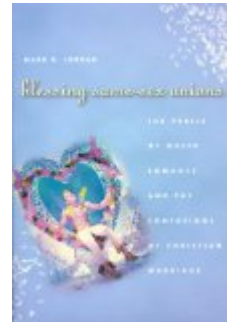


Mark D. Jordan. *Blessing Same-Sex Unions: The Perils of Queer Romance and the Confusions of Christian Marriage.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. x + 258 pp. \$29.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-41033-3.



Reviewed by Thomas A. Foster

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Opponents of gay marriage often argue that marriage has always been defined as the union of one man and one woman. Legislation that has been passed to protect this allegedly age-old institution, which has recently come under attack by gay rights activists (or so the argument goes), codifies this historical understanding of marriage. But as Mark Jordan's latest book, an academic discussion of Christian theology and gay marriage, demonstrates, "they are plainly wrong." Mark Jordan, the Asa Griggs Candler Professor in the Department of Religion at Emory University, has written extensively on the history of the church and sodomy, homosexuality, marriage, sexuality, and Christian theology.[1]

According to Jordan, "To claim that marriage is by nature the union of one man with one woman is to contradict Hebrew and Christian Scripture, Jewish law, Christian theology, and Christian understandings of natural law" (p. 160). Of course, most of those he argues against are not nearly as learned. So, in some ways, not only will his own arguments fall on deaf ears, but they are too rarified to change many minds on either side of the

current debate of church and state sanctioning of gay marriage. In this way, he is an academic preaching to the academics in the choir. Nonetheless, Jordan's brilliant reading of logic within current debates of history, Christian theology, and contemporary wedding culture effectively challenges what many hold to be true about "blessing same-sex unions."

Jordan's "rhetorical mediations" are at times subtle enough to hide a political or theological motive (p. 207). Ultimately, however, he candidly states his position. "Christian churches," he concludes "should bless same-sex unions. They should do it as a matter of justice, after reading the real signs of the times, with prayerful enthusiasm for the Gospel, and by way of securing some credible future for their marriage theology" (p. 206). Despite this strong statement, the book is not a heavy-handed argument in favor of Christian churches celebrating unions between gay men. Indeed, it is largely a careful rehearsal and discussion of the arguments that ground contemporary debates around gay marriage and those discourses that both cloud and clarify the discussion(s).

Jordan complicates both Christian history and current Christian views, arguing effectively that there is not one "single Christian doctrine," nor can contemporary arguments based on Christian historical conceptions of marriage stand in the face of his withering critique. As he argues, "A collective illusion, suffered by some queer activists and by Focus on the Family among others, declares that there is or had been a single theory of Christian marriage.... Christian and Jewish traditions disagree about a number of fundamental issues, including the value of celibacy, the permissibility of polygyny or concubinage, and the grounds for divorce that permits remarriage" (p. 100). As Jordan shows, the Christian church has only relatively recently blessed the unions of Christian heterosexuals--so why not bless gay male couples?

Jordan also complicates the tendency of both opponents of gay marriage and gay activists to see church blessings and state endorsements as separate. "Marriage remains the great testimony," he argues, "to the inseparability of church and state, to their ancient commingling." The implication for this, of course, is that "the debates can never be cut cleanly in practice, putting legal issues over here and theological issues over there" (p. 4). One of the great strengths of this examination is Jordan's ability to tease out so many disparate strands of rhetoric surrounding gay marriage, and his ability to point to the odd and sometimes surprising confluence of commercialism, homophobia, Christian theology, state power, and sexism (to name just a few) embedded in so many of the contemporary discourses of gay marriage. Jordan not only tackles the refined rhetoric of theologians, the middle-class-oriented popular culture depicted in television and magazines, and political rhetoric on both sides of the ongoing gay marriage debate, but he also shows how all of these apparently disparate discourses are in fact always interacting and are conjoined in contemporary society.

This book, a decidedly academic read, will appeal to students of gay studies, cultural studies, and religious studies. But the book packs more than simply a scholarly meditation on rhetoric. For Jordan the stakes are high: "blessing same-sex unions cannot be separated either from the future of Christian marriage or from the future of lesbian and gay 'identities'" (p. 3). And, more generally, the book demonstrates the important reminder that "Christian lives are not confined to churches. Queer lives are not subordinated to movements" (p. 207).

Note

[1]. Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); *The Ethics of Sex* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001); *Telling Truths in Church* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); and *Rewritten Theology: Aquinas after His Readers* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).

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