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**Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey.** *Between a Man and a Woman?: Why Conservatives Oppose Same-Sex Marriage.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 192 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-15620-2.

**Reviewed by** Whitney Strub (Rutgers University)

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**Commissioned by** Timothy W. Jones (University of South Wales, & La Trobe University)

## Between a Man, a Woman, and One Deeply Incoherent Movement

Into the dense thicket of scholarship on same-sex marriage sprouts this slender volume. The subtitle, *Why Conservatives Oppose Same-Sex Marriage*, seems a rather daunting subject to cover in 150 pages, but to his credit, Ludger Viefhues-Bailey hones in on his key arguments, taking a synthetic approach to invoke the massive body of thought already amassed on the topic, while employing precision analysis on the specific themes he wishes to highlight. It would be difficult to imagine a book radically altering the existing analytical frameworks generally employed by scholars to understand the fierce opposition to marriage equality that so often spills into oppressive policy decisions in recent years, and indeed, *Between a Man and a Woman?* does not fundamentally overhaul these frameworks. Viefhues-Bailey does, however, very effectively clarify some crucial points in frequently enlightening ways, and the book constitutes a useful and significant intervention into this most confounding political impasse of our time.

Rejecting uncomplicated acceptance of biblical inerrancy as the central structuring force of modern anti-gay sentiment, Viefhues-Bailey calls for a more searching analysis of Christian homophobia. Like legal originalism and its ahistorical constitutional fetishes, biblical inerrancy claims unmediated access to the meaning of a text, but in fact can never escape hermeneutic mediation. As Viefhues-Bailey rightly notes, even self-professed fundamentalists in practice utilize historicism in their discussion of divorce, extramarital sex, and masturbation, among other sexually transgressive behaviors. Why, then, is homosexuality, and especially same-sex marriage, the place where a sometimes âfluid and nuanced attitude toward sexuality and the Bible becomes brittleâ (p. 33)?

At the heart of Viefhues-Baileyâs response is the argument that normative Christian gender and sexual identity (which meld together, proper masculinity and femininity necessarily being heterosexual) is an unstable, even âemptyâ category, defined largely through negative reference to the âperversionâ of homosexuality. With the imaginary figures of the âoversexed hyper-male predatorâ and the âgender-insecure hypo-maleâ as demonized

foils, normative Christian identity resolves into the appearance of coherence through these contrasts. Maintaining and preserving that sheen necessitates serious theological, political, and emotional investment in a homophobia that otherwise appears quite irrational and arbitrary.

Viefhues-Bailey positions the book as a challenge to existing scholarly trends. In contrast to sociologists like Alan Wolfe who frame religious rhetoric as a mask for political ideology, and also to religious scholars and anthropologists who examine religious doctrine abstracted from political economy, Viefhues-Bailey insists on the mutually constitutive nature of the political and the religious. For historians of the American New Right, who have been treating conservatism as more than mere status politics, false consciousness, or other bygone tropes at least since Lisa McGirrâs *Suburban Warriors* (2001), this analysis will hardly startle; religion has certainly been central to U.S. state-building, perhaps never so much as in the past quarter-century, and historians go to great lengths to avoid reducing the Christian Right to mere bigotry, even if bigotry is one indisputable central component of its political mobilization. That âthe gender arrangements of âtraditionalâ marriage reflect the political needs of the nation-stateâ is surely true, but not previously unsaid (p. 67).

Yet Viefhues-Bailey accurately observes that âChristianityâ assumes rather monolithic form in many historical accounts, at the expense of doctrinal variation and clarity. To that end–and in keeping with its brevity– *Between a Man and a Woman?* limits its substantive close analysis to a single organization, Focus on the Family (FOF), whose relentless antigay activism will be familiar to anyone conversant in modern American politics. Readers of a historical persuasion may be disappointed by the authorâs transparent lack of interest in the groupâs evolution, role in state and national politics, or even apparent reluctant concessions to therapeutic culture after founder James Dobsonâs origins in disciplinarian academic psychology. The book is more interested in FOFâs discursive practices, particularly the ways it relies on antigay tropes in its inscriptions of various forms of normalcy.

Magnifying sexual politics in importance is the deep imbrication of this identity project with the production of modern nationalism. Viefhues-Bailey delivers some of his strongest analysis here, working through the links and parallels between marriage as a national endeavor and marriage as a sacred one. Nationally, the construction of the modern romantic marriage serves many state purposes, not least of which is the linking of potentially destabilizing âromanceâ (in which free social agents pair off according to unwieldy and regulation-resistant vectors of desire) and restabilizing ârespectabilityâ (generally a code word for various hierarchical regimentations of class, race, etc.) in a manner that preserves national myths of liberty and freedom while assuring the perpetuation of a stable social order.

The tension contained within this delicate balance is mirrored in Christian âsubmission,â wherein normative identity, particularly masculine identity, is poised precariously between the need to play the dominant role in the family while still submitting gracefully to God. Viefhues-Bailey follows such precedents as Didi Hermanâs *Antigay Agenda* (1997) in noting the far more visible role of male homosexuality in Christian anxieties, though he does attend too to the perplexities of proper wifely submission as contrasted by FOF to unfeminine lesbians and feminists. His argument that exactly âwhat submission is supposed to mean remains unclear both in [FOFâs] texts and in the lives of many ordinary Evangelicalsâ is borne out not just by the FOF texts examined here, but also in the political sphere (p. 96); reading *Between a Man and a Woman?* in the summer of 2011, one cannot help thinking of current leading Republican antigay spokesperson Michele Bachmannâs faltering recent attempt to define her submission to her husband when pressed at an otherwise toothless debate. âWhat submission means to us,â she responded, âit means respect.â[1]

This nonanswer fails every conventional standard of productive discourse, but was not, of course, intended to abide by such standards. As such, it bears out Viefhues-Baileyâs assertion that FOF and its allies are not making proper âargumentsâ but rather engaging in ârhetorical constructionsâ (p. 99). Conservative Christianity, he contends, has eluded efforts to define it doctrinally; being a hodgepodge mix of reactionary politics with a nearly unrecognizable fabricated âpastâ and innovative, forward-looking adoption of cultural and technological media, the Christian Right is always already deeply unstable. Actual scripture, if not entirely irrelevant, is hardly its solid basis, as a brief description of scriptural support for segregation attests; as Viefhues-Bailey notes, such arguments were never meaningfully debated or refuted, they âsimply stopped being citedâ as they fell out of favor (p. 39). It is not, then, theology, but rather âmodes of speechâ that define modern Christian conservatism (p. 6).

Viefhues-Bailey offers no fleshed-out praxis for subverting Christian conservative homophobia, but his analysis here suggests directions. FOF is a top-down institution, and indeed Dobson is âone of the most important theologians when it comes to shaping how Americans think about God, the nation, and familyâ (p. 7). Power in these public language-games is never monolithic, though, and Viefhues-Bailey emphasizes the dialectical nature of Christian speech; its means of production are centralized in the vast FOF discursive apparatuses, but FOF speech only holds relevance when it resonates with Christians. As segregation showed, theological change can follow social change. Within the context of the closed narrative provided by antigay FOF tropes, Viefhues-Bailey contends that neither facts nor ânew exegetical toolsâ for biblical texts can undermine homophobia (p. 40); what ultimately can are new reading practices wrought by social and cultural change that undermines the resonance of FOFâs absurd stereotypes.

The methods of such subversion are well known; LGBT visibility is and has been front and center in the effort to demystify homosexuality through personal familiarity. Viefhues-Bailey knows this, and his book is not a blueprint for social change. It contains some questionable choices; highlighting the fusion of religion and nationalism in Sri Lanka is a dubious strategy when very similar points could be made utilizing the more pertinent scholarship on modern conservatism in the United States, where such works as Natasha Zaretskyâs *No Direction Home* (2007) put gender and state-formation under intersectional microscope. The book is under-conversant in queer theory; when Viefhues-Bailey locates âsurprising resonancesâ with Judith Butler in his analysis, more theoretically inclined readers might wonder from whence the surprise, since Viefhues-Baileyâs methods and conclusions are quite congruent with what queer scholars have been doing for a few decades (p. 128).

That said, *Between a Man and a Woman?* offers a substantive contribution to the ongoing contestation of heteronormativity. In addition to the unpacking of the shaky respectability/submission nexus, small observational moments leave imprints. If the âdeep uneasinessâ of antigay rhetoric about the nature of sexuality and gender is well known, the examples culled from Dobsonâs simultaneously biological-determinist and cultural-constructionist writings are striking and useful (p. 126). His use of ârespectabilityâ to show how seemingly nonsensical slippery-slope arguments of âman on dogâ marriage obtain legibility is a useful situating of one of the more egregiously problematic antigay tropes. Such moments permeate the text; in its brevity it may leave some wanting fuller discussion on these unruly topics, but Viefhues-Bailey has imbued this work with a richness that belies its duration.

[1] Jeff Zeleny and Ashley Parker, â8 From G.O.P. Trade Attacks at Iowa Debate,â *New York Times*, August 11, 2011.