

Jack Rogers,

*Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church.*

Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. Pp.169. £8.92.

Edited by Duncan Dormer and Jeremy Morris,

*An Acceptable Sacrifice? Homosexuality and the Church.*

London: SPCK, 2007. Pp.179. £12.99.

Giles Fraser,

*Christianity with Attitude.*

Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2007. Pp.176. £9.99.

Much media coverage of religious issues tends to resort to using the simplistic categories of 'liberal' and 'conservative'. This is very much the case in presentations of the 'debate' in the Anglican Communion on issues of human sexuality. This crude dualistic reductionism masks a more complex contemporary theological reality in which positions formed on any particular issue have a much more varied provenance. This is very much exemplified by these three recent publications.

John Rogers, of 'conservative' evangelical stock (p.6; also John Rogers, *Confessions of a Conservative Evangelical*, 2002), is a former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA) who writes with the desire that his own denomination's wounds of division over human sexuality should be healed. It is surprising then that Rogers' conception of healing is dependent upon the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the life of the Church including not just ordination but also marriage (p.126).

The book is an account of Rogers' personal change of mind on the subject and its evangelical credentials rest on his assertion that he was not swayed by cultural or academic trends but 'by going back to the Bible and taking seriously its central message for our lives' (p.15). So, in an examination of the reversal of historical bans on the ordination of African Americans, women and remarried people within the American Presbyterian Churches, he argues that there is a 'clear shift from a literalistic method of biblical interpretation to one that looks at Scripture through the lens of the redeeming life and ministry of Jesus Christ' (p.16). These shifts demonstrate 'Christological' (p.34; p.46) forms of biblical interpretation which use the message of the 'whole Bible' in the interpretation of any of its particular parts (p.34).

In his chapter that deals with the relevant biblical literature, Rogers argues that those who oppose homosexuality on biblical grounds actually impose non-biblical theories on the text derived from 'natural law' theories of common sense. He is particularly good at unmasking the double standard of allowing divorced people remarriage and ordination while yet we are to 'take literally less clear statements regarding homosexual behaviour' (p.44). The increasing contemporary use of Genesis 1 to promote the ideal of monogamous, heterosexual marriage is also summarily dismissed as 'an artificial construct designed to deny the rights of marriage to those who are homosexual' (p.86). Rogers is no less outspoken in combating the notion that gay and lesbian people are a threat to the family: 'What we know is that homosexual men are murdered by heterosexual people just for being gay; what we also know is that there is no record of a heterosexual being murdered for not being gay' (p.101) and so therefore he asks that the Church should apologise to gay and lesbian people (p.110).

This book is well and clearly written. It articulates a bold position in requesting that marriage too be opened up to gay and lesbian Christians. It is also deeply personal in its testimony to the development of Rogers' own faith and his first-hand witness to the faith of gay and lesbian people that he has come to know. From an Anglican perspective its drawbacks relate to the specificity of Rogers' address to the Presbyterian Church (USA) where the issue of ordination is even more pressing since the same rules apply to elders and deacons as presbyters (p.10). The claim to be 'evangelical' is probably overstated, but what is refreshing about Rogers' daring argument is that it emanates in particular from wrestling with scripture and its interpretation.

In contrast the offering of a set of generally 'liberally' minded Cambridge based Church of England theologians to the current sexuality 'debate' in an Anglican context: *An Acceptable Sacrifice? Homosexuality and the Church* is thoroughly disappointing. The volume is in four parts. The three essays of the biblical section share a common concern for the need to see biblical literature as plural, often ambiguous, in need of contextualisation and open to a fluidity of meaning. The historical section charts the reality of change and development both within the Church in relation to the historical constructions of marriage and human sexuality. Part three examines what it is to regard another person as a fellow human being in the light of philosophical, scientific, psychological and political developments. The final section embeds the discussion in the context of the globalisation of market capitalism, the AIDS crisis in Africa, and the general 'sexualisation' and 'pornification' (p.163) of culture.

Most of these essays are very fine introductions to the topics that they address, providing comprehensive background material to enliven Anglican 'debate' on these issues. I was particularly impressed with John Hare's presentation, as a doctor and a priest, of the reality of intersexuality which undermines the use of appeals to Genesis 1 to construct a male/female binary. It implicitly supported those who argue that in the present Anglican 'debate' the appeal to reason is often lost.

The quality of all the essays did not, however, prevent me from feeling thoroughly frustrated with this volume. The problem lies in the editorial commentary. The introduction claims that 'Advocates of a change in the Church's policy towards homosexuality and their opponents have traded insults and claimed the moral high ground' (p.1) so that although these authors share the view that the church should move to a position of 'greater toleration' (p.2) of gay and lesbian people there is still the need in the Church to have a decent debate and to live with difference. Dormer and Morris fail to acknowledge that their own claim to some 'middle ground' in this 'debate' is in itself a claim to moral superiority. It is a claim that borders on the ridiculous with their confession that 'many of us' know 'gay, *sexually active* Christians' (p.3) for it seems highly unlikely that none of these essayists could have added '*sexually active ordained priests*'. It is from such self-delusion that the emotional tenor of the present debate originates for it exemplifies the general public retreat of 'liberal' clergy from the full support of gay and lesbian colleagues. Its methodological outworking is to deny any recourse (unlike Rogers) to the articulation of human experience. So we are not told of the sexual orientation/ histories of any of the contributors nor of their knowledge of real, living gay and lesbian people. It

speaks volumes of the 'debate' that from the contemporary Cambridge theological scene not one openly gay or lesbian voice finds expression here. This liberal abstraction of the issue finds its fullest articulation in the nonsense of the title, for it is not 'homosexuality' that is a possible acceptable sacrifice for the unity of the Church but the real bodies of gay and lesbian friends and colleagues. That much both Rowan Williams and Jeffrey John know. But there are no/bodies in this volume.

Real bodies are, however, the primary subject for theological reflection on virtually every page of Giles Fraser's *Christianity with Attitude*. This book gathers together some of Fraser's best journalistic contributions to *The Church Times*, *The Guardian* and *Thought for the Day* and rearranges them in thematically. There are sections covering the liturgical year, death, the 'bloody church', fundamentalism, sex and individualism. What is impressive about Fraser's journalism is that, for the most part, he makes passionate, insightful and memorable theological points which combine the personal, the philosophical and the political without resorting to trite sound bites. He also covers an amazing range of issues from what seem like the purely theological and philosophical, through reflecting thoughtfully on playtime with his children or his Grandmother's dementia, to discussing how to get rid of clutter in the church building.

Fraser is regarded by other media commentators as one of the Church of England's leading liberals. But as these pieces make clear he is a post-liberal liberal. In 'Dialectical Anglicanism' he argues that Rowan Williams' quest to maintain unity in the Church slaughters its own victims whilst in 'Billie Piper Liberalism' he combats Oliver O'Donovan's caricaturing of the liberal traditions. Here Fraser's feisty

Christianity simultaneously retains what is best of liberalism whilst remaking it in the face of some of its postmodernist critics. This remaking is characterised by his resurrecting of the human body within his thought. But this is not primarily the sexed body. The section 'Jewish Christianity' comes near the end of the book, yet its themes permeate the entire collection. It is the bodies of the victims of the Holocaust, which implicate his own body since he is of Jewish descent, that seem central to his entire thought. This in turn leads to much reflection on what constitutes a proper ethical response to the Holocaust and makes his journalistic reportage from Israel, which is thoroughly committed to resurrecting Palestinian bodies, some of the most moving pieces in this collection.

I had read many of these articles when they were first published and, as an honorary assistant priest in the parish of which Fraser is the Team Rector; I had been exposed to the sentiments expressed in many of the others. Yet reading them in collection proved a different and satisfying experience which allayed my initial cynicism that this book might well simply constitute an opportunistic cashing in on the market. In a media savvy age good religious journalism of this sort will prove to be an important evangelistic tool and yet these nuggets make me yearn for Fraser to turn his hand to a more in-depth study of some of the topics that he briefly illuminates.

All three of these books are well worth buying. As a (gay) priest working in the Church of England, read together they highlight how duplicitous the context of the 'debate' on the 'issues of human sexuality' actually is. The Cambridge 'liberals' reveal themselves to be establishment conservatives in their annihilation of real

bodies, whilst Fraser's Christianity just does not have quite enough attitude to argue, as Rogers' does, that gay and lesbian people need to be admitted to marriage too. I need to revisit some of my Ulster Presbyterian roots!

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