

James W Skillen **The Good of Politics: a Biblical, Historical and Contemporary Introduction.** Engaging Culture series, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids 2014.

Skillen's introduction tells us that this book was written in response to an invitation to contribute to Baker's "Engaging Culture" series. The invitation gave Skillen the opportunity to bring together the insights he has developed from his work in one coherent introductory volume. The book reads as his attempt to give an account of what he has been working on for close to half a century and to frame that by giving an explanation of **The Biblical Drama** (Part I).

Since his initial 1967 publication examining "The nature of man in Karl Jaspers" in **Dialogue** (Journal of Phi Sigma Tau), a little time after his encounter with the views of Arthur Holmes, Carl F. H. Henry, Francis Schaeffer, John Howard Yoder and Abraham Kuyper at Wheaton College, Skillen has not exactly been idle. Skillen now develops the overall perspective he has been working with by giving attention to how we should view the most recent global political challenges. This does not merely restate analysis of **With or Against the World - America's Role Among the Nations** (2005) but seeks to take note of the 2007-8 global financial crisis as well as the Arab Spring of 2011. Yes, these can be viewed as part of the ongoing aftermath of 9/11 and the "war on terror", but a political perspective needs to keep track of the ongoing quaking and crumbling of institutional structures considered permanent. In Kuyperian terms, political life requires an architectonic critique that can also account for such new configurations.

Skillen has continued his salient observations about the ongoing and unresolved interpretative struggle between Christians within the American polity about Augustine's thinking and the Platonic ambiguities of his theorising. In that sense **The Good of Politics** continues the self-critical appraisal he began decades ago when he confronted inner contradictions with American evangelical appeals to Augustine. This is a conversation that has to be continued among evangelical Christians in the US and elsewhere.

Then there is the further exposition of principled pluralism which he has been articulating since **Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Civic Community** (1994). That was a description of what Government and citizens as political community office bearers are called to do to promote public justice as a vocational demand. In this respect I find a significant statement in this latest exposition.

The common good, in other words, refers to the good of a public community that can be realized only through **the simultaneous affirmation** of the diversity of nonpolitical

responsibilities in a differentiated society
(p.137 lines 5-7, my emphasis).

In other words the “simultaneous affirmation” is also a matter of just governance of the public legal order. It is only from a theoretical point of view that the “simultaneity” seems to be an impossible task of keeping all the abstract balls of the normative (post-logical) aspects in the air at the same time. But Skillen’s point is clarifying something very similar to Bob Goudzwaard’s incisive comment in **Capitalism and Progress**. I am referring to a pivotal point upon which Goudzwaard’s contribution in its entirety depends. In explaining the biblical teaching about the stewardship required of the *Image Bearers* of the Creator, a decisive light is shone upon the way authentic economic activity expresses concern for fellow creatures with solidarity and equity for all of our neighbours.

... economic life can unfold its own meaning and significance only when a **simultaneous realization of norms** takes place. The norms of economic development and those of ethics, the norms of justice and the unfolding of technique, ought never to be played off against each other. Because God’s command is undivided, the norms set by him must be seen and observed in their mutual coherence (1979 p. 65).

What is “simultaneous” in Skillen’s formulation is not an abstract “realization”, but a formulation that helps clarify Goudzwaard’s intent. There is a need for a public-legal authority’s “simultaneous affirmation” of the God-given diversity of nonpolitical responsibilities in its legislation and policy-making. We need not quibble over the term “realization”, but we can say that the public-legal affirmation of **diverse political responsibilities** by Government (i.e. lawful administration) is a necessary part of normative economic disclosure. Perhaps the word “realization,” contrary to Goudzwaard’s evident reformational intention, is too close to neo-Kantian and more recent social constructionist ambiguities. Skillen emphasizes what his commentators have often neglected to point out (and which he may have held back a little from emphasizing) and that is that “principled pluralism” must refer to a government’s normative responsibility, for those in public office and also for those to whom they are accountable. **The Good of Politics** as an introduction aims to help people begin to think politically as citizens. And when public justice is given true expression we will see the emergence of a “principled pluralism” in which all non-political responsibilities are given their due, with respect to all citizens and their diverse faiths in a healthy, open society.

Skillen also maintains and cogently deepens his creative exposition of the two Exodus stories that constitutes the secularizing

political dialectic that seems to hold so many American Christians and post-Christians in its sway. But the value of his analysis is not only for Americans, because he continues an analysis begun in **With or Against the World** that can assist Christians *outside* North America to deepen their appreciation for how they are indebted to what has arisen from statecrafting within the "American project". In its assumption that the US has a place among the nations of the world, the book implicitly encourages the development of regional perspectives that avoid the idealist/realist (Wilson/Kissinger) tension which, in these days, is taken for granted, as over-militarised diplomatic relations continue to misshape public governance world-wide.

We in the South West Pacific have to come to terms with an emerging culture of militarism and face up to the way this challenges our small efforts to develop a coherent and comprehensive political perspective. We shall need great wisdom to discover how we can promote Christian democratic perspectives as part of our political contribution.

These days, with a reawakened awareness that religion cannot be shut out of political debate, some parliamentarians of Labor, Liberal or Green persuasion show an interest in doctrines developed by political theology. Public theology and sociological theology have to be met carefully and boldly in their own terms. But the task of clarifying what public justice requires is also a central task of political science for political scientists. Skillen's book gives a good account, as good as I have encountered, of why the comprehensive public justice thrust of reformational political science might help to give grit (as Calvin Seerveld might say) to humble efforts by Christians as they prepare themselves for political service in their own polities and regions. And they don't have to first become professional thinkers to do so, still less become theologians.

As I say, investment in arms and military hardware is by no means being squeezed at a time when budgets are requiring more and more "belt tightening". Skillen's identification of the "double separations" implicit in the way in which American Christians view themselves, their government and their political task (pp. xvii-xviii), can perhaps give us guidance as we seek to understand why current social welfare stringency coincide with an obscene extravagance by many governments when it comes to defense spending.

By curious contrast to [the minimalist] way of talking about government and politics, Americans sound a different note when speaking of their beloved *nation*. The major difference has its roots in the WASP version of American civil religion. If government and its bureaucracies are held in suspicion and often referred to as "them" over against "us", the beloved American nation represents and

symbolizes the freedom Americans cherish as central to their identity. Americans laud their nation as exceptional, a light to the world, just as they cherish their individual freedom. America is a city on a hill, the vanguard of democracy, the enemy only of tyrants, totalitarian regimes, and terrorists who threaten human freedom. America, the idealized nation – the beacon of freedom of hope, God’s new Israel – seems to be something quite different from politics and government. Is this because Americans associate the *nation* with their culture of freedom while associating *government* with limits to their freedom? (pp. xvii-xviii).

And in that sense Skillen is saying that if Americans think like that, then they should cease from doing so. They need to find a path to political repentance because such nationalism is actually idolatry. He’s certainly not saying one *has* to believe these myths; these Exodus redactions have arisen to justify American attitudes to their own political responsibility but a Christian view will have to find an alternative way to tell the Biblical story.

But **The Good of Politics** is a call to repentance, a call to political repentance. It is not only written for Americans. But seeks to encourage Christians wherever they live, in whatever polity they bear responsibility, to humbly reconsider their political responsibilities.

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