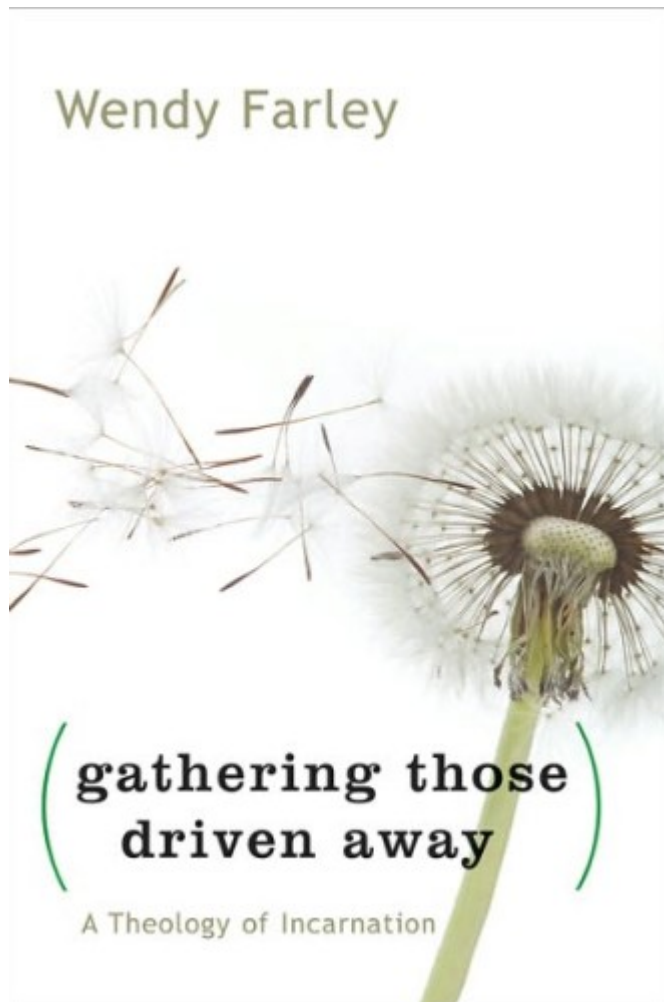


Gathering Those Driven Away, by Wendy Farley

reviewed by [Kristine A. Culp](#) in the [April 18, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Gathering Those Driven Away

By Wendy Farley

Westminster John Knox

A few friends gather on Christmas Eve, sharing the joy of the season. Women tell stories that reveal the depths of pain and love in ordinary life. One improvises on the piano. They agree that mothers, like Mary, recognize the divine in their children.

Men "pontificate" until Joseph enters the dialogue. He observes that "the subject of Christmas claims" creates a "speechless joy," soothes deep pain, gladdens the heart and eye; it was "one long affectionate kiss given to the world." The evening ends with all united in song.

This is the scene of Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Christmas Eve: Dialogue on the Incarnation*. It is also the setting of Wendy Farley's preface to *Gathering Those Driven Away*. In the spirit of Schleiermacher's *Dialogue*, she offers meditations, songs and spiritual practices—all rooted in the pain and joy of ordinary life. She formulates a theology of Wisdom incarnate—unleashed by divine desire, found in sublime moments and ragged places of ordinary life and born in a manger. In doing this, she gathers not merely the cultured despisers of Christianity, but "those driven away."

Farley's title comes from a paraphrase of Micah 4:6, "And in that day, says the Beloved, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away." In her book, "those driven away" first refers to casualties in the fight over sexual minorities in churches. Her premise is that the harm, betrayal and self-loathing caused in this "wreckage" reveals wounds of other times and places. But her focus is "the Beloved." The book is "mostly a long love letter to the Beloved, incarnate in the world, in Scripture, in Jesus, and in every human being." She offers words that "caress" the Divine and that intend to foster human participation in "divine *eros* and *caritas* for the world."

This love letter assembles voices from the margins through the centuries, including Origen, Pelagius, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, Schleiermacher, feminist and queer theologians, gnostic gospels, platonists, yoga practitioners, folk singers, prostitutes, tax collectors, Samaritans, a very young and "indecent" Mary, and Jesus of Nazareth. Some canonical voices join this mostly noncanonical chorus.

The metaphors of margin and of being driven away assume a center and a force. The center that Farley wants to displace is a "logic of domination" that continues to create heresies and marginalize persons. The struggle for orthodoxy associated with the promulgation of the Nicene Creed epitomizes this logic of domination.

Not coincidentally, the Nicene affirmation of the unity of divinity and humanity became decisive for Christian theologies of Trinity, incarnation and soteriology. Farley distinguishes the creed's "majestic poetry"—God from God, Light from

Light—from the history of effects associated with the struggle against heresy. She eventually retrieves Nicaea's poetry, a "sense of intoxicating oneness between humanity and divinity," and an understanding of salvation as theosis or divinization that, she notes, Athanasius largely shared. But first she purges the theological narrative of human thralldom to evil, a Lord God bent on punishment, substitutionary atonement and institutional control of right doctrine and the means of salvation. She associates a sweeping list of "collateral damage" with the drive toward orthodoxy and control: decimation, torture, enslavement, genocide, persecution, abuse, suicide.

These are not new critiques of hierarchy, of creedal Christianity, of substitutionary atonement or of Christian complicity. Farley's critique is preparatory to her constructive work, which is to hold divine mystery and love in the place where domination has ruled and to see Jesus Christ with the eyes and in the faces of those driven away.

In 1984, bell hooks argued for feminist theory that moves the analysis of race, class and gender "from margin to center." Farley moves theologically from the margins to pitch a tent in the center of theological power: an understanding of incarnation and salvation. She does not address social or ecclesial forms that can express this theology and further disrupt a "logic of domination." Instead she offers practices of contemplation and discernment that support the psychic and spiritual reconstruction of persons who have been humiliated and devastated by the church. Domination and humiliation are so closely associated with institutional Christianity here that all communal and organized expressions seem suspect.

Farley pursues a *via negativa* away from "ideas that are unworthy of Divinity . . . [and] of ourselves" and an affirmative way that contemplates and names wisdom. She construes both as practices of love: "Naming and negation are twinned ways of perceiving ineffable love. . . . As we fall more deeply into the divine love, its inexpressibility and mystery open ever more fully."

Farley characterizes falling into divine love as the intensification of desire or as falling into the "Erotic Abyss." Martin Luther once preached that "God does not want the world to know when he sleeps with his bride"—*bride* referring to God's people, the true church. Farley takes the opposite tack: divine desire is not possessive and controlling, and it is not closeted. Bridal imagery from the Song of Songs and as meditated on and expanded by Origen and Mechthild informs Farley's contemplation

of divine and human desire. She extends this tradition to same-sex desire in particular. She takes sexual union, namely the awareness of differentiation combined with the ecstatic dissolution of self and the other, as a disclosive analogy of divine incarnation and nonduality. She depicts the incarnation as an emanation from "Divine Eros" that "requires differentiation but longs for union."

The second half of the book turns to the incarnation in Wisdom, in creation, in gospel and in humanity. This is where Farley hits her stride and where her argument comes into better focus. Jesus' story—his birth; his presence among the poor; his relationships with women, tax collectors and sinners; his teaching—is situated in a wider story of the incarnation of Wisdom in human form. She tells the passion of the Christ in relation to suffering and ignorance in human existence, and she interprets salvation as seeing and bearing the face of Christ in the world. What Jesus gives us, she says, is not a social program or an ethics but "an optics": "He sees in society's throwaways beings to cherish, enjoy, befriend." She calls this "amoral, useless love" and associates it with the "radiance" of erotic ecstasy.

Farley writes that "in our devotion we try to find words, but they are love letters, not mathematical formulas." The language of love has been constrained in Christian theology and ethics, she contends, especially through a bifurcation of agape, which is prized, and eros, which is denigrated. Farley makes eros primary, and there is little constraint in her language—it stretches canonical and noncanonical sources alike. I wonder whether falling ever deeper into the Erotic Abyss transforms more than one person at a time. But Farley is right that degradation and humiliation have no place in a theology of divine love and incarnation. Generosity of attention and delight is a good place to start. To respond to the passion and incarnation already in our midst takes not only good stories and some music, but theology as a transforming and shared way of life.