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Dean of King's College, London
Date: 14 January 1996

Strangers and friends:
A new exploration of homosexuality and the Bible

Michael Vasey
Hodder & Stoughton, 1995, paperback, £9.99, ISBN 0 340 60814 5

"What is the most important issue facing the Church of England at the moment - the gay issue or the renewal of the liturgy?", began Michael Vasey, blinking owlishly into the TV lights at this book's launch. As a liturgical scholar of repute and member of the Liturgical Commission, he was quite clear that it was worship - but the media do not see it that way, nor indeed many in the church. Already the battle lines are being drawn: on one side the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement and Action for Gay and Lesbian Ordination (AGLO) are pressing for a General Synod debate, while at the recent Evangelical Anglican Leaders' Conference, Wallace Benn declared that there was no room for 'two integrities on key issues' such as the uniqueness of Christ or homosexuality.

In such a situation, a serious contribution by a known scholar is welcome. Its call for a 'new exploration' is all the more interesting because Vasey's evangelical background and tradition are beyond dispute. On the other hand, he has been able, wisely, to keep his personal life private and out of the debate.

The opening chapter introduces the reader to the current debate about homosexuality in both the public arena of politics, education and the arts, and the various responses from different churches. This is followed by an introduction to the writer: from a Jewish background (his German Jewish mother lost her parents and two sisters at Auschwitz) he is a conservative evangelical (with a high view of the Bible's authority) and an English male, influenced by A. E. Housman's poetry. Like later chapters, it ends with a question: where is God?

Part One, 'Thinking Straight' contains three chapters considering sexuality and social order; sex and the symbolic meanings of bodies and boundaries, and Christian understandings of sex; and thirdly, culture, creation and nature, and the method and shape of grace. This provides an interesting approach by clarifying several issues which often cloud our thinking, rather than going straight into the classic texts.

Part Two has five chapters on 'Understanding Homosexuality'. The first three widen the concept beyond certain same-sex genital acts: it is better to talk of 'homosexualities', since there is no single pattern. Drawing on scholars like John Boswell and David Greenberg, Vasey introduces the historical, cultural and anthropological background. Different forms of homosexuality may be across the generations or genders, over social classes or egalitarian. He

argues for a strong Christian tradition of same sex friendship (citing St Aelred of Rievaulx) over the first millennium, followed by a growing cultural hostility with a developing 'myth of sodomy' from the thirteenth century onwards. Modern gay identity emerged around 1700 in reaction to an industrial culture which prized male competition in a free market society and relegated love, desire and religion to the private sphere of the family. This fascinating study increases the reader's awareness of the background.

Only then do we **turn to the Bible**. According to Vasey, the standard evangelical presentation on homosexuality begins with the one flesh theology of Genesis 1-2 and Mark 10, followed by a handful of biblical passages, all with no reference to the cultural background of either the Bible or today's society. Following his previous sociological analysis, Vasey shows that the Bible contains a wide variety of sexual and marital patterns and draws attention to same sex friendships, exemplified in David and Jonathan, and Jesus' attitude to his disciples. He then considers the classic texts: the Old Testament passages (Gen. 18.26-19.29; Lev. 18.22; 20.13; Deut. 23.17-18) appear to be more about idolatry, purity and cult prostitution than modern gay relationships. Rom. 1.18-32 argues that sexual disorder is a consequence of idolatry and is addressed to homosexual patterns of Paul's day associated with idolatry, slavery and social dominance, rather than today's gay identity. The translation of *arsenokoitai* in 1 Cor. 6.9-10 and 1 Tim.1.8-11 is difficult, while Jude 7 refers to attempted sex with angels.

The final chapter on the causes of homosexuality considers different contemporary patterns, from the Sambia tribe in New Guinea through science and psychoanalysis to the theories of Friedman, Elizabeth Moberly and those engaged in therapeutic ministries to gays. Again Vasey ends with questions, here about the nature of Christian freedom.

Part Three, 'Life Issues', looks at the hostility to gays in society at large and then moves to the church. Vasey analyses the current clash between gays and the churches and proposes several passages from Paul's letters as a way forward; he discusses various current church strategies from outright rejection through the therapeutic enclave to gay self-assertion, concluding with a careful analysis of the situation in the Church of England following the House of Bishops' Report on *Issues in Human Sexuality*. The 'Uncharted Journey' looks for a way forward through grace, sex and friendship. The concluding chapter on HIV/AIDS and death leads to a vision of heaven in the presence of Jesus the outsider.

This is a serious and important book. Its paperback appearance and attractive price should not mislead the reader. This is no light weight popular foray, but a well written, closely argued text of 250 pages, followed by notes and an index. The questions it raises will repay careful reading.

Vasey writes as a male, and is concerned primarily for how the issue affects gay men. He warns against a too easy extrapolation to lesbians and apologises for not being able to deal with their concerns more (p. 16). He also clearly sees himself and writes as an evangelical. He contributed to discussion at the Evangelical Anglican Leaders' Conference. Some speakers wanted greater openness on this issue while others attempted to enforce a party line. What happens next will depend to no little extent on the reactions to this book.

There is an emphasis on grace throughout, as well as several sections specifically about it (pp. 58-63; 220-225). It is interesting to compare a similar stress on grace in the Basis of Faith of the Church of England Evangelical Council, of which Michael Vasey is a former member. His tradition is also seen in his constant interaction with the Bible. At first, it seems odd in an 'exploration of homosexuality and the Bible' to have only one chapter entitled, 'What does the Bible say?' (pp. 113-140); in fact, he keeps returning to the bible as scriptural texts and references litter the pages.

On the other hand, he tries not to use scripture as a weapon to 'prove' this or that point. His great contribution is the attempt to understand and explain the cultural background to both the Bible and gay expression today. There is a lot of sociological and anthropological analysis which some readers will find more persuasive than others. While Vasey is correct to point out the problems in some of the key biblical passages, the sociological analysis does not completely deal with the difficulty of the biblical prohibitions. This is particularly true of Romans 1; while I agree that the cultural background to the passage is different from the modern gay movement, I am not sure that solves everything – and Vasey himself says that neither gays nor non-gays can afford to ignore the passage (p. 134). He is on much stronger ground with his commendation of Paul's ethics of acceptance within the Christian community (pp. 196-199).

Similarly, Vasey is correct in his argument that neither the Bible nor the Christian tradition have been so totally 'pro-family' in the modern nuclear sense as some suggest. He draws attention to the differing social patterns in the Bible and in Christian history, pleading for wider relationships and friendships. Like all correctives, however, I wonder if it goes too far. The House of Bishops' 'evolving convergence' of the ideal of lifelong monogamy (*Issues in Human Sexuality* 2.29) does seem to reflect the Biblical development more than Vasey allows (pp. 116-118).

There is an attractive gentleness and winsome manner about this book. Michael Vasey tries to be fair, even generous to other views, such as his treatment of Moberly and the evangelical groups trying to help gays change (pp. 157-159, 206), or his praise of Martin Hallett (p. 205). The debate over the ordination of women led to a hardening on both sides. Some of us hoped that after the 1994 vote, the church might get down to the real mission of the gospel. Instead, we seem to be gearing up for another long and divisive debate (not to mention the reorganisation of Turnbull). On the staff of the University of Durham, Vasey is protected by the clauses on academic freedom in the Educational Reform Act inserted by our bishops among others in 1988. Calling for his dismissal from St John's College is thus illegal, and scarcely a biblical witness to our nation!

The gay debate is not going to go away. Vasey may prefer liturgical reform but the arguments over the BCP vs. the ASB were just as acrimonious. Vasey has made a great contribution to the content of this debate. This book must be wrestled with by both sides - not uncritically acclaimed nor dismissed unread. But perhaps more importantly, he has pointed a new way to the conduct of debate - in gentleness, care, and honesty. It would be a vast improvement if we all followed his lead in this respect.

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