

BOOK REVIEW

Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless. A Sexual Reformation*, Convergent Books, New York (NY), 2019.

If you were as disappointed -though not surprised- as I was with the *Nashville Statement*, you might just find the latest book by renowned author Nadia Bolz-Weber a very welcome and long overdue antidote. In the debate on sexuality and religion or sexuality and the Church, it is a breath of fresh air.¹ Part (auto)biography part practical and pastoral theology part public appeal, it offers a new way of looking at the unnecessarily strained rapport between sex and Christianity.

Spoiler alert: Bolz-Weber disagrees fiercely with the *Nashville Statement*.

If the name Bolz-Weber does not ring a bell, you will find plenty of material online. In short, she is an American Lutheran pastor (or pastrix as her detractors call her) and theologian, a mother of two teenagers, a divorcee and a recovering alcoholic. Her life story underpins her theological work and publications as much as her seminary training.

As the title suggests, she is arguing for a **reform** of Christian ethics and the theology of sexuality, gender and the body.

Bolz-Weber starts off with the so-called *Bathroom Bill* in North Carolina, which forces transgender people to use the bathroom corresponding to the gender indicated on their driving license. In a way, the *Bill* symbolises the culture war which has reignited in the USA under Trump.

In protest, NBW, on her way to a speaking engagement in that very state, taped the androgynous symbol representing the singer Prince (who had died that week) over the bathroom signs at Charlotte-NC airport. Then she went to church.

This act of civil and spiritual disobedience typifies Nadia Bolz-Weber, who counts many from the LGBT community among her parishioners at House For All Sinners and Saints, the congregation she founded in Denver (CO) and where she still ministers.

¹ Dr Johan Temmerman has written an article on this website in response to the *Nashville Statement*, and I highly recommend it. In his response to *Nashville* Temmerman, who is the Dean of the Faculty for Protestant Theology and Religious Studies in Brussels, laments not only the knee jerk (Pre-Modern) theology of the document's signatories but also its positive and almost triumphant reception by conservative clergy and theologians in the Netherlands, which brought the conversation very close to home. He also rightly points to the less than courteous response from some on the opposite side of the divide and pleads for more dialogue. You can read the *Nashville Statement* here: <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/>

Bolz-Weber is very protective of the people who attend the church - lioness-type protective. Before she is a public theologian and speaker, she is first a pastor.

Shameless is largely based on the conversations NBW had with several of the parishioners, as well as her own autobiography. This is why the book has a very cathartic feel to it.

Bolz-Weber, like many others in the book, grew up in a strict Evangelical community, where sex was only mentioned when talking about lifelong heterosexual marriage. One did not discuss pre-marital sex, divorce, homosexuality or questions about gender or else they were condemned. The book becomes a way for them to come to terms with their upbringing and their present-day struggles with sexuality, sensuality and spirituality.

NBW believes it is vital that this hurt, these skewed and dangerous views, these negative sexual dogmas which have been promulgated for far too long are addressed, not just in American Evangelicalism but in the Christian Church as a whole.

On a personal note, Bolz-Weber also struggles greatly with her own feelings of anger towards all those people who believe and preach these dogmas, those people who have signed the *Nashville Statement*, those people who dislike or even hate her congregants and people like them. She finds it very hard to love those people, even if she realises that God does love them, just as much as LGBT folks or progressive Christians.

This book is also a public confession of her anger.

Nashville features prominently, as does the counter statement the congregation of HFASS in Denver wrote: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2017/08/the-denver-statement>.

However, *Shameless* is not simply an accusation of bad sexual theology or a rejection of Church history. As Bolz-Weber admits, she cannot deny her own story; it is a story, a Church, a faith, she is unwilling to let go of.

She also tries to offer new insights and give tools to come to terms with some of the aspects of sexuality that have been painful and traumatic.

While NBW's candid style is compact and concise, she still takes her time building a case from her own story or the stories of others to expound on her point. At times this could make the reader wonder where she is heading, but Bolz-Weber does not lose track of her topic and manages to weave together different thoughts on the Patristics, sexual ethics and Biblical hermeneutics to name but a few to a logical and wonderful conclusion.

In the last chapter, she summarises the nine principles which in her opinion will result in good stewardship of our own bodies: shamelessness is the ninth principle.

It is refreshing and quite frankly a relief that Bolz-Weber does not let herself be distracted by the endless debate surrounding the so-called clobber passages, those bible verses used to hit LGBT people over the head.

Instead the foundation for her exploration and exhortation are *Genesis* and Creation which guide both author and reader through the text - hence the word 'stewardship' in her conclusion. Bolz-Weber does not however introduce (not even partially) a completely new Creation theology and an overhaul of Genesis hermeneutics, and maybe that would have been interesting seeing how gender roles, procreation, abortion and sexual morality are more often than not over-simplistically linked to the first book of Scripture. Nonetheless, she takes on the Stories of Creation with an abundance of humour.

Moreover, considering the several references to the 'breath of God', a more developed pneumatology might have been helpful and it might have been interesting to address topics like body positivity as well as the Biblical image of the body as a temple. A more expanded pneumatology would also relate to the significant role the sacraments have in the book.

The second Bible book NBW spends a lot of time with is the *Song of Songs*, to which she takes a surprising and intimately personal approach - she names the lead female protagonist, basically enrolling her as a member of the congregation.

Luther himself also rejected the allegorical interpretations of the *Song* (probably a theological first), however he read it as a political writing.

NBW's underlying theology is Lutheran -staunchly Lutheran, I would say- and perhaps she could have integrated more from Luther into this book, for example his fierce rejection of clerical celibacy and his praising of marriage.

Another element Bolz-Weber might have explored is the question of authority. After all, Christ himself was questioned by which authority he did what he did and said what he said. If some Christian groups and churches insist on perpetuating harmful and degrading teachings about sexuality, they should be confronted over the authority they claim to have. NBW tangentially touches on the topic when she refers to the canon within the canon of the Bible (p. 509), which is an important aspect of the Lutheran approach, not only on how

the Scriptures are interpreted but also on how they are applied in debate and study (at least in theory).

Nadia Bolz-Weber's *Shameless. A Sexual Reformation* is a must read for anyone interested in a radical reform of the relationship between sex and Christianity, who is looking for healing from the way their own upbringing has damaged their relationship to sexuality, for anyone wanting to broaden their study of sexual ethics and theology in a frank and taboo-less way.

Jo Jan Vandenheede