

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find a commentary based on the book *Sex and the Soul* by Donna Freitas, PhD.



## Making sex safer is a body and soul affair

Freitas, D. (2008). *Sex and the Soul*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

by Andrea Mrozek, Manager of Research and Communications

After years of sex education in our schools, Statistics Canada reports a fifth of teens do not use any protection for their first sexual encounter, rising to 44 per cent when kids turn 20. A 2007 poll suggests two-thirds of women do not use condoms every time they have sex. Right now, the religion of safe sex is failing in its most basic tenet: Thou shalt protect thyself. By the time students get to university, these failures hit the fan in the form of diseases and dissatisfied and depressed students. Sex, it would seem has some emotional—dare we say spiritual—ramifications.

The university sex culture is something Donna Freitas, assistant professor of religion at Boston University, studies in detail, recounting many salacious and simultaneously sad stories of student sexuality in her recently released book *Sex and the Soul*. It's old news that university campuses are the home of sexual encounters divorced from anything approximating an actual relationship. Her take on the matter, however, is different. She is asking whether sex and spirituality are intertwined, and whether students' religious beliefs inform their sex lives. What if (hold laughter) religious teachings actually have wisdom to impart into sexual behaviour?

What she documents is that spirituality is on the rise on campus, and students are very sexually active too. However, there is no room for spiritual expression or exploration of life's big questions—teaching, mentoring or even spiritual discussion are tacitly verboten. Mass and morality are separate entities, and so a new commandment is borne: Spirituality shalt not inform life outside a place of worship.

Freitas canvasses seven universities, secular, Evangelical and Roman Catholic and comes up with the following distinction. In essence, all schools are spiritual—students are universally interested in their spirituality. But only the evangelical Christian schools are both religious and spiritual “in affiliation and practice.”

In short, one might say students at the Catholic and secular schools are—wait for it—not sexually, but spiritually repressed. “When it comes to religion and spirituality, most campuses seem to be failing miserably, barely attempting (if at all) to create atmospheres where students feel welcome to pursue their big questions...This oversight has even bigger repercussions when it comes to sex, as student narratives will demonstrate,” writes Freitas.

In short, all students are hungry for holistic spiritual formation—a robust spiritual integration even into to their sex lives. But only students at Evangelical colleges actually get it. Not one Catholic student Freitas talked to mentioned *Humanae Vitae*—or any other element of a robust Catholic theology on sexuality. Others from mainline Protestant faiths too, were unaware of what their denomination might teach about sex.

Most parents—liberal, conservative, religious or non—don't like the idea of their children having sex with multiple strangers, or attending "Pimps and Ho's" theme parties. But many parents wouldn't think that spiritual teaching can inform their child's sex life—furthermore that their kids might like it to. A body of literature suggests kids with a faith background are less likely to engage in negative behaviours—like drug, alcohol and tobacco use; they are less likely to experience depression or try suicide. Studies also show religiosity decreases the number of sex partners, and decreases teenage pregnancy rates.

More importantly, students themselves are uncomfortable with today's sexual status quo. Sixty-four per cent of students Freitas surveyed experienced "dashed hopes" or "mixed feelings" after a hookup. And ask a student to describe their most romantic experience and sex rarely comes up. "After dinner at my favourite restaurant we walked and talked forever," or "we had a picnic dinner and a ride in a boat on a river and looked at the stars" were common descriptions of romantic events. Freitas writes that "[s]tudents at Catholic, nonreligious private, and public schools are having lots of sex, but apparently, it's not very romantic or very loving." Love, we are taught, is a good reason to have sex. How disheartening that students rarely experience that.

And yet, is it not a logical consequence of a world that considers sex to be physical, a bit like a moderately dangerous sport that requires some protective equipment, but all in all, a good time? When Dr. Miriam Grossman initially published her book *Unprotected: A Campus Psychiatrist Reveals how Political Correctness in her Profession Endangers Every Student* about consequences of sex, she did so anonymously for fear of the fallout. But now poor sexual mores on campus and how those affect mind, body and soul are filling up book shelves. (Try Laura Sessions Stepp or Jennifer Roback Morse for two good examples.)

Sex education is a lifetime conversation—your child should know your family's values on sex, not those of sex educators or the confused students who will be a young adult's peers at school. In a sense, sex educators can only scrub the deck where parents provide the ship's navigation. The spiritual and sexual wellbeing of our children, which are indeed linked, starts in the home. *Sex and the Soul* merely documents the results of a world where we left sex education to the cast of *Sex and the City*, alongside a host of safe sex advocates—all faithful adherents to an ineffective religion. It just may be time to try something so old that it's new when it comes to sex education.