

Review: JAR3361

WALKING A MILE IN ANOTHER MAN'S GAY SHOES

a book review of
The Cross and the Closet
by Timothy Kurek

(BlueHead Publishing, 2012)

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The speed of America's shift to a pro-homosexual viewpoint is astonishing. In 1987, 75 percent of survey respondents believed that same-sex coupling was always wrong; by 2010, only 43.5 percent disapproved of homosexuality.¹ Accordingly, political, legal, and theological debates on the subject have also shifted to reflect the public's widespread acceptance. This year the U.S. Supreme Court will consider the merits of homosexual marriage; the Queen James Bible (not a joke!) has been released as the first "gay friendly Bible"; gay characters are the new normal on television sitcoms; and bans on counseling for people wanting to overcome homosexuality are being proposed and implemented state by state. We're a nation that could rightfully say, as Cary Grant famously announced in the classic film *Bringing Up Baby*, "I've suddenly gone gay!"

It's no surprise, then, that even believers are getting swept up in pro-homosexual fever, considering how easily many are influenced by cultural trends regardless of how contrary they may be to Scripture. And Exhibit A in this group might well be Timothy Kurek, a young, heterosexual, self-identified Christian who decided to pose for one year as an openly gay man in order to "understand what was truth and what were stereotypes."

The event leading to his drastic act was moving, if misleading. A lesbian friend of his "came out" to her family, with wrenching results. Weeping in his arms, she described how they'd abandoned her, disowned her, and "excommunicated her from her entire life." Knowing her to be a likeable, worthy person, he had an epiphany: she was not an abomination; his long-standing beliefs about homosexuality sprang from his "inner Pharisee"; and he needed to better understand her plight and, indeed, that of all lesbians and gay men. Empathy for a friend in pain thus revised his long-held theological convictions about human sexuality.

A Call to Cultural Conformity. Those revisions are recorded in Kurek's book *The Cross and the Closet*. Released in October 2012 to coincide with National Coming Out Day, it chronicles his journey from disapproval to affirmation of homosexuality. Predictably, the author received rave reviews from homosexual and pro-homosexual leaders, hailing his courage for living as a gay among gays, and for attempting to educate conservative Christians on this critical issue. But the book's aim is to elicit more than kudos from the already convinced. Kurek also hopes to change the minds of those who consider homosexuality a sin, a hope largely based on what he learned during his undercover stint as a gay man, and he desires those who openly object to homosexuality to have a conversion of thought similar to his own.

That's no small conversion. By his own account, the author, a former student at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, was raised in an environment where homosexuality was not only considered a sin, but one of the worst, where homosexuals were viewed as promiscuous, liberal, disease-carrying child molesters. Three issues played into his belief system and emotional response to homosexuals: his theological position, informed by the Bible, that homosexuality was a sin; his stereotypical views as to what homosexual people were like; and his inability to empathize with them as fellow humans. All three, by his own account, have undergone a radical transformation.

Acceptance or Approval? The issues raised in *The Cross and the Closet* are as relevant as this morning's newspaper, since believers living in 2013 are fully aware of the prevalence of homosexuality and are likely to have some form of interaction with a homosexual person. As more gays and lesbians are open about their sexuality, more Christians are likewise aware of them. In the interest of loving our neighbors, letting our light shine, and being ready to give an answer for our faith and hope, it behooves us to be better equipped to dialogue with both homosexual and pro-homosexual people about this critical but contentious issue, so a book claiming to heighten our understanding and compassion rightfully grabs our interest. But sadly this one, however well intended, presents a case based more on emotion than logic. *The Cross and the Closet* is long on anecdote and sentiment, but woefully bereft of conclusions or strategies that stand the scrutiny of Scripture.

We can applaud Kurek's desire to re-educate himself, and Christians in general, regarding stereotypes. Holding a moral position does not, after all, require us to foster myths about those with whom we disagree. Believing abortion to be wrong, for example, hardly compels us to generalize about what sort of women abort their children, and believing illegal drug use to be wrong needn't translate into assuming all drug abusers are of the same personality type.

Likewise, one can easily conclude, by a simple reading of both Old and New Testaments, that homosexuality under any circumstances does not comply with God's intentions, and thereby also conclude that all forms of homosexual expression are wrong. But to additionally presume all homosexuals are promiscuous, politically liberal, flamboyant, or raised by unhealthy parents can only hinder our ability to relate

honestly and productively with them. As a population they defy stereotype, a fact that we should admit has been ignored by many Christians.

So the author's generalizations about them were wrong, and his experience among them corrected his thinking, a correction we can applaud.

One question, though, whether posing and living for a year as a homosexual—a drastic move by any standard—was a necessary, much less redemptive, way to abolish one's stereotypical thinking about homosexuals themselves. Surely we have the ability to analyze our assumptions about any group without joining it, whether the group in question is religiously, racially, politically, or sexually identified.

A Proper Response. So I may wish to dialogue with, and evangelize, Muslims. I may also hold presuppositions about them, based on movies I'd seen about them, jokes I'd heard, stories I'd been told, or what little exposure I'd had to them. In the interest of better understanding Muslims and hopefully reaching them, I could study their religious material, befriend some of them, engage in dialogue, observe their mannerisms and behavior, and weigh the evidence of what I've seen and heard firsthand against whatever stereotypes I previously held, all of which can be done without pretending to be a Muslim myself.

Furthermore, all of this could be done without concluding the Islamic view of God and life is valid. Perhaps, in getting to know Muslim people, I'd find them likeable, intelligent, reasonable, and agreeable, all of which would challenge my previously held stereotypes. Would such a challenge necessitate my embrace of the Qur'an? Would it require me to say, in essence, "I was wrong about the type of people Muslims are, therefore, I was also wrong for believing their book is not divinely inspired"?

Clearly not, so an obvious distinction comes into play here: learning that a group you previously disliked is in fact likeable does not necessitate agreeing with the goals and values of that group, a point Kurek is either unaware of or ignores. He implores the reader to abandon unfair generalizations about homosexuals (a reasonable request) and then asks him or her to likewise abandon clear biblical prohibitions against same-sex behavior as though they, too, were as subjective and erroneous as the generalizations.

That's the greatest weakness of *The Cross and the Closet*. It calls for a revision of standards based not on an analysis of those standards in light of objective truth, but rather in light of the likeableness of those in violation of the standards. Comparing apples to oranges hardly changes the nature of oranges, and comparing stereotypes about homosexuals to the rightness or wrongness of homosexuality itself is just as fruitless. Midway through the book, I found myself yelling, "OK, I get it! You met lots of intelligent, thoroughly likeable gay people. But tell me again why that should change my view of homosexuality itself?"

Jesus endorsed compassion, particularly when He approached a group ready to stone a woman for adultery (John 8:3–11). He rightfully pointed out that few among the potential executioners were innocent of similarly serious sins, then offered mercy, in lieu of death, to the woman herself.

None of this revised His assessment of the sin in question, an assessment summarized in His parting admonition to her: “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.” Somehow this simple approach, an excellent model to emulate when dealing with people we want to see converted rather than condemned, is missed by Kurek, who seems to have garbled it into a well meant but wholly unbiblical revision: “Neither do I stereotype you. Go and hesitate to sin no more.”

That revision is reverberating coast to coast, as more people are, through their firsthand exposure to homosexual people, shedding their prejudices against them and renouncing their unfair, inaccurate stereotypes. That’s good, and we can be grateful that it’s increasingly unacceptable to hate, assault, demonize, or denigrate gays and lesbians. Simultaneously, we have to question the accuracy of those who claim disagreement and denigration are essentially the same, a claim Kurek makes, perhaps indirectly, in his writings. One finishes *The Cross and the Closet* feeling as though the author intends the reader to conclude that since gays have traditionally been mistreated and misunderstood, then not only should the mistreatment and misunderstanding end, but the goals and principles of the gay rights movement should also be embraced.

We’re left convinced of the one, leery of the other. Revisiting the Bible we see homosexuality specifically named and prohibited, not once but five times, with no positive mention of it in the whole of Scripture, nor any guidance given in either testament to same-sex couples, the absence of which speaks volumes. Nowhere in these God-inspired writings do we see stereotypical descriptions of homosexuals themselves, so we concur with Kurek when he deplures such generalizations. But when he concludes that the wrongness of the generalizations thereby nullifies the clear prohibitions, we have to conclude his book to be a well-meant error, promoting tolerance but, in fact, distorting compassion into license. —*Joe Dallas*

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NOTES

- 1 “Americans Move Dramatically toward Acceptance of Homosexuality: Young People Lead the Changes,” *Science Daily*, September 29, 2011, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/09/110928125403.htm>.