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# Just Love: A Framework For Christian Sexual Ethics



## Synopsis

This long-awaited book by one of American Christianity's foremost ethicists proposes a framework for sexual ethics whereby justice is the criterion for all loving, including love that is related to sexual activity and relationships. It begins with historical and cross-cultural explorations, then addresses the large questions of embodiment, gender, and sexuality, and finally delineates the justice framework for sexual ethics. Though *Just Love's* particular focus is Christian sexual ethics, Farley's framework is broad enough to have relevance for multiple traditions. Also covered are specific issues in sexual ethics, including same-sex relationships, marriage and family, divorce and second marriage, celibacy, and sex and its negativities.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

'In a world of moral confusion and ethical compromise, the principles for which Margaret Farley stands have shone as a lodestar of hope. Or perhaps like a beacon, for her life and work guide us though the haze of uncertainty in which we nowadays perforce live, leading us always toward the good and the real.' - Sherwin Nuland, author of *How We Live and How We Die*. Reference & Research Book News/ August 2006 (mention)'On a topic about which too many angry polemics are written, Farley's calm, commonsense style comes as a relief...This will be a wonderful book to use with students...In a society where sex is used to sell nearly everything...Margaret Farley has the guts and the clarity of mind to give as a third alternative to "narrowly constituted moral systems and rules" on the one hand and sexual chaos on the other.'William C. Placher, *Christian Century*, October 17th 2006 (The Christian Century)Just Love carries to a new level Farley's analysis of

different world-views and cultural systems....As a theologian, Farley gives us a social ethic of sex that incorporates both the biblical "option for the poor" and the orientation of Catholic social thought to the universal common good. As a feminist, she reminds Catholics that their tradition should make its global option for women more consistent, more explicit and more effective, especially in the areas of sex, motherhood, marriage and family.' ~ Lisa Sowell Cahill, America, December 2006 (Lisa Sowle Cahill, J. Donald Monan Professor of Theology, Boston College)

Margaret A. Farley holds the Gilbert L. Stark Chair in Christian Ethics and Professor Emerita at Yale University Divinity School. She was awarded the 2007 St Elizabeth Seton Medal and 2008 Grawemeyer award. She is also a past president of the Society of Christian Ethics and the Catholic Theological Society of America.

I read this book because I felt that somewhere in the mass of educated humanity, someone might be able to shed an objective light on the ethics for human sexuality. Someone with a mind not born of the Middle Ages, or reactionary moralism. Having read several news stories about Sr. Margaret Farley and her dustup with the powers-that-be at the Vatican, I decided to purchase the book and see what she had to offer. I wasn't disappointed. The book is breathtaking in its sweep and perspective, and let's be fair, this can't be captured in a book review, and not likely even a review of several thousand words. 'The Questions and Their Past' (Chapter 2) starts the reader off and sets the stage as it were. We learn about Foucault's 'historical constitution of desire' (p. 18), as well as Catherine MacKinnon's take on gendered violence (p. 23) and even a historical perspective on sexual ethics in the West (p. 26). Then there are the 'Secular Paths: Philosophical Developments- Medical Influences'. But these opening segments merely whet the appetite for more, and the writing style is engaging. Chapter Three on 'Diverse Traditions' really opens the reader's mind with exposure to a series of different cultures from around the globe. All of this is by way of showing the basis for a 'comparative sexual ethics' by referencing distinct customs as pertains to sexual rituals, rites so we can compare them to our own. We learn for example of the "matrilinear society" peculiar to the South Seas (p. 70) where "sexuality is woven into the fabric of life". Then in African Cultures (p. 77) we learn sex is "primarily for the sake of the community" and "this cardinal belief shapes many sexual norms and makes them difficult for Westerners to interpret". (For example, male extramarital sex is condoned, but not female) On p. 90, Sr. Farley provides some insights into the Indian 'Kamasutra'. And in 'The World of Islam' (p. 95) we learn that "there is no fall and no doctrine of original sin in Islamic literature" (p. 98). In addition, "the physical delights of sex belong not only to

this world but also to paradise". The chapter is important because it provides a variety of 'benchmark' cultural comparisons which permit us to see Western sexuality in a more rational and nuanced light. Chapter Four 'Sexuality and Its Meanings' explores both secular theories and takes (i.e. Jean -Paul Sartre's on p. 122) and 'Christian Theologies' (p.128) say as promulgated by Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Origen and Augustine. In this section we also learn (p. 129) that "Aquinas considered women deficient as human beings and hence deficient in their status as images of God". This antiquated take may explain why the Church (Catholic) still treats women as second class citizens. Also engrossing in this chapter is Farley's discussion of gender (p. 149) and how it dovetails with biology and experience. Also we note "there are human bodies that are neither male nor female, they do not fall neatly into a binary sexual division". She is referring here to "chromosomal constitutions alternative to XX and XY" but also to intersexuals. Chapter Five, 'Just Love and Just Sex- Preliminary Considerations' is the precursor to the core of the book, in which Sr. Farley provides the disciplinary inputs to her main chapter (Six). The inputs include (p. 189): philosophy, biology, medicine, psychology, sociology, anthropology "and even history, literature and art." Chapter Six, 'Framework for a Sexual Ethic', the putative core of the book. lays out seven norms for Just sex, which "are not merely ideals, but are bottom line requirements". As she notes, this means "there is a sense in which they are stringent requirements but also ideals". This embraces a deep perception of the human condition as well as the human brain, and how though we may aspire to high minded actions, reality and biology often gets in the way. This is reinforced in Chapter Seven, but let me first detail the norms: 1. Do No Unjust Harm - this, of course, means mental-psychological as well as physical. In any case, betraying the personhood and autonomy of another. 2. Free Consent - we respect the rights of others to their own self-determination free of imposition of our own will. 3. Mutuality - properly conducted sexual activity requires respect for the person and mutuality of participation. 4. Equality - Beyond free choice and mutuality there must be equal power, or sharing of power. 5. Commitment- some form of commitment, loyalty must characterize relations that include a sexual dimension. 6. Fruitfulness- This is beyond the notion of mere procreation (since there are many heterosexual couples who are childless by choice or happenstance) but extends to the level of "fruitfulness in interpersonal relations". (p.227) In other words, the couple's lives also enrich the lives of others, whether through voluntary service, friendship or other avenues. 7- Social Justice - Sexual partners "take responsibility for the consequences of their love and sexual activity" The end of the chapter deals with "Special Questionings" (p. 232) whereby the original norms might be extended or extrapolated beyond a rigid framework. For example, there is the controversial (though it really shouldn't be so today) issue of

'Sexual Relations with Oneself' (p. 235). Here, Sr. Farley rightly observes that "self pleasuring" needs to be removed out of the realm of taboo morality". This Materialist couldn't agree with her more, and as I pointed out in my own book: 'The Atheist's Handbook to Modern Materialism' (2000), Chapter 6 'Materialism and Morality', proscriptions against it are usually based upon a long defunct 'natural law' theory which is remarkable for its incoherence. (For example, the Catholic Church once regarded slavery as conforming to 'natural law' since some men 'naturally required the oversight and guidance of others'.) At another level, the Catholic hysteria over masturbation (they believe it's a 'mortal sin' which can send a person to hell - errrr....excuse me, his "soul") reflects an unhealthy preoccupation with the natural biological dynamic of one mammalian biped species on one ordinary planet in one ordinary galaxy among billions. At another level - that for morality- it engenders an inchoate system which boggles the rational mind. As I pointed out in my book (p. 185): "If it's equally grievous to kill 20 people with an AK-47 as to manually induce a single orgasm in oneself, then where's the proportion? The equalization of gravity, in terms of postulated penalties ('eternal damnation') leads to an inherent logical inconsistency that permeates and weakens the entire moral foundation". Hence, as an intelligent rationalist - as well as religious - Sr. Farley is quite wise to also perceive this as on p. 236 when she notes that in terms of self-pleasuring and norms of justice, whether this particular activity harms or helps is "an empirical question not a moral one". That she comes down firmly on the side of self-pleasuring is embodied in one statement on the same page, to do with women with limited experience of their own bodies, in which case, "masturbation actually serves relationships rather than hinders them". In other words, it expands the woman's potential for greater sexual discovery and hence, joy. (Not mentioned is that this can also apply to males, i.e. following prostate cancer surgery or radiation treatments, for which erectile problems are common and many medical sites suggest "mutual masturbation" as a way to get around it). The only folks that would have problems with this are the zealots and hyper-moralists. In the section on 'The Negative Potential of Sex' (p. 237) Sister Farley surveys a couple of the negative agents (e.g. prostitution and pornography) that might negatively impact the relational norms in her sexual ethics. Again, she must be congratulated for a sober as opposed to hysterical, irrational treatment, as when she observes (p. 239): "Not all use of pornography is harmful to individuals, no doubt, and it is all too easy for zealots to lump even great literature and art into the category of pornography." Indeed! In Chapter Seven, 'Patterns of Relationship: Contexts for Just Love' we see that the basis for ethical sexual norms can extend beyond the conventional heterosexual couple to other family combinations, orientations. These others can also be deemed within the orbit of "Just love" and for whom Sr. Farley's sexual norms can also be said to apply. As she asks (p. 272): "the fundamental

question is when is sexual activity appropriate in human relationships". Meanwhile, for those interested in biblical exegesis, there is a nice little nugget on p. 274, wherein we learn that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:1-29) has not one iota to do with homosexuality or rapes based on it. According to Farley: "In its earliest interpretations, that is, in other Hebrew Bible and apocryphal texts, the extreme moral depravity of the citizens of Sodom and other cities of the plain was identified not with homosexuality, but with violations of moral requirements of hospitality, as well as with injustice, arrogance and hatred of foreigners. [Ezek: 16:49, Sirach 16:8, Wisd. of Solomon 10: 6-8, 19:13-15]" Well, who knew? You learn something every day. I took biblical exegesis at Loyola University in 1965, and we never encountered that, but then our attention was mainly on the New Testament, and the quadriform gospels. The main point I wish to end with is that Sister Margaret Farley's book is a serious addition to any library on human ethics, or moral evolution. Her analytical mind imbues every page and her words and arguments are - for that reason - a delight to read. No surprise then that I've placed her text along side my most prized books, including moral-religious textbooks from Loyola, Elaine Pagels' monographs (e.g. 'Adam, Eve and the Serpent') and Ute Ranke-Heinemann's 'Eunuchs For the Kingdom of Heaven' (Doubleday, 1990). Most importantly, despite the Vatican's recriminations, criticisms of Sr. Farley, her book is a welcome, long overdue liberation of Catholic Sexual morality from its anti-sexual Manichean roots, as embodied in the Church's antiquated Magisterium (Teaching office). As we were taught at Loyola University in our Ethics classes, by the Jesuits no less, NO ONE is obliged to adhere to any injunctions of the Magisterium - they're intended strictly as 'guiding suggestions' and not predicated on the 'ex cathedra' (infallible) papal pronouncements). Most of Farley's critics don't grasp this, but maybe they prefer not to. Sr. Margaret Farley has advanced a refreshing, realistic sexual ethics predicated on real flesh and blood humans, not glorified angels inhabiting human bodies. For that she is to be commended, and one reason I recommend her book, even to non-Catholics and atheists! The fact is we ALL need the vision provided by a rational sexual ethics devoid of antiquated doggerel, foolish ancient crutches (e.g. "natural law") and absurd encyclicals that look backward instead of forward, and making the planet better.

I recommend this book for believers who are wrestling with the issue of Christian sexual values in a modern context. Whether you consider yourself conservative/fundamentalist, liberal/progressive, or somewhere in-between, you may find that you are challenged reading this text. Perhaps a bit longer than it needs to be, but definitely in-depth.

Margaret Farley has crafted an intricate and profound point-of-view in the ever important and growing discussion of Christianity and sexuality. I enjoyed that Farley looked at multiple cultures for their views of gender and sexuality and even provided historical information for Christianity along with adapting the ideas of Michel Foucault for her work. With all these resources Farley constructs her compelling argument and ideas. I will say that I did not agree with all of Farley's conclusions myself (such as her statement on a certain sexual act, I won't say what that is or what her view is as I want other readers to find out for themselves) but I could still see where she was coming from and why she said such things. I would recommend this book for any Christian who wishes to delve into the issues behind the ongoing discussion of Christianity and sexuality or who may work in some sort of pastoral setting with a attention to sexual issues.

About a decade ago I significantly cut back my readings of Catholic moralists and ethicists for two reasons. First, the "Curran methodology" seemed to expand the umbrella of moral concerns and constituencies to a point of infinite ubiquity. Second, the present generation of Catholic moralists--seminary professors, for example--appeared to labor in an unproductive and potentially dangerous environ of balancing absolute Magisterial imperatives against the work product of the sciences and the sense and practice of many Catholic Faithful in matters of human sexuality. Sister Margaret Farley's work at hand was brought to my attention by the Vatican's public censure of "Just Love" in 2012. Evidently I was not the only ambulance chaser; as of this writing "Just Love" ranks #16,623 among all sales and commands \$80.00 in hardback. Who knew Rome was as potent as Oprah when it comes to hawking books? So what kind of work touches off a firestorm in both directions? "Just Love" is a seminal work, that is, a well-defined hypothesis or direction of research. In our work at hand the author approaches the ethics of sexuality from a novel [and yet very ancient] approach, the tradition of Christian justice. Justice, over centuries of theological formulation, has evolved into the art of human rights, the specific entitlements if you will, of each and every one of God's children. Not accidentally, this sense of justice has permeated papal teaching since Leo XIII defended private property in 1893 and girds the Church's present day emphasis upon the right to life. Early in the work Farley makes the valid point that every generation and every culture is called upon to explore the meaning of the unique human experience of gender, both in terms of assigned roles and personal experience, and implied in that, the experience and meaning of sexual acts. The author's range of examined disciplines and philosophies is extensive and consumes a considerable portion of the work. My own learning curve was accelerated by the exhaustive bibliography of present day philosophers, anthropologists, ethicists, and historians, too numerous to quickly count,

who, like the author, are exploring the profound meanings of human gender experience and the relational implications of that awareness. At times her survey conveys a feminist sympathy, as do at least many of her sources, but in fairness, "the victors write the history" and some critique of custom and teaching seems a reasonable corrective. As Joseph Ratzinger himself wrote in 1969, "...Tradition must not be considered only affirmatively, but also critically." [186] It is Chapter Five where the author begins to delve into present-day experience of human sexuality and its behavioral implications. I should note here that the reader is well advised at this point to carry forward some sense of difference between Christian ethics [behaviors appropriate to all the baptized] and Catholic morality [prescribed behavior--based upon a fluid matrix of Revelation and subsequent ecclesiastical Tradition.] As a vowed Catholic religious who taught four decades at Yale Divinity School, Farley is well positioned to speak from both disciplines, though at times a reader is hard-pressed to know which hat she is wearing--which evidently was one of the Vatican concerns. Farley's guiding principle in matters of sexual behavior is stated clearly enough: "...the aims of sexuality ought to be in accord with, or at the very least, not violate the concrete reality of human persons." [214] Her sympathies lie with the acting intentionality of a just person, and as she unfolds her discussion, it becomes clear that she is not proposing an overthrow of Catholic orthodox teaching, but rather like Archimedes a better place to stand to shape an effective blueprint for sexual ethics. If nothing else, her proposal rescues Catholic sexual teaching from moral physicalism, a stumbling block in church teaching of matters of sexual expression [as in why "rhythm" is morally acceptable and a condom is not, when human intentionality is the same.] A splendid example of Farley's method is found in her treatment of marriage. For a marriage to be truly just, she argues, its framework must be mutuality, equality, and fruitfulness. She makes an interesting case that the pastoral phraseology "total gift of self to the other" can be dangerously misconstrued toward a "power differential" [267], a state of affairs, she observes, that rarely works in favor of the woman. In treating of marriage, Farley notes that the marriage vow is oriented toward the future. The individual, the spouse, the offspring, and society in general are justly served by the permanence of a progressive commitment to the vow. She allows that there are circumstances when the vow can no longer be maintained, most of these in my view described as moral collapse or severe personality disorder. But in a remarkable insight, she argues that a marriage vow can never existentially disappear. A couple that has shared community, sexual intimacy, and created children cannot casually erase history, obligation, affection, or responsibility by civil [or by implication, Church] court. Farley raises this question in the matter of remarriage, particularly in the matter of just care for children in custodial considerations. Farley discusses the current controversial



public discussion of same sex marriage at considerable length in the same context of the entitlement to justice. Whatever one's reaction to her analysis, in fairness this is a working hypothesis. The Vatican has concluded that this work is a danger to the faithful. Is this the case? In the first instance, I do not believe this work was intended for "the faithful" but was instead a contribution to working Christian ethicists and theologians. [Ironically, Rome itself promoted the author's book into the limelight.] Secondly, this is a work of methodology, not pastoral policy. Thirdly, the condemnation arises from a peculiar tendency to single out specific items of sexual behavior as litmus tests of full Catholic orthodoxy. And finally, one would hope that the Church never becomes so self-satisfied that a healthy critique is perceived as something other than a gift.

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