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Marriage — There Is No Alternative

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The fact that many young women are recapturing a vision of virginity until marriage has attracted a considerable amount of media attention. Media coverage has been devoted to books by authors such as Wendy Shalit and Dawn Eden and to programs encouraging sexual abstinence until marriage. The force of our cultural and moral revolution is immediately apparent in the fact that these developments are considered newsworthy. Since when did virginity make news?

These developments have also attracted detractors, and one of the most revealing critiques of the virginity movement comes from feminism. Writing in the current issue of *The Nation*, Nona Willis-Aronowitz suggests that these movements are efforts to turn back the achievements of the feminist movement and, at the same time, prove that feminism has not “finished its job.”

After reviewing the new emphasis on virginity (especially Shalit’s work), Willis-Aronowitz writes:

You have to be living under a rock not to notice that casual sex, once an expression of a subversive impulse, is now certifiably pop culture. Since the 1960s, sex—like everything from rock music to the psychedelic aesthetic—has been mainstreamed. But it’s a dubious claim that these images and ideals are really breeding mindless sex machines. “If we have to choose between emotional repression and sexual repression...then a better trade-off seems to be fewer partners and more intimacy,” concludes Shalit. But the idea that a woman who has lots of sexual partners forgoes her chance of finding “intimacy” and a “soul mate” is not only sanctimonious—it’s just not true. Ninety-five percent of Americans have sex before marriage, so chances are a good number of the bikini-clad women making out with strangers at Cancun foam parties will be married with kiddies at the age of 30. The hookup culture isn’t a sign of a loveless, commitment-free society—it doesn’t even provide an alternative to matrimony.

Interestingly, Willis-Aronowitz concedes her own concern about some aspects of modern sexuality. She finds a 10-year-old girl in sexually provocative undergarments to be “undeniably creepy.” Her own stomach “does sink a little when I see one of my peers woozily stripping her clothes off on a *Girls Gone Wild* commercial.” She does not want Paris Hilton to be her daughter’s role model.

At the same time, she sees the virginity movements as “retro,” not progressive:

Shalit’s so-called “rebels” amid our “pornified” culture may be technically raging against the mainstream, but they are surely just repackaging age-old ideas as defiance. They appear in the form of 16-year-old rappers preaching abstinence, Orthodox Jewish women getting married before even touching their husbands and a teenager getting her knickers in a twist over reading the word “[removed]” in her assigned reading. Most retro about the call for modesty is that it once again implies that women’s actions are somehow responsible for men’s. Since men simply cannot control themselves, poor things, women should shroud their bodies in cloth and desperately guard their virginity so as to quash men’s dishonorable intentions. These are the strong, “empowered” women who will quell the supposedly adverse effects of our sex-saturated culture.

Willis-Aronowitz resists bringing morality into the conversation at all. Morality is itself quite retro in her world. Sex is

about power and autonomy. Women have a right (even a responsibility?) to be as sexually adventuresome and promiscuous as men. It is all about power and “picking up on the element of fun that sexiness can bring to everyday life.”

The most interesting part of Willis-Aronowitz’s critique is her assessment that feminism has thus far failed in a central task — that of providing a genuine alternative to marriage. Citing feminist theorist Ariel Levy, she argues:

The culture has not yet carved out a space for women to indulge their own fantasies rather than to fulfill those of men. Feminism has not finished its job; a version of nonmushy, nonmarital sex that makes women feel good about themselves is still hard to achieve.

On closer analysis, it is the new movements’ focus on marriage that is her real concern. How fascinating that she would indict feminism for its failure — for now — to create “a version of nonmushy, nonmarital sex that makes women feel good about themselves.”

So “nonmushy, nonmarital sex” is a goal of postmodern feminism? In reality, it is an old story.

Utopian ideologies have sought in vain for an alternative to marriage for centuries. Plato’s original “Utopia” subverted marriage and the family in terms of the *polis*. Marxism defied the marriage covenant and sought to replace it with an ultimate commitment to the state. In its later stages, Nazi Germany redefined sexual morality in order to breed the “Master Race” without the constraints of marriage. The feminism of the sixties, we remember, looked to marriage and the traditional family as domestic “concentration camps.”

Now, Nona Willis-Aronowitz wants feminism to create “an alternative to matrimony” — a “version of nonmushy, nonmarital sex that makes women feel good about themselves.”

Sorry, Ms. Willis-Aronowitz. It isn’t out there. There is no alternative to marriage. History is littered with shattered experiments and the scarred lives of those who have believed otherwise.

Wendy Shalit’s work is cited here but not endorsed. Dawn Eden appeared as a guest on *The Albert Mohler Program* on [January 9, 2007](#) with guest host Russell Moore and again on [April 23, 2007](#) as my guest in the studio. Her book, *The Thrill of the Chaste: Finding Fulfillment While Keeping Your Clothes On* is a manifesto for the new movement.

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