

Celebrating Life: Beyond the Sacred–Secular Divide by Graham Buxton. Pater-
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The author is the director of a research institute that examines the broad context of Christian service to the community in Adelaide, Australia. The primary focus of the institute is exploring the interface between the Christian faith and modern (Western) society. This is the context of the broad concerns and thematic content of *Celebrating Life*, and the overtly Christian ministerial tone of the book. In general the book is targeted towards appealing to those with an explicit faith and working in a ministerial role, who may be struggling with balancing that with the world around them, or struggling to integrate aspects of popular culture into their teachings.

Celebrating Life seeks to move the church (and so also, personal faith) beyond synonymous expressions such as “emerging church” and “connecting with culture,” by considering why they should engage with today’s society and what historical and theological grounds they have for doing so. It is divided into eight short chapters, grouped into three distinct sections. The first part attempts to provide the historical and theological evidence as seen through the lens of creation (in a broad sense). The second section provides distinct examples of theological and ministerial engagement with culture: the literature and the creative arts, science, politics and economy. The third section seeks to set forth the theological principles in which Buxton asserts the sacred and the secular typically “butt heads,” so to speak, and very briefly outlines how culture can be utilized to advance understanding of such principles.

There is much to recommend in this book. It sets forth an agenda in which the typical (or cynical) attempts of the church to engage with popular culture can be critiqued and held up to the light. Likewise the desire of some churches to disengage with society, or indeed anything not considered sacred, is challenged, on both theological and historical grounds, in a very convincing manner. For example, Buxton posits how the division of “grace versus nature ... opened up the way for the secular, natural realm to assume dominance in Western culture” (20). For undergraduate and some

graduate students at a theological seminary this book has much to offer as a key text.

Likewise the attempts in section three of the book to engage with theological dogma and metanarratives deserve recognition, although it must be acknowledged that they are too succinct and assumptive to really fulfil their purpose. This is an attempt to offer a theological critique that seeks unity rather than division, without going so far as to dissolve a perhaps necessary distinction between the church and society. Necessary, according to Buxton, to prevent assimilation to such a level that the church reflects society and so has nothing of any meaning to say about it and no means of holding a moral mirror to it. (22)

There is no reference in the book to, and no indication of the author's awareness of, *Implicit Religion* or any attempt to locate religion outside of institutions or in areas more typically defined as "secular." No attempt is made to engage with questions of what religion is (or is not); who defines it, and why; or why people seek spiritual engagement outside religious institutions. Instead it is assumed (understandably, perhaps, given the author and the publisher) that the reader is an engaged and active missional or evangelical Christian; it is also assumed that engaging with society should only be done to enhance one's faith and/or church, rather than to benefit social development or spiritual growth, outside of narrow definitions or delineations.

Ultimately there is a disjunction between what Buxton wants to do—have the church engage with culture on a meaningful and respectful level without fear or oppression—and what his practical examples actually demonstrate. The very brief section on heavy metal music, for example, provides a good insight into some of the themes and the ideals behind the subculture. However, when he then turns to those he holds as good examples of how Christianity and the church should engage with the culture, he focuses on those who are using the subculture as a means of proselytising. They are not interested in the meaning that the subculture and the music holds for those deeply engaged in it (83–84). One such musician, he quotes as saying;

I never got into this for the music. A lot of bands want to be bands for God; with us it was the opposite. We were trying to reach people, and He told us to start a band (85).

In the next paragraph Buxton reminds his readers of George Barna's *Generation Next: What You Need to Know about Today's Youth*, in which he asserts, "we aren't called to love the culture, only to recognize, understand

and deal with it” (86). Buxton is actually leading his readers to use culture in a very cynical manner to evangelize and proselytize, without making a real or honest attempt to understand WHY the particular aspect of the culture matters to those involved, or speaks to spiritual needs that the church does not. Until those questions are meaningful and honestly acknowledged and engaged with, the sacred-secular divide will remain, and works like Buxton’s, well-meaning and well-written as they are, will serve to reinforce the division.