

# A book that shows why humanism isn't enough

PRINCESSES AND PORNSTARS: SEX, POWER, IDENTITY  
BY EMILY MAGUIRE

PUBLISHED BY THE TEXT PUBLISHING COMPANY, MELBOURNE  
PRICE: \$32.95

REVIEWED BY PETER BENTLEY

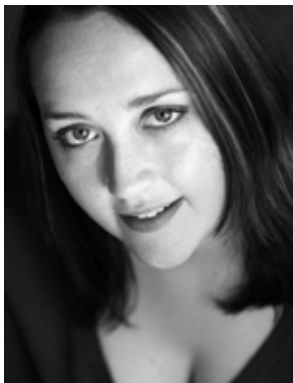
Emily Maguire is a young writer, perhaps most prominent in certain church circles for *The Gospel According to Luke* – a novel about faith and life, and love between a pastor of a church (Luke) and a worker at a sexual health clinic. The orientation of the novel was clear to me from the start: it could have been more aptly called *The Gospel According to Emily*. While Maguire has written many articles for newspapers, this is her first major non-fiction work. It reads well, with a mix of personal comment, stories from other people and references from contemporary books. While the direct religious references are not frequent, there is much for believers to consider in this book, as many aspects can be linked to a challenge to Christian ethos and morals.

The title is of course linked to the current debate in our era where pornstars become role models and pornography has become, in some places, so mainstream it is routine. It is also a questioning of the present situation with regard to the place of women and whether real change has taken place: or are women stuck with a choice of being a 'princess' or a 'pornstar'?

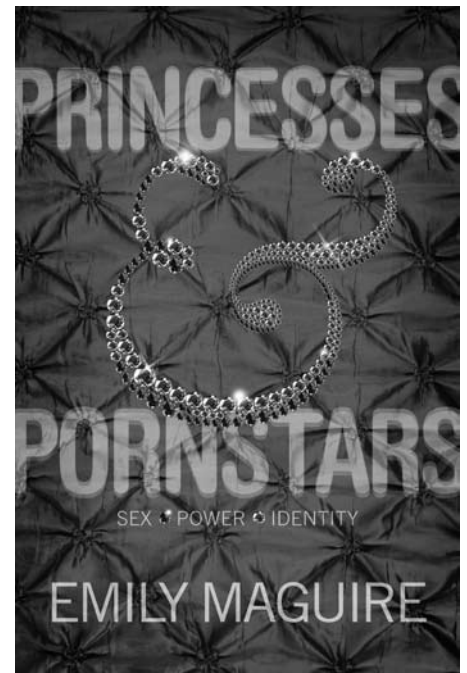
The book covers the areas one would expect from a feminist work written in a post-modern culture. It is also presented in a spirit of reasonableness, though I found underlying a didactic quality that was somewhat at odds with the prevailing ethos of supreme tolerance in a post-modern world. Rather than comment on every aspect of the book, I thought it more prudent to comment on the areas that I found more intriguing. For example, the discussion on sex education raised with me one main question. Why do abstinence and modesty movements deny people's sexuality?

Maguire's analysis of pornography suitably fits a post-modern feminist interpretation which wants to harness pornography for what it perceives as 'the right way.' I found this section somewhat naïve, but this may be chalked up to my flawed, male understanding. However, ultimately the idea of harnessing pornography for a positive purpose fails to realise the inherent nature of sin and the pervasive, destructive nature of pornography which never leaves the individual satisfied.

The place of 'women and work' is a continuing theme, but for me this illustrated Maguire's failure to look at the subject in a different way. Emily Maguire perpetuates a focus on 'men and work' which she wants to critique, and in most places thus continues the myth of work as only being that performed by people for money. She may not believe this view of work herself, but the quotations and references are such that money becomes the centre of discussion. This is a common trap for all of us, but I constantly remind



Emily Maguire



myself that in the church, the majority of 'work' is not paid, and in some cases not counted. We all need to work, and most need to do paid work to pay bills and live. But even if you don't need the money, work is good for you and is part of God's creation.

Questions related to child care and parenting is something that needs more consideration, though, as the author acknowledges, she has decided herself not to have children, she was not able to incorporate personal reflection on these questions.

Now 31, Emily Maguire has been married since she was 20, an interesting fact in itself. Even more intriguing is her attitude to marriage, which she notes as conflicted. "Although I am more in love with my husband now than on the day I married him, if I was making the decision today I would choose not to get married."

After considering her position it was unclear to me what she thought marriage actually was. The main 'wedding' she talks about is one between two of her female friends, which would not have been a legal wedding, but illustrates the popular idea around today of 'recognition services.' This story would have naturally left most readers smiling and thinking how wonderful love is. It certainly begged the question of what marriage is, and simply illustrated to me the focus on individual rights today which renders rites of life as more a personal adventure for each

and any couple in any format they want. It also helped me to consider more the Christian understanding of marriage.

The most significant and devastating chapter is that concerned with body image – ‘The body trap’. Women are airbrushed, nipped, tucked, changed for a day and a new perspective, especially for men. Do we encourage any proper consideration of this tremendous social change which has arisen so dramatically? Is our main theology of beauty telling the bridal party that beauty is something that also comes from within? How can the church help to address this dominant culture?

Overall, I found this work to provide an example of the current logical difficulty that is faced by many promoters of tolerance and love: wonderful concepts that are of course difficult to argue against especially when they are not defined. I could not help but wonder, when I read this book, how can we hold any relationships above others? Why can certain things still be regarded as not helpful, let alone sinful?

As a point for discussion: why are people now so reluctant to critique different forms of relationships, or endorse marriage as both a good and proper ‘institution’ and the appropriate place for sexual relationships? Is it because a post modern society does not provide a consistent moral framework to do so, or are people simply afraid of offending anyone in any type of relationship different to their own?

I am not suggesting that Emily Maguire does not have high standards and a moral framework and understanding. But I was left intrigued as to the authority and basis of her decisions and words of advice.

While I can find points of help in most books, this book is a particularly helpful example of why I believe secular humanism is inadequate. Violence, sexual harassment and discrimination against women will not be ended by good moral education (especially for men) and by a call to better arms. A thing called sin is not easily swayed by helpful advice, no matter how good the prose. □

## Are church modernists Christian? Thomas Oden sets the record straight

DOCTRINAL STANDARDS IN THE WESLEYAN TRADITION

BY THOMAS ODEN

PUBLISHED BY ABINGDON PRESS  
PRICE: \$49.95

REVIEWED BY PAUL LANGKAMP

The United Methodist Church in America, it seems, is plagued by the same sort of ultimately gospel-denying modernists who have influence in the Uniting Church in Australia. Thomas Oden, former professor of theology at Drew University and the author of the relevant reference work on this phenomenon – *Turning Around the Mainline* – has just published a method for checking whether modernists conform to the faith of the classic Christian gospel, presented in the Holy Scriptures, hammered out by six centuries of prayerful deliberation, obedience and debate by the Church Fathers, rediscovered by the reformers and the Anglican divines, and received and lived out in an inimitable way in the Methodist and related churches.

Oden’s book is called *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition*. The first edition was published 20 years

ago and is much revised in this new edition.

The Wesleyan tradition is of no little relevance to the Uniting Church in Australia. The Basis of Union declares that the UCA will “listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty-Four Sermons” and “commit her ministers and instructors to study these statements so that the congregation of Christ’s people may again and again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture.”

In other words, Wesley’s sermons are doctrinal standards for the Uniting Church. No other churchman is mentioned in the Basis of Union.

In other words, when the UCA says it listens, as its leaders repeatedly said they would listen to the church members during a previous and continuing debate, it must not close its ears to what is loudly and clearly there, as it did to the Bentley Report. The UCA is regulated by what it listens to. Inevitably, it is, by whatever it listens to.

Of course there are more than 44 published sermons of John Wesley’s. In total there are 34 volumes. And the curious reader, for instance, can download a thousand pages of them from ccel.com for US\$2.95 – or get them free if impecunious. Oden explains the exact process by which special ones got selected as regulatory. It happened over many decades and

“

**Surely, the ACC has come into existence because the Uniting Church has lost all power of godliness.**

”