
Political Polarization, Same-Sex Marriage and Religious Liberty

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Thomas C. Berg, *Religious Liberty in a Polarized Age* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023)

Laudably, author Thomas C. Berg clearly states this book's thesis in the introduction: "In our time of polarization, we must renew our commitment to religious freedom for all." Berg focuses on the U.S. context, but the book applies to the situation in Europe as well. In this review, I will focus on one of the questions that Berg handles in detail: the relationship between religious freedom and LGBTQ rights.

Pluralism and Polarization

Berg desires to reduce the rift between those who advocate LGBTQ rights and those who want to protect traditionalists' religious liberty. In wrestling with how that deep division can be assuaged, Berg maintains that both sides must first stop demonizing each other and seek to understand each other. He writes: "In a society shot through with negative polarization, one crying need is sympathy for those with whom we deeply disagree—sympathy not for the truth of their underlying position, but for the predicament in which they find themselves when they face penalties for living consistently with their deepest beliefs." This is an important point and undoubtedly correct. But then he goes much farther than that: in effect, he contends that conservative Christians should support and defend the right to same-sex marriage and that advocates of gay marriage should defend traditional Christians' religious freedom, even if traditionalists hold the belief that homosexual activity is sinful and harmful. His argument: "...in our divided society we must protect both [LGBTQ people's right to marry and traditionalists' religious liberty] if we hope to protect either."

The problem he is dealing with is *worldview* pluralism, although he never expresses it in those words. In the United States (as in Europe and throughout the civilizational West) we are no longer blessed with a pluralism that is "limited" to the political, that is, a political pluralism in the context of a Judeo-Christian cultural consensus. The pluralism we face today is a comprehensive world-and-life-view split between traditionalists who believe in the Judeo-Christian Western tradition and secularist progressives who reject religion and view the common good as the right of everyone to decide for himself what is true and what is good, rejecting as oppressive the very idea of pursuing a set of objective truths and goods that might help bind us all together.

This is the root cause of the extreme polarization that Berg laments, and that he proposes to alleviate via a strong commitment to religious freedom for all, along with robust support for the right to same-sex marriage.

Is There a Difference Between Religious Freedom Rights and LGBTQ Rights?

Berg delineates very well what he means by religious liberty. He says, "...this book defends a conception of religious liberty that is (1) substantial in scope and (2) evenhanded among faiths." By "substantial in scope" he means that religious freedom encompasses not only freedom of worship but also free exercise, the "room to exercise religion in all aspects of life, in charitable work and in one's daily activities." By "evenhanded" he means "strong protection of religious freedom for all," not just for a particular favored religion. He adds that religious freedom protections must be not only strong but also balanced with other legitimate interests: "If the purpose of religious-freedom protection is to preserve space for all persons to live according to their (diverse) deep beliefs, then protection must be strong. But it must also take other interests into account."

Berg is not as clear on what he means by LGBTQ rights. In effect if not in intent, he treats the right to engage in same-sex marriage fundamentally in the same way he treats the right to religious freedom for all. His reason for doing so appears to be his view that traditionalists seeking religious freedom and gay marriage advocates find themselves in analogous situations. He points out that both religious commitment and living in a same-sex relationship are matters "of pervasive importance" to one's personal identity. Both sides, he says, seek to "live out their identities... not only in private... but also in civil society." Both religious and LGBTQ identities, he says, "express themselves [not only in identity but also] in conduct," and both "are the source of duties and responsibilities." Finally, he says that "both same-sex couples and religious dissenters face the problem that what they experience as among the highest virtues is condemned by others as a grave evil...."

Where Does the Right to Same-Sex Marriage Come From?

But this raises the question whether the purportedly similar *subjective experience* of religious traditionalists and same-sex married people is the *only* reason Berg equates religious freedom rights with same-sex marriage rights, or whether he has other, more objective reasons. To put it more pointedly, from where does Berg derive the right to same-sex marriage? As far as I can tell, he derives the right from three considerations. First is his claim, described above, that everyone deserves empathy. Second is the pragmatic argument that in a pluralist society, everyone must respect everyone else's beliefs as far as possible in order to uphold the social cohesion that is necessary to safeguard one's own freedoms. His third consideration is his weakest, I believe, especially since he doesn't bother to make an argument for it. Berg apparently assumes that "marriage equality"—a politically manipulative term that Berg uses repeatedly—is a positive good for society, and that this is obvious to all right-thinking people. In one passage, he seems to characterize all opposition to any type of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) as prejudiced and illegitimate: "Of course, ... SOGI discrimination...aim[s] at characteristics that are innate or at least deep-seated, and ... [has] involved prejudiced or misinformed treatment bearing little relation to any legitimate concerns." Ironically, such implicit moral relativism speaks neither to

the concerns of traditionalist Christians, nor to those of most LGBTQ rights activists. For both sides, this is about two incompatible and diametrically opposed views of the human person — of what contributes to human flourishing and social peace. For many on both sides, the practice and belief of the other side cannot but be harmful to a society. Berg should grapple more deeply with that fact.

Berg's Political Prejudices

While making no judgments regarding sexual morality, Berg does reveal some substantial political prejudices. His disapproval falls particularly hard upon evangelicals who are political conservatives, especially Trump voters, to whom he imputes all kinds of evils. "But there are two lines of activity by some evangelicals today that unnecessarily harm the credibility of evangelical religious-freedom claims—'unnecessarily,' I say, because these activities have no real grounding in religious beliefs. The first is the embrace or acceptance of the divisiveness and paranoia of Donald Trump. The second is resistance to the claims of racial justice and equality."

But the problem is not just evangelicals who like Trump. Berg apparently believes that political conservatism in general is divisive, and potentially extreme, in ways that other political views (such as his own, I'm guessing) are not. He says, "...unwarranted divisiveness by evangelicals also damages their liberty by damaging the credibility of their underlying faith. In the long term, religious traditionalists will get less sympathy for their freedom if there's no sympathy for their faith. And the faith will lose sympathy as they tie themselves more rigidly to political conservatism, even its extreme mutations."

Regarding his claim that some evangelicals resist racial justice and equality, Berg comes close to the tired trope of white evangelicals/Christian nationalists, steeped in the "right-wing populist mindset," and tainted with markers of racism. For the most part, what counts as "resistance" to racial justice are evangelicals' purportedly restrictive views on immigration or their reluctance to jump to the conclusion that incidents in which black men were killed by police, though tragic and horrible, constitute proof of systemic racism in the U.S. justice system. (Manhattan Institute Fellow Heather Mac Donald shows convincingly in her book, *The War on Cops*, that there is little evidence that police in the U.S. treat people differently according to race.)

It doesn't stop there. Berg strongly hints that the dreaded white evangelicals ignore the common good, and that they need his instruction in how to live out their faith more selflessly. At a key point in his argument, Berg actually writes: "... it will be harder to evoke sympathy for a religious group's claims of freedom if many members of that group ignore the common good. That fact is a caution to everyone, but especially, today, to white evangelical Christians. It would help for evangelicals to understand religious freedom through the concept that frames this chapter: 'freedom to serve.'...angry and hostile behavior among evangelicals, and other Americans, is driven significantly by fear." I know that Berg sincerely wants to be helpful, and believe that he does not mean to be so harsh. Nevertheless, it would be hard to come up with a more unfair and patronizing insinuation against an entire group of people—and he doesn't offer a single specific example.

What Marriage Is, and What It Isn't

What weakens Berg's argument more than anything is that he does not acknowledge what a radical paradigm shift it is to redefine marriage to include same-sex marriage. A few short years ago, no one would even have considered overturning the essential heterosexuality of almost all conjugal relationships throughout human history, because that history and practice reflected fundamental—and obvious—biological, anthropological and social realities. How could such a radical paradigm shift, one that seeks literally to redefine human sexuality and human relations, and to alter profoundly the view of the human person as a whole, co-exist with the truth about human beings?

As Robert George wrote more than ten years ago in *Conscience and Its Enemies*, marriage is not just any type of "sexual-romantic domestic partnership," but rather is "an all-encompassing sharing of life [including]...a bodily union made possible by the sexual-reproductive complementarity of man and woman...ordered to the all-encompassing commitment, [and]... pledged to permanence and sexual exclusivity and fidelity." To imagine it is possible to transform the idea of marriage—and the family—so completely without grave consequences for freedom and human flourishing is unrealistic, to say the least. As George writes:

By rewriting the parental ideal, abolishing conjugal marriage as the legal norm would undermine in our mores and practice the special value of biological mothers and fathers. Moreover, by marking support for the conjugal view as 'bigotry,' it would, as we are already seeing in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere, damage religious liberty and freedom of speech and association....There is...no chance—no chance— of persuading champions of sexual liberation...that they should respect, or permit the law to respect, the conscience rights of those with whom they disagree. Look at it from their point of view: Why should we permit 'full equality' to be trumped by bigotry?

George's latter point has since been proved by the flood we've seen in recent years of anti-religious prejudice and politicking, of anti-religious propaganda in the media, arts and entertainment, of woke sex education and transgender ideology that harms children and tramples over parental rights, and of anti-discrimination and hate speech legislation and regulations, and lawsuits aiming to curtail religious freedom.

What Now?

So: what is to be done? On the one hand, Berg is right: we need to find a way to live together and tolerate each other. We must respect each other's legitimate civil rights, and protect religious freedom for all. Despite its shortcomings, this book provides a valuable perspective that is often impressively comprehensive and nuanced. Berg also is spot on in pointing out that seeking to understand and respect our opponents must play a central role in reducing today's social polarization.

Ultimately, though, one cannot avoid the fact that we are now witnessing not just political polarization, but *worldview* polarization. This is a rift that is deeper, and that has deeper effects, than Berg wants to believe. Berg tries to bridge the gap by an "evenhandedness" that not only reveals his center-left leanings but often also seems to borrow from the playbook of moral relativism regarding sexuality. This is a problem: given human nature, the relativism of exaggerated tolerance will not alleviate polarization. We fallen human beings are attracted to relativism because it allows us to accept or disregard truth according to our own perceived interests. A relativistic approach to

polarization, however tolerant it seems at first, will ultimately encourage us to disregard others and idolize ourselves.

In order to reduce polarization, we must clearly reject relativism and apply the Christian view of the human person: we are all created in God's image, and thus creatures of unalienable dignity. At the same time, we are all flawed. Our hearts are inclined towards corruption and abuse of power. Thus, we should respect our adversaries as imagebearers of God, and keep in mind our own flaws and limits.

But an essential outgrowth of this tolerance toward others and self-critical view of ourselves is also a non-relativistic approach to the public debate. This is especially true of the political issues that arise out of deep worldview differences and have serious consequences in real life — we need to pursue the debate in a way that practices tolerance while at the same time relentlessly pursuing truth and rooting out falsehood. Berg comes close to saying that. In fact, I have a sense that he *is* arguing largely on the basis of the Christian view of the human person, even though he never says so. Unfortunately Berg stops short of calling clearly for the pursuit of truth and the rejection of falsehood, favoring instead an exaggerated tolerance that misses the depth and scope of what is happening in our societies. Still, I believe Berg has helped blaze a trail in the right direction. He deserves to be commended for his good-faith and substantive contribution to the debate. We conservatives should build on his work, and engage rigorously in the search for solutions.

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