

Rafael Rodriguez

Sex and the [Univer]City: Students, Sex, and Spirituality on American Campuses

Freitas, Donna. (2008). [*Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*](#). New York: Oxford University Press. 299 pp. \$24.95

Donna Freitas's book, [*Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*](#) (Oxford University Press, 2008), provides an important window into the private lives of American undergraduate students.ⁱ "Private" is the operative word here, as Freitas's two areas of concern—sexuality and spirituality—have both been relegated to the realm of the individual even as both find themselves the subjects of prime-time news features. How often do we hear statements such as, "It's none of *my* business what they do behind closed doors," or "What a person believes is her business and nobody else's"?

Despite these overtly individualistic approaches to both sex and faith, society speaks very loudly to American youth about both, whether through pop culture (television, movies, and music), aggressive advertising, glossy magazines (increasingly for both female *and male* teens and young adults), and political discourse. In theory American teens are free to think (and do) whatever they want with respect to religion and relationships; in practice, however, the pressure to conform to what everyone else is doing (or what Hollywood portrays everyone else as doing) is everywhere.

Freitas provides a sustained look at both the spiritual and sexual dimensions of students' experiences in college. With respect to the spiritual proclivities of American college students, Freitas cites a UCLA study,ⁱⁱ which "reports that there are many more college students in the 'spiritual but not religious' group (35%) and that almost half of college students report that 'it is 'essential' or 'very important' that college[s] encourage their personal expression of spirituality'" (Freitas, 2008, p. 10). Whether at explicitly faith-oriented campuses such as Johnson Bible College or otherwise, the majority of college students identified themselves as "spiritual" and/or "religious" (91.8%, or 2,256 of 2,455 students; cf. 2008, p. 37). We cannot presume that either the "spiritual" (87.1%, or 2,138 of 2,455 students) or the "religious" students (70.3%, or 1,727 of 2,455 students) are "Christian" students.ⁱⁱⁱ But clearly American college students are interested in questions and issues regarding God and/or the divine and their experiences of him (or it). Freitas reminds us that the students she interviews—whether they're having sex or not, whether they're anguished about their sexual experiences (or lack thereof) or not—are demonstrably *and keenly* questing after spiritual significance and meaning. Even so, most of them are questing alone, so that students' search for ultimate meaning, in their sexual lives as well as their social lives, is largely conducted without a helpful map, road signs, or even traveling companions.

Freitas's interviews with college students from a wide spectrum of educational and spiritual backgrounds and environments reveal a portrait of the "typical" college student that challenges

our perceptions of them as hedonistic, lazy, or ignorant of issues larger than this weekend's social opportunities. According to Freitas,

There are college students all across America, the majority of them women, who are eager not only to talk about sex, relationships, religion, and spirituality as individual subjects, but who are deeply curious about what these same topics—which often seem to them disparate and irreconcilable—might have to say to one another. Significant numbers of students across varying institutions in higher education want to have conversations about sex *in relation to the soul*. (2008, p. 12; original italics)

Despite the desire to integrate exploration of their sexuality with their spiritual development and maturation, students have learned from experience that religious teachings are either unreasonable or irrelevant vis-à-vis their questions about sex, love, romance, and intimacy.^{iv}

With respect to evangelical colleges and their students' sexual attitudes and experiences, Freitas examines what she calls *purity culture*. According to purity culture, sex outside its proper context becomes “dirty,” “the enemy,” “corrosive,” “ruin[ous].” Freitas observes that “within contemporary evangelical Christianity, the operative classification is marriage, understood as a kind of ‘purifying container’ for the messiness that is human sexuality” (2008, p. 79). We might want to quibble with the connotations of Freitas's language here (though perhaps we might not). Regardless of how faithfully or not this take on purity culture reflects our understanding of biblical teachings about sex, the mechanisms by which purity culture encourages some behaviors and punishes others often remain unexamined. The result? “The chances of realizing romantic hopes within the purity paradigm are slim. This can create terrible angst and disappointment for young adults, who are often shattered by their failure to live the fairy tale” (2008, p. 80).^v

On the other hand, Freitas similarly examines what she calls the *hookup culture* on Catholic and non-religious campuses and exposes the disastrous effects of the avowedly secular approach to sexuality and spirituality at these institutions. She repeatedly chronicles the isolation of most students' attempts to draw meaning from their sexual feelings and experiences and even from their spiritual yearnings. “Save for the rare crisis — when Amy and her friends might offer up prayers for one another—Amy's spiritual life lacks a communal dimension. . . . Whereas God might indeed ‘be everywhere’ for Amy, he is clearly not very social” (2008, p. 19). This isolation is both remarkable and disastrous. Remarkable, in that higher educational practice emphasizes the communal nature of questioning, learning, and maturation. Disastrous, in that most students lack the resources to make sense of the contradictory messages regarding both sex and faith with which they are incessantly bombarded by the media, the church, their peers, and even their own bodies.

In light of all of this, one question in particular faces everyone who works with teens and young adults: “Why do colleges tolerate a situation in which students are left alone in facing these problems [of reconciling sex and the soul]?” (2008, p. 216). In light of the especially communal environment on JBC's campus we might be tempted to think this problem doesn't apply to us.^{vi} Youth ministers, too, might prefer to think their youth group provides an especially safe place to explore what our faith has to say about our sexuality.

But whereas student culture at the “spiritual colleges” arguably privileges freedom to experiment and participate in any sexual activity that doesn’t overtly harm any of its participants over accountability to any religious tenets, evangelical culture inverts this privilege. On our campuses and in our churches we emphasize the biblical teachings about sex and purity, but do we give much attention to how to encourage students to talk about their *actual* experiences and feelings toward sex, especially when these fall short of biblical expectations? Our students clearly understand that faith infuses every moment and aspect of their sexual lives. But when their sexual history (or preferences, or thoughts) contradicts their faith, where does that leave their relationship with God? Too often our emphasis on sexual purity leaves students feeling alienated from God, objects of his wrath, and ineligible for his redeeming grace (e.g., 2008:171).

We need to develop space on our campuses and in our youth groups for students to speak openly and honestly about their hopes, expectations, failures, and struggles with the interface between their sexuality and their relationship with God. At the moment I don’t know how to go about doing this, but I think that understanding and highlighting the God-giveness of human sexuality provides the starting point. Not just sex within the context of marriage is created by God, but sexual desire itself, as part of what we are. This doesn’t mean that just any expression of that sexual desire is godly; certainly sexual malpractice has wreaked havoc within innumerable lives throughout our society and even throughout history. But we need to enable and encourage our students to see their struggles with sexuality as an aspect of their daily efforts to live faithful lives to God rather than as continual reminders of their depravity and moral bankruptcy. Only when our students are free to discuss openly and honestly their questions, fears, and hopes about sex will they be able to effectively pursue the ideal of purity and sexual expression within marriage that God has established as the proper and safe place for sex and its consequences.

Freitas’s book closes with “A Practical Guide to Sex and the Soul: Three Musts for Your College To-Do List” (2008, pp. 229–242) which in itself is worth the price of the book if you are a youth minister, college admissions counselor, or parent looking for ways to help your child enter and experience college positively with respect to their sexuality. A few words of caution, however: Freitas provides numerous student accounts of their sexual and spiritual beliefs and practices, and some of these are explicit and unvarnished. While Freitas never indulges in gratuitous description of her interviewees’ sexual histories, neither does she censor them. *Sex and the Soul* is graphic without becoming pornographic.

Secondly, Freitas, a Catholic scholar, writes sympathetically and honestly about her experiences on evangelical campuses, but she does not herself advocate an evangelical approach to sexual and/or spiritual questions. As a result, she advocates some solutions to the problems she identifies that many (most?) readers of *ChurchLink* will not find acceptable. I do not intend my endorsement of her book to imply that her suggestions should be implemented, either at JBC or in your ministries. Rather, *Sex and the Soul* encourages us to ask some important questions, questions with which our students are already wrestling, and to engage in serious efforts to help our teens and young adults develop into adults with healthy and robust sexual and spiritual identities.

Endnotes

ⁱ *Sex and the Soul* was also reviewed by Elizabeth Redden at insidehighered.com.

ⁱⁱ See p. 255, n. 8, where Freitas points readers to the Associated Press story, “Surveys: Young Adults Search Spirituality,” which can be found at beliefnet.com.

ⁱⁱⁱ These figures add up to more than 2,455 (100%) because students could identify themselves as “spiritual and religious,” “spiritual but not religious,” “religious but not spiritual,” or “neither.”

^{iv} This point is made at numerous places in *Sex and the Soul*, but see in particular chapters 8 (“God vs. My Boyfriend”) and 9 (“Dividing Sex from the Soul: Why Religion Doesn’t Matter When It Comes to Sex”).

^v Let me say explicitly: I am *not* advocating abandoning biblical principles and expectations for sexuality and sexual behavior. But too often we have been happy to point to those principles and expectations and have felt free to ignore any responsibility we might have to minister to people wrestling with, questioning, or striving for a godly sexual ethic. As a result, many people, whether young or otherwise, express feelings such as that found in the epigraph at chapter 8: “I’m supposed to be a great Christian guy and I have sexual feelings, and with God I feel guilty, and I ask God to forgive me, and *I feel that I’m going to run out of grace*” (2008, p. 167; my emphasis; this quote comes from an evangelical university student, even though “he and his girlfriend have never done anything other than kiss [!]” [cf. 2008, p. 180]). When the ways we advocate a biblical sexual ethic result in this kind of crippling spiritual angst, we have ceased teaching biblical sexual ethics.

^{vi} Indeed, Freitas found that evangelical campuses in general tended to foster especially well-integrated communities where intellectual, emotional, physical, as well as spiritual development are holistically interconnected (e.g., 2008:64–65); this level of holistic integration stands out in stark contrast to “spiritual colleges” (Catholic, private nonreligious, and public institutions), where sustained, reflective discourse about faith and sex in particular was nowhere to be found.