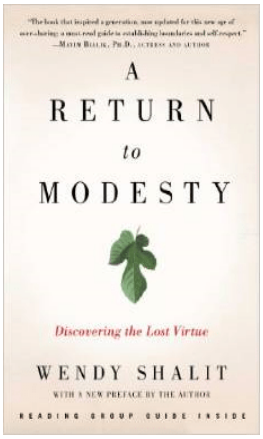
A Return to Modesty

The Loss of the Virtue of Modesty



This article is an examination of Wendy Shalit's book *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*. The book was written in 1999 and addressed to her "parents, and anyone who has ever been ashamed of anything." *A Return to Modesty* is an examination of public and personal attitudes toward the problems faced by young women at the end of the twentieth century, and the beginning of the twenty-first.

Shalit's starting point is the change from a healthy modesty toward sexual experience to a sheer embarrassment at the lack of experience. Her book is not a call to a prudish, Victorian sexuality, but a reminder of the value inherent in female modesty and the rewards for those who wait until marriage to become sexually active. Arguing against a culture which systematically attempts to rid us of our romantic hopes and natural embarrassments, Shalit offers young women an open invitation to cultivate one of the most feminine of all virtues, and to do so without shame or regret.

A Return to Modesty is divided into three parts: the first concerns our present view of sexual modesty and the problems with this view. The second section surveys the intellectual battles which led to our present situation. And the third is a

look at women who are saying “no” to contemporary values and returning to an earlier conception of modesty.

The War on Embarrassment, the title of the first chapter, looks at the early and middle ’80s when sex education in grade schools was beginning to become more commonplace in the United States. Young girls ten and eleven years of age sat in mixed company as instructors discussed the particulars of intercourse, venereal disease, and birth control. The result, argues Shalit, is that subjects that had been discussed privately among the separate genders are brought into the open in such a way that all modesty is systematically removed. Preteen girls are taught to be ashamed if they are embarrassed, and embarrassed if they are ashamed. The ensuing confusion leads to a schizophrenic approach to sexuality which will follow the young girl through puberty and into young womanhood.

The impact of this early exposure to sexuality is discussed in the second chapter, *Postmodern Sexual Etiquette.* Here the modern dating scene is shown to be a direct revolt against the supposedly debilitating sexual disease of Puritanism and the Judeo-Christian ethic.{1} The traditional maturation cycle of courtship, love, and marriage has been replaced by a sequence of hook-ups, dumpings, and post-dumping checkups. The result, which we will discuss, has been that women are generally disrespected, trivialized, and abused in ways that should concern us all.

The Normalization of Pornography

As we continue our examination of modesty, I would like to cover the statistical fallout from our behavior during the last half of the century.

Stalking, rape, and harassment of women in the work place and

at home all increased dramatically during the latter part of the twentieth century. But nothing is as alarming an indicator, says Shalit, as the "normalization of pornography."{2} The contemporary debate is little more than a "ping-pong" game over censorship with feminists and conservatives crying "yes," and the civil libertarians volleying back "no." What is missing is the realization of how our views of pornography have shifted and a recognition of the impact that this has on the lives of ordinary men and women.{3}

One indicator of our growing acceptance of recreational pornography is the increase in strip clubs in the past decade, up over 100 percent from 1992. Strippers have become a kind of cultural wallpaper, and are present to such an extent that they are no longer shocking.{4} Women who object to their husbands and boyfriends looking at porn are accused of being prudish and full of hang-ups. The result has been a plethora of diseases and disorders as women attempt to look like the airbrushed super models seen in magazines and film.

A young woman named Jennifer Silver was concerned that her boyfriend was reading *Playboy* magazine, but she and her friends were reluctant to say anything which would make them seem prudish or un-cool. In a porn-friendly culture Miss Silver's opinion was only valued if it was sympathetic to the norm. She said in an article to *Mademoiselle* magazine:

> *The real reason I hated Playboy was that the models established a standard I could never attain without the help of implants, a personal trainer, soft lighting, a squad of makeup artists and hairdressers, and airbrushing. It's a standard that equates sexuality with youth and beauty. I didn't want my boyfriend buying into Playboy's definition of sexuality.{5}*

Her boyfriend discontinued his reading in light of Miss

Silver’s observations, but many men, even Christian men, do not see the harm in this kind of indulgent and sinful behavior.

It is not enough to say we want to return to a more modest culture; we must actively strive to create such a culture. If women are ever going to be able to be modest, men will have to value that modesty, and one way to do so is by allowing women to be who they are and not place impossible demands on them.

The Intellectual Landscape

In part two of her book Shalit takes aim at the intellectual battles which have led to the present crises in virtue. Under the guise of “being comfortable with our bodies,” our universities, advertising companies, and even fellow Christians have urged women in the last half century to “let it all hang out.” Indicative of this attitude is a quote from *Bazaar,* a leading women’s magazine, in response to a cover which offended some readers:

> *The barely revealed breast on our August cover wasn’t meant to offend. It was meant to celebrate the beauty of the female form. Bazaar believes that women should feel comfortable with their bodies.*

The response to this reader’s letter was in effect saying that, if one should choose to be modest, then it is a reflection of not being “comfortable with one’s body.” The result is that we’ve become so comfortable with the body that people feel free to dress immodestly from the beach to the grocery store.

Shalit continues her examination of the intellectual landscape of modesty with a glimmer of hope based on nation-wide surveys in some of the most prominent women’s magazines. Her findings are that 49 percent of women wish they had slept with fewer men, and the happiest women were those who had the fewest

partners.{6} In addition to these observations, one could add that the same women's magazines that frequently advocate a more progressive and immodest lifestyle are also full of the confessions of women who have low self-esteem and feel that they are ugly and do not measure up to an increasingly critical society.

Following the statistical surveys, Shalit examines the idea of "male obligation." In an unusual turn she says that it is difficult to expect men to be honorable. Many women send messages that men are no longer expected to behave like gentlemen.{7} The short skirts, plunging necklines, and pouty lips so popular today are an invitation for men to stare at and perceive women as objects. The honor women want from men, argues Shalit, begins with the signals that women send. Those interested in a clear guide to a return to modesty, in their own lives or that of their friends and daughters, will find such a guide in Shalit's book *A Return to Modesty.*

Modest Dress

In an effort to find a way back to a more modest approach to sexuality, Shalit turns to some themes common in most religions. First she makes the observation that there is almost unanimous agreement among religions that modesty is inextricably linked to holiness.{8} In the first of several examples, Shalit quotes Christ's admonition: "Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked and then see his shame."{9} After this she recalls the occasion when Moses covers his face, and is afraid to look upon God. Finally, she considers the account of Isaiah when he sees the fiery angels surrounding the throne of God, and four of the six angels' wings are not functional because they are used to cover their feet. The rationale, says Shalit, is that in the presence of the Holy One, they should cover themselves.

In the section titled *The Return to Modest Dress,* Shalit documents the changing trends in women's dress. She discusses

how women who have rebelled against the immodest dress characterized by spandex, push-up bras, and bikinis have found a new self-respect they never knew was available. In addition to this, these same women have found that they are attracting the kind of men they really desire as opposed to men who approach them for their outward beauty alone.

There is a difficulty for young women who choose to be a part of the counter-culture of modesty Shalit is advocating. We live in a time when the loss of one's virginity is considered a right of passage into maturity. Young women who choose to hold on to their virginity are often ostracized by other girls who wish to have partners in their loss. The result is that one must frequently choose between the loss of innocence, or the loss of fellowship with one's peers. This is a tragic choice to ask of a young, teenage girl who desperately wants to be accepted.

The problem is not confined to young women alone, but is played out among more adult women with the same dire consequences. Men no longer have to marry a woman to get them to sleep with them and the result has been a growing hostility toward the institution of marriage.{10} The power to say "no" that women once collectively possessed, has been surrendered to the point that it is very difficult to reclaim. Shalit's book shows the way out of a dark forest of our own making.

How To Get There

"Loss of innocence is nothing new," writes Shalit, "but it is our assumption that there is now nothing to lose."{11} We frequently act as though previous generations have decided that young women need not value their innocence, and we are powerless to resist the pressures of society. However, we are told exactly the opposite throughout the Scriptures. We are told that we can, and must, resist the world. We are told that the individual can choose to behave differently than societal norms. And, we are reminded that the failure to resist the

temptations and standards set by secular society is sin.

The first thing we must do in order to return to a more modest society is to believe that it is possible, and to voice our desires for such a return actively. The second thing we must do is realize that cultures differ about what exactly is modest. Shalit cites examples of eighteenth century France where women would not bare their shoulders, Chinese women shy about their feet being exposed, and native women of Madagascar who would "rather die of shame than expose their arms."{12}

Shalit proposes that we listen to the universal instinct within us which has been systematically suppressed. We know that we are naturally shy and sensitive to some things and should sometimes, but not always, cultivate our reservations rather than trying to overcome them. Quoting Francis Benton, Shalit writes:

> *Specific rules about modesty change with the styles. Our Victorian ancestors, for instance, would judge us utterly depraved for wearing the modern bathing suit. Real modesty, however, is a constant and desirable quality. It is based not on fashion, but on appropriateness. A woman boarding a subway in shorts at the rush hour is immodest not because the shorts themselves are indecent, but because they are worn in the wrong place at the wrong time. A well-mannered and self-respecting woman avoids clothes or behavior that are inappropriate or conspicuous.{13}*

In order for society, and especially Christians within a secular and hostile society, to return to modesty we must be willing to look a little awkward in our actions and appearances. God has called us to be a strange and peculiar people for His purposes. One of the easiest and most influential ways to do this is through our outward appearances and actions. We should return to modesty before it really is too late.

Notes

1. Wendy Shalit, *A Return To Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 26.
2. Ibid., 49-54.
3. Ibid., 49.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 52.
6. Ibid., 90.
7. Ibid., 104-105.
8. Ibid., 218.
9. Rev. 16:15.
10. Shalit, 227.
11. Ibid., 241.
12. Ibid., 232.
13. Ibid., 232.

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