

Beyond 'Gays in the Church': New Approaches to the Histories of Christianity and Same-Sex Desire

A Conference and Discussion, 25-26 September 2015, London, venue tbc

Call for Participants: this invitation is being sent out both to researchers and to members of faith groups so as to develop a rich interchange of ideas and experiences.

Organisers:

Dominic Janes (Professor of Cultural and Visual Studies, University of the Arts, London and Reader, Birkbeck, University of London).

Mark Chapman (Acting Principal of Ripon College, Cuddesdon and Reader in Modern Theology, University of Oxford).

Confirmed Speaker, Mark D. Jordan (Mellon Professor of Christian Thought, Harvard University).

The relationships between diverse forms of religious and sexual identities have been widely contested in the media since the rise of the lesbian and gay liberation movement in the 1970s. One of the key images that often appears in public debate is that of 'gays in the church' as a significant 'problem'. On the one hand many members of faith communities have remained hostile to physical expressions of same-sex desire, whilst on the other hand many lesbian and gay activists have been suspicious of various forms of religion. The compromise that has been reached over church exemptions from the obligation to perform same-sex marriage ceremonies in England indicates that many people do continue to find interactions of religion and homosexuality to be highly problematic. This event aims to approach these issues from a different viewpoint. John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (1980) and *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* (1994) created considerable controversy because they argued that the early and medieval Church was not inherently hostile to same-sex desire and that this was a development of the later middle ages. Inspired by the challenges of such works we want to invite discussion on new creative approaches to the histories of Christianity and same-sex desire.

In Dominic Janes' work on Anglican Catholicism since the nineteenth century (due to be published as *Visions of Queer Martyrdom from John Henry Newman to Derek*

Jarman) it is argued that the priesthood was an important focus for the creative development of aspects of queer culture in Britain. Moreover, this book argues that creative interactions between forms of Catholicism and same-sex desire in later Victorian England were written out of lesbian and gay history not only because of religious prejudices but also because of the secular perspectives of the much of the rights movement that emerged from the United States during the 1960s. We are delighted that Mark Jordan (author of many important studies including *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism*) will be speaking at the conference. His work provides eloquent testimony to the many problematic issues that have developed over the centuries of Christian history. He will be joining debate on how best to engage with challenging aspects of the Christian past as an opportunity for creative thought and expression.

This is a call, therefore, for participants who are interested in debating positive and creative (rather than simply problematic) approaches to Christianity and same-sex desire in historical perspectives, albeit ones that may be directly of relevance to contemporary concerns. At this stage we would prefer to leave the choice of period and geographical focus open, but this may need to be altered depending on the pattern of responses. The event is interdisciplinary so contributions that focus on such areas as gender, literature, art and popular culture, as well as theology and religious studies, are encouraged. People are encouraged to email Dominic Janes at d.janes@arts.ac.uk to indicate whether they would simply like to

- attend such an event,
- or would also be interested in participating in an informal discussion group (in which case do you have a particular topic you are interested in exploring?)
- or would also like to deliver a more formal paper (in which case please send a proposed title and c.300 word abstract) by 1 January 2015).

It is also envisaged that participants would be able to attend for all or part of the event. It is not envisaged that there will be any fees other than the cost of refreshments and we would hope that there will be financial assistance available for those giving papers. Regrettably, however, space restrictions mean that it may not be possible to accommodate papers that do not quite fit the focus of the event or requests to participate that arrive after the deadline. Finally, if you have any other questions, or if you think that the scope of this day could usefully be extended or amended, we would also be delighted to hear from you. We will then write round to everyone in early 2015 with a proposed programme and formal booking form. Our best wishes and we look forward to hearing from you.