

BOOK REVIEW:

A SACRED DUTY, BY ESTER RASBAND AND RICHARD WILKINS

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The call for papers for this issue of *Perspective* suggested these topics: making sense of the world in which we live, basic principles students should understand as citizens of the world, unsettled environments and new realities. The book *A Sacred Duty*, immediately came to mind. It is a glimpse into global issues about families and politics, powerful forces defining those issues, and how an ordinary man can be an instrument for good and have his life changed as he experiences new realities—temporal and spiritual. I recommend this book for colleagues, students, and friends. Our department chair, Nancy Ahlander, has our Family Studies majors read it in Family 260. She says that these students have a great experience with the book, and many are inspired to get involved in family policy issues.

Last year when Richard Wilkins spoke to us at a forum on the United Nations and policies which impact the world's families, some of our colleagues were rolling their eyes and smirking about U.N. conspiracy paranoia. And there was some concern about whether LDS scholars, working through BYU's David M. Kennedy Center and the newly formed NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) Family Voice, should even be trying to influence world policies by imposing our traditional family structures and values on others who have their own traditions which work for them.

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I was surprised at the reaction because I was already somewhat familiar with Wilkins' experience at the U.N. Conference in Istanbul. I was aware that the real “pushers” of values weren't the traditional people like Brother Wilkins and Family Voice, but powerful lobbying groups and social engineers, mostly from the West. I had read an interesting article about Wilkins' experience in Istanbul called “Fiddler on the U.N. Roof.”¹ It, like the book, describes how he and others (many LDS) were instruments in the Lord's hands in stemming a dangerous tide that was gaining momentum from previous U.N. Conferences in Beijing and Cairo—dangerous to families, nations, and the whole world. In it Wilkins describes his Istanbul experience as

the legal equivalent to the parting of the Red Sea. Professionally it was the most interesting thing I had done. On a spiritual level it was almost the most profound thing I've witnessed. I felt the hand of the Lord moving people from all over the world in ways that were as real as if He had been there in a pillar of smoke and fire.²

A Sacred Duty is the explication of this story. In 108 enjoyable pages (plus 40 pages of notes and appendices) Sister Rasband tells a faith-promoting and sobering story with first person reflections by Richard Wilkins, the BYU Law Professor and reluctant warrior who found himself in the midst of political intrigue against the likes of Bellah Abzug, the U.N. Women’s Caucus, and the White House. Funding his battle largely by increasing the limits on his personal credit card, finding inspiration from the *Family Proclamation*, and drawing strength from his wife back home and other Latter-day Saints in Istanbul, Brother Wilkins found unexpected opposition and opportunities.

Wilkins did not want to go to the U.N. Habitat Conference in Istanbul. He didn’t want to make waves in his comfortable life; and besides, he was reprising the role of Tevye, with his wife as Golde, that they had played 25 years earlier when they were seniors in high school. To go, he would have to leave before the final performance. In the book he writes:

I prayed about it, of course; but my prayers were more in the nature of ‘Please, I don’t want to go’ than they were ‘I’ll go where you want me to go.’ I suppose I was fiddling on the roof. Like Tevye, I was ‘trying to scratch out a pleasant simple tune without breaking [my] neck.’ It wasn’t going to work.³

So he went, cropping his beard rather than shaving it to avoid funny tan-lines. Registering at the conference, he was mistaken in Istanbul for an Ivy League Liberal from the Kennedy Center at Harvard; and so some doors opened for him. He had the opportunity to be a spokesperson for the many conservative NGO’s who opposed the juggernaut agenda of abortion rights for women, increased sexual liberties for children, redefining family, and allowing for multiple gender variations.

Through this story, you can share the wonder of small things bringing great things to pass. You’ll share powerful emotions with Brother Wilkins including a life-changing “epiphany” in the Suleymaniye Mosque. And you’ll get a glimpse at the battle over family concerns that invites us, as the *Proclamation* does, “to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.”⁴ It is a touching story that I’ve shared with my family. It’s an inspiring story that speaks to each of us who care about the principles in the *Family Proclamation* and would like to help others understand that “the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children.”⁵ It is a story about the love, faith, and brotherhood that transcend nations and religions. It is a powerful story of a man (often prodded by good, inspired women) who was led to do, and, I believe, is still doing his sacred duty. ☺

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NOTES:

1. Cranney, *Clark Memorandum* (Spring 1997), 12 (also at <http://advance.byu.edu/acrobat/clarksp97.pdf>).
2. *Ibid.*, 14.
3. Ester Rasband and Richard G. Wilkins, *A Sacred Duty* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), 12.
4. *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*.
5. *Ibid.*