

[reviews]



THE REDEMPTION OF LOVE:

RESCUING MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY FROM
THE ECONOMICS OF A FALLEN WORLD

**Carrie A Miles, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids,
Michigan, 2006**

Reviewed by Doug Hynd

CARRIE MILES, *The Redemption of Love*, has written the sort of book, hurdling several disciplinary boundaries in the course of the discussion, that gives both reviewers and book review editors headaches and can lead to an attack of mutual grumpiness between disciplinary experts.

Her work clearly does not fit neatly within any of the major theological disciplines. Handing it over to a sociologist or an economist would likely leave them scratching their head about how to assess the biblical exposition and theological analysis.

The Redemption of Love by Carrie Miles is the sort of theological reflection that Zadok has sought to encourage. The publisher, Brazos Press has, in less than a decade, developed a reputation for a critical, society-engaging theology with a radical edge that moves beyond the 'liberal'/'fundamentalist' divide.

Miles works as an organisational psychologist and is associate director of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics and Culture and associate director of the consortium for the Economic Study of Religion at George Mason University.

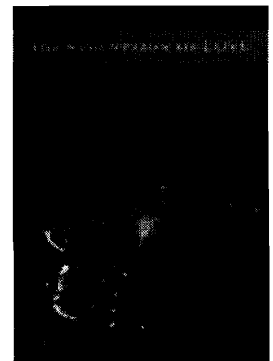
I have written this review from the perspective of someone who has a background in economics and the application of economic perspectives to a variety of social and religious issues and has a non-expert's familiarity with some of the broader trends in biblical studies and their application to Christian ethics.

Specialists in the study of both the Old and New Testament may well wish to dissent from my assessment of the value and substance of the way Miles has used the scholarship of the specialists in these areas. They are, I suspect, going to have even further difficulty in any case with their assessment of the way the author has handled their material because the target audience for this volume is not academia.

Miles has sought to bring her exegetically grounded readings of Genesis, the Song of Songs and Ephesians into dialogue with an account of the development of marriage and family relationships from pre-industrial society to the present within a strongly economic framework. The author has drawn from these specialist fields to write for a target audience of the tertiary educated person who is not theologically trained.

The need to revisit the Christian theology of marriage is pressing for the church in Western industrial countries, Australia included. We have not yet thought our way through the theology of marriage and the issues of pastoral guidance and teaching within the church for a post-Christendom context.

Simon Barrow and Jonathan Bartley have provided an excellent account of that post-Christendom context in a recent *Ekklesia* paper, July 2006, 'What future for marriage?' The paper is available online at www.ekkleisia.co.uk/content/article_abolishmarriage.shtml and is an important contribution in its own right to that task. Here I just want to draw attention to a couple of issues raised by Barrow and Bartley that are relevant to an assessment of the interpretation of the shaping of the marriage relationship and the possibilities for the future that Miles sketches out.





In recent years the Christian churches have set great store by 'family values' and the institution of marriage. Yet the form of marriage we know as such today is a relatively late invention out of something that once had much more to do with solidifying dynastic power... Given the wider fragmentation in society (and the corrosive impact of a market culture where most things can be sold, swapped or re-negotiated in an instant), it is undoubtedly important to address these trends.

People need security and stability as well as challenge and risk, especially the vulnerable. But desperately trying to 'keep the lid on' as far as marriage is concerned—by lecturing people, offering tax breaks, and denouncing other relationship forms—is proving (for Christians and for others who 'believe in marriage') a basically inappropriate and unsuccessful response. A much bolder and more positive approach is needed. But in order to arrive at it, we need a clearer understanding of what we have inherited, why, and what choices we face.

Theologically then the task facing the church is not an easy one. Contrary to the popular association of the church with 'family values',

... the Gospels are often downright hostile—a search for Jesus' sayings about 'the family' suggests that, while he cherished covenantal values, had married companions and abhorred the practice where by men could summarily divorce and disinherit women at will, he saw blood ties or contracted family bonds as less significant than the creation of a new kind of community. That community was rooted in those who were often despised and 'impure' within the established political order. But it reflected the levelling, forgiveness-generating, favour-free, all-embracing, demanding love of God's coming kingdom. And for that, Jesus said, one should be prepared to abandon all if necessary—even family, as we have understood it thus far.

Barrow and Bartley go on to make two further points that are relevant to assessing the case that Miles sets out to make.

...Our current confusion between the civil (secular), juridical (legal) and sacramental (religious) meanings of marriage arises from the 'Christendom' assumption that religious understandings can be superimposed on society through the state, and vice versa.

Perhaps more important is the conviction that ...What the church calls marriage is not just another name for a legal and civil arrangement—it is specifically about the kind of relationships made possible by God's love and the community of people who seek to be transformed by this love through worship, common

life, mutual forgiveness, and discipleship.

The story that Miles wants to tell us involves bringing together an economic analysis of marriage and family set against a reading of scripture which commences with an original abundance. Patriarchy and its consequent abuses, including the alienation of man and woman from each other she argues is a result of the fall and the material demands of life outside the Creator's abundance. Jesus and Paul both challenged the economic and patriarchal order of the fall and worked to slowly transform the economically based family and elevate the status of women.

Her account of the changes that we are going through is the reverse of that usually offered. The sexual revolution, rising rates of divorce and children born out of the traditional patterns of family relationship are the results not the cause of the breakdown of the family. Family institutions until recently were based on the need for labour, initially agricultural and later industrial, a need met by having children.

Technological changes have eliminated the economic imperative for family. The current confusion, unhappiness and hurt for children and adults alike are at least partly the results of attempts to 'rebuild a new base to support the love, human connectedness, and concern for each other that we still crave' (p.13). To put it bluntly we are not faced with a moral collapse on the marriage front. People in preceding generations were not necessarily more virtuous than we are. Material requirements set the conditions that sustained particular forms of marriage. Christians do not have a stake in seeking to return to that past situation. It is gone beyond recall.

Restating the fall in terms of the economic limitations that it placed on family relationships and the way it constrained sexual relationships in a way that lead to female subordination is challenging and provocative.

Against the background of an account of the economics of the fall, Miles provides a rereading of the biblical stories that helps us understand how scripture can critique the resulting patriarchy and how such a rereading can help us to rediscover and recover a Christian basis for marriage and family that can guide us in the time that we are in. That is she is offering a restatement of a theology of marriage in an arc that commences with the original abundance of Genesis and ends with Paul's eschatological vision for the human race.

Because the author is working to challenge some long held traditional readings of scripture on this topic, the argument and exposition can at times seem somewhat labored. Its slow painstaking character has the merit of taking the text seriously and wrestling with it as Jacob did with the angel to retrieve a bless-



ing. Miles' critique of women's subordination takes on a distinctly less abstract caste than is often the case because she has grounded it in the economic reality that shaped sexual mores and the dynamics of family relationships.

The issue of what role Christians should take in the maintenance of sexual morality is one where Miles' conclusions come close in their general orientation, if not their more detailed conclusions to those offered by Barrow and Barrett in the paper I quoted earlier. It is a position that again cuts across the expected liberal/conservative divide by on the one hand denying a fear driven approach to coercive legislation of family values, while on the other emphasizing the importance of the church as a community that demonstrates its commitments to faithfulness and mutual service in the way it lives as a community.

A significant segment of society actively resists going back to the shame-based and economically based enforcement of traditional sexual morality. And really who can blame them? A morality that exists only through coercion is not a morality at all. In fact absent the material needs that generated it, the old morality, with its judgments, gossip, ostracism, and punishments begins to look extremely immoral. The old morality existed not to protect and promote love but to repress and restrain individuals in order to protect the material welfare of society. (p.197)

The resulting freedom that has resulted from the economic changes over the past half century works reasonably well for the affluent and well educated in our society but the costs are born by those who cannot afford to cope with the negative consequences of freedom of sexual expression, the poor, the uneducated, the young fatherless children and the unborn. Implicit here is a line of thinking that asks what a preferential option for the poor might look like in our assessment of sexual mores.

What then should be the Christian response? Miles argues that Christians can only offer their values and not impose them and that co-option by government inevitably corrupts the church. 'Our duty as Christians,' she says,

is not to pass laws to prevent the spread of immorality. Our duty is to let our redemption, our joy, our peace, and our love for each other permeate our lives to such an extent that we become the light of the world, a city on a hill that cannot be hidden (Matt. 5:14) (p.209).

What might need to be done to sustain 'the redemption of love' in human relationships within Christian communities is the question that is left hanging by the author. Nonetheless we are in her debt

for having attempted to ground a theology of marriage in a framework that takes account of the impact of changes in economic structure and begins a recovery of the importance of the church as social reality that does not depend upon the power of the state to enforce a morality.

Doug Hynd is a Public Servant & Sessional Lecturer St Mark's Canberra.

THE TROUBLE WITH ISLAM: A MUSLIM'S CALL FOR REFORM IN HER FAITH

Irshad Manji, Random House Australia, 2003

Reviewed by Daniel Johnson

THIS IS A RADICAL and self-critical perspective on Islam. Irshad Manji is someone who cares about Islam and Muslims, but says she has only just held on to her faith. Labelling herself a Muslim Refusenik, she refuses to adopt standard Muslim approaches to the veil, sexuality, hermeneutics, the West and Middle-Eastern politics.

She critiques the sexism, tribal insularity, stubborn anti-Semitism, Arabisation and uncritical reading of the Koran that she believes holds Islam back. The veil, for example, is worn as an act of spiritual submission but she says it is more about cultural capitulation to Arabic style clothing (suitable for desert climates). Her call sounds like an appeal towards contextualization:

To parrot the desert peoples in clothing, in language, or in prayer is not necessarily to follow the universal God. But you wouldn't know it by the myths with which Islam has been propagated through the centuries. These myths have turned non-Arab Muslims into clients of their Arab masters—patrons who must buy what's being sold to them in the name of Islamic 'enlightenment.' (p.146)

She often seems to long for an Islam that is more like Christianity or Judaism in celebrating questions, tolerating intellectual diversity, and interpreting Scripture.

Manji revels in turning common assumptions on their head which reflect her own liberating discoveries.

- In her own reading of the Koran, instead of