

Happy --Â and Chaste --Â on the College Campus

By NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY

In the spring, a New York Times reporter stumbled onto a new organization at Princeton University, the Anscombe Society. Founded to advocate chastity and abstinence outside of marriage among undergraduates, the group boasts about 80 members. To anyone who has followed the conservative drift of today's college students, the presence and relative popularity of Anscombe will not come as a complete surprise. But unlike many such groups, which are based upon a religious foundation (indeed, many are based at religious institutions), Anscombe's mostly Roman Catholic members say that they are not trying to preach faith to their fellow Princetonians.

But can a convincing case be made for abstinence, let alone chastity, outside of a religious context? In 1999 Wendy Shalit attempted that in her book, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (Free Press). Shalit had graduated from Williams College a couple of years earlier, and the impetus for her writing seems to have been the sadness and anger of the women she knew at college. Despite all the freedoms her female classmates had gained in the preceding decades -- freedom to have casual sex, to wrestle on the men's team, to be friends with their exes, to wear clothing as revealing as they'd like, to use co-ed bathrooms -- they felt uncomfortable, unsafe, and unhappy. Shalit's book looks at the women of her generation battling eating disorders, cutting themselves, and living in fear of sexual assault, and wonders: Was it always thus?

Through the course of the book, she discovers the benefits that accrue to religious women, those who don't touch before marriage, and whose clothing covers their whole person. They seem happy, confident, and even sexually satisfied (when the time comes). And so she looks to Orthodox Judaism for a model of a more satisfying life, although she does not argue that we all need to follow the laws of the Bible regarding relations between men and women. Rather, Shalit suggests, rewards that come to women from leading a traditional religious life can be adapted by secular women as well.

Lauren F. Winner, the author of *Real Sex: The Naked Truth About Chastity* (Brazos Press, 2005), on the other hand, does advocate basing chastity and abstinence on faith. Winner first burst on to the scene in 2002 with a memoir, *Girl Meets God: On the Path to a Spiritual Life* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2002), which described her bumpy journey from a Reform Jewish childhood to an Orthodox Jewish college life to an evangelical Christian adulthood. But like a lot of young people who adopt a faith seriously, in her latest book Winner says it was not easy to change her behavior to match her new beliefs.

Though she took great time and care to study the meaning of both Jewish and Christian laws on just about every other aspect of her life, she acknowledges that, when it came to sex, "I settled for an easy conclusion: What God really cared about was that people not have sex that might be harmful in some

way, sex that was clearly meaningless, loveless, casual." As an unmarried young woman, she did not abstain from sex.

There is little doubt that the many college women who engage in regular one-night stands could benefit from even the minimalist notion that God genuinely cares about when and with whom they have sex -- that no matter what the radical campus feminists may say, sex is and should always be meaningful. But is that rough guideline sufficient? For Shalit, who subsequently became an Orthodox Jew -- her next book will tackle that journey -- it wasn't. Nor for Winner. Though her sexual activity seemed restricted to relationships she found serious, in the end she wanted a brighter line, noting that she now finds it a "relief to know that I don't have to rely solely on my intuition or experience to make decisions about ethical behavior."

Perhaps it is that sentiment that is at the heart of both Shalit's and Winner's quests, and those of so many young people who are returning to orthodox religion lately. Shalit's book notes that "I found myself making up all these ridiculous rules. Suddenly I decided I would always leave the bedroom door open, I wouldn't see R-rated movies. I would always call men 'Mister,' and so on." Reading Shalit's account makes one consider the perhaps needless burden we place upon young people today -- expecting each of them to come up with their own moral code. That is not to say that we should always expect young people to adhere to the moral code they were raised with, but offering them a substantive starting point, perhaps in the form of religion, might not be such a bad thing.

We regularly say that young people want boundaries, and many of the students I've interviewed over the last few years -- students who choose religious colleges with strict rules even when their parents don't force them to -- are attracted to the kind of structure that a religious lifestyle and community can provide. Faith gives them a lodestar when their families and friends seem unable to offer them advice or judgment regarding relationships.

But which comes first? Are more students finding religion in college and then agreeing to follow its prescriptions regarding sex? Or are they looking for rules about sex and finding that faith can help them? The answer is surely a complicated one. Even Winner, who seems to come to religion first and then only later begins to take its precepts on sex seriously, offers hints in her religious memoir that she was always searching for help when it came to men. Her relationship with Steve, a boyfriend while she's in graduate school, runs hot and cold, but it always seems intertwined with her faith. At a church service with him in Memphis, Winner describes Steve crying during the altar call. "I sit next to him with my hand on the small of his back and my cheek pressed into his shoulder blade; I am both praying for the Spirit to set up shop in his heart and wondering at all the work the Spirit has already done."

Religion offers young people not only a glimpse at a different way of living and dating and coping with the difficulties of finding a mate, but also other people who will support them when they swim against the tide. At one point, Winner goes to see an Episcopal priest for confession. After she tells him of her sexual misbehavior, her confessor answers, "Well, Lauren, that's sin." She recalls, "I knew that this priest had just told me something true." Her behavior does not change immediately, but it is the beginning of a gradual journey toward chastity.

Winner does wish that more clergymen and women could be as blunt as that one, but having a priest or rabbi tell you that what you did is wrong is not enough for her. Rather, she wants individual young adults to speak to each other about their behavior. "Americans consider sex a fine topic of public disclosure," Winner writes, noting the ubiquity of sex in popular culture, "but we insist that sex is also private, nobody's business but mine and the person with whom I'm doing it. I can show you my midriff in public, and I can make out with my boyfriend on a park bench, but there is no communal grammar that allows you to talk to me about this body I am exposing in front of you." Winner wants everyone to participate in the conversation, not least because it's awfully hard to practice chastity in a vacuum.

In addition to a good scolding, then, a religious community may also provide a meeting place for young people who share values. College is generally the first time we are forced to live among people whose views may be radically different from our own. Relationships with people of other faiths earn the same stamp of approval that relationships with other races and ethnicities do (and young people who say they will not date or marry outside their faith are sometimes looked at with suspicion). But while administrators tend to see such interfaith friendships and romances as opportunities for growth, they come with their own set of problems. Particularly with regard to dating and sex, there is something to be said for a shared set of religious rules.

A student at Christendom College explained it to me thus: "You show up, and all of a sudden you discover ... very nice girls, who share very much the same values and morals as you, the kind of girls you very rarely run into." He went on to say, "All that groundwork, you know, that you'd have to do back home is not necessary." Students at other religious colleges, like Brigham Young University, echoed that sentiment when they talked to me, explaining that they were happy to finally be in an environment where they didn't have to defend their decision not to have premarital sex.

But faith doesn't simply provide a supportive community in which to make the hard decisions about sex. When Winner finds a young man (now her husband) who shares her faith, the two of them still have to navigate some rocky waters about sex. "Don't do anything sexual that you wouldn't feel comfortable doing on the steps of the rotunda," is the advice of a campus pastor. Winner likes it not simply because it provides her with a clear line, but because it reminds them that they are

"participating in a holy discipline, not making an individual choice." The idea of practicing modesty and chastity as disciplines, like, for instance, fasting, is a theme Winner returns to throughout *Real Sex*. She notes that such disciplines teach "the simple lesson that I am not utterly subject to my bodily desires." Religious practice, in other words, rather than just mindless adherence to someone else's rules, reminds us of our own humanity.

That guidance and support are surely reasons for the growing popularity of traditional religion among young people. Though the chaste are probably still a minority on college campuses, and among young Americans generally, one can begin to see the attraction to the religious life in the words of Shalit and Winner. It seems to be selling at Princeton.

Naomi Schaefer Riley is an adjunct fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, in Washington, and the author of *God on the Quad: How Religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation Are Changing America* (St. Martin's Press, 2005).