

# Meeting Donna Freitas: A Review of *Sex and the Soul* and an Interview

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## Review

Donna Freitas. *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 299 pp. Hardcover, \$24.95; ISBN: 978-0-19-531165-5

Returning from spring break in 2005, Dr. Donna Freitas, assistant professor of religion at St. Michael's College, a small Roman Catholic school near Burlington, Vermont, witnessed an epiphany in her "Dating and Friendship" course. One by one, her students admitted to themselves and to each other their profound disappointment in the sexual culture of their school—the "hook-up culture." They were tired of juggling reputation and desirability. They noticed that it was practically impossible to find a respectful and long-term relationship and equally impossible to find any romance at all. And finally, they wanted to figure out how so much could be going on at frat parties that flew in the face of what they supposedly believed. After discussing the larger issue, Freitas's students determined that there was an essential dialogue missing from their everyday campus lives. Conversations about sex were pervasive within peer groups, and campus priests and professors spoke often about spirituality, but Freitas discovered that her students wanted to "have conversations about sex *in relation* to the soul" (12; emphasis hers).

Thus began *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*. Freitas took her

students' questions and shaped them first into a cross-country study and, second, into a critically acclaimed book. *Sex and the Soul* explores the pressures experienced by students across varied college demographic situations. Her research includes seven campuses, each classified within her system as either Catholic, Evangelical, private secular, or public. However, although she makes these technical distinctions throughout the book, Freitas concludes that there is little difference between the spirituality of sex in Catholic, private, and public schools, eventually lumping them into a more general "secular" label. The outliers in her "spiritual" category are the Evangelical colleges in which the "hook-up" culture was practically non-existent and where students worked within the framework of their own complex "purity" culture.

*Sex and the Soul* quotes extensively from the more than 2,500 student interviews Freitas conducted as well as daily journals kept by selected study participants describing everything from their party schedules to their wardrobes to their feelings at mass. As Freitas moves between her chapter-by-chapter review of students' romantic ideals, peer anxieties, and spiritual connections, readers become acquainted with individuals like the popular but conflicted Amy Stone or bisexual and Evangelical Molly Bainbridge (pseudonyms). Using the words of the students themselves, Freitas stays connected to the campus scene and the various peer pressures found in both her "secular" and "spiritual" schools.

*Sex and the Soul* takes a balanced approach to its explorations of both hook-up and purity culture. Though the majority of the book focuses on the varied experiences students have in reconciling sex and spirituality, Freitas is able to identify how all of her subjects are alike in their sexual and spiritual dilemmas regardless of their campus affiliations. First, they are all highly invested in their spiritual identities, whether the construction of those identities is primarily institutional or strictly personal. Second, all of her respondents experience sexual desire and long to act on it. Third, students generally agree that "romance" is mostly an asexual experience and that finding it is a life priority. Yet, finally, all have difficulty reconciling the three, regardless of their campus affiliations.

*Sex and the Soul* distinguishes itself not only as the first major study to explore young adults' experiences negotiating their spirituality and sexuality, but also in its call for action and practical solu-

tions. Students in every situation expressed a “degree of shame, regret, or angst with regard to sex, though for different reasons” (216). Furthermore, Freitas observes that “students at Evangelical colleges lack mentors when it comes to sex, and students at spiritual colleges lack mentors for spiritual formation”; therefore, “reconciling sex and the soul is not only extremely difficult for them, it is rare” (216). Because of these problems facing both “secular” and “spiritual” college students, Freitas includes “A Practical Guide to Sex and the Soul.” In it she encourages a more open discussion of sexuality and its undoubted connection to students’ spirituality within families, campuses, and churches. She even provides a “Top Ten Questions to Ask about Sex (and Love and Romance)” on pre-college selection tours. She also encourages parents to have a “college sex talk” with their student about the pressures found in any university situation and includes suggestions on what to ask and how best to approach the subject.

Though none of Freitas’s respondents identified as LDS, many similarities can be found between her discussions about Evangelical campuses and Brigham Young University. Students strive to remain sexually abstinent before marriage, make up specific and sometimes elaborate rules for themselves in dating relationships, have similar issues with guilt and fear of rejection from the community, frequently marry young, and even use similar slang terms like NCMO (non-committal making out). In some ways, LDS campus life represents an even more conservative “purity culture” than the Evangelical colleges Freitas visited, in sexual activity if not in theology. At least statistically, LDS students are having significantly less premarital sex than their conservative counterparts. I realize that comparing two separate studies can skew some assumptions. Regardless, it may be interesting to note that in Freitas’s study between 20 and 35 percent of Evangelical students reported having engaged in premarital sex, which is still well below the percentages reported from students at “secular” colleges with comparable results of 67 to 74 percent. These figures are well above the 3 to 4 percent reported in a 2002 BYU survey of LDS students.<sup>1</sup> In addition, BYU students are marrying during college at a significantly high rate. In April 2007, 63% of male and 55% of female BYU students were married by gradua-

tion—numbers that elicited more than one surprised exclamation from Freitas herself during our interview.<sup>2</sup>

From these statistics, one would assume that LDS campus culture must achieve such conservative percentages only by exercising an ultra-orthodox regime of purity. However, BYU students are not subjected to nearly the same quantity or quality of “chastity warfare talk” as the Evangelical students in Freitas’s study. Many, if not most, of her “spiritual” students held their standard at a “kiss at the altar” and felt as if their dating lives were mere acts of selfishness and even a form of idol worship (179). LDS students are encouraged to have vibrant dating lives, to never associate “proper” affection with guilt, and to consider their physical bodies and sexual desires as sacred, eternal, and, most importantly, godlike.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the secret of BYU’s chaste success is not a hyper-conservative theology of sexuality or an extremist purity culture, but rather an openly pro-sex doctrine linked with a premarital ideal that attempts to balance desire with restraint.

Of course, LDS campuses are not purity perfection by any means. Many of the spiritual, social, and emotional hardships that Freitas’s Evangelical students describe are found at BYU as well, particularly the anxieties experienced by single women. As at the Evangelical schools, female BYU students also feel the “senior scramble,” which Freitas succinctly defines: “Failing college for these young women is not about grades or jobs. Failing college is about graduation without a husband, or at least a fiancé” (114). To further complicate the “ring by spring” fear, women also feel as if “they are expected to be passive” in the courtship game (114). Though women at BYU have been encouraged, even over the pulpit, to be more pro-active in dating, aggressive female wooers are simply not included in the distinctly and concretely defined LDS gender traits list.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps then, an LDS female student has it even a little worse than her Evangelical counterpart. A female student in Freitas’s study only has to fret over her culturally enforced passivity, but an LDS woman has to wade through mixed messages of, “Go get him, tiger” and simultaneously deal with, “Guys don’t like pushy girls.”

*Sex and the Soul* thus provides an important comparison study for an LDS audience. Though Freitas’s observations on “hook-up” culture provide a stark juxtaposition to a campus like BYU, it

is her chapters on the complex communities created by a “purity” culture that illuminate more of the positive and negative consequences a conservative college campus may have for its sexually mature students. Perhaps even more fascinating are the differences that LDS readers and scholars can identify between the Evangelical and BYU sexual experience:

- How do we theologize chastity compared to our “Sex and the Soul” counterparts?
- Do we (or do we not) accept the idea of “born again virginity”?
- Mormonism teaches that sexual sin is “most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood” (Alma 39:5) and theologically claims that “gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose” in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” Do these popularly understood teachings cause teens and young adults to become seriously conflicted, doctrinally empowered, or some confusing combination of both?

The foundational theses and extensive data of Freitas’s *Sex and the Soul* round out an information base that simultaneously connects LDS campus culture to the larger American college scene and distinguishes places like BYU as unique and worth future investigations.

Overall, *Sex and the Soul* is not only an intellectual and sociological achievement but maintains a helpful readability, personal tone, and practical application often lacking in academic publications. Freitas’s well-researched study provides indispensable insight into the most personal dilemmas of modern teens and twenty-somethings and, indirectly, insight into the reconciliations we all make daily between our action and our belief.

### **Interview**

*In addition to this review, I interviewed Dr. Freitas on August 7, 2008, over lunch at a Salt Lake City restaurant when she was presenting her research on hook-up culture at the 2008 Sunstone Symposium. Dr. Freitas, currently an assistant professor of religion at Boston University,*

recently published a well-received young adult novel, *The Possibilities of Sainthood* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2008),” and is a contributor to the *Wall Street Journal* and *National Public Radio*. As intimidating as all these accolades can be, her energetic personality (fueled perhaps by her marathon running) and friendly “hey girlfriend!” attitude could set anyone at ease . . . especially her extremely nervous former-student-turned-Dialogue-interviewer, myself.

*Heidi:* Why should an LDS audience care about Sex and the Soul?

*Dr. Freitas:* I think one of the things that is important about some of the recently published books about hook-up culture is to remember that a lot of us are coming out of that sort of environment. It can help those from religious colleges—which are quite different communities from your average American university—understand the pressures of hook-up culture. In addition, the pressures students feel are getting more extreme. Starting up a conversation about these things is important.

The one thing that distinguishes this book is the faith/religion/spirituality link where most other books on sexuality and young people only deal with sex or romance and nothing else. It’s more than, “Look, people are hooking up!” It’s the soul part of the book. What I think is important is recognizing how intertwined sexuality and religion are within many students’ minds. For me, the way out of hook-up culture is an interest in spirituality. It is the most effective way out I’ve found.

I do think that students in Evangelical colleges are interesting examples of what it could mean to live out your romantic desires via a faith life. Most of the students everywhere else were interested in understanding or getting a portrait of that life. They didn’t know how to do that, even though they understood that spirituality might be able to affect their relationships. That’s why so many of my students have been interested in books like Joshua Harris’s *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 1997) or Wendy Shalit’s *A Return to Modesty* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Free Press, 1999) which combine these two ideas and offer you that picture—the possibility of what a “spiritual” sexuality looks like.

*Heidi:* That window is one of the most important ideas of the

book. You discovered something interesting about the ideal of “romance” in your interviews.

*Dr. Freitas:* Yes. Both men and women tend to describe romance as chaste, as asexual. That tells you a lot about hook-up culture. It is implied that their experience of sex is completely separate from romance. Their romantic ideal is so innocent. It’s holding hands and communication, maybe a kiss. It tells you something about both Evangelical and secular college campuses. In large part, Evangelical colleges are living out the romantic ideal that other colleges only conceptualize. But it isn’t perfect. Purity culture has its pressures and negative effects on certain individuals and groups. For example, there is tremendous anxiety for women who are constantly concerned about, “Am I pure enough?”

*Heidi:* You mentioned your Evangelical colleges as having a type of mentoring community. What are the effects of this type of community?

*Dr. Freitas:* There’s a porousness in Evangelical culture. People don’t just want an education. They want to learn what it means to be a good Christian in the world. Their academic and faith lives cross over into each other. And it is an intergenerational conversation—which is so unique. Secular students often felt alone. It wasn’t acceptable to bring up personal things with your professors, and it set up this stark separation between what you live and what you learn that could really be a disadvantage. Perhaps secular colleges could have a similar culture by actively exemplifying, say, a mission statement, a set of ideals that are constantly referred to within the college community, a living foundation.

There is also a peer mentoring aspect that can be good or difficult. Evangelical youth culture is a community in which people hold each other accountable. If you’re stressed about something, it is very common to go to your roommate and say, “I need some help here. Can you pray for me? Will you help keep me in line?” But some issues become a lot more taboo than others. For example, it’s a lot scarier to be open about or ask for forgiveness about sexual things. It can lead to judgment, harsh criticism, and even alienation. But that foundation for intimacy is there, even if there are some negative effects. For the most part, it creates a rich community.

Secular students are at a disadvantage. I mean, hook-up culture isn't the result of an intergenerational conversation, after all! It's the symptom of a purely peer-generated pressure which is much less healthy and much less empowering.

*Heidi:* BYU has what is called an Honor Code—an institutional code of conduct, including sexual conduct. Did any of your schools have a similar system and what were the effects you observed of that system?

*Dr. Freitas:* Well, it depends on which college you go to. Many had a Declaration of Beliefs and many also included a code of conduct. In my interviews I heard positive thoughts about these systems, but there are also negative effects. For example, many students were afraid to get help for pregnancies or fearful about STDs, but they didn't have anywhere to turn where they could feel safe and free to ask questions. They were afraid they might get kicked out of school. But at the same time, when I talked to campus ministries, they were horrified by the idea that students would be afraid to come for help.

Sometimes it has a really intense effect on campus. Sometimes it's just more of a statement of ideals that they try to hold each other to, and some don't have anything like that at all.

*Heidi:* Could you talk a little about the sexual minority groups you came across in your Evangelical college studies? How do they cope and reconcile, or could they?

*Dr. Freitas:* I think it really depended on the person. It's important to note that there is diversity everywhere, tremendous amounts of diversity in every college population I studied. I think the perception of Evangelicals in America is that they're all somehow "lock-step" and speak with a single voice, but their incredible diversity of opinion is evident in the stories I've highlighted in *Sex and the Soul*.

There's no doubt that it's complicated if you're not heterosexual in conservative religion. It definitely makes your faith life difficult. One story is about a male student who admitted his attraction to men and a refusal to have sex with women but who vehemently denied being gay because of the religious associations it had in his community. He really showed how deeply wounding this conflict can be. It was sort of like a death sentence to himself and his faith. But another student I highlight was a lesbian with



preacher parents. She was the founder of an LGBT [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender] awareness club on her campus, was extremely “out,” and had been in a long-term relationship for several years. It was difficult for her at times, and she expressed desires to have the traditional Christian fairytale wedding, even though she also knew she couldn’t have it if she was a lesbian. But she was certainly working through it. She was okay being in that complicated place.

There’s an incredible diversity even within these sexual minority groups. I think everyone assumes that these people have faith lives that just die when they identify themselves within those groups, but that is simply not true. I think it’s one of the important things we need to see. Now, that doesn’t mean it isn’t complicated for these people. It’s always complicated. But sexuality is complicated for everyone.

*Heidi:* Was purity culture equally emphasized for men and women, or were there different consequences for deviancy? Did you find a gender difference at the non-Evangelical colleges?

*Dr. Freitas:* With regard to purity culture, the answer is yes and no. Everybody at Evangelical schools aspires to chastity culture regardless of gender. Almost across the board, all men were as concerned about keeping their virginity as the women were. However, I think women talked more about chastity. The expectations they had were the same, but women were more stressed about it—probably because of the social repercussions. If women cross a line and that comes out in some way, the repercussions for them are far greater and potentially ruinous than to men. It’s your typical double standard. Men will aspire to chastity; but if they cross the line, they far more easily forgive themselves and are forgiven. You know, “Boys will be boys” or “Boys just want this more.”

The line that women students at non-Evangelical colleges have to walk may even be more complicated. They have to participate in hook-up culture because that’s how you find a relationship—even though that’s, like, the worst way to do it!—but at the same time they have to be very, very careful how often or how much they participate because the guys still want, well, they want virgins! They basically want a woman to be a virgin and a whore at

once. A very stereotypical thing. Girls have to be very careful in hook-up culture about getting a reputation.

*Heidi:* Will you be continuing your work in youth culture, sexuality, and spirituality in the future?

*Dr. Freitas:* Of course! I still have a lot of material I wasn't able to include in the book and quite a few more angles my data showed that I want to explore more. Hopefully, there will be a few more articles and books on this subject.

*Heidi:* Well, I hope so. Sex and religion is a combination that deserves more exploration.

*Dr. Freitas:* Much, much more.

*Heidi:* Thank you for the interview, Dr. Freitas.

*Dr. Freitas:* Thank you for the lunch!

### Notes

1. Bruce A. Chadwick, "A Survey of Dating and Marriage at BYU," *BYU Studies* 46, no. 3 (2007).

2. These statistics were posted on the BYU website, "Gender and Marital Status at Graduation," demographics page (accessed March 2008) but no longer appear on the website.

3. See, for examples, Dallin H. Oaks, "The Dedication of a Lifetime," address delivered at Church Education System, May 1, 2005; and Jeffrey R. Holland, *Of Souls, Symbols, and Sacraments* (pamphlet) (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), publishing his BYU Devotional, delivered January 12, 1988.

4. I make this observation based on my personal experience in a BYU singles' ward for four years and two years in a Boston Young Singles Adult ward. Women were encouraged to take a more active role in dating "at least for the first one." In one Relief Society lesson, a member of the bishopric encouraged the women to initiate dates as much as we could, not excluding men who were not members of the Church. However, somewhat contradictorily, Dallin H. Oaks, "The Dedication of a Lifetime," encouraged a more "Evangelical" model by instructing men to "start with a variety of dates with a variety of young women" while he enjoined women to "*make it easier for shy males* to ask for a simple date" and to "*persuade men to ask* for dates more frequently" rather than to initiate a relationship themselves (emphasis mine).