

TALKING STRAIGHT

Review of Homosexuality and American Public Life, edited by Christopher Wolfe

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Among activists who want to keep the "hetero" in "sexuality," a consensus is developing that we need a "public philosophy," a way to speak wisdom to the people. It is pretty much taken for granted that means something different from quoting Scripture to our fellow citizens; they don't all believe in the Bible, those who say they believe it interpret it in diverse ways (which means, all too often, that *interpreting* is just what they are *not* doing), and they are suspicious of anything that looks like "forcing one's religious opinions upon others.

The irony is that much of the Bible itself was originally intended as a kind of public philosophy. Thus the book of Proverbs: "Wisdom cries aloud in the street; in the markets she raises her voice; on the top of the walls she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks" (1:20-21.) It faced the same problem of rejection in its time that the public philosophy does today: "I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, and you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof" (1:24-25.) Finally, it resembles the new public philosophy in its preoccupation with the dangers of disordered sex: "Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned?" (5:15-16, 6:27.)

None of this is to suggest that by not mentioning the Bible the advocates of the new public philosophy are doing wrong; not even the Bible demands starting every conversation with the Bible. To pagans, Paul quoted pagan poetry (Acts 17:28), talked about the weather (14:17), and commented on their own secret sense that their idols could not save (17:23). In theological terms, what the contributors to this volume are doing is developing a basis in "general" revelation for talking with the American public about homosexuality: a basis in what is known, or can be known, before or apart from the Bible. Part I, "Science," therefore deals with the causes and cures of homosexuality, with the scientific myths about homosexuality, and with the politics of science itself. Part II, "Moral Norms," investigates the standing of homosexuality in the natural law. While in legal terms, Part III, "Law," is rather narrow -- it focusses almost entirely on legal recognition of so-called same-sex marriage -- in some ways it actually gives a broader overview of the moral problem with homosexuality than does Part II.

This odd division of the moral territory between Parts II and III may reflect an uneasiness about academic natural law theory something like the uneasiness I mentioned earlier about the Bible. If so, there would be some reason for it. Obviously the theory of natural law should instruct us about things like (1) what's wrong with homosexuality; (2) why marriage requires two people of opposite sex, and (3) why points 1 and 2 are legitimate concerns of public authority. These things the theory does rather well, and the two essays about it, by Janet Smith and Robert George, are quite good (and they have other merits too). But there is a deeper problem with the academic theory of natural law, a problem which books which venture into public philosophy tend not to recognize at all. In some sense, the theory of natural law supposes that people already know what marriage and sexuality are about: after all, the foundational precepts of the natural law are classically said to be "the same for all, both as to knowledge and as to rectitude." And yet in another sense people are obviously confused about the subject, or we would not be in our present cultural crisis.

For this reason, we need the theory to provide a further instruction which it has not so far offered. To meet the present need, it must help us distinguish between (1) what people not only know about marriage and sexuality, but know that they know; (2) what they know latently, but haven't quite pieced together; (3) what they know, but *pretend* to themselves that they don't know; (4) what they know latently, but try *not* to piece together; and (5) what they really don't know at all. In the first domain, a public philosophy would only have to offer reminders; in the second, it would have to go further and "connect the dots"; in the third and fourth, it would have to venture the more difficult step of piercing self-deceptions and blowing away smokescreens; and in the fifth, it would have to recapture the enemy-captured arts of expanding the public imagination, speaking to the people of new things, and making familiar to the mind and affections what was previously unimagined.

Until our philosophy can do such things, it may be a true philosophy, but it will fall short of true *public* philosophy because it will still fail to show us how to speak to the people. Only one contribution to the volume (but that is one more than in most such books) touches on these matters directly: Joseph Nicolosi's fascinating essay on "The Gay Deception," which argues that gay identity "is a culturally approved process of *self-reinvention* by a group of people in order to mask their collective emotional hurts." Unfortunately, this contribution is also one of the shortest. I should have liked Nicolosi to comment on how a better understanding of this self-deception might help us develop better ways to tell the truth about homosexuality.

But I complain too much; pining for one missing virtue should not distract us from other virtues which the present book shows forth in abundance. What are some of the other things we should demand from a collection of essays on homosexuality in American public life?

The popularity of the notion that some people are "born gay" makes it indispensable that such a book include a fair presentation of the research on predisposing factors for homosexual attraction. Articles by Jeffrey Satinover and George Rekers, focussing

respectively on biology and on psychological development, serve this purpose fully. Almost as widespread is the related notion, "once gay, always gay." Richard Fitzgibbons and Joseph Nicolosi explode this myth by discussing just what is involved in same-sex attraction disorder, how it should be viewed by therapists, and how it might be treated.

Because the specter of AIDS has been invoked by activists on both the pro and anti sides of the movement to make homosexuality "mainstream," another merit of the book is the comprehensive survey of the state of the epidemic by Patrick Derr. Unfortunately, Derr fails to deliver on the second of his stated purposes -- to sketch how the politics of AIDS has distorted the scientific and governmental response to it. Particularly helpful would have been a discussion of the allegations of scientific dissidents, for example that the definition of the syndrome is circular, that what is called AIDS in different parts of the world is not the same thing, and that heterodox models of the associated diseases have been suppressed. Perhaps all these allegations are baseless, but if the author thinks that is true, it would have been good to learn why.

During the Clarence Thomas hearings, Senator Joe Biden established his philosophical reputation by remarking that he believed in a *different* natural law than the one which usually goes by the name -- a natural law, as he gave the public to understand, which allows everyone to do as he pleases. Politicians might find it harder to get away with such flimflam if scholars had not already given it a good reputation. Janet E. Smith weighs in against historian John Boswell's misrepresentation of what Thomas Aquinas taught about homosexuality, restoring Thomist doctrine to its integrity. Robert P. George follows up by attacking the legion of scholars who have propounded the fatuous idea that it is possible for the law to be "neutral" regarding competing understandings of the nature of marriage and the goods that it involves.

In view of the preoccupation of most of the contributors to Part III with the legal crisis in Hawaii, which has since receded, I was prepared to be disappointed by the final section of the book. In fact I was pleasantly surprised; the essays provide not only sharp analysis of legal strategies, which I had expected, but also a good deal of unlooked-for insight into the broader challenge of defending marriage in our civic culture. Hadley Arkes, for example, includes welcome reflections on the dilemmas of talking with friends. Michael Pakaluk explains in exactly what sense the common claim that homosexual "marriage" would undermine the heterosexual family is true. Gerard Bradley convincingly shows why the extension of the privileges of marriage to homosexual couples would not be an extension *of marriage*, but rather the demolition of marriage and its replacement by a novel institution of a different kind. David Orgon Coolidge offers a highly practical analysis of the various understandings of marriage that underlie most public debate, and just how the arguments work.

Well-framed by statements by William Kristol and Richard John Neuhaus, this indispensable volume represents the state of the art of public moral apologetics, and a platform for pushing the art even harder.