

## Feminism and Human Sexuality: Part I

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Feminism comes in different varieties. Some forms are compatible with Catholic/Christian teaching on human sexuality; others are not. In a two-part essay I will consider the heterodox feminist understanding of human sexuality and of norms governing sexual activity proposed by some Catholic theologians that is quite different from and opposed to the understanding of human sexuality and its norms held firmly by the Catholic Church.

In this essay I will briefly review the thought of a leading Catholic feminist theologian, Margaret Farley, a member of a religious community, the Sisters of Mercy, who teaches at Yale University. In Part II I will consider the thought of Lisa Sohle Cahill, a married woman and mother who is professor of theology at Boston College. Neither Farley nor Cahill can be described as radically militant feminists comparable to theologians Rosemary Ruether or Christine Gudorf, but their views are highly influential. Farley is Past President of the Catholic Theological Society of America and the Society of Christian Ethics and has received honorary degrees from at least 11 universities, among them leading Catholic institutions.

Farley presents her understanding of human sexuality and of norms regulating its expression in depth in her 2006 book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*. Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight, are centrally important. In Chapter Six she takes up “Norms for a Just Sex” and “Special Questions.” She enumerates 7 norms: 1. Do no unjust harm (216-218); 2. Free Consent (218-220); 3. Mutuality (220-223); 4. Equality (223) 5. Commitment (223-226); 6. Fruitfulness (226-228); and 7. Social Justice (228-230).

I will comment on norms 1, 3, 5, and 6 to help show how Farley herself understands the norms she proposes. This can be best done by relating the norms both to two “special questions” she takes up in Chapter 7 (teen sex and sex with oneself, pp. 232-236) and to her discussion of marriage and family, same-sex relationships, marriage and divorce in Chapter 8.

*Do no unjust harm* (norm 1) is a self-evidently true proposition because by definition “unjust” harm cannot be just. But what specifically counts as “unjust harm”? Farley lists many kinds of behavior that are surely *prima facie* harmful in an unjust way: violent sex (e.g., rape), battering, deceit, pornography, prostitution, pedophilia, and similar deeds. Among behaviors causing unjust harm she also includes “negligence regarding knowing what we must do for sex to be ‘safe-sex,’” along with “terrible things done to those who deviate” (p. 217). To what does she refer here? In light of what Farley later says about “mutuality” and “same-sex relationships” it is apparent that the reference is to the “terrible things” done to those who engage in sodomitic sex.



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Farley prefers “mutuality” (norm 3) (pp. 220-223) to the older “complementarity,” which she thinks is “steeped in images of the male as active and the female as passive” (p. 221). She declares that today we know that “the possibilities of mutuality exist for many relationship—whether heterosexual or *gay* (emphasis added), whether with genital sex or the multiple other ways of embodying our desires and loves” (p. 221). Coupling this passage with her fervent defense in Chapter 8 (pp. 271-295) of “same-sex relationships” that in some way embody the seven norms set forth in Chapter 7, it is evident that for Farley “gay” sex is a good illustration of “mutuality.”

With respect to *commitment* (norm 5) (pp. 223-226) Farley first asserts that in the Christian past commitment was “largely identified with heterosexual marriage” and “was valued more for the sake of family arrangements than for the sake of the individuals themselves” (p. 224). (1) She then speaks of ways persons can keep the power of sexual desire alive within them. One way that she endorses is “through a relationship extended sufficiently through time to allow the incorporation of sexuality into a shared life and an enduring love,” which seems possible “through commitment” (p. 225). In Chapter 7 she deems this kind of commitment sufficient to ground heterosexual marriage (see p. 265 where she sees a lifelong permanent commitment as an ideal but by no means only kind of commitment on which such a marriage can be based. And in that chapter she discusses same-sex unions at length (pp. 272-294), setting forth criteria for “just” same-sex genital relations and, on pp. 293-294, affirming that the more persuasive position regarding same-sex marriage is that “the possibility of gay marriage would actually reinforce the value of commitment for heterosexuals as well as for homosexuals.”

*Fruitfulness* (norm 6) encompasses a great deal for Farley. She treats it in Chapter 6 (pp. 226-228) and in Chapter 7 in her discussion of children in marriage (pp. 269-271), and again in the discussion of same-sex unions (see especially p. 290). It obviously refers to the generation of new life or procreation, but it has a far wider ambience. As far as procreation is concerned, Farley adopts a sophisticated version of the slogan, “No unwanted child ought ever to be born,” and of course one way to assure that no unwanted child is born is to use contraceptives in the exercise of “responsible parenthood.” Farley articulates this view when she writes: “Traditional arguments that if there is sex it must be procreative have changed to arguments that if sex is procreative it must be within a context that assures responsible care of offspring” (p. 227). In Chapter 7 after reviewing new modes of reproduction and social conditions affecting child-rearing, Farley offers a “principle” to guide us and that can perhaps extend to the “consequences of sex.” It is this: “no children should be conceived who will be born in a context uncondusive to their growth and development in relationships, or uncondusive to their ultimately becoming autonomous, morally responsible for themselves” (p. 271). This principle obviously does not exclude having children by new reproductive methods, using contraception (or abortion) to prevent conception of children if one judges that they will be born in a context “uncondusive to their growth and development.”

In these sections she also makes it clear that couples (heterosexual or gay) can be “fruitful” in many creative ways that do not involve the generation of new life.



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Enough has been said regarding Farley’s understanding of marriage and the family. I will now briefly summarize her views on *divorce and remarriage*, *teen sex*, and *sex with oneself or masturbation*.

*Divorce and Remarriage.* This is considered at great length on pp. 296-312. Farley definitely shows in these pages that she thinks some marriages, including those whose husbands and wives acknowledge that they are valid marital unions, surely fail and that the proper response to such failures is divorce followed by remarriage.

*Teen Sex.* Farley considers this a “special question.” Although not a strong advocate of teen sex, she leaves open the possibility that some teens can have the maturity and capacity for just sex. This is clearly what she proposes on pp. 234-235.

*Sex with oneself or masturbation.* Farley regards masturbation itself as “morally neutral,” and believes that “masturbation actually serves relationships rather than hindering them” (p. 236).

It is quite evident that Farley, a professed religious and highly esteemed by groups such as the Catholic Theological Society of America, as whose president she once served, understands human sexuality and the moral norms governing its exercise in a way incompatible with the teaching of the Magisterium.

I will close by briefly noting her false claim that *pleasure* is good in itself and that a key reason for engaging in sex is for the *pleasure* it gives. “In most sexual experiences,” she writes, “pleasure is a key component. This is one reason sexual activity can be desired for its own sake; *pleasure is a good in itself* (emphasis added), (though not all traditions have thought this, and it remains for us to consider whether sexual pleasure is in every context and circumstance an overall or moral good)” (162). Here, of course, Farley is badly mistaken. Pleasure is *not* something good in itself. In fact, it can be evil and pain can be good. If I put my hand on a hot stove and it feels pleasurable rather than painful I soon may not have my hand, and that is not good. Pleasure rides the back of human activities. If the activities are morally good, and the conjugal act is a morally good act, then the pleasure is morally good. If the activities are morally bad, for instance torturing a kitten or fornication, then the accompanying pleasure is morally bad.



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(1) This assertion is grossly unjust to the Christian tradition. St. Augustine, for instance, spoke highly of the sweetness of the relationship between husband and wife in his *De bono coniugali*, and St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure wrote of the “singular, intense love that is to exist between husband and wife,” etc. On Thomas, Bonaventure and other medieval appreciations of love in marriage and the personal nature of the bond between husband and wife see the eye-opening two part article by Fabian Parmisano, O.P., “Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages,” *New Blackfriars* 80 (1969) 599-606, 649-660. Farley seems totally ignorant of this and similar studies, written partly to correct misinformation found in John T. Noonan’s celebrated *Contraception* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard Belknap Press, 1965). See also

# Briefs

Germain Grisez, "Marriage: Reflections Based on St. Thomas and Vatican Council II, *The Catholic Mind* (June, 1966), 4-19.

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