

Review of

Sexual Ethics: A Theological Introduction

TODD A. SALZMAN AND MICHAEL G. LAWLER

Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012. 280 pp. \$26.95

Making Love Just: Sexual Ethics for Perplexing Times

MARVIN M. ELLISON

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. 176 pp. \$18.00

Intended for “the general educated Catholic population” (xiii), *Sexual Ethics: A Theological Introduction* (SE) is a masterfully abridged version of the authors’ award-winning 2008 book, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* (TSP). Nearly all of the text of *Sexual Ethics* is common to both volumes, much of it edited for a broader audience. Omitted in *Sexual Ethics* are about seventy pages presenting contemporary debates between the methods and anthropologies of traditionalists and revisionists (most of TSP chapters 2 and 3). New in *Sexual Ethics* are “Questions for Reflection” at the end of each chapter and a brief discussion of “conscience” (xxv–xxvi).

In both books, the authors offer a “historically conscious and revisionist approach” to Catholic sexual morality (SE, 221). Beginning with “two magisterial principles” in “Catholic moral, sexual tradition”—procreation and the confines of marriage—the authors note different theological bases for these principles—nature and reason, respectively (xiii–xiv)—and propose a significant shift in focus from the “nature’ of the act” to “the meaning of the act for the human person” (xvii). Chapter 1, which could stand on its own, provides a helpful, “brief history” of “sexual morality in the Catholic tradition,” undergirding the authors’ historical (in contrast with a classicist) approach. In chapter 2, the theological crux of the argument, Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler proceed to explore methodological developments and tensions in magisterial teaching, choosing “the principle of the human person adequately considered,” theologically articulated in *Gaudium et spes*, as the basis for their proposal of a “unitive sexual anthropology” (47). This holistic anthropological approach to the sexual person attempts to shift the magisterium’s “focus on acts and absolute norms” in sexual ethics to a method more akin to its social ethics, focusing on general principles, interrelationships, and the common good (59). Central to their

argument is a reworking of the concept of complementarity purged “of every suggestion of either gender or sexual inequality” (63). The remainder of the book illustrates “how these principles apply in real, concrete, particular human relationships” (87).

To critique the argument of *Sexual Ethics* necessarily implicates *The Sexual Person*, which is beyond the scope of this review. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to ask whether the same argument presented as a “renewed Catholic anthropology” (in *TSP*) for professional theologians functions equally well as a “theological introduction” to sexual ethics (in *SE*) for a lay (nonscholarly) audience. Chapter 6, “Artificial Reproductive Technologies,” is the most successful in this regard, exploring a range of ethical concerns (e.g., means versus ends, burden of proof, presumptions against, appropriate cautions, and consideration of the common good) to arrive at a qualified expansion of magisterial teaching, which becomes a guide to personal discernment. Other topics in *Sexual Ethics* include marriage and contraception (chapter 3), cohabitation and premarital sexuality (chapter 4), and homosexuality (chapter 5).

Overall, *Sexual Ethics* functions better as an introduction to Catholic sexual teaching and moral anthropology than as an introduction to sexual ethics. For example, reworking the concept of “complementarity”—despite the authors’ inclination “to abandon both the word and the idea” (63)—may be necessary for reconstructing Catholic tradition, but is not necessarily the most helpful starting point for sexual ethics. *Sexual Ethics* will be challenging for readers lacking theological training and will be of most interest to those already committed to and invested in magisterial teaching. My recommendation would be to use *The Sexual Person* as a teacher’s guide when assigning *Sexual Ethics*. By any measure, these books present a brilliant, careful, and sophisticated scholarly argument that revises Catholic sexual teaching in important and faithful ways.

In *Making Love Just: Sexual Ethics for Perplexing Times* (*MLJ*), Marvin Ellison provides an accessible, engaging introduction to sexual ethics for “progressive Christians interested in shifting from a patriarchal to a justice-centered, egalitarian paradigm with respect to sex and sexuality” (141). Conceived during a political action campaign, the book is meant to equip the reader to “talk publicly about sex and sexuality” and “to engage publicly in ethical inquiry” (ix). Readers of Ellison’s previous work will find familiar themes and commitments in *Making Love Just*.

Sexual Ethics and *Making Love Just* make for an unlikely but fascinating comparison. Both seek to promote dialogue (*MLJ*, 8–9; cf. *SE*, xviii) and individual discernment (*MLJ*, 2–3; cf. *SE*, xxvi), locate moral authority in the community of the faithful (*MLJ*, 5, 141; cf. *SE*, 225) and sexual ethics within the field of social ethics (*MLJ*, 15; cf. *SE*, 59), and desire to “reshape the Christian tradition” (*MLJ*, 5–6; cf. *SE*, 221) and prompt conversion (*MLJ*, 21; cf. *SE*, 224–25). Like Salzman and Lawler, Ellison rejects an ahistorical, essentialist view of

nature in favor of a socially constructed view, adopting a “historical-cultural approach” (*MLJ*, 15; cf. *SE*, xvi, xxi) and “[a] more relationally focused ethical framework” (*MLJ*, 4; cf. *SE*, xvii) that recognizes perspectival limitations (*MLJ*, 6; cf. *SE*, xxii) and moves its focus from acts to persons and relationships (*MLJ*, 29, 33–34; cf. *SE*, 37). The books diverge from there. Where Salzman and Lawler privilege Catholic tradition as a starting place, Ellison privileges the experiences of “those on the margins” as a primary source of moral wisdom (17). Where Salzman and Lawler focus on developing a relational anthropology, Ellison focuses on “the misuse of power and exploitation of vulnerability” (3). Ellison offers a “liberating ethic” in contrast to the “dominant imperial approach” of traditionalists (5).

For Ellison, a primary task of ethics is to ask the right questions, leading him to assert: “The moral problem is sexual injustice and the eroticizing of power inequalities to bolster the social privilege of some at the disadvantage of others” (12–13). Thus, he focuses his analysis on “race, gender, sexual, and economic oppression and the pervasive patterns of sexualized violence” (9). His ethical norm is “justice-love, understood as mutual respect, commitment, and care and a fair sharing of power” in all relationships (21). Chapter 2 argues for this norm in contrast to and in order to transform the Christian tradition. Like Salzman and Lawler, Ellison seriously engages the history of church teachings but casts a wider net, analyzing texts from the apostle Paul, Augustine, and Vatican II to material from Focus on the Family, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the United Church of Christ, among others. Ellison develops the implications of his ethical method through a variety of topical questions in chapters 3–7.

Ellison’s method of interrogating the issues, reframing them in terms of power and injustice and then relating them to the norm of “justice-love,” provides for provocative reading, thoughtful ethical analysis, and challenging conclusions. Chapter 3 considers the topic of marriage, fidelity, and adultery by presenting the tough case of a spouse with Alzheimer’s. The “caregiver’s dilemma” invites the reader to move beyond a rule-based ethic focused on adultery to consider the context and underlying principles at stake (48). This strategy decenters heterosexual, monogamous marriage, allowing Ellison ethical footing for his exploration of other traditionally taboo topics: polygyny, open-ended marriage, and polyamory. In chapter 4, Ellison continues his attack against “sexual fundamentalism, the notion that the only morally acceptable sex is heterosexual, marital, and procreative” (69) by discussing the “mixed blessing” of legalizing same-sex marriage. Not content to settle for equality as a goal, he claims that relational justice demands more: “a comprehensive justice framework that confronts not only sexual and gender oppression, but also white racism, economic exploitation, and cultural elitism” (68). This notion of justice then interrogates neoliberal capitalism and Christian

patriarchalism as Ellison argues for political and spiritual transformation (73–76). Ellison’s mounting critique of misogyny and patriarchy propels his ethical analysis of sexual and domestic violence (chapter 5), procreative freedom and responsibility (chapter 6), and sexuality education (chapter 7). He concludes by defending his justice ethic as a faithful transformation of the Christian tradition, belonging to a “new ecumenism” of progressive Christians (140).

Making Love Just will have greatest appeal to those readers discontent with traditional sexual mores and seeking tools for ethical discernment in these “perplexing times.” Readers impatient with Salzman and Lawler’s laborious theological journey to reinvent an ethically palatable complementarity may be satisfied with Ellison’s quick rejection of this form of “subordination” (112). Readers uncomfortable with Ellison’s radical transformation of tradition may sit more comfortably with Salzman and Lawler’s heroic attempt to speak within that tradition. Significantly, Margaret Farley is one of the few interlocutors common to *Sexual Ethics* and *Making Love Just*, and her *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* serves as an appropriate point of connection between these two very different approaches to sexual ethics.

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Review of *Other Dreams of Freedom: Religion, Sex, and Human Trafficking*

YVONNE C. ZIMMERMAN

New York: Oxford, 2013. 223 pp. \$35.00

In *Other Dreams of Freedom*, Yvonne Zimmerman develops a genealogical analysis of US antitrafficking policy. She aims to show how antitrafficking initiatives in the United States are influenced by and expressive of distinctively Protestant norms regarding gender, sex, and freedom. Zimmerman argues that US antitrafficking initiatives are limited in their ability to promote