



STATEMENT DB-326

BOOK REVIEW

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE: **The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart**

by Peter J. Gomes

The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart can best be described as a theologically liberal defense of the Bible. This may sound strange to conservative evangelicals, but it should not. Many theological liberals have great respect for the Bible and believe that one can derive divine truth from it. Many of these (especially those who identify themselves as evangelicals) are orthodox in their creed but heterodox in their bibliology. At first, Peter J. Gomes seems to be this sort of theological liberal. Although I believe he is mistaken on some points, there is no doubt that he is a serious man, who has given much thought to the role of Scripture in the Christian life.

Gomes, the minister in The Memorial Church as well as the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard College, is an engaging writer with a gift for persuasion. *Time* magazine named him one of the seven best preachers in America. A registered Republican with an evangelical background, Gomes gave the benediction at Ronald Reagan's inauguration as well as the inaugural sermon for George Bush. But he is also a homosexual. Although *The Good Book* is not your typical liberal diatribe, the results of this treatise are familiar. We might call it a different road that leads to the same destination.

The Good Book's first three chapters deal with the place of Scripture in American churches, the problem of biblical interpretation, and the Bible in America. These chapters set the tone for the rest of the book. Gomes suggests, among other things, that Christians ought to be careful when interpreting Scripture, for there are three dangerous temptations one can succumb to: (1) bibliolatry, (2) literalism, and (3) culturalism. Although this book discusses a number of topics — some of which are quite informative and helpful — I will focus in this review on some of the areas in which Gomes differs from conservative evangelicals. I will do this by covering the three supposedly dangerous temptations and some of the examples Gomes employs.

The first of his caveats, *bibliolatry*, Gomes defines as "the worship of the Bible, making of it an object of veneration and ascribing to it the glory due to God" (p. 36). It is unclear exactly how Gomes applies this in practice, since he does not cite any actual instance that seems to fit his definition. He does, however, give us some insight when he writes, "It was Martin Luther['s] ...reformation slogan, *sola scriptura*, 'by scripture alone,' [that] gave rise to the greatest temptation yet, which was to make of the Bible a domesticated substitute for the authority of God" (39). But if the Bible is the Word of God, as all Christian churches have taught until this century, then how can one say that Luther's

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slogan gave rise to the Bible replacing God's authority? After all, God's Word by definition carries His authority. Since it is God who is the appropriate object of worship, how does Gomes gain information about this God in order to distinguish Him from inappropriate objects of worship, such as the Bible? Is Gomes's source the Bible? If it is, which parts of it? If only some parts, on what basis and on what authority does he distinguish the divine parts from the less-than-divine parts? If it's the whole Bible on which he relies, on what authority does Gomes trust it? God's authority? It's not clear from reading *The Good Book* how Gomes answers these questions.

Certainly Gomes is correct in saying that we should not worship the Bible, but that's not the real issue. The real issue is whether the Bible is God's Word. And given that, the real question is: How can we as Christians best understand and respond to what God has communicated to us?

Literalism is "the worship of the text, in which the letter is given an inappropriate superiority over the spirit" (36). If all Gomes were saying is that the Bible includes numerous literary styles written for assorted reasons to a diversity of persons in different historical contexts, and that a careful reader of the Bible should take all these factors into consideration, Gomes would be saying nothing that evangelicals could not embrace. But this is not what he is saying. A key to what he means is found in his comparison between those he calls biblical "literalists" and those who believe that we ought to interpret the U.S. Constitution by the intent of its framers:

The issue, framed in American constitutional discourse, is not what you and I might think the Constitution means; nor is it what the Supreme Court, at any given point, thinks it means. The only valid line of inquiry, according to the doctrine of original intent, is what the authors, the framers, had in their minds when they wrote what they wrote. It is the business of the courts to interpret the Constitution on that basis, and the business of the legislature to legislate with that intent in mind. It is no small point of cultural coincidence in contemporary America that those who find security in the authority of the text and its authors' intent in scripture, will be equally anxious to submit themselves and others to the same authority in constitutional discourse. (43)

Assuming that Gomes is the author of this passage and that he intends to convey to his readers that he believes biblical conservatives and constitutional conservatives usually occupy the same pews in churches and synagogues throughout America, who am I, as a believer in original intent, to dispute such an accurate sociological observation? Even though he expects the reader of his book to espouse original intent when reading *The Good Book*, Gomes does not encourage the same courtesy to be extended to the authors of the Bible and the U.S. Constitution.

Although Gomes provides no philosophical argument against the positions espoused by either group of "original intenders," he does provide one telling reason for his viewpoint: "Most of us would not want to reconfirm our country's civilization to these original intents, even though we know what they are" (44). According to Gomes, therefore, the Bible, like the U.S. Constitution, is to be understood not by the intent of its authors (or Author), but by the wants of its readers. But if its readers happen to be the church (i.e., Christians generally), or in the case of the Constitution, the Supreme Court, on what basis can the church claim to be Christ's body, or in the case of the Court, the Constitution's authoritative interpreter? If Gomes answers by appealing to the authority of "the Bible" and "the Constitution," he is either affirming the authority of those documents or he is affirming the authority of the readers. If the former, he should be applauded. But if the latter, he becomes trapped in an appalling loop in which "Constitution" and "Bible" simply mean "whatever the people who read it want it to mean."

It is not evident, however, what Gomes believes. For instance, when it comes to conclusions that agree with social and theological conservatism (e.g., marriage should be between only one man and one woman; abortion is unjustified homicide), Gomes shows great respect for the author's "original intent" and tries to demonstrate that the Bible, when properly interpreted, does not agree with these conclusions, but in fact supports more liberal views. On the other hand, he refers to those outside his African-American ethnic community who are concerned with the historical truth of biblical miracles as "fact-obsessed white Protestant Christians" (341).

Gomes provides an example of misguided literalism that tells us less about the perils of literalism and more about Gomes's understanding of those with whom he disagrees. He writes:

The Bible is silent about abortion, but the religious zeal of the protesters at abortion clinics is based upon what they believe to be the plain and clear meaning of Exodus 20:13, where in many English translations the familiar commandment says, "Thou shalt not kill." The moral energy of the anti-abortion movement is fueled in large part by this clear and unambiguous commandment, which it claims is violated with impunity every time an abortion is performed. One has only to listen to the chilling justification of his action by Paul Hill, the minister convicted of first-degree murder at a Pensacola abortion clinic, to sense the depth of the conviction based upon the moral force of this commandment. (44)

Gomes correctly points out that Exodus 20:13 should really be translated "Thou shalt not murder," because there is a scriptural distinction between murder and killing. He proceeds to argue that abortion qualifies as killing, but not murder. But, Gomes does not understand the prolife movement and Paul Hill's defense of his action.

First, many prolife who are against abortion for preborn human beings support capital punishment for postnatal murderers, since they understand the difference between killing and murder and that Exodus 20:13 prohibits the latter but not the former. The literature by prolife scholars on this is enormous,¹ but Gomes does not appear at all familiar with it.

Second, the prolife position has never been based on one passage of Scripture (Exod. 20:13). In fact, I can't think of one well-known activist in the history of the movement who has grounded the prolife position exclusively on the basis of that passage, even though Gomes claims, without one citation, that "the religious zeal of the protesters at abortion clinics is based upon what they believe to be the plain and clear meaning of Exodus 20:13." (44)

Third, Gomes makes it appear as if Hill is representative of the prolife movement and that Hill's position has widespread appeal among prolife. This is false, as a recent symposium of leading prolife activists and intellectuals in the journal *First Things* makes abundantly clear.²

Fourth, although what Hill did was morally wrong, those who defend his actions do so by making the very distinction that Gomes suggests prolife should make — namely, the difference between murder and killing.³ These extremists argue that killing an innocent unborn human being is murder while trying to prevent that murder by killing or impairing the murderer is justified, because not all killing or maiming is condemned in Scripture. They ridicule Christians who appeal to "Thou shalt not kill" as an argument against killing abortion doctors, making the exact point as Gomes does in order to *justify* what Gomes thinks is morally reprehensible.

Gomes's third key term is *culturalism*, "the worship of the culture, in which the Bible is forced to conform to the norms of the prevailing culture" (36). If understood as merely a condemnation of cultural prejudice and imperialism, evangelicals can embrace Gomes's warnings. In fact, Gomes accurately points out the injustices, such as anti-Semitism, slavery, and racism, that have been defended by falsely appealing to Scripture.

Yet it seems that Gomes is saying something much more. According to Gomes, it is "culturalism," and not the teaching of Scripture, that has led to the belief that homosexuality is immoral and contrary to the Bible. Gomes defends his position by relying primarily on the work of John Boswell, whose writings on the history of homosexuality and the Christian church have been, in my judgment, refuted convincingly by numerous scholars, including Thomas Schmidt in his book *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995). To his credit, Gomes acknowledges that Boswell's position has come under severe criticism (368-72), though he thinks that the questions Boswell has raised are sufficient for the church not to rely on the traditional Christian opposition to homosexuality.

Although Gomes's case for homosexuality is multifaceted, I have room to address only one aspect of it. According to Gomes, apparent scriptural condemnations of homosexuality are concerned with the debauchery of homosexual prostitution and heterosexuals who are practicing homosexuality. In other words, the Bible is not condemning those who are homosexual by nature and who are committed to loving relationships. There are several problems with this argument, but I will bring up only one: the same principle can be used to excuse nearly every behavior condemned in Scripture. For example, based on Gomes's method of interpretation, one could argue that biblical prohibitions against stealing, child sacrifice, bestiality, and adultery are only speaking of those who are not thieves, child killers, zoophiles, and adulterers by nature and who are not engaging in these behaviors out of love. But this is absurd, since there is nothing in the text to warrant this interpretation. Gomes's interpretation of Scripture, though politically correct, is completely unwarranted. It seems that Gomes is engaging in the "culturalism" he rightly condemns, when employed by racists and anti-Semites, as he forces the text of Scripture to conform to the culture of the liberal intellectual class.

This posture was evident in a speech he gave in Harvard Yard in which he "warned of the dangers of Christian absolutism," and "dismissed the easy references to scripture and the rather glib social analysis as unworthy of thinking or charitable Christian debate" (165). Fair enough, but when a group of conservative Harvard students published a periodical dedicated to giving a theologically informed and intellectually respectful critique of homosexuality, Gomes said that the existence of the periodical on campus challenged the virtues of tolerance and diversity. He went on to assert: "What may have been a genuine desire on the part of the young authors to present their strongly argued positions as a way of opening a vigorous debate on an issue of enormous moral significance had the effect of most polemics. Fears and anxieties were raised where few had been before, discourse was inhibited rather than stimulated, and the moral climate of the community was poisoned. What was meant to be robust debate was perceived as theological thuggery, and the situation could not continue unaddressed" (164). So, instead of challenging the hysterical, unjustified, uncharitable, glib, and unthinking reactions of the diverse and tolerant community over which he pastors, Gomes blamed the young authors, implying that they should have kept their mouths shut.

Gomes's assessment is an example of what I call "passive-aggressive tyranny." The trick is to sound "passive" and accepting of "diversity" even though you are putting forth an aggressively partisan agenda, implying that those who disagree with you are not only stupid but also harmful. In fact, throughout his book Gomes presumes that one is either bigoted or ignorant if one thinks that homosexuality is immoral and that it is not possible to formulate a thoughtful, carefully wrought case against homosexuality.

Such hubris is astounding. It not only presumes that traditional Christians are wrong but also that they are stupid, irrational, and evil and should not even be allowed to make their case. They are, in a word, diseased, suffering from that made-up contagion, "homophobia" (166). At the end of the day, Gomes is as "narrow" and "intolerant" as he would have us believe the courageous young students were, who dared to challenge orthodox liberalism and who would not keep their mouths shut for the sake of "diversity."

Although *The Good Book* raises many questions about Scripture and its interpretation to which evangelicals must be prepared to respond, Gomes's case for a liberal interpretation of Scripture fails to convince.

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NOTES

¹See, for example, Francis J. Beckwith, *Politically Correct Death: Answering the Arguments for Abortion Rights* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993); Harold O. J. Brown, *Death Before Birth* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1975); John Jefferson Davis, *Abortion and the Christian* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1984); and Francis Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revel, 1979).

²"Killing Abortionists: A Symposium," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 48 (December 1994): 24-31.

³See Michael Bray, *A Time to Kill* (Bowie, MD: Reformation Press, 1994).