

# Sexuality and Spirituality in American Adolescents

BY LAUREN TAYLOR

Both adults and young people are hesitant to discuss the topic of faith and sexuality. Research in the three books reviewed here suggests ways to address this silent stand-off, bridge the generation gap, and start the conversation.

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Understanding the ways religion impacts adolescents' attitudes and behaviors toward sex is difficult. It is subtle. It is complex. It is constantly evolving and usually locked in the mysterious and often impenetrable minds and worlds of young people. Those of us who shepherd youth through life, faith, and relationships know spirituality and sexuality are related, but how do we discern this connection if it is so shrouded in mystery? And how do we communicate that relation in a healthy way to our teenagers and twentysomethings? This is often where we get held up.

Adults, however, are not the only ones who get stuck. Young people also are hesitant to discuss the topic of faith and sexuality. It is awkward to bring up, taboo to talk about, and could elicit disappointment, shame, and punishment, especially in the religious world. Students are left wondering what is acceptable to talk about with adults. What will happen if they bring it up? And so, this is often where adolescents get held up.

But in the midst of this silent standoff, we must find a way to bridge the gap and start the conversation. The stakes are high, for the way adolescents understand the interconnectedness of sex and faith has serious long-term consequences on how religion and sexuality become integrated into their daily lives, affecting their relationships, marriages, and perspectives on God.

## **CONNECTING SEX LIFE WITH SOUL LIFE IN COLLEGE**

Donna Freitas, in *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*, updated edition (New York:

Oxford University Press, 2015 [2008], 352 pp., \$19.95), seeks to articulate the connection (or lack thereof) between the sex lives and the spiritual lives of American college students.

Her project began in the classroom where, as a professor of religion, she stumbled into a post-spring break discussion among her students lamenting the hookup culture on campus. "The problem was that hookup culture promoted reckless, unthinking attitudes and expectations about sex, divorcing it from their larger value commitments – religious, spiritual, or otherwise," Freitas explains. "After a few years of living in this environment, they felt exhausted, spent, and emptied by the pressure to participate in encounters that left them unfulfilled" (xv). So, Freitas investigated this divide and its consequences further by conducting 2,500 surveys and interviews at seven categorically different colleges and universities. At each of these institutions (spanning from Catholic to evangelical to major non-religious universities), she sought to answer questions about students' experiences with sex and their spiritual lives, and how institutions responded.

Looking at religious life, Freitas pinpoints a growing problem with many of the non-religious private and public schools. In many of these schools, faith and religion have become an intensely private matter, both personally and on an institutional level. "Religion remains resolutely private – something students don't speak...or even debate about," she notes (33). These types of institutions often boast of their religious diversity, but by not fostering dialogue about faith this diversity is completely lost on students' real experiences. On the other hand, for many evangelical schools faith matters not just in theory, but is often woven into practice; it is valued both as private good and a public good, and thus conversations about faith are knit into the campus curriculum and culture (67). Admittedly, this sort of campus culture might be easier to attain at an evangelical school where the whole community signs onto the same statement of faith. But an environment where faith and religion is part of the conversation is essential for the healthy development of college students, no matter what type of institution they attend.

With regard to sexuality, Freitas highlights some disturbing trends in campus cultures of different sorts. Evangelical purity culture, for example, rigorously tries to instill in students the notion of saving sex for marriage. This can be helpful in some ways – namely, by encouraging students towards sexual faithfulness and reflecting God's faithfulness to the world. It can also be destructive in how its rhetoric so narrowly defines gender roles, places unrealistic expectations on sex in marriage (especially for those who never marry), and often inflicts damaging emotional and spiritual consequences for those who did not maintain the high standard of purity.

At secular institutions, on the other hand, sex is much more normalized both in institutional life and in student conversation. According to Freitas, being a virgin is often seen by students as a stigma "that kept them from

being 'normal' adults and having a 'normal' college experience" (134). Relationships are often avoided, as they take up too much time and effort for the fast-paced lifestyle of students, but hook-ups and one-night stands are the norm. As her interviews reveal, such an over-sexualized world imposes many unfortunate consequences. These college women learn to use sex and sexual allures as a tool to gain popularity without much thoughtfulness or regard to their own self-respect. College men, on the other hand, learn to use sex for self-gratification, divorced from any relationship or commitment.

Freitas sheds tremendous light on the topic of sex and the soul in the lives of adolescents by sharing large portions of her interviews and surveys. She presents the research in a helpful and compelling way. It is fascinating to jump inside the minds and hearts of young people and to hear them talk about their anxieties, curiosities, and confidences with regard to these often shadowy areas of their lives. It becomes clear to the reader that most college and university settings do not encourage any connection between sex and the soul, and while evangelical schools might offer a setting where this connection can be made, the evangelical culture is certainly not without its faults in this regard. Aside from a brief conclusion, Freitas leaves most of the concluding up to her intended readers – the parents, professors, pastors, and others who shepherd people through their complex adolescent years.

### **LINKING RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT TO TEEN SEX LIVES**

In *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 304 pp., \$20.95) Mark D. Regnerus examines the "formation of sexual attitudes and motivations, and the initial and subsequent experiences of sexual intercourse and related sexual activities" of American teens (5). His research seeks to answer helpful questions about what sex means to teenagers, what expectations they have about it, and how they navigate the many voices speaking mixed messages about sex into their lives.

Regnerus confirms that religion generally influences the attitudes and behaviors of adolescents, but in regard to their sexuality, things become a bit more complex. For example, according to his findings, teens today receive most of their sex education from "uncensored and unchallenged sexual content on the internet" and other similar cultural voices, rather than more stable, thoughtful sources like school, family, or church (81). Their sexual decisions, like many other teenage decisions, are influenced most often by feelings and "emotional readiness," and less often by religious affiliation, especially for those with Jewish, mainline Christian, and Catholic backgrounds (117). As far as rhetoric goes, evangelical Protestant youth were most likely to talk about saving sex for marriage, but in terms of actual sexual experience, Regnerus uncovers that "evangelical Protestant youth don't always practice what they preach about premarital sexual behavior" (161). Despite the trends cited above, he discovers that teenage sexual decision

making is shaped more by high religiosity than certain religious affiliations. In short, it is commitment, not membership, which has the most influence.

Regnerus presents readers with a dense bit of research that covers the large diversity of American teenagers and sexuality. He asks big questions, and answers them with great breadth, which creates a wonderful jumping off point for those seeking an introduction to this topic. Regnerus definitively concludes that religion can positively influence young people's sexual attitudes and behaviors, and helpfully introduces the reader to the current dialogue on the subject.

### **EXAMINING THE EVANGELICAL PURITY CULTURE**

Adopting a more focused line of research than Regnerus or Freitas, Christine J. Gardner analyzes the rhetoric and arguments that come from the evangelical purity culture in *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011, 264 pp., \$29.95). "I am less concerned with mapping the terrain of sexual (or sexually abstinent) practices among teenagers than discovering how teens talk about their sexuality and abstinence," she writes to explain the uniqueness of her approach. "I take a narrow but detailed look at the specific rhetorical arguments and strategies persuading young people to say no to sex" (12). For students and instructors engaged in the evangelical culture and immersed in the academic world of rhetoric and communication, Gardner's research is gold.

Gardner focuses on three different abstinence campaigns in America:

True Love Waits, Silver Ring

Thing, and Pure Freedom

(6-10). She highlights rhet-

orical shifts in these cam-

paigns, like the move from

talking about *abstinence* to

talking about *purity* (Gard-

ner explains that thinking

about purity gives teens a

more active role in their sex-

ual decisions, compared to

abstinence, which remains

largely passive), and the

move to "use sex to sell

abstinence" to teens (41). Gardner points out that, for better or worse, these

campaigns have borrowed from popular culture by using sexy concerts,

comedy, and celebrities to send the message that abstinence provides great

sex in marriage (61). She goes on to trace the rhetoric of gender roles (espe-

cially noting the role of women), how teens talk about the practical applica-

tion of these purity ideals, and the dialogue surrounding those teens who

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did not wait for true love. She concludes with an insightful look into abstinence movements in Africa, especially as it relates to the AIDS crisis. Though living and teaching in an evangelical setting, Gardner does not shy away from maintaining a critical eye towards this rhetoric, and offers helpful reflection on both the positive outcomes and potential damaging consequence of these movements.

Gardner's highly sophisticated approach to this rhetorical research is interesting, especially for those who find themselves connected to evangelicalism. For those of us who find ourselves in the midst of the silent standoff between adults and young people, wondering how to bridge the gap and talk about the interconnectedness of sexuality and spirituality, this research sheds light on the ways the evangelical culture speaks into the lives of students and could, perhaps, inspire thoughtful reflection on the way we guide them.

### **ENCOURAGING FAITH AND FAITHFULNESS**

Recognizing the diversity of perspectives that these authors present, I draw two basic convictions from this research about working with adolescents in the area of faith and sexuality. The first is that we must primarily be concerned with encouraging adolescents towards faith, and specifically towards faith in Christ. In other words, the good news of the gospel must precede conversations about sexual morality. The research shows that in the midst of a culture that sends so many unhelpful and unhealthy messages with regard to both spirituality and sexuality, it is faith commitment that lays the foundation for long-lasting attitude and behavior change over and above any simple religious affiliation or non-affiliation.

Second, it is after the gospel is known that encouraging young people towards faithfulness, and reflecting God's faithfulness, makes the most sense. In other words, one is able to see God's good intention for our physical bodies and our sexuality and how they work alongside of our spiritual identities, only after God is actually known. This leaves room for grace, which, through Christ, characterizes our whole relationship with God.

With these convictions guiding our conversations with young people, perhaps we can avoid some of the pitfalls of the past and foster an environment where adolescents genuinely seek out a deeper understanding of faith in Christ and mature in their understanding of how to represent Christ's faithfulness to a watching world in their lives and relationships.



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