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## Review of Gay is OK! A Christian Perspective

BY JOSEPH GOH, GUEST CONTRIBUTOR – 9 NOVEMBER 2013  
POSTED IN: BOOK REVIEWS, MALAYSIA



Ngeo Boon Lin, *Gay is OK! A Christian perspective*

Gerakbudaya, Petaling Jaya, 2013, 240 pp, ISBN: 9789832344193

Reviewed by Joseph N. Goh

Ngeo Boon Lin unsettled preconceptions of how religion and sexuality are related to each other when he **publicly came out** in 2006 as a gay Christian pastor. In 2012, Ngeo and his male partner held a **wedding banquet** in Malaysia as a means to elevate gay visibility amidst objections from several Christian and Muslim conservatives. Ngeo, who is better known as the Rev. O. Young among Chinese-speaking communities, holds a doctorate in theology from Boston University. He currently teaches and works in New York. "Gay is OK! A Christian Perspective" (Gerakbudaya, 2013) is an effort on Ngeo's part to discuss sensitive issues of homosexuality and religiosity within a Christian framework in Malaysia. Working primarily from an apologetic angle, Ngeo cites specific Malaysian events to "refute the belief that Christians should oppose homosexuality" (p. 11-12).

"Gay is OK!" covers two major parts. Part One comprises 25 short, unnumbered essays that were originally published on the *Malaysiakini* online news portal between September 2010 and February 2011. These are brief pieces that deal with sociological and religious issues on homosexuality, and draw in part from Ngeo's own personal experiences. Part Two is made up of 10 lengthier essays that deal with scriptural passages that ostensibly appear to endorse the exclusivity of heterosexuality, as well passages that are commonly used against homosexual persons. These essays originally appeared in "God loves Gay People," an anthology that was produced in 2010 for internal circulation among LGBT Christians. The book ends with a decent array of bibliographic and internet resources for those who are interested to explore issues of homosexuality and gender variance with greater depth. As Ngeo's decision to publish this book comes from a desire to provide an affirming and progressive Christian perspective on homosexuality that is reader-friendly, the book avoids being academically dense.

In Part One, Ngeo declares that he respects views which hold homosexuality as a sin, but he rejects both an imposition of religious views on others and an overarching condemnation of homosexual persons as immoral. He repeatedly insists that his sexual orientation is not a choice, and recounts how the failed attempts of a heterosexual marriage became a catalyst for greater reflexivity as a gay man. Reparative therapy, as such, is futile. Ngeo also interrogates the idea of "nature" in

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  - **Chris Beale:** My theory is the opposite of Patrick Jory's. I don't think this is "impetuousness"...
  - **Andrew MacGregor Marshall:** Righto. I'll keep it under 200,000 words then.
  - **Nicholas Farrelly:** Hi Andrew, The theory should be stated "succinctly". Let's...
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terms of morality, and argues for the repeal of sections 377A and 377B in the Malaysian Penal Code as remnants of colonial Christian beliefs. Laws with religious undertones ought not to bear on Malaysia as a "secular nation" (p. 19), particularly as they are implemented unevenly in different cases. For Ngeo, the condemnation of homosexual couplings as incapable of progeny is shaky logic as not all heterosexual couples can procreate. Ngeo posits heterosexism as the misplaced superiority of heterosexuality, an attitude that has driven many homosexual Malaysians away from their homeland.

Ngeo advocates learning from past mistakes in relation to homosexuality and parallels "right thinking" (p. 29) with rationality. He cautions against the insidiousness of silence that continues to oppress homosexual persons, and proposes that transformative agency on the part of homosexual persons is possible as seen in the overthrowing of old miscegenation laws. A number of his essays discuss homosexuality in relation to social justice and human rights, and lament the lack of protection that homosexual persons suffer. Ngeo warns against the dangers of religious fundamentalism and literalism, as "no literal reading of the Bible can support" the condemnation of homosexuality (p. 45). Apart from decrying the inconsistencies with which biblical passages are interpreted, Ngeo blames biblical literalism as responsible for "many historical blunders committed by Christians" (p. 59). He also denounces the idea of homosexuality as an American import, and cites the existence of same-sex relationships in ancient China. Ngeo understands equality for all sexual persons as respectful of diversity and pluralism, and as a distinctive mark of civilisation.

Part Two approaches biblical texts that are connected to purported issues of homosexuality. In Chapter 1, Ngeo speaks against a literal or historical interpretation of the creation accounts in Genesis 1: 1-31 and 2: 1-25. He tackles homonegative interpretations of Genesis 19: 1-29 and Judges 19: 1-30 in Chapter 2. Here, Ngeo argues that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as proof of the sin of homosexuality is the consequence of misinterpretations that have gained solidity over the years. Building on the scholarship of queer scholar Mark D. Jordan, Ngeo reiterates that the sin of Sodom has been "systematically misread" (p. 115) into homosexuality by the likes of Roman Catholic theologians such as Peter Damian. As such, he suggests reading these texts from a Foucauldian "genealogical approach" (p. 117) that takes historico-cultural contexts into consideration. Ngeo also examines the significance of Sodom in other books in the Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament) and New Testament. In Chapter 3, Ngeo looks at Leviticus 18: 22 and 20: 13, and re-reads them as imperatives to preserve cultural purity in "Israel's holiness code" (p.124), rather than overarching condemnations of all forms of homosexuality. In his take on Romans 1: 26-27 in Chapter 4, Ngeo warns against an anachronistic reading and insists that the epistle must be read within the context of Paul addressing the problems of idolatrous sexual practices. He states that claims of "against nature" refer to the subversion of social norms of that time, and cannot be seen as "opposing homosexuality" (p. 142). In Chapter 5, Ngeo highlights fluctuations in the English translation of 1 Corinthians 6: 9-10. A great deal of uncertainty remains in the translation of the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* which have often been uncritically translated as homosexual persons. In Chapter 6, Ngeo understands the reference to *arsenokoitai* in 1 Timothy 1: 9-10 as an allusion to people who engage in exploitative sexual behaviour. In Chapter 7, Ngeo reminds the reader that Jesus never explicitly mentioned homosexuality, yet one can learn from Jesus' insights on same-sex relationships, especially his "respect for common sense" (p. 164) and "respect for human need and ... compassion over rules" (p. 166). Love, as he explains in Chapter 8, forms the "core teaching of Christian belief" (p. 172), the benchmark with which to evaluate same-sex relationships.

Ngeo claims in Chapter 9 that gay theology and queer theology strive "to interpret Scriptural passages by taking them back to the historical scenes in their own particular time and place so that the truth may be revealed and the Christian faith practiced [*sic*]" (p. 183). He sees such interpretations as queer "subversion and intervention" (p.185). Gay and queer theologians emphasise that "God is on the side of gay people" (p. 188). In Chapter 10, Ngeo encourages healthy, logical debates that pursue the truth and appeals to reason, "a dialogue rather than a monologue" (p. 193). He does not discount the possibility that some of his scriptural interpretations may be faulty, but if homosexuality is really wrong as a religious issue, such religious convictions not be imposed on "a culturally and religiously diverse society" (p. 195), and should be confined to "the domain of a religious prohibition" (p. 196).

I find myself occasionally approaching some of Ngeo's arguments with tentativeness. Ngeo advocates a total separation of secular and religious realms as when he asserts that "one should keep one's beliefs to oneself as it is clearly a religious taboo as opposed to a moral issue" (p. 30). In a country like Malaysia where religion continues to hold prominence and worth in political socio-cultural realities, it is questionable if such a dichotomy is possible or desirable. Moreover, while many of Ngeo's biblical arguments are sound, I struggle with some of his reasoning. Ngeo admits to Adam's heterosexuality by virtue of the creation of Eve, but only because Adam's search for any other partner was unfruitful. Ngeo also reasons that not all human beings can

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    - **tocharian:** OK, I'll carry on! The squeaky clean "City State" is also infamous as a...
    - **Allan Beese:** "carry on"? just because the place is squeaky clean does not mean the...
  - **Thaksin, a yellow shirt? (14)**
    - **Sceptic:** "he is a crook of the highest order" If so, he is surely not a very clever...
    - **Sceptic:** "Any talk of his making deals, if real, will only be towards making his position..."
    - **Nicholas Farrelly:** Thanks Nathan, As reflected in my response on this thread we are aware of the...
    - **Nathan:** Clearly the person behind the Peter Cohen moniker is some kind of paid troll. Why is the...
  - **Peter Cohen:** Mr. Marshall, I need not give a comparative analysis since your bias...
  - **Andrew MacGregor Marshall:** Peter, to give some substance to your ranting anti-Thaksin comments...
- **The end of the Red Shirts? (4)**
- **Sam Deedes:** The red shirts are not a monolith so a title like "End of the Red..."
  - **Suriyon Raiwa:** Trebor has it just right. If the answer to his question is correct, then this...
- **After the bombings: 15 October in Yangon (6)**
- **matt:** Sorry, no blog! Just quick reflections after moments that were particularly difficult....

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inherit the heterosexuality of the prototype heterosexual human being Adam, just as not every human being can be a "gardener or horticulturalist" (p. 98) as Adam was. I also feel uneasy when Ngeo compares homosexuality with crime, as in the case where he states that "to say that homosexuality is justified *merely* because it has always been in the natural world is to justify horrible crimes like murder because they have always existed in the natural world" (p. 14, emphasis in the original). Ngeo's variegated but constant use of "gay" and "homosexual" suggests a bias to speak on behalf of gay men, although "LGBT" is sometimes used. Lesbian women, and bisexual and transgender persons are scarcely, if ever, mentioned. I would have appreciated a greater sense of inclusiveness of the wider LGBTQ community in this book. Finally, although this book was written by a Malaysian with Malaysians in mind, it demonstrates a marked absence of works by Malaysian and other Asian LGBTQ theoretical and religious/theological scholars who work in similar issues.

Despite these observations, "Gay is OK!" provides a gentle and accessible gateway to issues of homosexuality and Christianity that adopts a 'common-sense' approach. Ngeo's thoughts and arguments are reflective of a wider scholarship on how alternative interpretations of scriptures can be affirming for LGBT Christians. I recommend it as an introductory text for further discussion and dialogue, not only among LGBTQ Christians, but also among the diverse Christian populations in Malaysia. It is also a valuable resource for readers who may be uninitiated in the controversies surrounding the interface of homosexuality, religion, biblical thought and various areas of the social sciences in Malaysia.

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