

Mark D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex*. Blackwell Publishers 2002. 198 pp.

A review by Gary Pence, Professor of Pastoral Theology, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

The speech of Christian sexual ethics seems often to have been moved by unchristian fears and fantasies. It has served to sanction old designs rather than to announce good news. Instead of confessing yet more sexual sins, or preaching yet again against them, we might want to confess the sins we have committed in presuming to teach sex as we have. We might want to consider our bad habits, our vices, when it comes to setting forth a Christian ethics of sex. (p. 5)

You get the drift here of the approach Mark Jordan, a religion professor at Emory University, will take in his new book, *The Ethics of Sex*. The book jacket describes the author as “part of a group of theologians who represent a concerted attempt to reconceptualize and re-engage Christian theology from non-heterosexual, marginal perspectives.” Already praised for his earlier books, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* and *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism*, Jordan here broadens his view to encompass the whole landscape of Christian responses to human sexuality. It is not an altogether pretty picture.

Jordan begins with the uses and abuses of scriptural authorities. Although the biblical references to sex contain multiple images and principles reflecting different circumstances and different preoccupations and although the interpretations of these references by Christians through the centuries have displayed as much diversity and contradiction as the texts themselves, each Christian group has nonetheless portrayed its own interpretation of Scripture as an authoritative reading of a monolithic Christian sexual ethic that never in fact existed. “A person may justify a specific interpretation by appeal to Christian tradition, but in fact the ‘tradition’ is no more than the latest communiqué from a denominational agency.” Jordan appeals for Christians to be “faithfully multilingual” in their use of Scripture, to follow secular scholarship by giving serious attention to “what a passage says, why the passage says it, how the passage is traditionally assigned to a topic, and whether the passage is normative for contemporary Christians.”

As Jordan demonstrates, the core of the problem with traditional Christian sexual ethics doesn't lie in the Bible itself, however, but in the anti-erotic idealization of virginity as a “new life beyond sex” which came to dominate Christian sensibilities and continues to influence Christian attitudes to this day. While renunciation of sexuality altogether was commended as the Christian ideal, marriage—a second-class status—was reduced to an inferior state grudgingly tolerated for the majority of Christians, who were incapable of sustained abstinence from sexual activity. Sex within marriage was excusable, forgivable, and yet severely circumscribed. Referring to “sins of nature” and “sins of Sodom,” Jordan notes that “the two categories have included, in one author or another, every erotic or quasi-erotic act that can be performed by human bodies except penile-

vaginal intercourse between two partners who are not primarily seeking pleasure and who do not intend to prevent conception.”

Jordan provides evidence that even Luther and Calvin succumbed to theological suspicions of sex, even within marriage. For Luther marriage redeems sex from its fallen condition and can serve good ends, both physical and spiritual. Yet even within marriage sex must be guarded with cautious restraint, for immoderate exercise of sex within marriage is as coarse, filthy, defiling, and demonic as he assumes unredeemed sex outside of marriage to be.

With such views controlling Christian understandings of sexuality, it is hardly surprising that homosexuality, masturbation, and any sexual activity except conventional heterosexual intercourse have been viewed by most Christians with discomfort and suspicion, if not outright condemnation. Jordan asks, “Where is a religion that begins with such a strong critique of human sexual life to find principles for constructive teaching of it?” “We should notice,” he writes, “how little positive instruction Christian theology has traditionally given about married sex. There is no Christian pillow book or Kama Sutra, no Christian saint is revered for attaining the vision of God through disciplined erotic refinement.” “Theological shame has corrupted or determined the language of sex.”

Near the end of his book, Jordan poses an alternative vision of what might have been:

Imagine an alternative history of Christian literature. In this imagined history, an early commitment both to God’s goodness in creation and to the transfiguration of human bodies promised by the Lord’s resurrection would lead to the cultivation of erotic genres. Theologians would regard a rich and detailed language of sexual love as an index of their fidelity to God’s incarnation. From this patristic period, we would inherit exhortations to sexual discovery, rules for conducting it, and public letters of sexual encouragement or advice. From this Scholastic period, we would still have a vast Christian compendium of sexual arts, which we would count as one of the most authoritative works in moral theology, meriting generations of commentary. Our contemporary theological schools would vie in providing interesting departures from it.

Such a history is still open to us, he writes, in the writings of the Christian mystics and the language of prayer, and the future appears hopeful. “Who would have imagined, two decades ago, that an introduction to the Christian ethics of sex would be written by an ‘unrepentant homosexual’? For that matter, who would have imagined that church blessings for lesbian and gay unions would be a matter of debate? Or that gays and lesbians would be serving proudly in the churches of many denominations with the full support of their congregations?”

Jordan’s handy volume is a well documented, often riveting historical account of why Christians continue to be so exercised over sexual values and practices even today. Yet even within that often dismal story are the seeds for tomorrow’s hope. Jordan is to be thanked for providing both.