

Virgin territory: Sex and the single man

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [October 4, 2005](#) issue

With all of its jokes about bestiality, sexual harassment and pimpin' for drunk ho's, ***The 40-Year-Old Virgin*** is not a film to show the youth group. The humor is vulgar enough to make the producers of *South Park* blush. But in its own way the movie makes a case for virginity, one likely to gain a wider hearing than a True Love Waits campaign. It's not only genuinely (if crudely) funny, but surprisingly human.

Andy (Steve Carell of *Anchorman*) works at a Best Buy-like store, where his co-workers are determined to see him bring his years of sexual inexperience to an end. One suggests Andy pick up the drunkest girl in the bar. He does so, but once in the car, she hurls into his lap. Then the friends hire a prostitute, who turns out not to be the right gender. They suggest he approach women with greater Alpha-male aggression, so he stands there, coolly aloof, and lets them talk about themselves. One of them falls for it, but her very eagerness turns out to disgust him.

As their antics mount, the friends seem less cool and more pathetic. One tells of his weekend exploits in Tijuana. "We went to see a show about a girl having sex with a horse, and I know it sounds cool, but it was just gross." Compared with these guys, the virgin doesn't look so silly. "Look at him—he looks ten years younger than us, and he's ten years older!" one marvels.

Andy eventually falls for Trish (the fetching and matronly Catherine Keener), a mature mother of two. They fall in love precisely because they can agree not to have sex. She helps him divest himself of a house full of action figures so he can give up his stockroom job and open his own store. She also gets him to give up his argyle wardrobe and teaches him to drive. Meanwhile, Andy's friends are playing sadomasochistic video games as they needle one another about who is "gay."

By this time it's clear that this movie is actually about a longing for maturity. For women in our culture maturity often comes all too early. Trish is actually a grandmother, whose pleas to her teenage daughter to avoid sex ("I'll actually take

you back to church!” she promises, or threatens) fall on deaf ears, since she herself clearly did not follow her own advice. Yet when her daughter realizes that Andy is a virgin, she defends him, for he’s reasonably normal and good to her mom, and perhaps even worthy of imitation.

The women’s emotional maturity stands in stark contrast to the men’s imbecility. Yet amid their clownishness they have moments of surprising self-awareness. The boys may be having fun, but they know they’re pitiful. When one counsels Andy to have sex with someone he doesn’t care about enough times that he’ll be good at it when he’s with someone he does care about, he goes on to admit, “even then you’ll be bad at it.”

Sex reveals the insecurities of the biggest braggarts—perhaps especially theirs. And when Andy’s practiced growth in “cool” yields a trophy hookup, he walks away precisely because he loves Trish and wants to wait for her. Casual sex is shown to be pathetic, whereas sex in the context of serious commitment is shown to be genuinely erotic.

The title of the film is meant to be catching because it is so ridiculous. Yet it caught my eye because virginity also turned the head of the ancient Christians I’ve studied. Their praise of virginity was, often enough, a reflection of their misogyny and lingering Platonist ill regard for bodies, but just as often it was a recognition of the power of sex—that with our sexuality we can be our worst selves, using others and lying to others and ourselves.

They also thought the best analogies for God’s love are often erotic, and that the very best love is the nonphysical kind, between the soul and God. “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,” intones the Song of Songs, and legions of Christians gave up all other sexual partners for life to pursue only the kiss of the bridegroom, Jesus.

Somehow sex-crazed Hollywood has so satirized the sexual practices of our day that it has ended in the traditional stance of praising virginity. A 40-year-old in argyle who doesn’t know what a breast feels like may be ridiculous, but that’s clearly far less ridiculous than the lifelong search for titillation pursued by Andy’s friends. When the minister at Andy and Trish’s wedding pleads, “Now consummate the thing!” and the crowd starts dancing to “The Age of Aquarius,” we smile—this is how it should be.

Theologian Sarah Coakley has observed that whereas moderns think talk about desire for God is veiled talk about desire for sex, ancient Christians assumed the opposite—desire for sex is really veiled desire for God. If so, we can laugh along with this tale of disordered desire, which here gets steered the right way, perhaps in spite of itself.