

## CSCS NEWS

The newsletter of the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality

### 32: Spring 2007

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#### EDITORIAL

This edition focuses on the Annual Conference and AGM held in Birmingham on 10 February. Although numbers (particularly at the AGM) were small, there was much of interest – and many who expressed regret that other commitments and/or appalling weather prevented their attendance.

The formal report and accounts for the AGM are below. It will be clear that there is only one serious threat to our independent future. It is not money; we are now very solvent and able to look at new initiatives. It is not membership; we are much smaller than we should like to be, but are perfectly viable. It is not even the increasing number of other organizations, such as Inclusive Church, whose agenda overlaps ours; we can find ways of collaboration and unique contributions to make. No, **the only threat to our viability is the shortage of people coming forward as committee members and officers. The Chair and Treasurer have both given notice that they will serve a maximum of two more years, and we have no Secretary, strictly speaking, at all.**

I have myself served on the Committee for rather more years than I care to remember. It is very convivial, often extremely rewarding, and - with just three or four meetings a year in the Midlands - no more demanding than any individual wants to make it. The Committee has powers to co-opt to make up its numbers. If you care about CSCS (and you would not be reading this if you did not), how about you?

The value of CSCS was well affirmed in the afternoon Annual Conference. Rabbi Margaret Jacobi and Shaykh Michael Mumisa both demonstrated how it is quite possible, in both the Jewish and Islamic traditions, to interpret sacred texts in a way which gives an unequivocally positive image to sexuality. (Following the AGM papers, I include some in this issue some notes from Rabbi Margaret's talk.) Even the apparent condemnations of same-sex relationships can be interpreted as referring only to particular situations which might be inherently exploitative or idolatrous, and not to those relationships whose positive values we all affirm. To be sure, as was pointed out in the discussion, both of these faith communities (like Christianity) have their share of texts and traditions which suggest a more negative or ambiguous image of sexuality, such as emphases on ritual purification and on "modest" dress for women. But to some extent these are simply a recognition of the fact that sex, though a great gift from God, is also dangerous. How religions deal with this, and how our culture deals with it, are questions which continue to face us all.

And there are few if any places, other than in CSCS, where such huge questions could be explicitly faced. Most other organizations whose remits overlap with ours are focused on

rather specific issues, often matters of Church politics, or else on very much broader theological questions. Some of them may have an interest in burgeoning areas of concern such as teenage sexuality and sex education, which are ignored in the current preoccupations with the gender and sexual orientation of bishops and so on, but their interests are within much wider contexts. CSCS remains the only place where focused dialogue across the territory of faith and sexuality – now including interfaith dialogue – can be promoted.

Our impact is not easy to measure. We do not know how many people find on our website resources either for academic study or for personal pilgrimage. We do not know how many people, apart from our members, read either this newsletter or *Theology and Sexuality*, and what impact that reading has. We do not know, unless they tell us, how far our members themselves find from us the resources they need, either to work out issues in their own lives or to promote dialogues in their churches or elsewhere. One thing we do know is that some of our core members find in us an inspiration and support in their various spheres of work and witness. We shall be looking, in the coming year, at ways to disseminate this effect more widely. Most of that may well need to be done in collaboration with other organizations, such as the Modern Churchpeople's Union and the Student Christian Movement with whom we held such a successful joint conference last summer. But we remain of the belief that our witness is distinctive, and distinctively needed. We hope that you will agree – and will share in it accordingly.

In the meantime, I have included in this edition a number of notes of encouragement. The first is the Statement from the conference on Faith and Homophobia, which CSCS promoted along with many others under the auspices of LGCM, and which took place just a week after our own Annual Conference. Second, there are some deeply theological and profoundly moving words from the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church of the USA following the Dar es Salaam Primates' Meeting. (Alas, there is no space for reflections on events since that meeting – but perhaps another time.) Last, there are reviews of books by two inspirational figures in liberal theology and practice.

Anthony Woollard

## **CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF CHRISTIANITY AND SEXUALITY**

### **MINUTES OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING HELD AT CARRS LANE CHURCH, BIRMINGHAM, ON 10 FEBRUARY 2007**

#### **Present**

Jane Fraser (Chair)  
John Gladwin (Patron)  
Lydia Gladwin  
Daphne Cook (Treasurer)  
John Cook  
Hugh Bain  
Hazel Barkham

Janet Kent  
Bruce Kent  
Martin Pendergast  
Anthony Woollard

**Apologies:** David Gamble (Patron), Roberta Rominger (Matron), Jean Mayland, Colin Coward, Michael Egan.

**Minutes of meeting of the AGM held on 11 February 2006** were agreed as correct.

**Matters arising** were covered under the Report from the Chair.

**Chair's report:** Jane Fraser spoke to her circulated report (copy attached to these minutes). She drew attention to the following points:

- The cost of *Theology and Sexuality* had been frozen for a further year, meaning that no change was needed in the subscription rate.
- The new two-tier membership appeared to have been a success, with numbers remaining around the 100 mark (of whom about two-thirds took *Theology and Sexuality*) despite some weeding out of those in arrears. The death of Roy Parr was noted with sadness. Subscriptions were still being received from a couple of members who had proved uncontactable, and attempts would be made to track them down via the bank.
- The experiment of sending the newsletter to theological training institutions had not had any visible impact.
- The joint residential conference with the Modern Churchpeople's Union had proved particularly successful, though again the visible impact was limited (one former member had rejoined).
- Attempts to contribute to the Anglican "listening process" had so far also been unsuccessful but other avenues would be pursued.

**Treasurer's report** Daphne Cook spoke to her report (copy attached to these minutes). She noted the surplus of £1,253, compared to the previous year's deficit of £70. Whilst subscription income had fallen under the two-tier membership system, nearly all categories of expenditure were markedly reduced.

Anthony Woollard proposed, and Martin Pendergast seconded, the adoption of the report. Daphne proposed the re-appointment of Michael Egan as independent examiner of accounts. Both motions were carried unanimously.

**Elections:** The meeting noted the resignation of Colin Coward and more recently of Jean Mayland.

In the absence of other nominations the remaining committee members (Jane Fraser, John and Daphne Cook, Martin Pendergast and Anthony Woollard) were elected unanimously.

**Discussion on the future:** The Chair invited members to consider issues regarding the future of CSCS – a very small organisation, with an ageing committee, which nevertheless had considerable human resources and connections, and also now sufficient financial resources to make possible some small new initiatives.

Points raised in discussion included the following:

- Advertising in the ecclesiastical Press, one possible use of the current surplus, rarely brought in any significant results.
- There might be a better case for using the money in some way to bring together the fragmented “liberal” groups who shared the CSCS agenda – though it was noted that a previous attempt at this, namely the establishment of Inclusive Church, appeared simply to have created yet another body!
- The current public focus on issues such as teenage pregnancy, which did not fall within the remit of the other groups, could offer new opportunities for CSCS.
- Although Press advertising might not be worthwhile, the placing and sharing of articles could be valuable. Even closer links with other bodies such as MCU and SCM could be helpful (and weblinks could be improved, for example with the Churches Together in England site which was believed to be hungry for content). Some ecclesiastical journals might be susceptible to encouragement by Patrons/Matronas to carry CSCS copy, including reports of the Annual Conference. There might also be a case for trying to provide a “voice for the voiceless”, as in current debates on gay adoption where the professionals (not to speak of the adopters/adoptees) were being largely ignored.
- The independent future of CSCS depended, not only on its continuing to develop its “unique selling proposition” along the lines suggested in discussion, but also on recruiting new officers and Committee members.

The Chair, summing up the discussion, said that the Committee had noted the many positive points made and would attempt to progress them during the year.

**Date of next meeting:** Saturday 9 February 2008, probably in London.

## **REPORT FROM THE CHAIR FOR THE AGM OF CSCS 10<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2007**

CSCS has continued to meet its aims of providing opportunities for sexuality to be discussed honestly and openly and to help others in the churches to provide similar opportunities. This has been achieved through the medium of the CSCS Newsletter, through contacts with other Christian bodies and conferences/workshops. This process has been steered along the way by the commitment and energy of its committee members who have continued to meet quarterly to discuss policy, topics of relevance to our aims and the interests of our membership, items for the Newsletter and finance. In addition to these meetings there has been regular contact and discussion through the medium of email. The committee is a small but energetic and committed group who would welcome additional support from other members to invigorate our planning for and organisation of CSCS. We are grateful for the generous hospitality of John and Daphne Cook for these meetings and Daphne’s diligent oversight of membership fees and CSCS finances. We were sorry to lose Colin Coward from the Committee due to his increased commitments with Changing Attitude but we continue to ‘keep him in the loop’ and draw on his contacts and expertise. Anthony Woollard continues to double as minutes secretary and editor of CSCS News. Martin Pendergast has enriched our understanding of sexuality

issues and concerns within the Roman Catholic Church and we continue to marvel at the extent and breadth of his range of contacts – both within and outside the churches.

The introduced a two-tier membership subscription seems to have been successful in enabling some members to remain involved with CSCS without the additional payment for *Theology and Sexuality*. Membership numbers, since releasing those who had ceased to pay an annual subscription, have remained broadly static, but we continue to get a trickle of new members. The majority of current members have chosen to receive the newsletter three times a year and the journal *Theology and Sexuality*. Sage Publications have agreed to keep the subscription to the journal at the same rate as last year.

Anthony Woollard continues to play an active role in the production of the CSCS Newsletter, both as commissioning editor and as a stimulating contributor. We are grateful for his oversight of current issues of concern to the membership and his ability to stimulate lively debate among the membership. We look forward to receiving contributions from two of our Patrons, The Revd. David Gamble, Co-ordinating Secretary, Legal & Constitutional Practice in the Methodist Church and The Revd. Roberta Rominger, Moderator of the Thames North Synod of the United Reformed Church. We value the continuing commitment of The Rt Revd. John Gladwin to the aims of CSCS which is reflected in his willingness to contribute to our Annual Conference today. Both David Gamble and Roberta Rominger were extremely disappointed not to be able to attend today and have sent us their good wishes for this event.

We continue to develop our links with other Christian organisations with agendas that overlap with our aims. Colin Coward is our main link with Changing Attitude and will be travelling to Africa to attend the meeting of Primates where one of the main agenda items is the subject of the Church's position on gay clergy. Three of our committee members serve on the Council of the Modern Churchpeople's Union, Anthony Woollard and Jean Mayland as elected members and your Chair as a CSCS observer, together with two other CSCS members. The annual, residential conference of MCU last summer was a joint enterprise with CSCS and SCM and was extremely successful, generating a surplus of £300 to CSCS funds. We also maintain links with Inclusive Church and LGCM to our mutual benefit. Martin Pendergast has been actively involved in the LGCM conference on homophobia, which takes place later this month. Your Chair is active on the General Synod of The Church of England where, as you know, there is a continuing, lively (and sometimes acrimonious) debate on the role of gay clergy in the priesthood and of women in the episcopate. She is also active in raising concern within church congregations on the problem of teenage pregnancy and has started to organise conferences on this topic with funding from the Teenage Pregnancy Units in the Midlands. As an experienced trainer, she has run a workshop on sexuality education with church and youth work funding and plans to continue this work.

Last year we circulated the CSCS Newsletter to Theological colleges and seminaries as an experiment to stimulate interest in CSCS and its aims but this was not successful in its aim.

We are grateful to Philip Gardner for his continued work on updating the CSCS website

despite other pressures on his time and expertise.

In the meantime, our thanks are due to Daphne Cook, in her capacity as our Treasurer, for drawing up the end of year accounts for us and for keeping us within our budget. Thanks are also due to Michael Egan for auditing the accounts.

Finally, I would like to thank all of the membership who contribute to the aims of CSCS by encouraging education and informed debate on the issues around Christianity and sexuality within your church communities and congregation.

The Revd. Canon Jane Fraser  
Chair of CSCS

### **CSCS ACCOUNTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2006**

	2006	2005
<b>Income</b>		
Subscriptions	1903.00	2472.00
Conference fees	312.50	220.00
Interest receivable	18.43	11.71
Tax refund	879.13	0.00
	<b>3113.06</b>	<b>2703.71</b>
<b>Expenditure</b>		
Journals	1080.00	1112.12
CSCS News	296.56	778.35
Conference	209.58	404.97
Website	155.10	102.80
Committee/secretarial	118.70	377.35
	<b>1859.94</b>	<b>2773.59</b>
<b>Surplus/(shortfall)</b>	<b>1253.12</b>	<b>(69.88)</b>
<b>Opening accumulated fund</b>	2892.20	2962.08
<b>Closing accumulated fund</b>	<b>4145.32</b>	<b>2892.20</b>
<b>Represented by:</b>		
Current Account	2067.49	332.80
Deposit Account	2077.83	2559.40

## **JUDAISM AND SEXUALITY**

*Notes provided by Rabbi Dr. Margaret Jacobi on her address given at the CSCS Annual Conference, 10 February 2007*

### **Biblical**

Adam and Eve – Eden seen as ideal, referred to in wedding ceremony

– companionship, Woman created to be a companion to Man.

– first commandment: be fruitful and multiply

BUT – men seen as being dominant after Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

Sodom – story is not so much about sexuality but more about not welcoming strangers

Positive view of sexuality – Song of Songs erotic love poetry. Interpreted as love of God for Israel.

Ex. 21:10 ‘If take second wife, shall not diminish conjugal rights of first.’

Sexual intercourse not just for procreation.

Forbidden sexual relationships – Lev. 18. Lev. 18:22: “You shall not lie with a male as you lie with a woman – it is a ‘*to’evah*’” – note words used – ‘male’ not man, but I don’t know what the significance of this is. ‘*To’evah*’ difficult to translate, though does indicate something unacceptable. May mean there should not be a relationship of domination – and there have been many other interpretations

Sexuality both holy and dangerous – Kedeshah, from Hebrew root KDSH meaning holy, something set apart, meant a Temple prostitute. Kiddushin from same Hebrew root came to mean marriage.

### **Post-Biblical**

*Yetzer haRa* – impulse to evil, understood as sexual urge, but not seen as necessarily evil – ‘Were it not for the impulse to evil, a man would not build a house or procreate.’

(Talmud)

Women were entitled to sexual relations – the Talmud set out how often.

Not just for procreation – can marry older woman or someone known to be infertile.

Marriage thought of as desirable, monastic life not favoured.

*Niddah* – prohibition of sexual relations during and for seven days after a woman’s period – limits sexual activity.

### **A Liberal View**

Women’s equal status is emphasised. Therefore marriage is not, as in Orthodox Judaism, the acquisition of a woman, but rather the creation of a partnership.

Sex seen as positive

Like traditional view, we emphasise that sexual relations should take place within a loving relationships, and not be casual, promiscuous or exploitative.

We would apply our view equally to gay and lesbian relationships – we recognise that sexual orientation is innate and therefore not a sin, rather it is how we use our sexuality.

Pre-marital sex – we recognise it as a reality. Biblical precedents, e.g. concubinage, though not necessarily helpful as concubines had inferior status. Sexual act leads to marriage de facto in Jewish law.

Again would emphasise that sexuality is positive but precious and should take place within the context of a loving relationship.

## **CONFERENCE DECLARATION: A Statement from the Faith, Homophobia and Human Rights Conference**

The Faith, Homophobia, & Human Rights Conference, gathered in London on 17th February 2007, calls on all people of goodwill, of whatever faith or none, to affirm and celebrate human equality in all its dimensions and particularly to work for the elimination of any faith-based homophobia and institutionalised prejudice towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

We reject the activities of certain religious leaders, seeking exemptions from equality legislation, and attempts to base this on the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, such a right being for all, not just for some. We deplore the internalised homophobia within religious institutions that fails to confront prejudice and hate. We encourage and support those faith organisations, which express their commitment to diversity and equality in practice and policy. We believe that full civil rights for LGBT individuals are not only consistent with the right to religious freedom, but are rooted in the best and fundamental teachings of all major faiths; love, justice, compassion, and mercy, such values being shared by all who seek the common good.

We call for further progressive public policy that will deliver comprehensive and effective anti-discrimination legislation, including positive duties, on the basis of race, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation, and belief. We call on the newly formed Commission for Equality and Human Rights to listen to the experience of LGBT faith networks and those who have suffered homophobia from and within religious organisations.

Today, the alliance of over fifty faith and secular organisations supporting this conference affirms and celebrates the values of human equality and social justice, rooted in the best of faith traditions, and shared by all who are committed to a fully human vision of a transformed society.

Details of the Conference Sponsors, Supporting Bodies, Speakers, Panellists, and Workshops are available at [www.lgcm.org.uk/fhconference](http://www.lgcm.org.uk/fhconference).

## **A SEASON OF FASTING: REFLECTIONS ON THE PRIMATES' MEETING**

*An extract from some reflections offered by Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori on the February meeting in Dar es Salaam*

We travelled home from this meeting at Carnival, the farewell to meat (*carne vale*) that comes just before Lent begins. That is an image that may be useful as we consider what the Primates' gathering is commending to the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church has been asked to consider the wider body of the Anglican Communion and its needs. Our own Church has in recent years tended to focus on the suffering of one portion of the body, particularly those who feel that justice demands the full recognition and celebration

of the gifts of gay and lesbian Christians. That focus has been seen in some other parts of the global Church, as inappropriate, especially as it has been felt to be a dismissal of traditional understandings of sexual morality. Both parties hold positions that can be defended by appeal to our Anglican sources of authority - scripture, tradition, and reason - but each finds it very difficult to understand and embrace the other. What is being asked of both parties is a season of fasting - from authorizing rites for blessing same-sex unions and consecrating bishops in such unions on the one hand, and from transgressing traditional diocesan boundaries on the other.

A parallel to this situation in our tradition might be seen in the controversy over eating meat in early Christian communities, mentioned both in the letter to the Romans and the first letter to the Corinthians. In those early communities, the meat available for purchase in the public market was often part of an animal that had been offered (in whole or in part) in sacrifice in various pagan religious rites. The troubling question in the Christian community was whether or not it was appropriate to eat such meat - was it tainted by its involvement in pagan religion? Did one participate in that religion (and thus commit apostasy) by eating it? Paul encourages the Christians in Rome and Corinth to recall that, while there may be no specific prohibition about eating such meat, the sensitive in the community might refrain if others would be offended. The needs of the weaker members, and the real possibility that their faith may be injured, are an important consideration in making the dietary decision.

The current controversy brings a desire for justice on the one hand into apparent conflict with a desire for fidelity to a strict understanding of the biblical tradition and to the main stream of the ethical tradition. Either party may be understood to be the meat-eaters, and each is reminded that their single-minded desire may be an idol. Either party might constructively also be understood by the other as the weaker member, whose sensibilities need to be considered and respected.

God's justice is always tempered with mercy, and God continues to be at work in this world, urging the faithful into deeper understandings of what it means to be human and our call as Christians to live as followers of Jesus. Each party in this conflict is asked to consider the good faith of the other, to consider that the weakness or sensitivity of the other is of significant import, and therefore to fast, or 'refrain from eating meat,' for a season. Each is asked to discipline itself for the sake of the greater whole, and the mission that is only possible when the community maintains its integrity.

Justice, (steadfast) love, and mercy always go together in our biblical tradition. None is complete without the others. While those who seek full inclusion for gay and lesbian Christians, and the equal valuing of their gifts for ministry, do so out of an undeniable passion for justice, others seek a fidelity to the tradition that cannot understand or countenance the violation of what that tradition says about sexual ethics. Each is being asked to forbear for a season. The word of hope is that in God all things are possible, and that fasting is not a permanent condition of a Christian people, nor a normative one. God's dream is of all people gathered at a feast, and we enter Lent looking toward that Easter feast and the new life that will, in God's good time, be proclaimed.

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Fighting Fundamentalism: a spiritual autobiography*, Douglas Bartles-Smith. Saxty Press, Shrewsbury, p/b, pp129, £12.00. ISBN 978-0-9555021-0-1.

This artless little book is not quite what it says on the cover. It is not the “journey of a soul” in the same league as, say, Harry Williams’ *Some Day I’ll Find You* – though the author clearly owes a great debt to Williams. And it is not a guerrilla handbook for Christian liberals either – though they might well find some ammunition here. What it does do is to remind us of the “seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal”. When we feel most alone in the struggle for what we believe in, the life and ministry of Douglas Bartles-Smith is there to remind us of the good fight that others have fought.

Bartles-Smith spent nearly all his ministry in the Anglican Diocese of Southwark, and a considerable part of that as Archdeacon, from which post he retired only in 2004. Thus he can tell a personal story leading from the days of “South Bank religion”, when the Diocese was seen in the 1960s as a haven of radicalism, up to more current struggles with the Thatcherite impact on the inner city and the emergence of issues about gender and sexuality as a focus for ecclesiastical conflict.

The most prominent theme in his life-story is actually nothing directly to do with fundamentalism or sexuality, but is about inner-city ministry, where he made some pioneering contributions as a parish priest, and on which he later contributed mightily to the Church’s challenge to Thatcherism in the *Faith in the City* report and its aftermath. There is a great and encouraging story to be told here, and one which must not be forgotten. But there is also material for theological reflection. Bartles-Smith rejects fundamentalism (especially on matters sexual) because it is “too counter-cultural” for an incarnational faith, and yet his opposition to Thatcherite social and economic philosophy was very counter-cultural indeed. Truly there are no simple answers in the Christ-and-culture debate.

Issues of sexuality crop up from time to time in the book, but, until the final chapters, they do so in a very low-key way. Bartles-Smith paints a vivid picture of Anglo-Catholicism in the fifties and sixties when closet gayness was almost the norm, but there is no real analysis of that. Almost suddenly, in the last two or three chapters, the issue in the book’s title is seriously addressed, as our author witnesses Thatcher’s appointment of Archbishop Carey and the rise and rise of the Evangelical party, and in their wake the smuggling in of fundamentalist ideas, leading rapidly to a struggle in his own diocese over the treatment of gay clergy. But again this is quite properly anecdotal, not analytical.

We know that the Thatcherite culture was laissez-faire in economic terms but largely authoritarian in social terms, and that is a long-established syndrome in the Evangelical tradition especially in the USA. A Thatcher could hardly have appointed anyone but a Carey to lead the Church of England. But why did Evangelicalism catch on so quickly? And above all why did the conflict focus so sharply around the gay issue? As Bartles-Smith reminds us, Christian fundamentalists – unlike their Muslim cousins with whom he also deals – tend not to take literally the condemnation of lending money on interest, or

most of the other Levitical laws. So why the obsession with homosexuality?

Perhaps the Thatcherite emphasis on personal fulfillment, in such apparent conflict with her social authoritarianism, inevitably lifted the lid off the pressure-cooker of sexuality, and hence also released others to express their fear of sexuality. In a “me” culture, is there inevitably going to be a faultline somewhere in the area of sexuality and specifically homosexuality? Bartles-Smith hints at this in quotations from notorious Christian homophobes such as Peter Akinola. If you leave out the condemnation of “unnatural” sex, Akinola’s protests against Western self-indulgence sometimes read remarkably like Bartles-Smith’s own protests against Thatcherite capitalism. A good illustration, perhaps, that this counter-culture business is not straightforward. We are also reminded, however, that the South African Church, which has never been backward in criticising cultures of social injustice, has taken a very different stand on the gay issue from those elsewhere in the African continent. The causes seem to be multi-dimensional, and perhaps our author (who certainly knows his theology) has in him the material for a more analytical approach to such questions.

Be all that as it may, Bartles-Smith’s story is a valuable one of realistic courage on the part of a liberal/catholic priest in a Church which became dominated by a very different spirit. Reading such a biography reminds me very much of A H Clough’s “Say not, the struggle naught availeth”. I write this review just as reports are coming through of debates in General Synod over aspects of the gay issue. I am informed that a number of delegates bravely and movingly came out during these debates. Perhaps the Church of England is again on the move, and this time to a healthier place. If so, the decades of faithful witness of those such as Douglas Bartles-Smith have contributed much to making that possible.

Anthony Woollard

*Undergoing God - dispatches from the scene of a break-in*, James Alison, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 2006, £12.95 - ISBN 0-232-52676-1

Who was the only living English theologian referred to by the Archbishop of Canterbury in a lecture given during his recent formal visit to the Vatican? No prizes for guessing right – James Alison! Rowan Williams also had this to say about the first book by Alison, published in the UK following the latter’s return after many years lecturing in Latin America and the USA: “James Alison’s many admirers will find in this book (*Faith Beyond Resentment - fragments catholic & gay*) much that is new, but also all that they will be used to – wit, clarity, depth and surprises.”

Like its two immediately preceding volumes, *Faith Beyond Resentment* and *On Being Liked*, Darton, Longman & Todd have brought together in James Alison’s latest title more of his recent writings and lectures. The sub-title not only hints at James’ penchant for television crime thrillers, but also reveals something more profound about Alison’s theological reflections. The notion of ‘undergoing’ “is the corollary of the Christian claim that we are talking about a happening irrupting into and upon the world.” The Son of

Man also comes like that of ‘a thief in the night’, not as a *Deus ex machina* but as the divine break-in which really is Good News.

Importantly for Alison, the sense of ‘undergoing’ has both personal and ecclesial implications, and these he explores in themes of Monotheism, Worship, Atonement, Transubstantiation, Evil and Reconciliation in the more systematic first part of *Undergoing God*. His treatment of these, and other themes, is biblically based, reflecting his early evangelical upbringing, while embracing the growth and development of his adult Catholic faith, not least from the perspective of a gay man. In common with many of his Dominican former confreres, he has an extraordinary knack of turning language, concepts, doctrinal understandings upside down, not in any glib or iconoclastic theological terrorism, but in ways that are “almost frighteningly profound.” (Stanley Hauerwas)

As always, Alison’s approach draws heavily on the methodology of Rene Girard. Given the Girardian key concept of scapegoating, how can you resist a chapter entitled, ‘Reconciliation in the wink of a hippo’? James has always preferred to be known as someone reflecting theologically on basic Christian doctrines from, amongst others, the perspective of a gay man, rather than as a ‘gay theologian’.

His much earlier works, ‘Knowing Jesus’, ‘Raising Abel’, and ‘The Joy of Being Wrong’, reveal his concern to do theology in a way that implies an undergoing of divine things. This transformation is not as if an object called ‘transformation’ falls from the sky like a badly targeted missile: “The very word ‘to undergo’ is an oddity, an active verb with a passive meaning. It is more active than ‘suffering’, more passive than ‘confronting’, more objective than ‘experiencing’, and more involving of subjectivity than ‘being handled’. This also shows just how literally adept James is in breaking open the Word/word.

Chapters 8–14, forming the book’s second part, show Alison dealing more specifically with LGBT issues insofar as they form the bases of current debates within the Roman Communion. These are welcome updated versions of previous lectures and essays, dealing with the use of scripture and tradition, same-sex unions, and the recruitment and ordination of gay men in the Roman Catholic Church. It is rumoured that Chapter 9, which first appeared in *Opening Up* (recently reviewed in this Newsletter), was photocopied and doing the rounds of various Vatican departments as an example of the best contemporary expression of the ‘status questionis’ regarding homosexuality and Catholic teaching. We have yet to see its full impact in those quarters

James Alison’s work is never a ‘doddle’. Some chapters are easier to read than others, but be not deterred! While his many fans may not be holding their breaths that he will be appointed as a Consultor to the Vatican’s Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, all Christians ignore, at their peril, his attempts to flesh out a critical form for a more adult Christianity. He is undoubtedly one of the brightest younger stars in the British theological firmament.

Martin Pendergast

Note: James Alison's latest work can be found on [www.jamesalison.co.uk](http://www.jamesalison.co.uk) where links to various Girardian sites may also be found.

**This Newsletter is produced for CSCS  
The Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality**

**Chair:**

**Jane Fraser  
Sunnybank House  
Holly Green  
Upton-on-Severn  
WORCESTER  
WR8 0PG**

**Phone: 01684 594715**

**e-mail: [cscs@revjane.demon.co.uk](mailto:cscs@revjane.demon.co.uk)**

**VISIT OUR WEBSITE**

**<http://www.cscs.co.uk>**

**for more information on CSCS, its committee and its activities**

**Next copy deadline for the Newsletter is 1 September 2007**

**Please send your contributions to:**

**Anthony Woollard  
1 Chestnut Walk  
STRATFORD-UPON-AVON  
CV37 6HG**

**Phone/fax: 01789 204923**

**e-mail: [awoollard@joyousgard.org.uk](mailto:awoollard@joyousgard.org.uk).**

**Please submit contributions by e-mail if possible. If e-mail is not available,  
contributions on disk are appreciated.**