

GOD, GAYS AND THE CHURCH: *Human Sexuality and Experience in Christian Thinking*

Edited by Lisa Nolland, Chris Sugden and Sarah Finch; **The Latimer Trust, PO Box 26685, London N14 4XQ; 2008; Pbk; £5.00+p&p; 249 pages; ISBN 9780946307937**

The Anglican Communion is in deep trouble and human sexuality is very much at the centre of the crisis, as is the related hermeneutical issue of women priests/bishops. Although this latter point is disputed, in the book, by Professor Edith M Humphrey, a former salvationist. As far as the Church of England is concerned, the problems and divisions over homosexuality have been rumbling for many years. In the 1970s-1980s practical issues of homosexuality arose in some of the Theological Colleges. At a Conference of the College Principals, St Stephen's House (Jan. 1974), guidance was sought of central authorities on how to handle the matter among ordinands. A Grove Booklet was published in 1976 which led to the publication of *Humanity and Sexuality*. General Synod debated this in 1978. This was followed quickly by the Gloucester Report and further debate at Synod.

In 1987 Tony Higton, who had been at Oak Hill College with me as a student, tabled a Private Member's Motion: That this Synod reaffirms the biblical standard, given for the well-being of society: (i) that sexual intercourse should only take place between a man and a woman who are married to each other; (ii) that fornication, adultery and homosexual acts are sinful in all circumstances; (iii) that Christian leaders are called to be exemplary in all spheres of morality, including sexual morality, as a condition of being appointed to or remaining in office; and calls upon the Church to show Christ-like compassion to

those who have fallen into sexual sin etc.etc. With some slight amendments, or reworking of the language, Synod passed the motion 403-8 (with 15 abstentions recorded).

From hereon, it seems that the Bishops took control of the situation and produced their own Report ISSUES IN HUMAN SEXUALITY. Thereafter, the waters become very muddy indeed. As far as the "laity" are concerned, *'while unable to commend the way of life just described (faithful and lifelong*

homophile bonding) as in itself as faithful a reflection of God's purposes as the heterophile we do not reject those who sincerely believe it is God's call to them'. Clearly, a document that has double standards - clergy to abstain and laity may engage - was bound to create impossible tensions. All this was challenged at the 1998 Lambeth Conference when deep division occurred between the conservative South and the liberal North American Church. To this was added a further division, the

strong denunciation of evangelical African bishops that practising homosexuality is a serious sin that needs immediate repentance. After all, front-line African Christians are weakened in their mission to Islam by unbiblical views of homosexuality. Since the last Lambeth Conference, the ordination of an American practising homosexual Bishop, with live-in partner, has deepened the divide. As, indeed, has the appointment of Dr Rowan Williams to Canterbury, a known sympathiser with the practising homosexual. It is difficult

to assess whether the Church of England will hold together over the issue, but it would be fair to affirm that the worldwide Anglican Communion is already in process of consequent realignment and restructure. Many faithful bishops intend to hold their own "Lambeth" later this year at Jerusalem.

Where does this new publication fit into the debate? It deals with these and many other related points. There are testimonies from former lesbians and homosexuals. Genetics enter the debate, as indeed does biblical theology, and there are very practical contributions on pastoral considerations, civil partnerships, and the sexualisation of youth. Valuable appendices take up such wide-reaching subjects as gay health, gay culture, why children need two parents, culture war casualties, winning through the media, homophobia, and pornography. The book closes with an annex on the General Synod debate - 28 February

2007 - which shows just how much the ground has shifted towards an acceptance of a "Christian homosexual lifestyle", which allows same sex relationships. The Bishops of the CofE (generally speaking) did not oppose the present (godless) Government's civil partnership scheme.

All the contributions are of a high standard. For Anglicans, it is a "must have" book. For others, particularly students, it has considerable value. Professor Robert A J Gagnon, a leading authority, contributes a fundamental chapter on the biblical texts. It is an excellent prelude to his seminal work - *THE BIBLE AND HOMOSEXUAL PRACTICE*. Latimer Trust, the publisher, is well-known as a conservative evangelical body working, mainly, among Anglicans. Many will be grateful for this highly useful and conservative material.

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