

*Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers.* By Mark D. Regnerus. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 304 pages. \$29.99.

In *Forbidden Fruit*, Mark D. Regnerus has contributed a compelling sociological study addressing the effects of religion on the sexuality of American teenagers, ages sixteen to eighteen. He argues that religion influences the formation of teenage sexual attitudes and values more than it influences sexual behaviors. Furthermore, the impact of religion on sexual practices is best predicted by degree of religiosity rather than mere association with a religion; that is, teenagers who embrace religion as a vital part of identity are most likely to translate their religious ideals into sexual practices. He concludes that while the majority of teenagers claim religious affiliations, most lack the religious passion and religious support system that lead to effects on sexual decisions.

This study draws upon two national surveys: the 2002-2003 National Survey of Youth and Religion and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Regnerus supplements these statistics with 267 interviews with teenagers from various parts of the country. He measures teenage religiosity by frequency of church attendance, intensity of self-reported religiosity, and the degree of influence that respondents think religion has on their decisions. Much of the book is dedicated to the effect of evangelical Protestantism on American teenagers, first, because evangelicals make up the largest religious group among the subject pool (about thirty percent), and second, because evangelicals have been known for their bold claims about the influence of their beliefs on sexual behaviors. Regnerus's general finding that evangelicals exhibit sexual behaviors similar to other American teenagers challenges these bold claims. For example, teenagers who consider themselves evangelicals do not necessarily live up to the evangelical sexual ideal of abstinence before marriage and, in general, they "are not the religious group least likely to have sex" (153).

Each of the chapters of *Forbidden Fruit* could stand alone; together they provide a comprehensive overview of the relationships that exist between Christianity and sexuality among American youth. The first chapter presents discussions about sexuality from Christian traditions, followed

by a chapter summarizing previous social scientific research on the relationship between teenage sexuality and religion. Chapter three discusses how teenagers in general learn about sexuality and concludes that “most teenagers know very little about sex and about pregnancy risk” (74). Regnerus further suggests that the internet is replacing school-based sexual education as the source of information about sex, which often leads to misguided notions about sex and risky sexual behaviors. Children in religious households are least likely to be informed about sexual practices from their parents because their parents tend to emphasize the ideals of sexual morality, rather than the mechanics of sexual behavior.

Chapter four begins by examining the widespread claim among Regnerus’s subjects that they are “emotionally ready” to have sex, regardless of their age. A minority of teenagers resist this justification for sex, assert that age or marital status determine sexual preparedness, and report higher degrees of religiosity or conservative religious backgrounds. This latter group often partakes in the popular trend of pledging abstinence as a means of verbally denouncing sex before marriage. Regnerus examines the effectiveness of abstinence pledges and concludes that while most pledgers break their pledge by engaging in sex before marriage, the pledge is effective in reducing the number of sexual partners and delaying first sexual encounters.

Chapters five and six focus on sexual experience. Teenagers who report to be very religious tend to lose their virginity at a later age and are less likely to engage in oral sex, compared to those who report to be less religious. Across religious affiliations, higher rates of church attendance are related to lower reports of anal sex. While religiosity is the best predictor of sexual behavior, some sexual patterns are attributed to religious affiliation: evangelical Protestant teens are less likely than their mainline Protestant counterparts to report regular contraception use; Jewish and nonreligious teenagers report the highest rates of pornography consumption; Catholic, Mormon, and black Protestant youth are less likely than Jewish and mainline Protestant youth to report experiences of oral sex.

Throughout the book, Regnerus challenges various assumptions about youth. By portraying the average American teenager as religious<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>albeit unenthusiastically<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>he contests popular cultural representations of youth as antireligious or “spiritual but not religious.” He also rejects the belief that teenagers “widely participate in casual sex, group sex, partner switching” and other forms of “nontraditional” sexual behavior (41). Rather, he finds that teens understand sex to belong within relationships, even if these relationships last a short period of days. Lastly, he refutes the media theory that religiously conservative teenagers are increasingly having oral sex instead of “real sex” to preserve their virginity. Regnerus interprets the low reporting of oral sex among religious teens to mean that these youth are not looking for alternatives to vaginal intercourse. More interestingly, he finds that nonreligious youth are more likely to fit this trend of “maintaining technical virginity” described by the media (167).

Regnerus’s focus on Christianity leaves room for future work on the effects of non-Christian religions and agnosticism on sexual behaviors. His attention to the common sexual patterns among

American youth invites other scholars to investigate religion's influence on "nontraditional" sexual practices, sexual orientation, and the experience of sexual abuse among teens in further detail. His work could also be usefully connected to studies of religion and sexuality among Americans younger than sixteen, as well as those older than eighteen.

In sum, *Forbidden Fruit* is an accessible, multi-faceted study relevant to those who study American youth, sexuality, or evangelical Protestantism. Regnerus provides a useful articulation of why religion and sexuality are essential topics for anyone interested in anthropology when he writes that "both religion and sex are elemental life pursuits, not mere window dressing but close to the heart of what it means to be human" (6, author's emphasis). For this reason, *Forbidden Fruit* was not written for academics alone. Regnerus hopes that his findings will inform parents, as well as those who work with teenagers, about teenage religion and sexuality so that more effective guidance can occur. Instead of placing the burden of teenage sexual behaviors solely on teenagers, he suggests that they represent in some ways larger American society, which is "caught somewhere between understanding sex as sacred and thinking it profane" (4).

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