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61 How Student Life Is Different at Religious Colleges

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Religious colleges and universities are thriving. Naomi Schaefer Riley visited twenty of these religious institutions and found that many of the students had fairly traditional and conservative views about politics, drugs, music, and other topics. This selection describes the students' attitudes about premarital sexual behavior, especially while on campus.

In 2003, Yaacov Weinstein and Gil Perl took some time off from their graduate study at Harvard to produce an eleven-page monograph called "A Parent's Guide to Orthodox Assimilation on University Campuses." The two warn that the atmosphere at secular schools—from the classroom, where students are taught that the Torah was not divinely authored and that Israel shouldn't exist, to the dormitory, where the abundance of sex, drugs, and alcohol has now come to include officially sponsored "lingerie study breaks" and "pornography clubs"—encourages young Orthodox Jews to compromise or abandon their faith. Weinstein and Perl observe that even the campus Jewish organizations "often place Orthodox kids in un-*halachic* [contrary to Jewish law] social situations."

Promiscuity, or at least "sexual awareness," has become part of a college education promoted by the administration at secular schools. While she was a student at Williams College, Wendy Shalit wrote an article in *Commentary* describing the meeting in which the residents of her dormitory voted to make the bathrooms coed. When Shalit objected to the idea, "The other girls actually seem[ed], for a moment, to take her part, as the poor benighted miss surrounded by a pack of worldlings patting her on the back, flattering and reassuring her. 'Don't worry, I was just like you once,' one of them [began] condescendingly, smiling with the smug authority of the victorious. 'And then . . . I became COMFORTABLE WITH MY BODY.' " After Shalit is embarrassed into going along with the decision, "The resident advisers," she notes, "take this opportunity to announce that if anyone has problems with the coed bathroom, please do come and talk with them—there are any number of good campus counselors at 'Psych Services.' "

And if you're crazy not to want to share a bathroom with a member of the opposite sex, why not a *bedroom?* Several schools, like Haverford College, have recently added the option of coed dorm rooms as a way of accommodating homosexual students who don't feel comfortable living with

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someone to whom they might be sexually attracted. Of course, since the schools involved would never question students about their sexual orientation, the policy gives a free pass for heterosexual couples to live together. Few administrators feel as though they have any basis for protesting such an arrangement. Tufts University president John DiBiaggio was able to muster only this half-hearted explanation for his rejection of the idea: "I'm not saying that we are prudish. We are not acting in loco parentis. But we are dealing with life-threatening venereal diseases here."

With administrators backed into a corner like this, unable even to seem like they are taking a moral stance, students at secular universities continue to push the envelope. Life on most college campuses remains defined by the 1960s mantra that college is the time for students to get out from under the thumb of their parents and "experiment."

Rich Powers, the dean of students at Wheaton College, who used to work at a public university in Illinois, recalls how, shortly after arriving in his current job, he telephoned one of his former colleagues. "I asked how are things going, and the person I talked to said, 'Oh man, somebody shot off a gun in his apartment the other day and campus police just had to bust a prostitution ring.' " Powers acknowledges that Wheaton is far from perfect, "but the issues here by and large pale by comparison."

Religious college students generally seem to avoid the kind of trouble that puts secular campuses in the headlines. There are certain exceptions, of course, but on the whole, religious campuses are devoid of the alcohol, drugs, sexual activity, and violence that plague many secular universities. "We have our challenges," says Powers. "We want students to think as critically outside classroom as they do inside of it. We want them to make wise decisions which are honoring to the Lord and good for them and the community."

How do they do it? First, and most importantly, religious college kids *want* to be in this environment. Only a small minority of the students I spoke with claimed their parents told them they had to attend a religious college. Carri Jenkins, who is in charge of public relations at Brigham Young, tells me why over lunch with a few other administrators and faculty:

> Many of these students have been in a high school where they are the only one who is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ, and they are tired of having to constantly defend who they are. They want to have fun without getting drunk. This is freedom for them. They come here and they can be who they want to be. They can live their principles.

Second, religious college leaders have no problem acting in loco parentis. In fact, the parents themselves often become involved. At Calvin, for instance, there is a parental notification policy for any alcohol use on campus or any other disciplinary infraction. "We've found that to be very effective," says administrator Shirley Hoogstra. "We think that a parent is a partner in the process in terms of discipline."

Administrators at religious colleges, not surprisingly, take a religious approach to discipline. Professor Scott Moore notes that if a Baylor student violates a rule, "any action taken would be redemptive." Most of the adults on these campuses agree that human beings are sinners, prone to make mistakes, and, within limits, it's the job of the college to help set them on the right course, rather than simply kick them out.

Powers explains, "We will hold students accountable for choices, but do it in a gracious fashion, not a punitive fashion." Wheaton's student body president Noel Jabbour finds the administration's attitude useful. "They ask 'How can we help this person to get through what he has done, and explore the reason why he did it?' " Administrators believe the key to successful discipline is creating an environment in which students will come for help before they are caught violating some rule, "when they reach a point where they feel like they are not in control."

Steve Baker, the director of BYU's honor code office, boasts that fewer than 1 percent of students are ever brought to see him. One reason for this is that problems are often handled

in a religious context—with a student approaching his bishop or vice versa—before they ever get to the university offices. If a disciplinary infraction does come to the attention of the administration, the student can choose to involve his or her bishop as an advocate. Baker emphasizes that the student is entitled to the "ecclesiastical confidential relationship that no one else is privy to."

Ultimately, religious college administrators are a lot like parents when it comes to the issues of sexuality or the use of alcohol. They offer guidance and help in the process of character formation, which sometimes includes punishment, but more importantly, they are also supposed to prepare their charges for the world outside. Most religious college students do not live in a vacuum. They are aware of how secular culture views dating, sex, marriage, homosexuality, drinking, drugs, and smoking. On some issues their faith may provide clear guidelines regarding what is expected of them in these regards. Mormons, for example, are not allowed to smoke under any circumstances. But in other cases, the gray area is more significant. Are young evangelicals allowed to kiss? To what extent are Catholic students supposed to drink? How are people with homosexual impulses supposed to be treated? It is the job of religious colleges to help their graduates make these decisions.

Administrators and faculty at religious college tend to agree that the place to start addressing these issues is in the dormitories. Most strongly religious schools have stuck with the relic of single-sex dorms. Many students note they are not comfortable sharing their bedrooms and bathrooms with members of the opposite sex. Moreover, they like the fact that they don't have a "third roommate" (the problem created when a roommate's significant other stays over regularly). Lauren Whitnah, a sophomore at Gordon College, was skeptical of the dorm rules, but says she is now grateful for them. "If my roommate was coming in drunk or with her boyfriend, I had recourse to say, 'That's not okay with me and not okay with the school.' I felt like there would really be someone that would back me up."

Kelly Pascual, a sophomore psychology major at Notre Dame, likes the single-sex dorms because they foster close friendships. Eighty-five percent of the university's student body lives on campus, and there is a general agreement about the positive effects of single-sex dorms. Erica Hayman, a junior, tells me that before she came to Notre Dame, she always wanted to live next door to a guy, and when she arrived freshman year she was irritated to find that on the weekends she could go six or seven hours without seeing one. Since then, though, she has learned to appreciate the value of the living arrangements. She notes, "Notre Dame wouldn't be Notre Dame without single-sex dorms."

The university's visiting hours are, however, some of the most liberal at religious colleges. Members of the opposite sex are allowed in the dorms until midnight on weekdays and two A.M. on weekends.

Few leaders of religious colleges are of the opinion that they can prevent all sexual activity among the students. Instead, most religious college leaders use dorm life as a means of student "formation." What is meant by formation, of course, varies from school to school. At Baylor, it involves a willingness on the part of the administration to adopt behavioral standards, but no one is checking the beds each night.

Some schools have adopted an almost military approach to formation, on the theory that breeding certain habits in students will build character. This has produced mixed results. At Bob Jones, where women and men are not allowed any kind of physical contact, the school's rules may be strict enough to minimize such incidents, but as most administrators will tell you, where there's a will there's a way. Even at Thomas Aquinas College, where students live on a mountaintop, spend almost all their waking hours studying, have a curfew of eleven P.M., and no visitation hours, a young woman was caught having an affair with a married man in a nearby town a few years ago.

At seven thirty on a cold, rainy morning in late April, the chapel at Magdalen, a small Catholic college in rural New Hampshire, is more than half full, most of its students and faculty (all attired, in accordance with the school's dress code, in either coats and ties of muted colors or long skirts and modest blouses) sitting in silence for the fifteen minutes before mass begins. Candles are lit on the altar just as the lights come up in the chapel. Two male students sitting in the third to last row check their voices against a pitch pipe and begin to lead the congregation in song. There is no organ at first, but the congregation's a cappella sounds almost professional. Though the service is slightly more elaborate today because it is the week following Easter, daily mass at Magdalen usually lasts close to an hour.

By the time students leave the chapel to line up for breakfast, where their seats are assigned (differently each day, so as to avoid the formation of cliques), they have made their beds and tidied their rooms. Clothes must be folded neatly, there can be no clutter on desks or dressers, and decorations on the walls are not permitted. Students also carry around an extra pair of shoes with them, and change whenever they walk into a building so that they do not soil the floors. That rule is easily enforced since students themselves do most of the campus cleaning.

"I thought it was crazy, nuts, and bizarre when I came here," says Mark Gillis, who graduated from Magdalen in 1990, and is now a professor there. Gillis, whose parents told him he could either go to Magdalen or be kicked out of the house, remembers his reaction to the school's ten thirty lights-out policy: "I would lie awake for hours. It was like detox." But one day during the spring of his first year, Gillis recalls, "I realized I was happy." Even the students who are forced by their parents to attend, Gillis believes, come to like it eventually. "As you mature, you begin to appreciate things being more or less organized. . . . It's good habits. It's character formation. It's Aristotle."

Magdalen also has the strictest policy with regard to dating—it's not allowed. The rule is actually against "steady company keeping" and most students come to like it after some time. Nancy Carlin, a senior, explains,

> The rule makes perfect sense to me. It has allowed me to have deeper friendships with guys than ever before in my life. There was a sense in high school that if you sit down with a guy you are attached at the hip. They will think, "You are mine and I possess you." It's so freeing to be able to sit at a table with a guy for an hour after lunch and not have people think you must be dating. [The rule against coupling] fosters a sense of self-giving.

"Whereas dating makes your world shrink to about this big," Carlin notes, holding her thumb and forefinger an inch apart, "it seems love should open your world."

Many Magdalen students do get married shortly after graduation, and Carlin thinks they have a better idea of whom they're marrying as a result of the no-dating rule. "It's pretty easy when you're going out to dinner and a movie with a guy that you just put on a front."

But at a place like Magdalen?

"It's much easier here to get to know someone. You are part of a group of friends and you see how they react with other people." Carlin, who grew up in a family with ten children, thinks that the best reason for putting off dating is that you have a better chance of getting into a solid marriage instead of a relationship based only on self-gratification.

Both Bob Jones University and Patrick Henry College have strict rules about dating as well. PHC requires students to get their parents' permission before pursuing a romantic relationship, and BJU requires chaperones for all dates. Though evangelical schools generally allow dating, some of their students have been attracted to the ideas in a recent popular book called *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*—which advocates that young people put off any kind of romantic relationship until they are ready for marriage.

Regardless of their rules on dating, all of the schools in this book try to monitor sexual activity on campus, starting with hugging and kissing. At Thomas Aquinas, students are prohibited from engaging in any public displays of affection

because the administrators believe it is harmful to the formation of community. At Brigham Young University, on the other hand, such displays are ubiquitous. Even during the "fireside" talks given by leaders of the church on Sunday evenings in the sports arena, couples are holding hands and men have their arms around their girlfriends' shoulders. There is a strange slow movement everywhere you look as students stroke each other's hair, arms, and faces.

But BYU students do take seriously the rule against premarital sex. Since most of the students live in off-campus housing, the rule is enforced primarily through peer pressure. Minji Cho, who only recently converted to Mormonism and experimented with sex in high school, tells me, "I realized that if I went to a public university there would be a lot of . . . temptation for me. I didn't want to necessarily be around Mormons; anyone with clean morals would have been fine." Knowing how she is struggling, Minji's roommates keep a motherly eye on her.

Like Minji, most religious college students seem thankful they will not have to confront the sorts of sexual pressures they would at secular schools. Rachel Stahl, a sophomore at Gordon, tells me she looks forward to going out with guys there. "I have dated people who aren't Christian and sex is all they want."

But are these students really abstaining from sex? When I asked that question to a gathering of Southern Virginia University faculty about their Mormon students, there was a lot of giggling, and several noted that there would hardly be such an intense obsession with getting married early if students were having sexual contact outside of marriage.

At most of the colleges, though, there is a contingent of students who are not living by the code of sexual conduct. Rev. Mark Poorman, the vice president for student affairs at Notre Dame, is not sure about the percentage of undergrads engaging in sexual activity. He posits that it's rather small, but notes that if the administration finds out about such behavior "from a credible source," they will challenge it.

Indeed, even at schools where students are not watched as closely as they might be at Magdalen or Bob Jones, sexual activity is not flaunted thanks to peer pressure and administrations that are clear about their standards. But an atmosphere where premarital sex is considered shameful and not to be discussed can also encourage what Abby Diepenbrock, a codirector of the Center for Christian Concerns at Westmont, calls "hypocrisy."

"Christian schools and religious schools in general," she says, "have a reputation for saying one thing and then behaving in a different way."

Abby senses that many of her fellow students feel guilty about this disconnect between their words and actions. "You can tell in conversation. People start talking about something that's a little questionable. I hear a lot of people saying, 'Oh, we couldn't do that if Jake were around,' " referring to her codirector. Abby asks, "What does Jake matter? What about the Lord?"

Ben Patterson, Westmont's chaplain, has been surprised by the kinds of things his charges are engaged in.

> In areas of [sexual] morality, students are very much affected by their feelings, more than any sense of dogma. . . . It's pretty scary around here how many professing Christian students who are really seriously believers split off there. What they will do . . . in intimate relationships [is] so off the edge. I was at [the evangelical] Hope College for four years and I talked to students periodically who wanted to clean up their sex lives, to get themselves in line with their faith. . . . It took me four years to realize what they meant by that. They weren't having intercourse, but they were doing absolutely anything else. And it just one day dawned on me. Oh heavens. I thought they meant they had very high standards, but they didn't. They went right up to that. That was the only thing left to do. . . . [Westmont students] are in the same place. They'll say, "I feel close. I'm not just doing it with anybody. I care deeply."

The solution to these kinds of moral slip-ups, according to students and faculty, may be early marriage. The median age at which college-educated women marry has increased dramatically in the last few decades. But at most religious schools, getting married young is encouraged, if not expected. (Even at Notre Dame, a number of

the seniors remark on their many friends who plan to marry shortly after graduation.) "Ring by spring"—that is, getting engaged by the spring of senior year—is a mantra at almost every school I visit. And there is always a rash of weddings right after graduation.

Because the vast majority of evangelical students do not get married while in college, they use a number of traditions to signify to each other the seriousness of their commitment. Christian Bell and Beth Heinen, the editors of the Calvin newspaper, who are themselves engaged, explain to me the various stages of courtship at Calvin, from the opal, which is the pre-pre-engagement ring, to the pearl, the pre-engagement ring, to the actual engagement ring. (Beth acknowledges that when she heard about the opal, "I was like, 'You've got to be joking.'")

In the Mormon community, courtship does not have so many stages because students often get married while in school, and after a relatively short period of dating. The high rate of marriage among students or recent graduates of religious colleges may be inevitable. Students are, often for the first time, placed in a pool of people their own age who share their beliefs and values.

But with the opportunity comes great anxiety. All of the sexual pressure that students at secular colleges might experience is transformed at religious colleges into the pressure to find a spouse. And it is compounded by the fact that many parents of religious college students found their spouses at such schools. Andrea Ludlow, a senior at BYU, who dates, "but not a ton," explains, some of her classmates "think, 'Oh if I don't get married in college, I'll never get married.'"

Paul Jalsevac, the student body president at the Catholic Christendom College, describes the temptation that arose when he first arrived at school:

> You show up, and all of a sudden you discover a whole bunch of people who, well, a whole bunch of girls, who, you know, are pretty beautiful, very nice girls, who share very much the same values and morals as you, the kind of girls you very rarely run into. They are looking for the same things in a relationship and care about the same things. All that groundwork, you know, that you'd have to do back home is not necessary. You have people who actually want a real relationship. They aren't just looking for something physical.

The result, according to Paul, is that freshmen get very serious very quickly. "They think, 'Wow this is the perfect match.'" Laura Johnson, the editor of Gordon College's newspaper, sees a similar phenomenon among her classmates. "The guys think, 'Wow, there are Christian girls here. And they're actually cool.' They haven't seen that. The tendency is 'I have to go get that right away.'"

The pressure is also compounded by the lopsided ratio of women to men at many of these schools. Laura tells me that women often complain to her about the ratio (almost three to one at Gordon). "They say, 'I'm never going to find anyone.'"

But, laughing about the "senior scramble," Laura says, "It doesn't bother me. I know that God is going to provide the right person, here or later on in life."

CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Most of the students said that they have high moral standards. However, many also admitted to having premarital sexual intercourse. Is there a contradiction between the students' attitudes and behavior? Can you explain this inconsistency?
2. How do religious colleges and universities reinforce beliefs about appropriate sexual behavior? How do the beliefs promote both social control as well as a sense of group solidarity?
3. What are some of the advantages of getting married right after graduation? What are some of the disadvantages?