

A Theological Method Critically Applied
to the Narratives Used for Sex Trafficking
and Prostitution

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Introduction

It is hard to find a social justice theme that evokes more of a knee jerk reaction than female sex trafficking.¹ This issue is among the trendiest and most attractive expressions of social justice interests, both secular and religious.² The groundswell of attention surrounding it has greatly influenced the evangelical non-profit sector. Since the turn of the millennium, hundreds of new NGO's have been formed to address this issue.³ A common component among these faith-based groups is an abolitionist narrative which inadvertently ignores the fact that sex trafficking issues are deeply rooted in the very complicated historical concerns of women in prostitution. While some NGO's indeed utilize this narrative with the intention to abolish the sex trade as a whole, others use the language of abolition to draw upon "a forceful, emotionally-loaded historical memory," that of the transatlantic slave trade.⁴

The ambiguity between sex trafficking and prostitution does not exclusively belong to the language of NGO's, it is found throughout legal documents used to define and combat trafficking as well. The roots of the International Agreement for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic, one of the first legal documents addressing sex trafficking, was sourced in the Progressive Era⁵ movement, both christian and feminist, to eliminate prostitution among migrating women in the U.S. and Europe.⁶ Furthermore, in the 1949, UN Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, legislation was made against trafficking, this time broadening the category to include labor trafficking and men. It also took a much more aggressive abolitionist agenda against prostitution.⁷

¹ Although males can be victims of sex trafficking, the majority of it takes place among women. For this reason, the article exclusively relates to women. See Meshkovska, et. al. 'Female sex trafficking', 386

² Campbell and Zimmerman, 'Christian Ethics and Human Trafficking', 145

³ Limoncelli, 'What in the World Are Anti-Trafficking NGOs Doing?', 317

⁴ Breuil, Siegel, van Reenen, et. al. 'Trafficking Revisited', 34

⁵ 1890's to 1920's

⁶ Kempadoo, *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered*, xii-iii

⁷ Breuil, Siegel, van Reenen, et. al. 'Trafficking Revisited', 33

Finally, the document used for legally fighting human trafficking was passed in 2000, often referred to as the Palermo protocol. This document contains the foundational language used by governments and NGO's to work against all forms of labor and sex trafficking.⁸

Guiding Narratives

There are three primary narrative approaches to define the relationship between sex trafficking and prostitution. The first is that of abolition, where the lines of delineation between prostitution and trafficking are often blurred and cases of exploitation within prostitution are categorized in a sex trafficking context.⁹ Here one commonly finds the language of rescue and restoration.¹⁰ In this context, individual actors such as pimps and traffickers, as well as the society itself which allows prostitution to flourish, are viewed as perpetrators.¹¹ The second narrative is one of criminal justice, where the issue is framed by the language of legal prosecution against criminals and the war on trafficking done by the State and NGO actors.¹² The third narrative is one of sex workers rights, where the human rights abuses surrounding prostitution are framed principally as gender migrant issues and the need for better working conditions is presented as the solution.¹³ Assistance from a sex workers rights approach speaks in terms of harm reduction and empowering agency among those in prostitution. This approach considers sex work to be a viable job when the conditions are correct and the women are free from exploitation.¹⁴

⁸ United Nations, *Trafficking Protocol*, 40, "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs"

⁹ Thanh-Tu, 'Women survivors of sex trafficking', 114

¹⁰ Soderlund, 'Running from the rescuers', 65

¹¹ Harden, *Sex Trade*, 84-85

¹² Kempadoo, *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered*, xvi

¹³ Ibid., xix

¹⁴ Kempadoo, 'Sex workers rights', 151

All narratives agree that sex trafficking is wrong. The departure takes place where views of prostitution are concerned. The prevalence of harm found in prostitution cause some to place it ontologically in the same category as sex trafficking while others would say that is overreaching and adds to the challenges women in prostitution face. In effect, presuppositions built by a commitment to any of these narratives tend to influence the orientation and *praxis* of an organization. In this essay, we will consider the role that the theological method has in engaging with these narratives, especially focusing on the conflicting concepts between the abolitionist narrative and that of sex workers rights. The goal is to use the framework of the theological method to engage with key epistemological differences in the narratives, in order to determine a more balanced and effective approach.

Scripture

For evangelical Christians, the source of scripture is given a privileged position in the theological method and is considered authoritative. It follows that organizations built on biblical values aim to use a narrative approach supported by the Bible. Although scripture forbids prostitution (Lev. 19:29) and even more explicitly warns against engaging in sex with prostitutes along with other forms of sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:15-20), it also contains stories where God shows great mercy towards women in prostitution. Such stories include that of Tamar (Gen. 38:6-26) and Rahab (Jos. 2:1-21; 6:22-25), as well as the forgiven and redeemed “woman of the city” (Luke 7:36-50). Speaking to the Pharisees, Jesus boldly states, “tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matt. 21:31). Scripture does not exclusively paint the prostitute with the broad stroke of hopeless sinner and seductress which the church has often adopted.¹⁵

Both the abolitionist narrative as well as the sex workers rights approach have looked to highlight those elements of scripture that would encourage empathy for women in prostitution. The abolitionist does so by emphasizing the societal evils which have stripped women of alternative choices as well as the victimization she experiences in this lifestyle.¹⁶ The sex workers rights approach towards scripture

¹⁵ Ipsen, *Sex working and the Bible*, 20

¹⁶ Carson, *Human Trafficking*, 84 and Ramiro, ‘Ancient Corinthian Sex Workers’, 61

considers the ways in which God affirms women in prostitution and empowers their agency.¹⁷ Taking Rahab as an example, Harden, an abolitionist, seems to liken God's rescue of Rahab from the destruction of Jericho as an act of rescue from prostitution itself.¹⁸ On the other side, Ipsen, who chooses to read biblical passages involving prostitutes from a liberation approach, shares that her readers, a group of politically organized sex workers, expect Rahab and her saved friends to "service" the men after being rescued and consider Rahab's heroic saving of her family the most significant point of the story.¹⁹ They certainly do not view the story of Rahab as one of rescue from prostitution.

Carson does a thorough evaluation of passages concerning prostitution, engaging with the biblical texts that utilize negative imagery of "the whore" and even depict humiliation and violence against her (Ez. 16:35-38, Rev. 17-18).²⁰ Ipsen's readers are concerned these passages will allow the biblical sanctioning of violence against prostitutes, something they unfortunately encounter often, even at the hands of authorities.²¹ Anyone who justifies actual abuse of women in prostitution based on these passages is certainly reading the text unethically and ignoring the purpose of the polemical language of metaphor utilized in prophetic and apocalyptic literature.²² In the case of the prostitutes (*pornē*) mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6:15, Ramiro uses social scientific criticism and historical research to show that they ought to be viewed as victims of sexual slavery and public humiliation.²³ For this reason, the women themselves should be seen as partakers in the same public shaming that the Messiah and the apostles likewise suffered.²⁴ Consequently, the warning of 1 Cor.

¹⁷ Scholl, *I Heart Sex Workers*, 124

¹⁸ Harden, *Sex Trade*, 91

¹⁹ Ipsen, *Sex Working and the Bible*, 74

²⁰ Carson, *Human Trafficking*, 98-101

²¹ Ipsen, *Sex Working and the Bible*, 177-183

²² Carson, Carson, *Human Trafficking*, 99

²³ Ramiro, 'Ancient Corinthian Sex Workers', 59

²⁴ Ramiro, 'Ancient Corinthian Sex Workers', 57

6:15-20 can be viewed as Paul fighting against the sexual entitlement and “demand” promoted by some in the Corinthian church.²⁵

In summary, the source of scripture gives us a sense of God’s disapproval of the societal harm associated with prostitution and utilizes the commodification of sexuality as a sign of spiritual infidelity to God. The agency of Rahab and the women coming to Jesus were certainly empowered but the biblical text frames this empowerment in terms of faith and a lifestyle change is anticipated to accompany their trusting loyalty to Yahweh (Matt. 21:32). Together with the historical evidence regarding the relationship between prostitution and slavery in the ancient world, we are certainly moved in an abolitionist direction. These issues ought not be ignored by sex workers rights groups who consider the scripture to hold authority. At the same time, key stories in the Bible of prostitutes showing agency defies the common abolitionist usage of the helpless victim motif.

Tradition

Church tradition has had a lot to say concerning sexuality and women which has had implications on their view of prostitution as well. The NT impulse toward a prophetic-liberating direction for women was rapidly lost in the centuries following.²⁶ Tertullian, as an example from the patristic tradition, gives a railing indictment of Eve for her role in the fall of Adam, considering all women to be destroyers of God’s image. He even implies some guilt on the part of women for the fall of the angels in Genesis 6.²⁷ Augustine established the dominant western christian tradition regarding women which was later affirmed by Aquinas. His “split view” of female inclusion within the *imago Dei* held that women’s souls are destined for redemption but their psychology (mental capacities) and gendered bodies ontologically belong to a fallen and subservient state.²⁸ Even though Reformers like Luther and Calvin viewed the subservient role of women to be sociological rather than ontological, they still

²⁵ Ramiro, *Ancient Corinthian Sex Workers*, 61-62

²⁶ Ruether, ‘sexism and misogyny’, 85

²⁷ Tertullian, ‘The Apparel of Women’, 14-15

²⁸ Ruether, “sexism and misogyny”, 86

consider this state to be determined by God and therefore unquestionable.²⁹ All of these traditions believed in an eventual transformation of the social order at the *perousia* but regarded it the duty of sincere Christian women to rightfully submit to this subjugation.³⁰

The ontological defense for female subjugation on the part of Augustine could be the primary contributing factor to the *laissez-fair* attitude he had towards prostitution, where he famously said, “suppress prostitution, and capricious lusts will overthrow society.”³¹ Given his views on women, it would be impossible to argue that Augustine was interested in the advancement of the agency of women in prostitution, although neither was he taking the stance of the abolitionist. In this case, he takes a pragmatic approach toward what he considered to be the unavoidable male demand for sex and saw this demand being best met by women who, by default, have no claim to sexual honor.³²

This kind of pragmatism built on the presupposition of male sexual entitlement can often be seen by those who operate from the sex workers rights narrative, even if, contrary to Augustine, they would consider such women honorable.³³ This justified view of male sexual demand is soundly rejected by those in the abolitionist narrative, referring to it as the “rape myth”.³⁴ Alternatively, many who hold to the abolitionist narrative, especially from a christian conviction, anticipate the story of rescue and restoration to conclude with repatriation into the anticipated social order of women (marriage, motherhood, etc.).³⁵ This anticipation aligns with church tradition. The Council of Elvira, for example, excommunicated pimps and prostitutes but would

²⁹ Ibid., 87

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Augustine, *De Ordine*, 2.4.12

³² Glancy, ‘The sexual use of slaves’, 227

³³ Scholl, *I Heart Sex Workers*, 69

³⁴ Farley et. al., ‘Comparing Sex Buyers’, 27

³⁵ Bjonness, ‘Necessity-Constructions of Motherhood’, 785 see also Campbell and Zimmerman, ‘Christian Ethics and Human Trafficking’, 152

welcome prostitutes if they were married to a Christian.³⁶ The Female Moral Reform Society, an early christian-feminist group doing outreach work in brothels in New York in the 1830's regularly published their activities. In their newsletter, the *Advocate*, the story is told of a woman working in a high end brothel who laments that her life would have been better if she had been the wife of a drunken, abusive man because at least she would be "at peace with God."³⁷ Christian abolitionist groups need to make sure they do not wrongfully confuse marital and societal norms with their salvation narratives.

Reason

The role of reason in the theological method often refers to the attention and commitment given to human *ratio* as a source of theological knowledge. Yet the role of the human *ratio* in western society has gone through a turbulent philosophical journey. The most influential philosophical movements shaping our intellectual world today are described as modernity and postmodernity.³⁸ In his views on these movements, Zygmunt Bauman considered "liquid modernity" to be a more fitting metaphor to describe the radical transformation and subsequent continuation of modernism.³⁹ Liquid modernity describes the postmodern spirit which was famously defined by Lyotard as "incredulity toward all metanarratives."⁴⁰ It is helpful to consider the role that modernism and liquid modernity have in shaping the two narratives we are analyzing.

Oxenham clearly summarizes Bauman's key points of departure between modernity and liquid modernity. One is their differing views on freedom.⁴¹ Where the modernist approach saw freedom as only possible through the work of "expert social architects" operating toward a common goal, liquid views have emphasized the dangers of a common utopian vision and replaced a unified "just society" with the vision for

³⁶ Sanger, *History of Prostitution*, 91

³⁷ Severson, 'Devils would blush to look', 234

³⁸ Hicks, *The Journey So Far*, 14

³⁹ Oxenham, *Education in Liquid Modernity*, 16

⁴⁰ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, xxiv

⁴¹ Oxenham, *Education in Liquid Modernity*, 18

individual human rights and “personal life politics.”⁴² To the liquidly modern mind, the totalizing language used by the abolitionist movement (i.e. victim, rescue, restoration) could be functioning as a “regime of truth,”⁴³ where the actual voices of women in prostitution are not being heard.⁴⁴ Emphasis on the empowering of agency among sex workers is certainly reflective of the emancipation concept within liquid modernity. There are also concerns from the sex workers rights approach on how abolitionist organizations are utilizing societal norms to affect the self-perception of those working in prostitution. One particular critique is framed within the concept of socialization by Pierre Bourdieu, a philosopher standing within liquid modernity.⁴⁵

It is evident that those criticizing the abolitionist narrative use the same postmodern critiques against modernism. At the same time, it is important to question if the postmodern approach to freedom as emancipation effectively addresses the exploitative systems within prostitution. Bauman is concerned that the emancipation approach will leave individuals with “increased vulnerability,”⁴⁶ something abolitionists identify as a failure of the sex workers rights approach.⁴⁷ Harden often associates the sex workers rights approach with the academy, as if to show that the intellectual trends of the academy can be out of touch.⁴⁸ In summary, the aversion that the sex workers rights movement has towards the totalizing language used by abolitionists as well as their emphasis on freedom as emancipation (i.e. agency through empowerment) demonstrates their stronger identification with the postmodern movement.

Experience

The category of experience plays a decisive role within the theological method and stands as one of the most contested sources in the abolitionist and sex workers

⁴² Ibid., 19

⁴³ Walsh and Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed*, 102

⁴⁴ Scholl, *I Heart Sex Workers*, 19

⁴⁵ Bjønness, ‘Necessity-Constructions of Motherhood’, 783

⁴⁶ Oxenham, *Education in Liquid Modernity*, 19

⁴⁷ Harden, *Sex Trade*, 90

⁴⁸ Harden, *Sex Trade*, 71,73,90

rights debate. Both groups claim to more accurately represent the reality of the situation.⁴⁹ They are not divided over the fact that women in prostitution and sex trafficking experience exploitation but differ in how to interpret these experiences.⁵⁰ The devastating consequences of sexual exploitation including a lack of choices and short/long term health symptoms is known and acknowledged by both groups. In most cases, however, the sex workers rights approach would view these experiences as violations of their labor rights or even as reflections of migrant issues as opposed to seeing them as descriptions of sex trafficking.⁵¹ They would further say that this is an accurate reflection of the way the women themselves view their situation.⁵²

An extensive ethnographic report on the trafficking of Albanian women into France came to the conclusion that what began as a trafficking system created through the social networks of exploitative husbands eventually turned into trafficking channels willingly chosen by women seeking to migrate.⁵³ Davies concludes that in this case, the demand for women in prostitution contributed very little to the trafficking situation.⁵⁴ At the same time, he makes it clear that while the researched women certainly did not want to be sex slaves, “neither did they want to be sex workers.”⁵⁵ This ethnographic example demonstrates the complicated push and pull taking place in the migration of women, which all too often includes sexual exploitation. In the case of these Albanian women, the intervention of NGO’s had a demonstrably negative effect.⁵⁶ Davies sees this as a consequence of not understanding the intention of the migrating women. Although they did not identify with a desire to be

⁴⁹ Sanghera, ‘Unpacking the Trafficking Discourse’, 4

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Meshkovska, et. al. ‘Female sex trafficking’, 386

⁵² Breuil, Siegel, van Reenen, et. al. ‘Trafficking Revisited’, 40

⁵³ Davies, ‘My Name is Not Natascha’, 266

⁵⁴ Ibid., 268

⁵⁵ Ibid., 256

⁵⁶ Ibid., 268

sex workers, they were willing to do whatever it took to migrate and were looking for help in that process.⁵⁷

Community

The last source of the theological method is that of community. As it pertains to the two dominant narratives concerning sex trafficking and its relationship to prostitution, the question of community is one of identification and commitment. NGO's can often find themselves being more directed by the self interests of their supporting stakeholders than those who are receiving their services, creating a sort of "god-complex."⁵⁸ This can especially become problematic when the narrative being used anticipates a form of "militant humanitarianism."⁵⁹ Organizations built on the abolitionist narrative have at times needed to make an industry out of rescue, despite the fact that a percentage of those rescued immediately run away.⁶⁰ The runaways do not nullify the value of a rescue action but they should call into question the way in which the story is framed.

The opposite of this god-complex approach is one where community and relationship are the foundation of assistance.⁶¹ Ipsen, for example, chose to place herself in the social location of women in prostitution and engage the scripture from this place, fully embracing a "reading with" approach as applied to women in prostitution.⁶² In order to do this, she felt it was necessary to abandon the abolitionist impulse and embrace sex work as legitimate work.⁶³ Chew expresses nearly the exact same journey. She came to the conclusion that she could not maintain acceptance and respect for the person if she kept wanting to divide them from their "profession."⁶⁴ Ultimately, Chew

⁵⁷ Ibid., 267

⁵⁸ Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 65

⁵⁹ Campbell and Zimmerman, 'Christian Ethics and Human Trafficking', 152

⁶⁰ Soderlund, 'Running from the rescuers', 66

⁶¹ Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 83

⁶² Ipsen, *Sex Working and the Bible*, 29

⁶³ Ipsen, *Sex Working and the Bible*, 58-59

⁶⁴ Chew, 'Reflections by an Anti-trafficking Activist', 66

says that one can stand within the sex workers rights camp and still fight for victims of trafficking,⁶⁵ something that is unfortunately rarely seen.

The question still remains, do the women organizing themselves as sex workers represent the majority of those within this “industry,” and thereby function as the representative voices? Although the abolitionist view seems to have lesser representatives of former prostitutes, there are some examples. A pressure group named WHISPER (Women Hurt In Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt) are outspoken concerning the harmful effects of prostitution:

We ... reject the lie that women freely choose prostitution from a whole array of economic alternatives that exist under civil equality. . . . We reject the lie that turning tricks is sexual pleasure or agency for women. We reject the lie that women can and do become wealthy in systems of prostitution. We reject the lie that women control and are empowered in systems of prostitution.⁶⁶

Here the ethnographic work of Davies is helpful. It seems likely that the vast majority of those working in prostitution, regardless of the way in which they entered and to what degree of exploitation, do not relate to being either victims of trafficking or as empowered sex workers. They relate to the idea of survival and sacrifice for their family. The abolitionist narrative in this case can indeed fall short of representing the full story, but so does the sex workers rights narrative.

Conclusion

We have considered the epistemological issues related to the abolitionist and sex workers rights narratives by utilizing the sources of the theological method. Although the scripture has a clear emphasis on the societal harm brought about by unchecked commercialized sex, it also expresses genuine mercy for those in prostitution; a mercy not only expressed by pity but also by the empowerment of agency. Church tradition left us concerned with the ways in which women were considered ontologically or socially inferior which could serve as a backdrop for Augustine’s

⁶⁵ Ibid., 79-80

⁶⁶ Carson, *Human Trafficking*, 78

famous statement on male sexual demand, known by abolitionists as the “rape myth.”

In considering the source of reason, we looked primarily at the two philosophical influences in our world today, that of modernism and postmodernism. Without question, the influence of postmodernism is much more evident in the sex workers rights model. The attraction towards a more modish philosophy is especially prominent within the academy but is also not without merit. The failures of modernism produced a lot of destruction in the world at the hands of social architects. The war on trafficking, like the war on drugs and terror, when not critically engaged, could lead to more powers being granted to governments at the cost of individual liberties. Experience and community both considered ways in which either of these narratives best represent the experiences of those actually being affected by prostitution and sex trafficking. Both narratives, when exclusively engaged and promoted, could be silencing the experiences and reality of the very women NGO’s are trying to assist. Although the sex workers rights narrative does a better job at more critically engaging with the complexities of trafficking, calling into consideration the role migration and the “option” of sex work plays for some women, it also seeks to categorize prostitution as not inherently harmful. The debate over the inherent harm within prostitution is expected to continue. Organizations which discern the importance of a balanced approach regarding these narratives could prove to be more effective in helping victims of sex trafficking and those in prostitution looking for a way out.

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