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Family & Relationships

Loves Me, Loves Me Not: The Ethics of Unrequited Love
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As befits a book about love, this one starts with a song: “Love, unrequited, robs me of my rest / Love, hopeless love, my ardent soul encumbers / Love, nightmare-like, lies heavy on my chest.” According to the author, this Gilbert and Sullivan tune underscores one of Western culture’s most defining preoccupations. Rejection and the pain it inspires has dominated the arts from the days of Dante to Dido. Still, considering all the creative energy expended on unrequited love over the centuries, Americans are surprisingly ill equipped to handle it.

Bridging this gap between obsession and practice, Smit has crafted an insightful, meticulously researched treatise on the ethics of unrequited love as it pertains to practicing Christians today. Topics such as how to reject someone confidently but gracefully and whether or not non-mutual love has spiritual value will offer much needed guidance to those for whom traditional church rhetoric about sexual behavior misses the point. “If you are a person whose romantic experiences have been largely unrequited,” the self-admitted single states wryly, “abstinence is not your cutting-edge ethical issue.”

Rather than claim immunity from moral concerns about sex, Smit contends that individuals who are not romantically involved still have serious questions to ponder. For example, is lack of physical attraction a valid reason to reject someone? Does giving up on marriage belie a lack of faith? In a refreshing break with mainstream ideology, Smit urges her readers to rethink societal expectations about marriage, and champions singlehood as a valid and spiritually fulfilling life choice.

Despite such brazen moments, the majority of Smit's theological arguments will no doubt seem most relevant to readers with a strong Christian background. Abstinence before marriage, a preference for heterosexuality, and belief in the literal second coming of Christ—while not her primary focus—are all addressed as philosophical givens and may alienate those with different views.

A former practicing pastor, Smit holds ordinations with both the Christian Reform Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA). She received her PhD in medieval philosophy and theological aesthetics from Boston University and currently serves as an assistant professor of religious studies and dean of the chapel at Calvin College.

The first-time author was awarded a McGregor grant in the summer of 2001, which enabled her to pursue much of the research cited in this book. In addition to compiling hundreds of pertinent clips from popular music, film, and television, Smit interviewed more than one hundred students and alumni of all ages. These heartfelt, real-life stories, combined with the author's impressive knowledge of Scripture, make for a remarkable reading experience that is nothing if not divine.

Aimee Sabo