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In Praise of *Consent*: Why Talking About Sex on Christian Campuses Matters Differently Than We Think; A Review Essay

Consent on Campus: A Manifesto

Freitas, D., J., 2018

New York: Oxford University Press

Review and Discussion by Kirsten L. Guidero, PhD

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Abstract

For many contemporary evangelical Christians, the concept of consent tends to evoke marked squeamishness. Popular essays have construed consent as a mark of a dangerous, God-forsaking world or of a modernity that can only form shallowly contractual, liability-avoiding relationships (Franks, 2017; Harrison Warren, 2017). But revelations of abuse and assault by high-profile perpetrators in contexts as varied as sports, entertainment, education, and, yes, churches, should prompt renewed deliberation. This review essay engages with Donna Freitas's work on consent to argue that Christians in higher education ought to heed her wisdom and adapt such conversations. The essay traces Freitas's research-driven definitions and recommendations before showing how consent actually holds a prime, intersectional place in Christian formation, ignored at our peril.

Introduction

“Universities are meant to be institutions that work for a better society and humanity, that work toward the ‘common good.’ Tearing down rape culture in order to build a culture of consent is one of those great common goods” (Freitas, 2018, p. 192).

Donna Freitas would like our attention, please—and after that, our full investment. *Consent on Campus* opens with a horrifying account of sexual assault narrated almost casually by a young woman who thought it simply normal campus life (Freitas, 2018, pp. 3-5; unless noted, hereafter all parenthetical citations reference this source). Freitas isn’t buying. She’s on a mission to eradicate such experiences, which requires first identifying them as the consequence of entrenched misogyny. Freitas has produced an avalanche of research to back up this claim. Unconvinced readers need only consult the examples and footnotes in *Consent’s* first chapter, examine her earlier *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America’s College Campuses* (Freitas, 2008; hereafter, S&S), or just peruse the news. Netflix’s recent release of the excellent *Unbelievable* also offers a good entry point into these conversations. Those making assault claims (most often, but not always, women) are treated with skepticism, ignorance, and sometimes overt hostility: claims are distrusted, misrepresented, or even downright buried. In addition, Freitas notes the prevalence of retribution against those who report assault. Though not limited to college campuses, in higher education contexts the fear of liability and bad press plus the ability to intimidate and silence younger persons specially twists the pursuit of justice (pp. 7-14). By the end of her introduction, Freitas advocates for another way, where the careful building of a culture of consent develops senses of “sexual agency, desire, and communication” so that we “talk honestly and openly about sex” (p. 15). Christian higher education must sit up and take notice.

Analysis

Because consent frequently masquerades as legal whack-a-mole for the a moral exchange of sexual favors (Franks, 2017), Freitas spends chapters 1-3 debunking those iterations. Coming under particular fire are Title IX, university policies on sexual activity, and views of alcohol.

First, Freitas explains Title IX’s mutations from the Obama to Trump administrations, giving special attention to the role of mandatory

reporting and standards of proof. Reporting requirements are meant to keep colleges from ignoring claims as they have in the past, but by automating action, they can stoke shaming and bullying reprisals, which may “convince victims to stay silent rather than confide in a trusted adult” (p. 31). Freitas also points to federal 2017 changes allowing colleges to require a higher burden of proof, which ignores the fact that assaults usually lack eyewitnesses (p. 33). (Since publication, new regulations make it even more difficult for survivors to bring claims forward or to seek protection from assaulters.) Thus, Freitas warns, “Title IX should remain a last resort for the people who populate our campuses” (p. 35). A more proactive culture of consent can prevent assault. But such a culture remains out of reach when sexual activity policies overly focus on consent as easily articulated completely, articulately, and verbally. Freitas quotes several campus examples, then deftly eviscerates them: they expect students to magically become adept at expressing themselves clearly and openly on subjects they may have little practice discussing, the pressure to conform to scripts that promote sexual violence remains potent, and the probability remains high that even if someone manages to plainly express their wishes, the other person may not be engaged, listening, and committed to respecting those boundaries (pp. 42-58). In other words, without forming a full culture of consent, our policies (whether affirmative or restrictive) actually set us up for failure. Experimentation with alcohol or other substances can certainly worsen these effects, especially binge drinking (pp. 63-69). Yet Freitas reminds us that while drinking lowers inhibitions, myopically focusing on restricting access will still miss the point: alcohol use can drive contexts to favor sexual violence, but does not actually create the propensity to assault (p. 62).

What does? Problematic, deeply engrained narratives of sex and gender. Freitas exposes assault as fostered by underlying narratives casting others (not always, but most often women) as objects for one’s sexual disposal, best taken advantage of when incapacitated (p. 4). Freitas’s research from S&S, cited in *Consent* chapter 4, overwhelmingly demonstrates that students believe being sexually active involves a competition to care less, not get attached, and conclude quickly (pp. 79-81). Freitas argues that a theoretical *right* to casual sex has created the *expectation* and then *requirement* of hookup culture, which thwarts students’ actual desires into a codified script (p. 86). Her interviews suggest students don’t actually want sex like this. They overwhelmingly cannot shake the immense pressures of hookup culture, which punishes those who

don't play along just as much as those who are its casualties (pp. 84-96). Though a sexual monoculture seems her main takeaway for why hookup culture so quickly foments assault, Freitas notes that "the better everyone is at fulfilling the social contract of nonattachment, the less likely people are to call an encounter a sexual assault, because they aren't supposed to care what happened anyway" (p. 88). An expectation for casual sexual encounters ends up enabling perpetrators. Speaking up about assault breaks the hookup code of silence and exposes ambiguities in consent standards (p. 88).

But this framework governs essentialist (or "traditional") gender roles just as much as it runs hookup culture. Chapter 5 showcases a blistering investigation of how views of men as sexually voracious and aggressive creates self-fulfilling prophecies. "We uncritically socialize boys and men to be aggressors: on the playing field, in the workplace, in the bedroom. To be a man is to assert one's power and superiority over others, especially women" (p. 107). If boys "are still raised to believe that power and acclaim are their birthright," women's success is cast as a threat worth squashing (p. 108). If boys are taught that emotional intelligence makes them not a real man, they are pressured into "performing the disrespect of women and the disrespect of sex" (p. 104). Capacities for empathy dwindle. Meanwhile, chapter 6 explores bodies rendered vulnerable by not being male, white, athletic, straight. Freitas characterizes certain bodies as the "good" ones worthy of "worship" as campus models of perfection, whether that occurs through athletics, fraternity/sorority life, or otherwise (pp. 111-115). On Christian campuses, chapel musicians and student leaders should be considered, especially males whose status in those roles remains the long-cherished norm. Other bodies represent extraneous, less important issues; their flourishing is optional, while male success is "normal" and to be protected at all costs (p. 116). Those suffering assault were probably asking for it; therefore they deserve to be shamed, blamed, and discounted (pp. 122-129). So, Freitas contends, "[i]n our culture, a single man's body can be deemed so valuable that it warrants the covering up of rapes" (p. 114).

Chapters 7 through 9 then unfold Freitas's proposals for a more complex, richly developed culture of consent. This culture remains possible if we only jettison our own cynicism, attend to consent as "a way of *being toward others*" (p. 135, emphasis original), view sexual ethics as part of the wholehearted fabric of communal life rather than boring prudishness, and articulate a starting framework for consent (pp. 133-146).

Such a framework centers others' holistic well-being, reclaims the need for careful communication, requires non-violence, promotes continual work to understand oneself as a sexual being and knows such work is always in flux, highlights empathy and compassion to champion sex as part of social justice and vice versa, accepts sexual diversity, recognizes that all sex involves ethics, and acknowledges sex as a community issue (pp. 139-144). It also appreciates commitments such as those people of faith may make to reserve sexual activity for marriage. In other words, teaching consent on campus does not require everyone to be sexually active, nor does it imply that refusing sex makes one inferior. By pondering character, consent actually brings those voices back to the table. Freitas encourages moving headlong into these conversations, making classrooms spaces for critical inquiry. Examining pop culture, university policies, or literature surfaces inherited scripts. Dialogue slowly builds the capacity to interrupt problematic narratives and create resilient, truth-telling, consensual communities (pp. 147-166). Freitas concludes by turning back to faculty and the classroom as underdeveloped resources, including suggestions for curricular development and helpful instigating questions (pp. 167-192). We must, she urges, "open up the intellectual domain to conversations about consent and sexual violence" as well as rigorously uncover our own biases—about what counts as academic concerns, about sex, about gender—in order to make universities truly educative.

Faith-Based Applications

Lest Christian readers quickly move past this book, I maintain that perhaps we most especially should heed her words. As I reflect on my experiences at one Catholic, one mainline Protestant, and two evangelical Protestant institutions, much resonates with Freitas's views. Though important nuances distinguish these contexts, dual faculty and student development roles at all three types of institutions surfaced worrying common trends.

In my experience, with one hand Christian campuses often try to hold together spiritual formation and intellectual pursuits. But when it comes to sex, the other hand quickly clamps shut, denying the integration of faith and learning that we claim as our institutional birthrights. Our attitude seems to be similar to how my dog reacts when she has been (uncharacteristically) naughty: if we just avoid eye contact and pretend this is not happening, it should go away at no cost to anyone. Or, perhaps we

look up from our piously crossed paws just long enough to throw off a few platitudes about how great sex is in the right context and how terrifyingly corruptive anywhere else. So knock it off, dear students, and muscle your way into marriage, the certificate of which will instantly convert all your confusion into a gorgeously sanctified and redemptively dreamy sex life.

But anyone who has been really listening to our students and grads (and maybe ourselves?) knows that this attitude fails Christian formation for at least three reasons:

1) no matter how cleverly we word our conduct statements and skillfully accompany students, some will be sexually active anyway. Do we count them lost causes and confine our engagement to more strenuously forbidding certain behaviors, instilling guilt, and doling out punitive measures? Freitas's works show that the silence enabling assault in hookup cultures may be just as operative in our very different climates, with the same disastrous effects.

2) however eagerly and earnestly marriage is pursued as a holy endeavor, converting "sex = forbidden" to "sex = authorized, approved, endorsed, encouraged, and maybe even required" generates formidable dissonance. We know that a healthy sexual ethic concerns all of oneself (see S&S, ch. 8-9). Yet Christian approaches to sex often advocate separating the will, desire, and practice. This rips us apart, imprinting patterns that cannot be undone by a few pre-marital counseling sessions or even faith-filled wedding ceremonies. Overcoming such whiplash entails long-term conversion. Again, Freitas's call for critically examining our whole selves compels attention.

3) moreover, stamping practices with the label "Christian" does not automatically guarantee just sex—including within Christian marriage. All the vows, sermons, statements of faith, and Bible studies did not stop Southern Baptist pastors, elders, and volunteers from systematically sexually abusing (and then enabling and covering up the abuse of) the most vulnerable in their midst (most often, women, other at-risk adults, and children) (Downen et al., 2019). Similar vows, sermons, prayers, and sacraments did not keep Catholic cardinals, bishops, priests, and volunteers from systematically sexually abusing (and then enabling and covering up the abuse of) the most vulnerable in their midst (most often, women, other at-risk adults, and children) (Rezendes et al., 2002). Nor did faithful Christian life inoculate survivors against those who preyed upon them. Engaging in what we call formative Christian practices does

not magically create just sexuality. Here, Freitas's research complicates a recent *Christianity Today* article advancing a sexual ethics of "repentance, renewal, and obedience" generated by the church over and against the world's "consensual, mutual fulfillment" (Harrison Warren, 2017). The full impact of Freitas's critiques hits home for Christians: we, too, have created cultures of assault, of power hierarchies and exploitation, of cover-up. We do not have the right to proclaim that we alone articulate and practice healthy sexuality. In other words, put more strongly, Christian higher education communities, like our churches and surrounding culture, stand convicted of rape culture. Until we recognize and eradicate it, we remain its ensnared enablers.

Theological Interventions

The bleak picture I have just sketched pushes us to acknowledge just how badly things are broken before we try to repair anything. But I do believe a better way is possible. I offer here a brief investigation that promotes teaching consent as Freitas recommends. I take three steps: uncovering the roots of consent in early theologies of the will; describing the will's characteristics and role; and reconsidering the will for both sex and broader Christian maturity.

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1. Consent's Early Roots

In 410, Rome reeled after the Visigoth invasion. The many survivors of rape presented a theological crisis: were they implicated in guilt? Permanently defiled? To recollect this historical point of view even if only to challenge it rightly makes us wince. Writing *City of God* in response, Augustine arguably pioneers the notion of sexual consent. Regrettably, he still treats female bodily integrity as destroyed by sex. Helpfully, he declares that a body governed by a holy will becomes holy itself, so that "while the will remains firm and unshaken, nothing that another person does with the body, or upon the body, is any fault of the person who suffers it" (Book I, ch. 16). Those who do not consent, *even if they experience pleasure*, bear no guilt (Book I, ch. 16-18). Augustine teaches us that consent is not a flawed modern invention. In our world as in his, when bodies are subjected to others' force, responsibility must lie not with the one forced but the one exerting force. Yet when Augustine centers personal integrity on the will as framed *in opposition* to the body, he risks pulling apart body and will. Holiness rooted in the will seems something outside of or over and against the body's vulnerability. While his moves negate the views he saw as problematic, they can ultimately be used to

justify overlooking the impacts of and responsibility for violence, which after all, marks and changes us as ensouled bodies, enfleshed wills (Tessman, 2005). We cannot escape the multi-faceted impacts of our own and others' actions by retreating to our wills as if they hover beyond our flesh. We need a more holistic view.

2. Characteristics & Actions of the Will

Augustine's ideas stem from deeply reading the Gospels, which depict Jesus turning his human will to God throughout his life, culminating with the agony in Gethsemane. In 681, this understanding was codified as the doctrine of dyothelitism. Jesus holds two wills: one human, and thus capable of development; the other, divine and thus unchanging, shared with the Father and the Spirit. Jesus's faithfulness does not consist of the Father overpowering the Son (or else God would have two wills and be split), or even of Jesus's divine will subordinating his human will. Rather, Jesus's human will radically and fruitfully collaborates with the divine will; this is what marks it as truly freed. By the late 1200s, Thomas Aquinas promotes similar behavior for Christian maturity. Each person must shape her life according to divine revelation. Her will mediates her contemplation of God's truth with her actions, ultimately enabling her to imitate God's own freedom. Such freedom does not entail proliferating options but rather enacting goodness across all areas of life (*Summa contra Gentiles* Book III, ch. 22-32; *Commentary on the Sentences* Book IV, distinction 49). The will matters not just for brute strength (as if actions could be removed from their contexts) but also for realizing the multitudinous ways we rely upon one another to form God's household. A human will's consent to God denotes neither "white-knuckling it" nor "willy-nilly-free-for-alls" but rather bridges the values stemming from our knowledge of God with our bodily desires and practices. Acknowledging how actions affect us as total beings allows the will to contribute to the flourishing of person, community, and cosmos.

3. Will & Holistic Consent for Christian Maturity

Thus, our need to understand, teach, and practice consent does not stop with sex. But let's start there. As Brit Marley wrote in 2017, true sexual consent requires attending to how economic or social inequity exerts pressures and compulsions. Teaching sexual consent therefore demands Christians start having more honest conversations about inequity in our midst. (I can already hear the gender role war machinery moving into attack formation. May I respectfully suggest that this is the wrong way to view sex, the will, and indeed all of Christian life? If we are

concerned that talking about consent might liberate “too much,” what business do we have preaching a salvation that would at all include the redemption of our wills? If equity causes fretting over gender roles, the issue is not this review, Freitas, or even consent. Our real problem is saying we worship a Savior who radically overthrew the gender roles of his day by relying solely upon a woman’s consent, with no male involvement, to receive her genetic material and gestation for the constitution of his human nature. Our real problem is trying to claim a Savior who, during a time when women’s testimony bore no legal weight, relied on his mother’s testimony to substantiate the miracle of his birth and Mary Magdalene’s testimony to attest to the miracle of his resurrection.)

It turns out, though, that inequities are not restricted to gender, nor are they only operative in sex. Power dynamics either free or constrict wills across *all* places of consent, for all of ourselves, for all decisions. The doctrines of sin and salvation suggest that our wills are not already free, but they might become more so. With Marley, Freitas, Augustine, and Thomas, we glimpse how the development of the will can transform all of our lives. How are our motives, notions of truth, and bodies intersecting to promote or inhibit the holistic flourishing of all: in dating, friendship, marriage, work, church, community, country, world; through political, economic, social frames? Reclaiming consent as a whole-self exercise lifts off problematic ways we view ourselves as flat, one-dimensional characters—whether that is hierarchical sex roles in hook-up culture or gender essentialism in the church—and reminds us that we are interdependent creatures in search of a God redeeming the entire universe.

Conclusion

Teaching consent indeed helps address our sexual crises by helping students better understand what is at stake in sexual behavior—now and for a healthy adult life. At the same time, teaching consent does not presuppose or require sexual activity; rather, it helps us re-envision what healthily mature Christian relationships might look like across multiple settings. We must begin in the middle, in the mess, by starting these conversations out loud: in chapel, residence hall life, counseling, small groups, and classrooms.

I commend Freitas for both of these books, which my comments fail to render full justice, and I recommend them wholeheartedly as a way to vision Christian maturity. I am grateful for her dedicated labors on behalf of our students’ well-being; for her courage to listen to their

experiences; for her persistence in raising the topics. If not on college campuses, and especially Christian ones, where? If not her counsel after years spent listening to what is really going on in our students' lives, who? As Augustine heard echoing down the block in another time, "take and read. Take and read."

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