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Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marrying; Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses

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Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker. *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marrying*. New York City: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Donna Freitas. *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*. New York City: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Brian J. Willoughby

Mark Regnerus (University of Texas) and Jeremy Uecker (Baylor University), both professors of sociology, have previously collaborated on a host of academic papers focused on the dating, marital, and sexual lives of young adults. Regnerus has previously published a book entitled *Forbidden Fruit* (Oxford University Press, 2007), which explores the sexual lives of American teenagers. In *Premarital Sex in America*, Regnerus and Uecker move forward in the life course by examining sexuality during young adulthood.

Premarital Sex in America purports to be a book about the varied aspects of how young adults think and act regarding sex. The subtitle is a bit of a misnomer, because the book is more focused on sex than marriage. To their credit, the authors claim early on that the book “explicates the sexual ideas, habits, and relationships of heterosexual emerging adults” (9). The lone chapter dealing with marriage directly (chapter 6) feels almost like an afterthought among so many discussions of sexual behavior, hooking up, and birth control.

The book also studies a fairly narrow age range (18–23 years), which limits the scope of its investigation. However, this age group has fascinated scholars and the public due to their ever-changing mindset and behaviors regarding sex. Thus, the book is geared toward those interested in understanding the complex topic of sexuality among those at the beginning of young adulthood. While many Mormon youth often abstain from premarital sexual activity, *Premarital Sex in America* offers an inside look into the larger culture that LDS youth will encounter. With this scope and complex topic in mind, the authors have certainly succeeded in providing a well-documented look at the sexual lives of young adults.

The book is intended for general audiences, though readers should be aware that the book contains very frank discussions of sex and sexual behavior, utilizing the common terminologies and phrases of actual young adults. As such, the language throughout the book includes both profanity and crude content that may not be suitable for younger readers. Also, the book's reliance on charts, tables, and statistics may make it better suited for counselors or college students studying the subject or for readers with at least some academic background.

One of the first things to note regarding the book is its focus on normative behavior. The authors seek within the chapters to help the reader understand how the *typical* American young adult thinks about and engages in premarital sexual behavior. However, this focus on what is normative leaves out several important, although smaller, sub-populations. For example, no discussion is undertaken regarding young adults who transition to marriage early, and little is said about those who abstain from sexual behavior.

When describing these normative trends, Regnerus and Uecker use very clear tables and successfully weave easy-to-read statistics with personal stories and anecdotes. Sexual histories are dissected across race, religion, and even political orientation. While trends related to Latter-day Saints are not explicitly discussed, the authors do explore how religion in general influences sexual choices. Regnerus and Uecker delve into the nuances of means and regression models, sometimes attempting to explain complicated statistical methods that underlie their analyses. The book's heavy reliance on raw numbers and empirical facts firmly establishes it as serious research, but for the same reason it may disinterest some of its intended audience. The book also has a tendency to rely on academic jargon. The authors are typically quick to define these terms, but even more effort could have been made to adapt these terms for a lay audience. The authors have attempted to supplement the reliance on numbers by interjecting quotes from interviews throughout the book, but in most chapters these stories take a backseat to the cold hard facts.

From chapter 3 onward, the authors rely on an economic perspective of sexuality. Although the authors are very upfront about this theoretical perspective, some readers may be put off by its very pragmatic analysis of who has sex and why sex occurs. Economic and rational choice theories can make human behavior appear robotic and predetermined, and at certain points the book leaves the impression that sexual decisions being made by today's young adults are more a matter of mathematical equations than agency or choice. Using this theory, the authors

maintain several common arguments about sexuality. Readers will learn that women are gatekeepers deciding when and if sex will occur and are more emotionally connected to sexual expression, while men are more focused on the physical aspects of sex and tend to seek out multiple partners.

Despite any reservations regarding this traditional view of gender and sexuality, Regnerus and Uecker convincingly show that men and women do indeed approach and react to sex in different ways. While the source of these differences may be debated endlessly, the point driven home several times is simply the extent of the differences between men and women when it comes to sexual intimacy. Bishops and other Church leaders who counsel with married couples and youth may find these discussions helpful as they strive to understand the complex gender differences related to sexuality.

Despite the above issues regarding the complexity of their language and theory, Regnerus and Uecker effectively highlight some fascinating aspects regarding the sex lives of today's young adults. Perhaps one of their most important themes is that young adults often assume that sexual activity and romantic relationships must go hand in hand. The authors also rightly document the deterioration of moral reasoning among young adults in America. The authors paint a picture of many young adults engaging in behavior because they "are supposed to" or because "everyone else is doing it," despite internal turmoil regarding the moral and emotional consequences of their behavior. If anything, the book is a wake-up call to young adults to buck the current cultural trends and realize that making healthy choices is more important than making popular choices. While this same social pressure may not resonate with many Mormon young adults, the book may help them understand that many non-LDS religious young adults are struggling with their sexual decision-making in ways that are in some respects comparable to the more religiously traditional.

If *Premarital Sex in America* suffers from being over analytical, then *Sex and the Soul* by Donna Freitas suffers from an overreliance on storytelling. Freitas is an associate professor of religion at Hofstra University and has regularly written articles and blogs on religion and young adulthood for several major news publications. While *Sex and the Soul* is clearly about sexual activity among young adults, the focus is more squarely on how religiosity influences sexual decision making. Freitas is interested in how religious institutions and universities are failing in their duty to help young adults negotiate the sexual landmines of the twenties. The book ties these themes into the larger scholarly field of

young adulthood, which consistently points to young adults' desire to search and explore. Issues related to soul mates, romance, and hooking up are discussed throughout the book, with many stories and quotes used liberally to illustrate the various themes.

While a discussion of Latter-day Saint youth is again omitted, Freitas's findings related to Evangelical young adults are often applicable. Freitas connects the exploring of young adults (both religiously and sexually) with their movement from "religiosity" to "spirituality." This trend can also be seen among Latter-day Saint youth who sometimes show a decrease in religious behavior after leaving home. She documents this shift by illustrating how many young adults forgo specific religious denominations, practices, and faiths for a more eclectic, unaffiliated, and humanistic version of religion.

Most of the data presented in the book are based on interviews conducted by Freitas at several universities across the country. While the reader will find a few sporadic tables and numbers, the vast majority of content is gleaned from the real stories of young adults. From a scholarly standpoint, this approach provides a potentially biased perspective on the topic material. Instead of providing sophisticated qualitative analyses, Freitas chooses which stories and quotes will best support her points. In that sense, the book has a predetermined quality to it, as though the author is projecting her worldview to the reader and rationalizing it with various passages demonstrating that actual young adults think this way.

Yet the stories do provide a rich and interesting peek into the minds of young adults as they struggle with sexual decision making, particularly those with a religious background who struggle to reconcile the reality of college life with their faith. Like the evidence found in *Premarital Sex in America*, the data presented here suggest that scripts, perceptions, and assumptions are more important to young adults than actual fact. As young adults start forming a rationale for what they consider "normative" sexual behavior, they often make decisions that conflict with their existing morals and religious beliefs.

Freitas feels that our religious institutions are not providing enough meaningful support to young adults, especially those young adults who desire to avoid the hook-up culture and premarital sex. Most chapters are filled with stories of young adults who have either given up faith traditions or rationalized away their faith's traditional religious values regarding sexuality. Freitas also ties this trend directly to religious institutions of higher education, pointing out their shortcomings and

offering practical advice for policy improvement. In particular, Freitas puts the Catholic Church in her cross hairs and spends large portions of the book documenting how Catholic young adults are often confused and ambivalent about their faith. When it comes to sex, Freitas makes a compelling argument that Catholic institutions are not having the impact on young adults that perhaps they would like.

Conversely, Freitas provides some enlightening discussion regarding Evangelicals and highlights the efforts of these denominations, which have led many young adults to make a stronger connection between sexual practices and religion. Readers may find it interesting to observe parallels between The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and these Evangelical traditions. Latter-day Saint young adults also tend to adhere to their faith's morals and boundaries regarding sexual behavior, and Freitas provides several insights into why and how such conservative Christian faiths cultivate faith and obedience.

Sex and the Soul is intended for general audiences, and most readers will have no problem absorbing its contents, due particularly to Freitas's conversational writing style. The structure of the whole book is likewise loose, and Freitas sometimes repeats herself and overlooks leaps in logic. The sections discussing sexual minorities feel out of place and do not do service to this complex issue. In general, the book provides a quality read for those interested in how religion intersects with the sexual decision-making of young adults. Freitas concludes her book by offering advice for both parents and young adults. Bishops and Church leaders may also find her insights helpful as they counsel young adults in navigating the sexual roadmap of young adulthood. The book may be of particular interest to those involved in higher-education policy making. Freitas provides several insights for how such institutions can improve their policies to provide better resources related to sexuality and religion for their students.

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