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“The New Virgin Army” –Rolling Stone Meets Sexual Abstinence

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Several years ago, an article in the journal *Theology Today* suggested that sexual abstinence just might be “the last sexual perversion.” In a world increasingly given to unrestrained sexual activity and a cornucopia of sensuality, voluntary sexual abstinence appears radical, suspicious, and downright odd.

This certainly seems to be the case as *Rolling Stone* magazine reported on what it called “The New Virgin Army” in its June 30-July 14, 2005 issue. The article, written by reporter Jeff Sharlet, identifies this new “army” of sexually abstinent Christian young people as, “the young and the sexless.” As the article declares, “There’s a new sexual revolution going on . . . Meet the Christian soldiers who are fighting the fire down below.”

A couple of decades ago, *Rolling Stone* magazine represented the voice of the counter-culture. Now, *Rolling Stone* is no longer part of the counter-culture—it’s mainstream in both audience and ideology. The magazine, we should note, has not shifted right. The culture has shifted left—at least on sex.

The sexual radicalism of the 1960s—the very culture that produced skyrocketing rates of teenage sexual activity, unmarried heterosexual cohabitation, the homosexual rights movement, and the eroticization of everyday life—has produced a moral context in which sexual abstinence before marriage appears nothing less than a perversion of the sexual norm.

Sharlet’s article begins by suggesting that the “true face of the Christian right” just might be “that of a twenty-four-year-old religious-studies graduate student at New York University.” Sharlet introduces us to Matt Dunbar, a young man who is described as committed to sexual abstinence, but not to prudery. To him, marital sex is “communion,” and the act of sexual intercourse—and all other sexual activity—is restricted to the confines of heterosexual marriage.

As Dunbar understands, “Abstinence is counter-cultural.” He ties it to a rejection of materialism, consumerism, and the sensuality that has debased the culture even as it has corrupted sex itself.

Dunbar and his three New York roommates are committed to sexual abstinence until marriage. For three of the young men, sexual abstinence has meant virginity. The fourth has had sex in the past but is now committed to abstinence until marriage. All four are from Visalia, California, and the photographs accompanying the article portray young twenty-somethings who look pretty much like their generational peers.

The young men are brutally honest about the difficult challenge of sexual purity. Scantly clad young women, sexually explicit advertising, and an entertainment universe saturated with sensuality produce a context that makes sexual purity a very difficult goal to achieve. Beyond all this, the moral message constantly communicated by the mainstream culture is that being sexually active is normal and sexual abstinence is something like an indication of mental imbalance or sexual cowardice. At the very least, it represents an eccentric form of moral Puritanism that is hardly understood by the mainstream culture.

These young men are not total ascetics. They enjoy food and other pleasures, but they see sex as belonging to an

entirely different world. As Sharlet explains, sex is understood to be supernatural among the sexually abstinent. “Sex that is just two bodies in motion strikes them as empty,” he explains, “even if love is involved.”

The most interesting part of the *Rolling Stone* article is the reporter’s fundamental assumption that the real agenda behind the campaign for sexual abstinence must be political. Early in the article, Sharlet makes this claim: “Chastity is a new organizing principle of the Christian right, built on the notion that virgins are among God’s last loyal defenders, knights and ladies of a forgotten kingdom.” When Dunbar describes sexual abstinence as a form of rebellion, Sharlet jumps to the political sphere. As he sees it, conservative Christians are now pushing the issue of sexual abstinence in order to make “every young man and woman part of an elite virgin corps.”

At times, the article reveals interesting insights and incisive analysis. Sharlet seems to understand the cultural awkwardness that comes with a commitment to sexual abstinence. Something has to explain this counter-cultural behavior, and Sharlet just assumes that the rise of the new Christian right must have something to do with it.

As a matter of fact, he cites the rise of an entire body of literature committed to sexual abstinence before marriage and programs of abstinence-based sex education and sees the Christian right discovering a platform. Sharlet suggests that “it wasn’t until the Clinton years that the Christian right fully discovered sex as a weapon in the culture wars.”

Clearly, Sharlet hasn’t been hanging around conservative Christians for very long. Anyone who thinks that the idea of sexual abstinence is a recent development tied to a political agenda within the Christian right just hasn’t been in touch with conservative Christianity. As a matter of fact, the reporter’s analysis serves as a fascinating lens through which to see the sexual values of the dominant media class. They haven’t considered sexual abstinence as an option for years, and at least some of them have a hard time believing that sexual abstinence before marriage was ever considered the normative expectation for young people. Coming of age in the 1960s—or raised by parents who came of age in the 1960s—those who live in the dominant sexual culture now hear the idea of sexual abstinence as something genuinely innovative and assuredly radical.

Sharlet does see something of a paradox at the heart of the evangelical abstinence movement. “It is at once an attempt to transcend cultural influences through the timelessness of Scripture and a painfully specific response to the sexual revolution,” he explains.

Ideologically-driven “liberation” movements of the last forty years come under particular criticism. The women’s liberation movement is blamed for preaching a message of self-satisfaction, even as the larger culture became enamored with sexual excess and managed to convince itself that there was no normative sexual morality.

These young men also blame an effeminized church. Sharlet cites a number of popular evangelical authors to the same effect, noting that most assume that men face particular sexual temptations, given the reality of the male sex drive.

Sharlet’s review of the literature is generally fair, and he clearly sees the proliferation of evangelical books urging sexual abstinence as something of a publishing phenomenon. He appears to be surprised by the candor expressed by the authors, and even more surprised at the understanding of human nature—as illustrated by the male sex drive—that serves as a foundation for the evangelical understanding of sexual morality. Where the evangelical authors suggest that young men must learn to “bounce their eyes” off of sexually-explicit advertisements and images, the dominant culture assumes that sexual arousal leading to lust is simply part of the spice of life.

Sharlet also seems to be fascinated by the fact that these Christian young men fully expect to enjoy sex as a major part of their lives when married. He understands that the discipline of sexual abstinence comes hand-in-hand with an elevated anticipation of marital sex.

“Like the fundamentalists of old, today’s Christian conservatives define themselves as apart from the world, and yet the modern movement aims to enjoy its fruits,” Sharlet explains. These young Christians committed to sexual abstinence combine “the biblical austerity of chastity” with an eager anticipation of marriage and marital sex.

All that is just the beginning, Sharlet argues. “Sexual regulation is a means, not an end. To believers, the movement offers a vision grander even than the loveliness of a virgin: a fairy tale in which every man will be a spiritual warrior, a knight in the service of the king of kings, promised the hand and the heart and, yes, the sexual services of a ‘lady.’ That is

the erotic dream of Christian conservatism: a restoration of chivalry, a cleansing of impurity, a nation without sin, an empire of the personal as political.”

The *Rolling Stone* article on “the young and the sexless” comes packaged in a magazine that features a sexually-explicit photograph of actress Jessica Alba on its cover. Within the article, Alba explains that she uses her physical attractiveness as a way of sending unambiguous sexual signals. “Men are about the physical,” she explains, and a smart girl is one who knows how to use the physical to get ahead.

That is the kind of sexual morality that represents what *Rolling Stone* magazine is all about. The magazine’s article about young Christians committed to sexual abstinence appears as something of an eccentricity—like the report of an expedition into alien territory. Nevertheless, by the time the article draws to a close, it is clear that from the vantage point of the dominant sexual culture, the movement for sexual abstinence appears as something a bit more than odd. In fact, this movement represents nothing less than a threat to a society infatuated with sexual permissiveness. That’s what makes this article not only interesting, but important.

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