traditionally kept us from being one'.<sup>32</sup>

The Million Man March sought to restore African American male pride and empowerment as black men. Participants reported that a blissful atmosphere was established: 'it was love, peace, joy, tears, warmth, sacred, strength, power, spirit-filled, fun, and laughter'.<sup>33</sup> According to Theodore Walker, Jr, 'the spirit of love and trust was so powerful that one father reported being accidentally separated from his son (age 15) for the whole day and experiencing no worry or anxiety during the day-long separation because he was certain this multitude of brotherly-loving black men would care for and protect his son'.<sup>34</sup>

Sex Panic seeks to restore the sexual utopia of the pre-AIDS era, 'a liberating, sexual, tribal gay experience that has led generations of gay men to bars, circuit parties or the countercultural gatherings of the Radical Faerie movement and the S&M communities'.<sup>35</sup> It wants to re-establish gay masculinity by '[repudiating] the possessive, monogamous, consumer-obsessed relationships of mainstream, heterosexual society'.<sup>36</sup> Liberated gay masculinity will then transform mainstream society. After the first SP Summit, Keith Griffith, owner of the World Wide Website, [www.cruisingforsex.com](http://www.cruisingforsex.com), exulted that it was 'very empowering to see all these people with so much energy and enthusiasm about sucking cock. I think gay men have a lot to teach the broader culture about how healthy and wholesome sexuality is'.<sup>37</sup>

32. Phillips, 'Seize the Moment', p. 7.

33. Ray Winbush, <http://www.igc.apc.org/africanam/hot.remarks.html>, 18 March 1998.

34. Theodore Walker, Jr, 'Can a Million Black Men Be Good News?' in Kasimu Baker-Fletcher (ed.), *Black Religion*, p. 10.

35. Wendell Jones, 'Reaction to the "New Sex Wars"', *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 5.3 (1998), p. 6.

36. Jones, 'Reaction to the "New Sex Wars"'.  
 37. Rex Wockner, 'Sex Panic! US Activists Gather to Confront Sex Panic',

[http://www.capitalxtra.on.ca/queer...al/cx/CX52/Mixed/cx\\_MM5%7F2\\_4.html](http://www.capitalxtra.on.ca/queer...al/cx/CX52/Mixed/cx_MM5%7F2_4.html), 27 February 1998.

*Implication 2. All Identity Is Multiple*

In the millennialism of phallic spirituality, male identity is monolithic; according to these three movements, what benefits one man benefits all. However, our assumption is that gender, like all attempts at identity formation, is a social construction rather than an expression of 'natural desires'. As Judith Butler summarizes Foucault, 'identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression'.<sup>38</sup>

Promise Keepers, the Million Man March and Sex Panic have emerged because there is slippage in the bedrock of male dominance. The assertiveness of feminist rebellion and the ambivalence of male subjects have introduced the possibility of multiple gender identities. Men can act like women; women can act like men; both men and women can have various sexual orientations. Multiple sexual and gender identities are threatening to the social order—single women who choose their own sexual behaviors; lesbian, bisexual and transgendered women who choose 'other' sexual objects; gay, bisexual and transgendered men who engage in proscribed behaviors. Such multiplicities are interpreted as threats to family values, heterosexual marriage and the proper upbringing of children. According to Promise Keepers and the Million Man March, it is time to reassert the official identities. These movements have emerged to buttress this bedrock for the future. Sex Panic can be understood as a movement to strengthen certain masculinist homosexual identities.

Theologically, identity politics depends on the unity and knowability of God. Those who assert two heterosexual genders with discrete and mutually exclusive content in hierarchical relationship to one another depend on a theology of a completely knowable God. Just as God must have a single identity that is fully revealed in the Bible and in Jesus Christ, so male and female are single identities with fixed relationships with one another. If all identities are multiple in terms of genders and sexuality, then the mystery of God also increases. This requires great faith in uncertain times.

*Characteristic 3. Phallic Spirituality Emphasizes Sexual Purity*

All three movements claim sexual purity as a constitutive element of reconstructed masculinity. Sexual behavior is a spiritual endeavor, and phallic spirituality aspires to sexual purity. Moreover, in stressing

38. 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', in Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 13.

purity and regulation or deregulation of sexual behavior, these movements express a desire for order, control and coherence. The Promise Keepers explicitly preach purity: promise number 3 reads 'A Promise Keeper is committed to practicing spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity.'<sup>39</sup> Jerry Kirk explains that for the single man, this promise means 'a willingness to wait until marriage for a sexual intercourse', and 'for those who have made a mistake already, it means making a commitment today to a "secondary virginity" that will wait for your spouse'.<sup>40</sup> For married men, sexual purity 'means reflecting God's absolute faithfulness to us in our faithfulness to our wives'.<sup>41</sup> Even 'watching racy movies on a business trip in an airport hotel, with or without masturbation, is a form of emotional adultery that will eventually weaken the marriage'.<sup>42</sup> Promise Keeper sexual purity also means that homosexual behavior is sinful under all circumstances.

At the Million Man March, participants pledged sexual purity as well, promising, 'I will never abuse my wife by striking her, disrespecting her, for she is the mother of my children and the producer of my future. I pledge that from this day forward I will never engage in the abuse of children, little boys or little girls for sexual gratification.'<sup>43</sup> Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher comments that 'such patterns of perversion must be broken in order for the shattered social fabric to be restored through prayer and counseling'.<sup>44</sup> However, he adds that by specifying 'wives' and not 'women', this promise 'does not address lovers, girlfriends, or dates—all very real relationships that are open to abusive treatment by males toward females'.<sup>45</sup>

While the Promise Keepers and Million Man March define sexual purity as the presence of clear sexual boundaries and rules, Sex Panic defines it without boundaries. Sexual purity means unrestricted sexual behavior. As long as sex is consensual, it should not be censored, criminalized or scapegoated. Sex Panic participants declare the right to 'sexual and reproductive self-determination...publicly accessible sexual culture', and 'a sexual life free from shame and stigma'.<sup>46</sup>

39. Phillips, 'Seize the Moment', p. 8.

40. Jerry Kirk, 'God's Call to Sexual Purity', in *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, pp. 91-98 (94).

41. Kirk, 'God's Call to Sexual Purity', p. 94.

42. Kirk, 'God's Call to Sexual Purity', p. 94.

43. 'Million Man March Pledge'.

44. Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, 'Keeping the Promises of the Million Man March', in *idem, Black Religion*, pp. 102-11 (107).

45. Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, 'Keeping the Promises', p. 106.

46. 'A Declaration of Sexual Rights'.

All sexual cultures should be celebrated in their diversity, complexity and multiple pleasures. The movement seeks to guarantee pure sexual freedom through legislation or its repeal. Anything less sacrifices gay culture on the altar of normative heterosexuality.

*Implication 3. Compulsory Heterosexuality Makes Homosexuality Necessary*  
Underlying phallic spirituality's stress on purity is the presumption of dualism, that is, that binary division of sexual norms is theoretically necessary. We agree with Diana Fuss:

For heterosexuality to achieve the status of the 'compulsory', it must present itself as a practice governed by some internal necessity... Heterosexuality secures its self-identity and shores up its ontological boundaries by protecting itself from what it sees as the continual predatory encroachments of its contaminated other, homosexuality.<sup>47</sup>

Promise Keepers and the Million Man March aim to shore up the bedrock of heterosexuality, that is, to buttress compulsory heterosexuality. Through talk of benevolent relationships with women and children, heterosexuality is reinforced. This opens the door for Sex Panic to reassert a vigorous sexuality without regard for object. According to Sex Panic, masculinity is asserted by free expression of male desire. Thus, the movement discloses the underlying male dominance in most heterosexual and homosexual masculinity. Therefore, heterosexuality and homosexuality are mirror images of one another in terms of their opposition, but are exact copies of one another in terms of their dominating desires.

Compulsory heterosexuality is a relatively new consciousness for a majority of men. Enforcement of heterosexual norms is common through invocation of terms such as queer, fairy and faggot in public schools and all-male organizations such as the military, prison, sports and boarding schools. Such socialization requires boys to imagine the proscribed acts in order to know what behaviors are being regulated. Sex Panic serves the debate by speaking these proscriptions out loud and clear. Paradoxically, these descriptions by Sex Panic describe a range of male behaviors that has always existed. Creating a benevolent form of patriarchy requires public heterosexuality, while in practice, the full range of behaviors will be tolerated for most men.

Theologically, the masculine God relates to the creation only through dominance. The creation cannot create God in traditional theologies; God must create creation. Any partnership between God

47. Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out*, p. 2.

and creation is temporary accommodation that God makes, while the ontological hierarchy is fully intact. The idea that God might have a peer who could be a competitor or a lover would be scandalous to most Christian theologies. But the implied heterosexual dominance between a masculine God and a feminine creation requires the idea that such a relationship could be reversed or transformed. God's masculine dominance can only be asserted in the face of its opposite. Therefore, the dominance of God requires the homosexual passivity of God as the contaminating idea. It is amazing how many sermons vigorously argue for the dominance of God, without fully identifying the possibility of homosexual passivity which such an argument requires.

*Characteristic 4. Phallic Spirituality Preaches an Androcentric Social Gospel*

All three movements proclaim the need for pragmatic activism. All desire not only individual conversion, but also societal transformation. They have concrete political and legislative goals, and although these goals are couched in terms to benefit women, they are clearly androcentric. Promise Keepers stress prayer and conversion as means to an end. Luis Palau states, 'America needs Promise Keepers committed to evangelism like never before'; after all, 'political campaigns, family counseling, and education do nothing about the inner condition of human depravity. Unless there's a change of heart, nothing has happened to change a person. And unless millions of hearts are changed, little has happened to change America.'<sup>48</sup> For Promise Keepers, as men pray and become converted to Christianity, they reclaim their role as head of their households and leaders in their churches. Then family and congregational life are stronger, leading to more godly communities and ultimately a godly nation. Although the group officially eschews political positions and does not endorse candidates, it has close ties to Christian Right organizations such as Focus on the Family, Concerned Women of America, and the American Family Association. Founder Bill McCartney has addressed Christian Coalition conventions.

Million Man March participants pledged themselves to revitalize their communities; to stand against abuse, oppression and racism; and to transform society through collective action. They promised to 'strive to build business, build houses, build hospitals, build factories and enter into international trade for the good of myself, my family

48. Luis Palau, 'The Great Commission', in *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, pp. 193-202 (199).

and my people' and to 'support black newspapers, black radio, black television'.<sup>49</sup> Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher observes that the 'March came to represent a way for Black men to make a very public Promise to ourselves, our families, our lovers, and the nation at large that we had arrived at the mature place of public self-critique.'<sup>50</sup>

Sex Panic has a similar national political agenda that focuses on gay men's sexual freedom and justice. At the second Sex Panic Summit held on 15–17 November 1998, Eric Rofes asked, 'When sex has been so devalued and so demonized that placing the word "sex" alongside "freedom" makes many people smirk, how do we articulate our beliefs that promiscuity may be as moral as monogamy, that the right to choose an open relationship may be as ethical as choosing celibacy?'<sup>51</sup> He then outlined four directions for the movement in 1999: (1) to create a coalition of groups with similar goals, like sex workers, pornographers and sadomasochists; (2) to form networks of activists in all 50 states to 'make the repeal of sodomy laws a top demand'; (3) to organize ongoing strategies 'focused on entrapment and preserving gay men's sexual civil liberties'; and (4) 'to continue to highlight prominently the linkage we see between sexual liberation, public health and social change'.<sup>52</sup> He concluded by urging the movement to 'continue to integrate a commitment to democratic freedoms, social change, and sexual health'.<sup>53</sup>

#### *Implication 4. Patriarchy Requires 'Woman' as an Empty Class*

The social gospel of phallic spirituality requires the creation of woman as a separate class so as to delineate what men are not. Our assumption is that patriarchy essentially depends on constructing two genders with specific and contradictory content in a hierarchical relationship to one another. In order to be dominant, men need others over which to be dominant. In order to be phallic, men need others who are non-phallic. Jane Gallop argues:

Judged by masculine measures, woman is inadequate, castrated... According to Freud, the sight of women's genitalia horrifies the young boy because he sees an absence. Mark that he does not see what is there, he sees the absence of a phallus. Nothing to see, nothing that looks like a phallus, nothing of like measure, no coherent visual representation in a familiar form. Nothing to see becomes nothing of worth... The female

49. 'Million Man March Pledge'.

50. Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, 'Keeping the Promises', p. 102.

51. Rofes, 'Building a Movement'.

52. Rofes, 'Building a Movement'.

53. Rofes, 'Building a Movement'.

sex organs are a blind spot.<sup>54</sup>

The return of phallic spirituality through Promise Keepers, the Million Man March and Sex Panic also depends on the empty category, woman. How does phallic spirituality know it is secure unless there is 'woman' to admire and affirm its reality? The absence of women in these movements has been mentioned more than once; women's auxiliaries, such as Women of Faith and the Million Woman March have followed in response. These men's movements require women to exist, but only as an empty category.

Theologically, an active masculine God requires a passive feminine creation. These mutually exclusive categories are built into most theologies, with the androgynous Jesus in between. But what is God without a creation to magnify his beauty and admire his creativity? The creation is empty unless it reflects its creator. In like manner, woman was created to reflect the beauty and creativity of man. Woman who rejects the masculine gaze for defining beauty, who asserts her creativity apart from man, engages in original sin, just as a sinful creation might rebel against its proper relationship to God.

One of the most repeated stories about Promise Keepers is the advice for men to go home and enact a new partnership with their spouses. They should be benevolent in the style of asking, but not by asking for her permission or input. Such advice seems to be modeled exactly on God's relationship with creation. Woman is an empty vessel who is only happy when she is given her place as a helper for men. Men do their spouses and families a great favor when they assert their dominance in benevolent ways. The Million Man March would support the same style, although issues in African American communities are more complex. Sex Panic would laugh at such nonsense.

### *Conclusion*

Obviously from the foregoing, we are critical of these three movements' expressions of phallic spirituality. However, we believe that, albeit critical, our analysis is important for two reasons. First, not being Christian evangelicals, African Americans, or gay men, we believe it is valuable to stretch our own cultural and theological frameworks to understand and empathize with Promise Keepers, the Million Man March and Sex Panic. Secondly, by critically evaluating these movements, we seek to validate them intellectually; they deserve

54. Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction*, p. 58.



to be taken seriously. We conclude by inviting you to reflect on the following questions: Do other men's movements express phallic spirituality? In what ways are these three movements life-giving for participants? Why have outsiders' responses to them so often been critical? What does the development of authentic masculine sexuality and spirituality look like? How might that sexuality and spirituality be fostered?