

Reviews

**JUST LOVE:
A Framework for
Christian Sexual Ethics
by Margaret A. Farley.
New York and London:
Continuum, 2006. xiii +
322 pp. \$29.95**

Farley, a professor of Christian Ethics at Yale Divinity School since 1971, has written a wise and thoughtful study of sexual ethics. It should be required reading for all clergy, seminarians, and lay persons who, for reasons of heart and mind, have concluded that certain traditional moral prescriptions handed down by churches through the centuries are neither appropriate to their lived experience of themselves as gendered and sexual beings, nor adequate in light of historical, philosophical, and psychological understandings of human sexuality and personhood.

By way of introducing her topic Farley adeptly guides the reader through the various theoretical discussions and empirical studies that have shaped our contemporary approach to thought about human sexuality. Of particular import are the moral challenges coming from feminism's insistence upon the equality of women with men, as well

as from gay and lesbian persons whose voices have been marginalized in classical and modern discourse about sexual ethics. What is required, therefore, is a reconsideration of the scriptures and the post-biblical traditions that have set the categories for how Christians have thought about what is moral and immoral in matters pertaining to sexual relations. This re-examination of the traditional sources of Christian ethics includes a critical assessment of the philosophical influences upon classical Christianity — such as the influential “natural law” tradition so important in the moral theology of Thomas Aquinas, among others.

Farley's own normative proposal involves two terms: justice and love. While much of the New Testament, and subsequent Christian tradition, have elevated love as the supreme principle of ethics, Farley correctly argues that love, if it does not presuppose justice, is too easily sentimentalized and distorted. Without justice, there can be no love worthy of the name. Justice requires that equals be treated equally, thereby undermining any rationale for hierarchical relationships between men and women, as was the case historically in biblical and post-biblical Christian understandings of marriage. It also precludes violence within the marriage relation. Justice

treats the other person as an end in her- or himself, and includes respect for the other's capacities of self-determination. Love, which is the most appropriate context for the embodied expression of sexuality, requires justice as its *sine qua non*. While love as the cherishing of another human being goes beyond justice, love must never leave justice behind. From within this revised ethical framework wherein love informed by justice is the supreme moral norm for evaluating the appropriateness of sexual relations, traditional prohibitions against homosexuality can no longer be sustained. At the same time, however, consensual and committed relations between persons of the same gender are beholden to the same moral criterion of just love as are heterosexual relations.

Farley is a disciplined scholar who has mastered all the relevant historic sources of Christian ethics, Catholic and Protestant. Moreover, she is conversant with the voluminous contemporary literature on gender and sexuality from multiple secular disciplines. As befits an ethicist standing in the Roman Catholic tradition, Farley affirms the importance of attending to insights from non-theological disciplines such as those derived from the social sciences. For that reason, her work will not appeal to

conservative Protestants who continue to maintain that the Bible, if not the sole source of Christian ethics, is nonetheless the absolute source of norms overriding considerations from any other source. Still, her reflections will appeal to liberal Protestants whose model of ethical reflection has more formal affinities with that of classical Catholic moral theology than with biblicism in either its cruder or more sophisticated varieties.

This spring I taught a course to undergraduates at Macalester College on the topic "Religion, Gender, and Sexuality", in which Farley's book was a required text. In that context it proved to be an invaluable tool for two reasons. First, it provided my students with clear and readable summaries of much literature already covered but which is not as stylistically lucid as is Farley's prose. Second, her book was a marvellous manual for teaching students what goes into the making of an ethical argument and how they might go about constructing such a normative position on sexual ethics for themselves. Since most of the secular literature we read was mainly of a descriptive or explanatory nature, while the religious and theological literature articulated those normative views on gender and sexuality that are

problematic for this current generation of college students, Farley helped them to synthesize various contemporary viewpoints critical of the Christian tradition with a revised approach to ethical reflection. Her book validates the experiential and intellectual reasons persons have to be critical of the church's inherited sexual morality, at the same time that she clarifies why Christian faith itself provides a warrant for ethical revision on behalf of its distinctive vision of what human life may and should be when lived out of a love that is just.

There is no better book on Christian sexual ethics. *Tolle, lege*: take and read.

— Paul E. Capetz

**CAUSE FOR HOPE:
Humanity
at the Crossroads
by Bill Phipps
CopperHouse 2007
232 pages, paper, \$23.95**

As a lawyer, an activist, a minister, and a former Moderator of The United Church of Canada, Bill Phipps has always wanted to change the world. In this book, he sets out to explain what drives him, what encourages him and what gives him hope. "*Cause for Hope*," says former Saskatchewan premier Roy

Romanow on the back cover, "offers up an inspirational vision for social progress, one which compels us to bridge the disconnect between our values and our vision for a just society."

It is a noble task, but unfortunately, problems arise as early as the Preface, where Phipps lists the book's three objectives. "First," he writes, "I believe that the faith traditions of the world are called to respond to the growing challenges facing our Earthly home." Well, yes, Bill, I think we all believe that, but what is the objective of the book?

In fact, all of Phipps' objectives — and an inordinate number of other sentences — begin with that phrase: "I believe...". But nobody seems to have decided the objective of the book. Is it to be a platform for one person's confession of faith? If so, it succeeds. Or is it to provide what the title promises, cause for hope? Here it is, well, hopeless.

But back to the supposed objectives. "Third, I believe that faith traditions need to emerge from behind doctrinal and theological differences to work together for the common good." Herein lies another problem: the book's editor failed not only to notice that the first objective is subsumed by the third but also other glaring mistakes, such as the misspelling of Sallie McFague's name.