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Chris Mounsey. *Being the Body of Christ: Towards a Twenty-First-Century Homosexual Theology for the Anglican Church.* London: Equinox Publishing, 2011. 240 pp. $99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84553-951-1; $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84553-952-8.

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Homosexuality and Anglicanism: Exploring a Troubled Communion through Twentieth-Century Fiction

The role of religion is particularly under-explored in the history of modern sexuality. Acting against this trend, Chris Mounsey's latest contribution to sexuality studies is an in-depth examination of the themes of homosexuality and Christianity in twentieth-century English fiction. Mounsey finds the twentieth-century novel to be an interesting medium through which to explore intersections of the spiritual and the sexual. His book analyzes the work of five English writers in an attempt to trace a literary tradition of exasperation at Christianity's reluctance to accept homosexuality as a legitimate sexual identity. Mounsey's own experiences–his sense of rejection by the Anglican Church because of his sexuality and his disappointment at the church's reluctance to accept its homosexual clergy–provide the backdrop to the study.

Part 1 employs literary sources to explore the religious lives of two homosexual men in further detail than current critical studies. Chapter 1 examines Oscar Wilde's "The Fisherman and His Soul," written in 1891, which exposes the tragedy of a relationship falling outside the accepted social and religious norms of sexual behavior. Mounsey suggests that this children's tale is a representation of the religious and sexual paradox that colored Wilde's life; his desire for religion was continually met by the antagonism of his desire for unauthorized sexual congress. Since the churches required Wilde to renounce his "immutable sexuality," he was forced to reject organized religion (p. 11). Mounsey juxtaposes his reading of "The Fisherman and His Soul" with E. F. Benson's *David Blaize* trilogy, a tragedy about sexual deviation charting the protagonist's struggle to come to terms with the Anglican Church's demand for homosexuals to be continent. Published between 1916 and 1924, this series has not previously been the subject of academic work. Mounsey describes Benson's predicament as an Anglican and likely a homosexual. Benson denied his sexuality in order to remain within the church. Guided by his faith, he found abstention and asexuality to be the only choices available.[1]

Mounsey successfully presents the tensions between spirituality and sexuality in the literature, interweaving this with biographical information, in order to show the ways in which Wilde and Benson negotiated their religion and sexuality. Such an endeavor makes an important contribution to sexuality studies by focusing on the ways in which religion engaged with contemporary changes in constructions of sex and sexuality. Nevertheless, Mounsey's use of these sources is particularly problematic. His interpretations are highly subjective. Mounsey admits that his reading of the *David Blaize* trilogy "sounds a little far fetched" at times (p. 100). The simplistic presentation of the Anglican Church as antimodern, backward looking, and repressive is also disappointing. Mounsey suggests that the church "effectively crushed Benson" and "has not moved very far from that position in the last century" (p. 7). Although Mounsey implies an appreciation of the historical background, he presents a very narrow view of the church's engagement with issues of sexuality during the twentieth century. This is in contrast to historians working to present the full complexities of the church's response to, and engagement with, new theories of sexuality throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[2]

Part 2 traces the development of homosexual theology, analyzing the literary works of three writers. The theme of this section is the theology of the body. Mounsey develops Edward Carpenter's concept of the homosexual gaze, a same-sex look of recognition, and Jeanette Winterson's plea to defy heteronormative expectations and objectification and to invent ourselves in love. Carpenter's poem *Towards Democracy* (1905), and his work

of sexology, *The Intermediate Sex* (1908), are read as a challenge to the Anglican tradition. Carpenter is said to assert that homosexuals should not deny their bodies in their spiritual struggle to find meaning, since revelations can result from bodily experiences. Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1989) is read as an exploration of the homosexual's moral choice between vengeance and forgiveness, giving "a clear call for spiritual absolution for those who have knowingly committed an injustice" (p. 9). Set in a society where sexual actions are real rather than implied by the homosexual gaze, *The Swimming-Pool Library* suggests that we must forgive authoritarian institutions like the church for trying to mold us according to their image. Mounsey's final analysis is of Jeanette Winterson's *The PowerBook* (2000) and *Lighthousekeeping* (2004). Winterson explores the problems of postmodern, scientific, and religious theories of language, all of which fail to fully describe the essential experience of being human. Her solution is to embrace the theology of the body. Although we typically think of ourselves as unitary and finite, Winterson urges us to invent ourselves in love in order that our multiple and infinite human condition be revealed to us. In the conclusion to part 2, Mounsey suggests a solution to his predicament, based on the implications of the theology of the body in his daily life. He works from a series of revelations to explore his own experiences as a man rejected by his church and as someone who is newly blind. He concludes that, if we are to be like Christ, we must be challenged by our bodies so that we can learn to fully understand our perceptions.

In general, the book requires a firmer historical context as its basis to avoid the tendency toward anachronism. Mounsey sometimes seems to be reading his own experiences onto authors of the past, rather than discovering the experiences of others on their own terms. His work, however, provides fresh insight to a long-standing and complex debate. He sees no reason why the church "should continue to drag its feet in reforming itself" and accepting its "active and fine homosexual clergy" (p. 178). In looking for a solution, his disheartening conclusion is that the only options are to either follow Benson on his path to asexuality or to express one's spirituality outside of mainstream Anglicanism. The refreshing personal urgency of this book should serve to remind readers that this debate is beyond the academic. For some it is a difficult and heartbreaking reality.

Notes

[1]. For further literature on the Benson family's unconventional sexuality, see Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Martha Vicinus, "The Gift of Love: Nineteenth-Century Religion and Lesbian Passion," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 23 (2001): 241-264. See also John Tosh, "Domesticity and Manliness in the Victorian Middle Class: The Family of Edward White Benson," in *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, ed. Michael Roper and John Tosh (London: Routledge, 1991), 43-73.

[2]. Matthew Grimley, "Law, Morality and Secularisation: The Church of England and the Wolfenden Report, 1954-1967," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 60 (2009): 725-741; Timothy Jones, "The Stained Glass Closet: Celibacy and Homosexuality in the Church of England to 1955," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20 (2011): 132-152; Hugh McLeod, "Homosexual Law Reform, 1953-1967," in *From the Reformation to the Permissive Society: A Miscellany in Celebration of the 400th Anniversary of Lambeth Palace Library*, ed. Melanie Barber, Stephen Taylor, and Gabriel Sewell (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), 657-678; and Graham Willett, "The Church of England and the Origins of Homosexual Law Reform," *Journal of Religious History* 33 (2009): 418-434.

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