

## Review Article

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Benne, Robert. *Good and Bad Ways To Think About Religion and Politics*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2010. ISBN 978-0-8028-6364-5. 120+vii pages. USD14.

Lisa Nolland, Chris Sugden, and Sarah Finch, eds., *God, Gays and the Church: Human Sexuality and Experience in Christian Tradition*. Oxford: The Latimer Trust, 2008. ISBN 978-0-946307-93-7. 249 pages. GBP9.99.

In this review, I begin with a preamble on the state of discussion with regards to the role of religion in the public square. Thereafter, I discuss Robert Benne with a view to locate his potentially programmatic proposal. I then review Chris Sugden and *et al's* treatment of a contemporary issue that faces the church in secular society. As a caveat, although Benne writes largely for the North American context, his framework could be readily applied beyond the American shores with some modifications. Thus, I review Benne's work on models of religion in society with Sugden's multi-authored investigation on the mono-sexuality discussion in the Church of England. Whether Sugden's treatment could be a testcase for Benne's recommendation, I will leave it to my readers to decide.

If my intuition has some validity, religion would continue to play a significant role in any political economy, regardless of whether a society embraces the separation of religion and politics. Of course, my hunch is not the only perspective available. Secularists like Susan Jacoby have relegated religion to a private sphere (i.e., religion should not occupy a public role for influencing societal trends and politics). Nonetheless, history shows that religion had and continues to influence politics publicly and privately. Jacoby would probably agree with me that voters cast their votes in light of their religious or a-religious convictions. Electoral decisions are not normally affected by whether the society constituted embraces a non-separation or a separation of church (or religion) and state, and so, even if Jacoby is right that the non-separation of church and state cannot be defended in today's largely

secular North America society (cf. *Freethinkers*, Henry Holt & Company, 2004), my thesis remains that religion will continue to shape society (and by corollary, politics as well).

What religious folks differ is the precise role of religion in politics and society. In our book under review, the author warns that if religion fuses with culture or politics, “religion would serve only as a sacred legitimatization of socio and political claims, [and] not as a causative factor in itself.” (p.60). Benne’s evaluation reminds me of Michael J. Gorman’s *Reading Revelation Responsibly* (Wipf & Stock, 2010) and T. Scott Daniels’s *Seven Deadly Spirits* (Baker Academic, 2009). Independently of each other, Gorman and Daniels have warned against the development of civil religion; they believed that civility would turn religion/Christianity into an instrument of a socio-political economy rather than allowing religion/Christianity to serve truly as salt and light in society. Like the Anabaptist tradition, religion is best kept out of the public square unless religious campaigners seek non-violent ways of participating in society. But, here is my chagrin. As soon as religious adherents seek non-violent participation in the public square, religion invariably becomes confluence with politics. For instance, organizations like the Moral Majority (and later the Christian Coalition), in seeking to curtail secularism’s drive to oust religions from North America’s secularizing society, have unwittingly become political in their efforts to influence society. The Islamic Shar’iah law, despite its differential implementations in the Middle East and in Southeast Asia, attests to the impossibility of separating religion from society. Thinking through these possibilities, I sometimes wonder how religion can truly influence society without becoming political, and if religion can truly be religious without shaping society. It is here that the book under review provides a helpful perspective.

Robert Benne (the ELCA ethicist who also holds dual appointment as the Director of the Roanoke College Center for Religion and Society and as Jordan-Trexler Professor of Religion Emeritus at Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia) argues for the confluential role of religion and politics in five chapters. To be sure, *Good and Bad Ways To Think About Religion and Politics* does not trace the history of church-state relations or the complex development of religion and politics in social-political history. It does not even review the historical antecedents to contemporary models of religion and politics. However,

the small paperback shows promise to become a programmatic model for anyone seeking to observe and/or analyze contemporary phenomena. In what follows, I will summarily review Benne's core proposals in chapters four and five against the backdrop of chapters one and two where he discusses the models he disapprove.

For the Roanoke College emeritus professor cum director, there can be no straight-line theory and practice for moving from religion to politics (p.39). As Christianity is a "religion of salvation" (p.41), Christians' primary concerns should not be in politics, even though Benne acknowledges that our discipleship will have moral and political implications. Furthermore, he urges a distillation of the Christian ethical principle of love to peripheral application for politics. No doubt humans are fallen beings, we are still made in the image of God; hence, statecraft should not infringe on human dignity and rights. In recognition of human finitude, the pursuit of restricted responsibility to care for oneself is legitimate by means of the principle of subsidiarity. And because God's concept of salvation and human efforts differ qualitatively, Christians would do well to recognize the limitations of building the Kingdom of God on earth, and not aim for an over-political messiah-ship even as Christians seek order, justice, and peace as much as it is possible (p.52). While Christians must recognize the instrumentality of political governance for order and justice in a land, they must not confuse that with seeing the government as God's instrument of salvation. Only with such a perspective can Christians serve responsibility in political arenas by participating critically as God's conduits (p.55-58), and bring faith to bear on their quest to provide care and enable justice and how some "concentric circles:" may be applied for public policy (p.60-79).

In Chapter four, the ethicist recommends a model of critical engagement. He believes that the core of religion could speak sensitively to public policy. By bringing intellectual and moral insights from their Christian traditions to bear upon their everyday life, they are critically engaging society with faith, hope, and love, and in so doing, they are "pressing [in] for greater degrees of justice in the world" (p.59). Benne postulates that Christians move from their core religious practice to engaging public policy as a result of at least eight social factors. These factors are a) family, b) regional culture, c) national culture, d) traditions of western civilization, e) race, class, gender, and marriage, f) peer

groups and their political culture, g) religious traditions and their practices, and h) broad and narrow self-intent. Benne further suggests that Christians will speak to public policy in light of their a) theological beliefs, b) the social teachings of the church, b) the history of Christian engagement with society, and c) Christian insights on abortion, civic/common marriage, liberation of the poor, religious liberty, and foreign policy that would affect executive and legislative public policies.

Proceeding to the final chapter, this Roanoke College emeritus religious professor shows how Christians may apply his confluential model of religion and politics. He explains that the strategy for engagement would differ, depending on whether the issue-at-hand is non-controversial, subtly controversial, or robustly assertive. Benne also uses the terms non-controversial, low-profile, high-controversial, and high profile issues. On non-controversial matters, the church may act in her conviction. On low profile issues, Christians may choose policies that correspond directly with their moral conscience, and social teachings of the Church. In highly controversial issues, the church should ideally act with persuasive power, by appealing to interest groups. However, Benne warns that Christian persuasion may be regarded as one among many other interest groups seeking partisan politics. And in high-profile areas, Benne suggests that the church use coercive power in directions that move in consonant with her moral conscience. Furthermore, Christians should modulate their theology with other philosophical and social scientific insights. But, to speak publicly with competence is no small task. To this end, Benne offers further guidelines for Christians seeking to use coercive influence. The guidelines are especially important when it concerns the issuing of statements on public policies; churches do not want to be identified with partisan politics. Hence, they should use this mode relatively infrequently. Along the way, they may suggest widespread revisions (rather than issuing plentiful statements of direct disapproval). And throughout the entire process of communication, they should observe the correspondency between their means and their ends whilst keeping their gaze on people at all times. Only under exceptional exigencies may a Church consider direct political engagement; however, once the crisis is over, churches should refrain from continual direct involvement since un-circumspective involvement would endanger the churches' life, mission, and witness.

As a backdrop for his proposed model, Benne argues (in Chapters two and three) why the two other approaches – the separationists and the fusionists – are “wrongheaded perspectives [or bad ways] on [relating] religion and politics” (p.1) that have deviated from biblical understanding. In Benne’s typology, the separationists ranged from militant secularists to fanatical religious followers. Separationists have confused the need for a separation of church and state with the reality of the actual and inevitable interaction of religion and politics. Separationists are interested to preserve the purity of religion and religious ideologies and messages from political influence, and/or to protect political economy from the encroachment of religion. To them, Benne offers a few rejoinders. They ought to recognize the free exercise clause in America’s First Amendment, trace the history of religious virtues as sources for the nation’s founding, and note the practical and real interface of religion and politics. Still, the Lutheran ethicist warns against any church exercising “coercive power of the sword” even though he believes that the church possesses “persuasive power of word” (i.e., when Christians bring their outlooks to bear on political realms) (p.16). Separationism truncates religion and impoverishes politics in that both are economies ordained of God for the development of society (p.24).

In contrast to the separationists, the fusionists meld religion and politics together, which could create “politicized religion or religionized politics” (p.25). In politicized religion or religionized politics, salvation is achieved through politics and whereby this worldly sphere is elevated to ultimate concerns. If political gains are achieved by appealing to religion, it can result in cynicism both about religion, and their religious/political leaders since religion may be read as an instrument to further political actors’ ambitions. But if the fusion becomes too intertwined, it would be difficult to distinguish between the two elements; the result is an enmeshing of religion with ethical/national identity. Religion then becomes misused as a tool for legitimizing the dreams of power centers. Consequently, religious convictions get watered down when conversations of civility becomes the central focus of religious talk in the hands of *defacto* fusionists (p.37).

It is clear by the time we come to Chapter five that Benne believes that religion does and should affect politics. However, he shuns a simple of unequivocal approach that takes a straight-line approach to certain

specific policies, and ideologies. Churches should act intentionally and as institutional players in accordance to their social conscience (p.82). In many ways, the project reflects the milieu of the author: from his burning question of whether American religion ought to have any political effect and in the process sacrifice its transcendence for an earthly pottage (p.6), Benne locks himself into a mindset of negotiating whether secularity would better serve the public life, or whether public politics would need the practice of religion. But of course, the real question which in my opinion he had not asked directly is – must it be an either/or, and why can it not be a both/and approach? Still because Benne writes lucidly; his typology would clarify for his readers how they may evaluate the different contemporary approaches. If there is a criticism, I wished that Benne had delved into the historical development of models for religion/church and state relations (cf. Jose Casanova, Oliver O'Donovan, Max Stackhouse, John Yoder, David Herbert, Joerg Rieger, David Lumsdaine); if he had a chapter unpacking historical models, he could have showed how his proposal would seat with historical antecedents on religion-state relations. After all, he also acknowledges that in Christianity's history with politics, when believers claimed to bring heaven, they had unwittingly brought devastations and unintended consequences such as hell on earth for society (p.54). And in that sense, locating his proposal in conversation with historical antecedents would showcase the value of his model. Nonetheless, I am grateful to Benne's contribution for another reason. He did not resort to an Augustinian rhetoric (of totally repudiating the validity of competing voices in Augustine's desire to claim Christianity's monopolistic edge to speak for God and civility in a polytheistic society intolerant of the emerging Christian faith). Instead, he sensitively demonstrates albeit theoretically how religion may authentically contribute to the shaping of public policies without becoming enmeshed with politics. Hence, *Good and Bad Ways To Think About Religion and Politics* presents a helpful perspective on how religion can truly influence society without becoming too political. I am positive that Benne's book under review would soon become a programmatic model for anyone seeking to observe and/or analyze contemporary phenomena.

I will now turn to a contemporary face of religion in a public square – that of mono-sexuality in the British context through the lens of Lisa Nolland, Chris Sugden, Sarah Finch, *et al.*

In preparation for the General Synod meeting of the Church of England held in February 2007, 26.5% of the 467 synod's membership signed a Private Member's Motion to support the tabulation of an agenda to welcome and to affirm lesbian and gay Christians into the Church of England. As the conference proceeded, several members from the House of Bishops were unhappy with the skewed presentation concerning LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transsexual) issues. The Changing Attitude, the premier Anglican LGBT organization, claimed that a thousand LGBT clergy were already either officiated or in the process of officiating in the Church of England. However, and in diffidence to The Changing Attitude's statistics, the Anglican Communion's official policy states that in the case of LGBT clerical applicants, only celibate clergy with non-heterosexual orientation could be ministers. In response to some revisionists' hopeful inclusivity and recognition of LGBT in the Church of England, the book under review suggests otherwise (i.e., the reality of LGBT ordinands are not widespread and the figures are "grossly exaggerated" p.5); it presents a traditional biblical view, with the goals to provide perspectives from the other side not presented at the Synod, as well as to provide guidelines for non-traditional baptismal candidates.

In the Prologue, the editors clarified an overlooked rhetoric in LGBT conversations. When proponents of LGBT asked for a hearing that is free from judgment and rejection (and with the explicit goal that the audience will not remain in status quo), the editors explained that a persuasive rhetoric is at work. LGBT proponents are not interested in neutral and mutually respectful exchange. If the audience does not come around to "full agreement with LGBT arguments on their terms" (p.17), the audience is deemed to be judgmental (none-accepting of LGBTs), and not progressing toward inclusivity. The only neutral position acceptable to LGBT proponents is when the audience ceases to perpetuate "outrageous" behaviors of exclusivity against LGBTs instead of invalidating them. To further demonstrate the rhetoric used by LGBT proponents, the editors explained their bewilderment as to why LGBT proponents only singled out homosexuality for reinterpretation and for radical inclusion but not with other 'sins' (p.16). The editors of *God, Gay and the Church* showed that when proponents reinterpreted LGBT in terms of relational fidelity, self-sacrifice, and mutual self-giving, it ironically

sets a theologically-and-morally inaccurate standard as if God's will includes "diametrically opposed moral[ity]" and "sexual straying" (p.21). LGBT proponents have also used the failure of successful rehabilitation as proof of the biological nature of LGBT sexuality, calling the failure of successful rehabilitation the failure of correct diagnosis. To these charges the editors explained that the failure of effective rehabilitation neither proves the failure of diagnosis nor the supposed biological thesis. Finally, the editors warned against letting secularity determine religious beliefs, which happen when biblical and theological truths are reinterpreted to embrace LGBT lifestyle in the churches (p.22).

With five sections, the book basically expanded on the conversations began at the prologue. The six sections are narratives, genetics, psychology and psychotherapy, biblical theology, and pastoral care and advice. The narratives section records five real-life accounts by some former members who have experienced God's transformative power as they transitioned into post-lesbian, post-gay, post-homophobia, and the truth of the facade of a supposed 'happy and free' lifestyle as an mono-sexual. Among the many heart-moving stories is a statement clarifying perceptions of the Church and LGBT: "We [gay community] are told that the Church opposes same-sex love. [But that is just] not true. The Church opposes homogenital sex, which in my experience is not about love, but about obsession, addiction, and compensation for a compromised masculinity." (p.73). As to whether sexuality is innate and immutable, the only contributing essay in the Genetics section explains the inconclusive findings of studies on genes to support the supposed innateness of same sex attraction (SSA) unlike what LGBT proponents would claim. In the section on psychology and psychotherapy, contributors examine a range of psychological and life-span development of homosexuality from boyhood to adulthood as well as the impact of affect in psychotherapy and whether the reversibility of sexual orientations for mono-sexuals, and what SSA tendencies may 'signal' to a former Gay. The psychiatrists and psychologists in this section affirmed the complexity of influencing sexual identities and behaviors, unlike the often straight-jacket assumptions of either the man-in-the-street or those from LGBT communities. More importantly, and without undermining the struggles of turning around one's commitment (such as the "faint stirrings of the old urges" – which is really "not about [the attraction

to] the other guy but about himself”), the reports show that with appropriate therapies, a recovering homosexual “will very possibly learn how to turn aright to other men to gain from them a genuine, nonsexualized masculine comradeship and intimacy; and how to relate aright to woman, as friend, lover, life’s companion, and, God willing, mother of his children” (p.87, 99).

On biblical theology of sexuality, the volume reserved space for two essays – one addressing homosexuality and the other, women ordination, homoeroticism and faithfulness. On “A Faithful Church,” the contributor Robert A.J. Gagnon addressed professor of philosophy at the University of Western Ontario John Throp’s article “Making the Case: The Blessing of Same Sex Unions in the Anglican Church of Canada” (May 2007). Throp claimed that scripture, tradition, and reason support blessing “lifelong, committed, and nurturing” same sex union. He labeled a church that does not accept LGBT practices as “frozen.” In response, Gagnon showed how Throp had misused scripture, tradition, and reason to make indefensible claims; claims resting on faulty exegeses, misguided theology (e.g., faulty interpretation of sections of *Didache*, misinformed reference of early church’s acceptance of homosexuality, etc.), and clear weaknesses in philosophical and logical arguments, such as his use of inappropriate analogies (e.g., analogies of left-handedness and ethnicity with innateness of homosexuality, and analogies of slavery and usury for accepting homosexual practice). In Gagnon’s explanation, Throp showed little concern for the church to be faithful to the pervasive, absolute, and strong biblical teachings on sexual ethics. The notion of marital monogamy by two-sexes (instead of faithful polygamous arrangements and/or committed ‘monogamy’ by two parties of the same gender) is the foundation and core value in biblical sexual ethics. “Incest and homosexual practice violate God’s sexual standards at a more foundational level than adultery” (p.110). However, when Throp reinterpreted many of the biblical passages on homosexual depravities as biblically acceptable, he had just turned against what God found to be abhorrently offensive. Quickly unto Edith Humphrey’s essay on women ordination, she questions the frequent mistaken rhetoric of collapsing women ordination with homoeroticism, just like the often mistake of not distinguishing the difference between preventing a pregnancy through the use of contraceptive and the abortion of a pre-born baby. On the issue of women ordination and homosexual orientation,

Humphrey acknowledges that both are concerned with an aspect of the nature of humanity, the categories should not 'slide' easily into the other because women ordination concerns ecclesiology while same-sex eroticism is about morality. Humphrey urges the Anglican Communion to clarify its position so as to seek "obedience to the Christian Way, as illuminated in the Scriptures and [to keep...] intact in the catholic tradition of the living Church." (p.146).

Finally in the fifth section, four essays recommend some pastoral care and advice. Mario Bergner wrote on pastoral care for those in same sex attraction, and in it he also clarified of ambiguities of at least four definitions of homosexuality: biological, psychological, sociological, and biblical. More importantly, Bergner recommends the possibilities of reordering through support provided by organizations such as *Living Waters*, and *Redeemed Lives*. Paul and Christine Perkin recommended a thorny issue facing parishes and clergy in the UK on whether the blessings of those who come to them with civil partnership contract, and especially in situations when the bishop is silent about discipline, and when the church in obedience to biblical command cannot endorse same sex union. Related answers were provided on guidelines for baptismal candidates, choice of godparents, and whether to allow church premises as venues for celebrating civil partnership. Lisa Nolland contributed two essays. In the first essay, she empathized with the pains Gays experienced, but remained firm that Gay-pains are not grounds for legitimatizing non-heterosexual partnership; beside biblical and theological grounds, Nolland also explained that not unlike homosexuals, most people experienced many levels of pains in life. She expressed thus: "To reconfigure the essential paradigms of sexuality, gender and marriage, in order to benefit the LGBT community, cannot alter transcendent truths of morality and the created order. In concrete terms, for us as a post-modern, post-Christian society to liberate sex from the domain of heterosexual marriage does not change the [biblical] ethical dimension." (p.177). She continued that to expand the range of our sexual options so that our LGBT communities can feel better about themselves whilst doing so is "an absolutely massive... [step] with profound repercussions for us all." (p.178). The rest of the article aims at clarifying the evolution of sexual promiscuity Nolland observed from materials including *Sexual Ethics: A report of the Lesbian and Gay Clergy Consultation Working Group*, edited by Andrew Henderson (2004), which included contributions by

leading theologians in Britain who approved sexually 'open' same sex relations such as James Nelson, Elizabeth Stuart, Michael Vasey and McCord Adams. In her next article analyzing "unexpected consequences [to] the sexualization of youth," Nolland warned that "the nomenclature ... sex 'education,' though sounding thoroughly respectable, has proved to be the perfect Trojan Horse for implementing and legitimizing a massive social engineering project, that of sexually liberating the ignorant, inhibited and repressed youth of today." (p.188). A large part of the essay is devoted to describing how explicit and horrifying sexual education is in the United Kingdom, and how "sex is now divorced from life-long commitment, marriage, family, babies, and generational ties" and from "love and 'relationships' in the process" (p.192).

The book also contains a helpful list of appendices on websites on same sex health, and a range of bulletin explorations on parenting, civil partnership and marriages, and a brief narratives of individuals who have been casualties for speaking out against this sexual liberalizing culture (in United Kingdom and North America), media strategy, and a glossary of terms, responses from audience participation at the General Synod, and an annex on the said General Synod debates pertaining to LGBT inclusion to the Church of England held in 2007.

The discussions by Benne and Sugden strike at the heart of Christianity in an already secular America, or increasingly secularized religious state of England today. Whether the context is North America, Great Britain, or for that matter, the Middle East or Asia, there is no denial that religion is not dead in society. On the contrary, the voices of religion and secularity continues to be a naked public square, where each seeks to dominate societal development. Religionists would benefit from Benne's clear-headed recommendation, even as secular thinkers would want to stay clear of fascistic development in their quest for a more progressive society. While my conclusion here prefigures the contribution of Continental critical theorists of religion and society, that is a subject for another occasion. So long as religionists and secularists recognize that the privatization of religion cannot in reality relegate religious influence from the public sphere (and that we do not want religiosity and their morality to be excluded from society), we would be on the right track if the two paths explores amiable ways of co-existence.

