



VOLUME 16, NUMBER 1  
EASTERTIDE, MARCH 2005

# GOD'S FRIENDS

JOINING AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN WORSHIP  
AND LIFE EXPERIENCE

## TALKING ABOUT SEX

**WHAT DOES THE  
CHURCH BLESS WHEN  
IT BLESSES GAY COUPLES?**

*By Juan Oliver*

**NATURAL GENDER AND  
SEXUALITY IN THE BIBLE**

*By Joan Roughgarden*

**COLUMN A AND COLUMN B**

*By Jacob Slichter*

**ABOARD THE  
DISCO BOAT QUEEN**  
AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES ALISON

On the cover: Feats of Magic #7, 2003. Collage on paper, 4 3/4" x 4 1/2". All artworks in this issue are by David King.

Below: Bringing Us Home, 2002. (From the "Air Goddesses" series.) Collage on paper, 8" x 8".

Background art throughout: Untitled, Gray Mosaic with Ellipses, 2002. Collage on paper, 6 3/4" x 7 3/4".

## THE FEATURED ART

How do you "talk about sex" and not show any sex? Our Art Editors looked for artwork that could join the conversation, talking in an intimate way about sexuality and personal experience, as the articles do. They hit the jackpot with collage artist David King of San Francisco, whose work explores his response to sexuality, spirituality, and HIV (he has been HIV-positive for 20 years) through the process of choosing, cutting, and juxtaposing images of men and women exercising, ballet dancers, divers, scientists, pilots, and lace doilies. "Growing up gay in a heterosexual world is to wonder where our emotions fit, and to constantly translate and or reinterpret the images we see around us," he says. "Though I was raised in a Catholic family, icons of Christianity have no power to connect me with the larger reality I believe is beyond the

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## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

In this time of massive human suffering through wars and continued acts of terrorism, it seems curious that so much attention has been focused upon issues of sexual identity. In our churches, our statehouses, and our courtrooms, we have been spending vast amounts of time debating the morality of sexual relations, in particular of gay relationships.

*God's Friends* has invited four noted thinkers and writers to explore the topic of sexuality in relation to spiritual life and practice. Joan Roughgarden, a professor of evolutionary biology at Stanford University, talks about sexuality in scripture as viewed through the lens of science. Juan Oliver, director of the Mercer School of Theology in New York, explores what it is we do as a church when we offer a blessing for same-sex couples. Author Jacob Slichter recounts his experiences trying to reconcile his deeply rooted Christianity with his sexual life as a single man. And in an interview, author and Roman Catholic priest James Alison talks about not talking about sexuality in Egypt, Great Britain, and America.

In the end, talking about these things is the only way to move forward in reconciling the sharp differences among members of our Anglican Communion and in society at large. We have very good conversations going on in these pages, and I hope you'll enjoy listening in.

Dave Hurlbert, Issue Editor

## LETTERS to *God's Friends*

*Our last issue, "Visual Arts as Incarnation," prompted quite a few new subscriptions as well as comments from readers. Their letters (and a few about earlier issues) are excerpted here. We're grateful for the feedback and for tips about other resources, and we hope to hear from more of you. —Ed.*

Dear Friends,

Thank you so very much for sending me the November 2004 issue of *God's Friends*. I am an artist, and I really was so encouraged as I read through it. I was impressed with the artwork and the articles. In fact I think the artwork was stronger because of the articles. I especially enjoyed [Olivia] Kuser's article and was challenged by the "conversation" article. Thank you, thank you.

Emily Frost  
Bolivar, Missouri

*We like it that Ms. Frost recognized that the words played a supporting role to the art in this issue—usually it's the other way around!*

Thank you for the beautiful issue—the effort to present a relevant word from the visual arts is met with my gratitude and hope! I'm still grieving the departure of *Christianity & the Arts*. *Image* has been a welcome presence. What you presented in a few pages is exceptional and admirable ... (and important!)

Rachelle Oppenhuizen  
Holland, Michigan

Dear editor,

Am enjoying the recent issue on Sacred Spaces [August 2004]. Since I'm in Philadelphia, I've experienced the new Cathedral; actually it was still in progress when I arrived. ... [I]n the context of revising a typically gothic building, it's a stunning space.

Anyway, as serendity would have it, the day after *God's Friends* arrived, the latest issue of *Science & Theology News* also arrived, and there's a fascinating related article re sacred space. Apparently, the Architects Institute of America has been holding workshops exploring architecture and neuroscience. As the article puts it: "the connection between design and devotion is under study by a group of clerics, neuroscientists and architects who are trying to understand how the mind reacts to the sensations of entering a house of worship." There is also an affiliate named the Academy of Neuroscience and Architecture. ... The website is: [www.stnews.org](http://www.stnews.org); editorial office, [info@stnews.org](mailto:info@stnews.org).

Hank Galganowicz  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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Scott as Kali, 2003. Collage on paper, 9 1/2" x 10".

## WHAT DOES THE CHURCH BLESS WHEN IT BLESSES GAY COUPLES?

By Juan Oliver

The two lovers, Jim and Peter, had asked me to dinner at a Middle Eastern restaurant near San Francisco's Castro district. A mutual friend put us in touch, and it was not long before we were meeting and greeting over hummus and baba ganoush.

"We were wondering if we can get married," they asked. In my role as an Episcopal priest in California in the early 1990s, I had to tell them, "Well, no, I'm not allowed to do that.... But first," I went on quickly, "tell me about yourselves. How did you meet?" And they unraveled their story: tentative early dates followed by an intense mutual fascination, and now, three years later, a sense that they were in this for the long haul.

"But why a service?" I questioned them.

"We are finding that this stuff of loving each other is kind of holy, and we'd like our families and friends to witness and support it."

"Holy?" I pressed, and they proceeded to talk about learning to love each other; about how their home had become a focal point for a wide community of friends; how in their love for each other they had begun to discover God at work—a transcendence beyond themselves and their daily concerns.

By the time the baklava came, their hands had found one another's and they were staring longingly at each other. I cut to the chase, unable to say anything else: "Well, I would be honored to thank God for your relationship."

A long silence ensued as they fought back tears. They had not dared think that this would be possible: thanking God for their relationship. But we did just that several months later, in a park in San Francisco.

### *Whom do we bless?*

The question, "What does the church bless when it blesses same-sex couples?" might better be phrased, "Whom do we bless?" And the short answer is, "We bless God." But why bless God? Aren't we the ones in need of blessing? Isn't blessing something that comes down from God to us—a kind of metaphysical fairy dust?

*The question, "What does the church bless when it blesses same-sex couples?" might better be phrased, "Whom do we bless?" And the short answer is, "We bless God."*

*Is a same-sex blessing a marriage, ritually speaking? If in marriage we are blessing God for the heterosexuality of the couple, the answer must be no. If in marriage we are blessing God for the commitment of the couple in love and faithfulness, the answer might well be yes.*

## WHAT DOES THE CHURCH BLESS

### *What does it mean to bless?*

Our idea of blessing originates in the Jewish tradition, where blessing is a prayer of thanks and praise that ascends to God. Jewish blessing (*berakah*) begins by praising God for what God has done: for example, the blessing at table over the bread simply says, “Blessed are you, our Lord, Ruler of the Universe, for you make grain to spring forth from the earth.” A more complex blessing, over the fourth cup of wine at the Passover seder, blesses God for the fruit of the vine and the yield of the fields, and ends with: “Have pity...on Israel your people ... and build Jerusalem, the city of holiness, in our days.” This blessing exhibits two distinct parts: thanking and praising God, and invoking God’s action (to build Jerusalem).

The same double structure of blessing is found in Christian worship, in prayers such as the Exultet at the Easter vigil, the blessing of water at baptism, and the Great Thanksgiving in the Eucharist. It is also present in the nuptial blessing in the marriage rite: “Most gracious God, we give you thanks for your tender love in sending Jesus Christ.... By the power of your Holy Spirit, pour out the abundance of your blessing upon [this couple], ... defend them, ... lead them, ...” etc. (*Book of Common Prayer*, page 430)

All of these Christian and Jewish blessings have a similar structure. First we bless God for being God, for creating and redeeming the world, and for the creature or relationship before us: bread, wine, light, water, a loving couple. Then we ask or invoke God’s grace and blessing upon them. Thus blessing comes full circle: we praise God, and we ask God to shower us with grace. In the western Christian tradition we have often shortened the structure to include only the second part: “May Almighty God bless you, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”—forgetting to bless God first.

### *Why would we bless God for gay and lesbian couples?*

It is clear from the nature of blessing that we cannot bless God for something that is awful, sinful, or degenerate. Our blessings acknowledge God’s loving presence in creation and redemption, and so it is not surprising to discover that people who cannot accept same-sex love cannot then bend their minds around the idea of a “same-sex blessing.” To them, such relationships, committed and faithful though they may be, cannot be a reason for praise and thanksgiving.

But in spite of the fact that some Christians feel this way, many Christian congregations have begun to thank God in public celebration for same-sex relationships. If you delve into their reasoning, it turns out that this is because they see all loving and faithful relationships as manifestations of the love and faithfulness of God.

### *And who blesses?*

It seems to me that, for these celebrations to take place, two different sets of people need to find reason to bless God. First, the couple must have a sense that this is “holy stuff” and move toward a decision to gather friends and family to celebrate it. They will be wanting, especially, to make a public celebration, since liturgy is by its nature social and public.

As an analysis of liturgical prayer quickly shows, the subject of the church is “us”—the congregation, as local instance of the church. The congregation, then, must also wish to bless God for this relationship, even when only a few congregants know the couple; that is, the congregation must in some way see the same-sex union as manifesting the love and faithfulness of God insofar as it is committed and faithful. We do not bless God for gayness any more (or less) than we bless God for straightness. We bless God for faithful love.

### *Is this marriage?*

The history of the development of the marriage rite is fascinating and full of variations, from the earliest fertility prayer over a bride to prayers at the door of the church—and, eventually, when the rite took on legal import, declarations of free intent, vows, and the declaration by the minister that the couple is legally wedded. Anglican bishop and author Kenneth Stevenson has pointed out that the unchanging core running through the history of marriage as a rite is twofold: commitment and blessing. The couple in some way is understood to have made a commitment (vows or no vows), and therefore we bless God, invoking God’s grace upon the couple to be able to live out that commitment.

Same-sex blessings can exist as a valid and significant church ritual, regardless of their legal import. Whether or not the union is legally recognized, the church must ask itself, “Is a same-sex blessing a marriage, ritually speaking?” If in marriage we are blessing God for the heterosexuality of the couple, the answer must be no. If in marriage we are blessing God for the commitment of the couple in love and faithfulness, the answer might well be yes.

*Juan Oliver is an Episcopal priest and director of Mercer School of Theology in Garden City, New York.*

## NATURAL GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE BIBLE

By Joan Roughgarden

Seven years ago I warily began to seek out the Bible's teachings on gender and sexuality. My goal was to learn what the "opposition" was saying, to discover why most American clergy found me and my loved ones so reprehensible. I wondered if the Bible was overrated. If it really is the word of God, the Bible must acknowledge the full scope of humanity's diversity. Does it? How is diversity discussed? Does the Bible command the persecution of gay, lesbian, and transgender people?

I came away inspired by the Bible—it's not overrated. Its teachings forcefully affirm the value of gay, lesbian, and transgender lives. Examining those teachings reveals that "Christian" activist political groups and senior clergy in many American denominations have unjustly commandeered the Bible as a weapon for prejudice and hatred.

LGBT Christians usually counter religious persecution by citing biblical passages where Jesus teaches love for everyone—"[T]hou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matt. 19:19)—and hope that any condemning passages in the Bible can somehow be downplayed. Perhaps this stance is too defensive. LGBT Christians, and all Christians who believe in God's inclusive love, need to reclaim the Bible, to learn what it actually says and not what some clergy want us to think it says.

Theologians have newly examined the few biblical passages that underpin the gay-persecution agenda. Perhaps the best known is a one-liner from Leviticus: "Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind" (Lev. 18:22). This passage has long been publicized as a direct prohibition against homosexuality. Not so.

Leviticus 18:22 speaks only of a class of sexual positions defined in antiquity as involving "penetration." Thrusting and entering from either front or rear, depending on whether conception was desired, was reserved for male-female intercourse. In contrast, male-male intercourse using the "intercrural" position was permitted: the couple stands face to face and one party thrusts between the thighs of the other. The ancient Greeks considered this missionary position of male-male sexuality to be "clean."

Gay Christians today deal with Leviticus 18:22 by pointing out various "unclean" practices undertaken by the very Christians who condemn homosexuality, including minutiae such as weaving cloth from two kinds of thread. Jesus invited people to move beyond the Leviticus laundry list of do's and don'ts; however, even those who do want to adhere to Leviticus are constrained only by ancient rules for what constitutes penetration. Thus Leviticus offers no grounds for excluding gays from unqualified membership in the church and from sharing in all its rituals and traditions.

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Preparing Harry, 2002.  
Collage on paper,  
6 1/2" x 10".

*“Natural” behavior is someone’s usual behavior. People who abandon God end up behaving unnaturally. People who depart from what is natural to themselves abandon who God has made them to be.*

My Spotter #2, 2003.  
Collage on paper, 6 1/4" x 3".

## NATURAL GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE BIBLE

The story of Sodom (Gen. 19) is also cited as condemning homosexuality. Again, not so. The sin of Sodom was that the townspeople attempted to rape visitors who had accepted their hospitality and protection. Whether the rape was homosexual or heterosexual was irrelevant.

Today, San Francisco is attacked as the Sodom of America by anti-gay activists. No. San Francisco is generous. If San Francisco ceased to care for its homeless, for its victims of AIDS, and for all people who face discrimination elsewhere; if San Francisco ceased to wed its citizens in the rotunda of City Hall; then San Francisco would commit the sin of Sodom, and the majestic dome of City Hall would become a pillar of salt.

Jesus himself does not condemn or even mention homosexuality. One must turn to Paul for any mention at all. In his letter to the Romans, while condemning people who have fallen into worshipping human and animal images, Paul describes depravity that includes “lusts” and “vile affections” (Rom. 1:24, 26). The next two verses place “lust” within a long list of depraved behaviors such as “fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness...” and condemn those who are “haters of God, spiteful, proud, boasters” (Rom. 1:29, 30). The people who have abandoned God suffer all these evils. Singling out homosexual from heterosexual lust as the target of Paul’s teaching is wrong. Paul’s letter does not focus on any particular vice for special condemnation but holds up the whole suite of behaviors as symptomatic of losing touch with God.

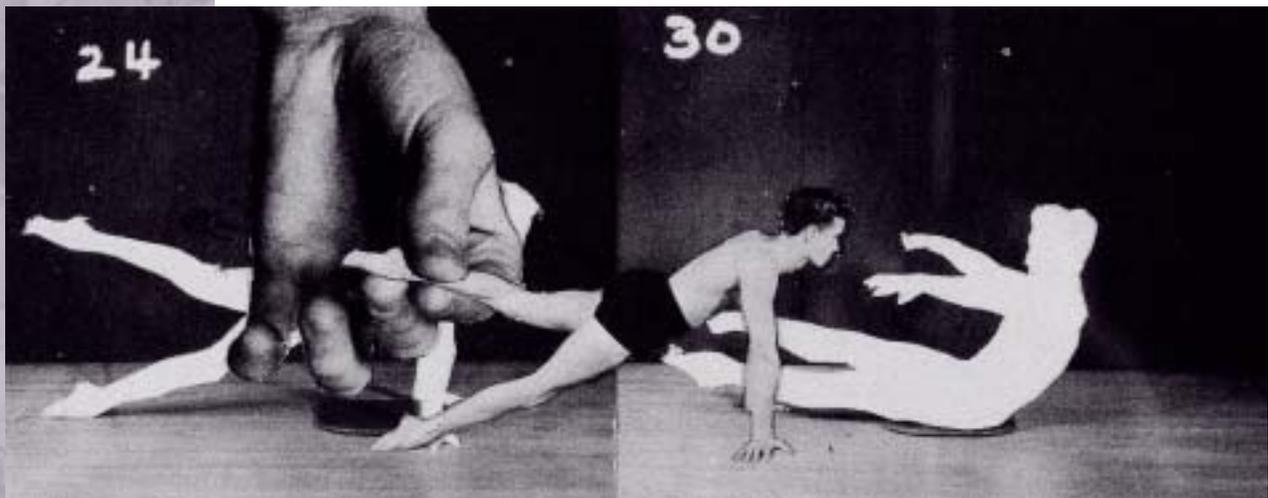
Paul does observe that “women did change the natural use into that which is against nature” and “and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly” (Rom. 1:26-27). If formerly God-fearing people abandon God, they act in ways unnatural for them and need counsel to return to God’s fold. Hence Paul’s letter—to guide them back to God.

Still, Paul places on the table the claim that homosexual sex is “against nature.” Is it? Is homosexuality against nature?

Theologians have observed two senses to “natural”: personal versus scientific. One could say that homosexuality is against nature in the scientific sense if it were rare or pathological among animals, and among people considered as part of the animal kingdom. But homosexuality is not rare. It occurs in native habitat among over 300 species of vertebrates, including our closest living relative, the bonobo, a species of chimpanzee. Throughout the day female bonobos often rub their genitals together, squeal in pleasure for a several seconds, and then go about their business of gathering food and raising young. These frequent, brief, and socially structured sexual contacts promote bonds of friendship for achieving cooperative solutions to problems. Intimate physical contact facilitates working together, coordination, and team play.

But however useful our current understanding is, it makes no sense to “refute” Paul with contemporary knowledge. The Bible is not an empirical theory subject to scientific test, like Aristotle’s ancient writings on animals; it is a spiritual and moral testament.

We return then to Paul’s use of “natural” in the personal sense, to matters of spiritual health, to the practical importance of retaining our relationship to God. “Natural” behavior is someone’s usual behavior. If someone of normally modest appetite gives way to an eating binge, one would say they were now behaving “unnaturally,” a red flag that something was amiss. People who aban-



don God end up behaving unnaturally. People who depart from what is natural to themselves abandon who God has made them to be.

The sin being committed today is not homosexuality, but betraying God by misrepresenting the Bible to underwrite persecution.

Still, it would have been helpful for today's times if the Bible had come right out and said something positive about homosexual people. Theologians have established that the Bible doesn't condemn homosexuality, but the Bible doesn't seem to endorse it either.

What are we to make of this silence about homosexuality? Perhaps we're not listening. If we attune our ears, we will hear not merely noncondemnation but full-fledged affirmation of people with varied expressions of gender and sexuality.

When I was a child in Sunday school, passages about "eunuchs" were mentioned briefly and quickly dismissed. Eunuch was an archaic category, not relevant to our modern world. Further Bible study reveals this dismissal as too hasty. The Bible mentions eunuchs in many contexts. Searching the keyword "eunuch" on a King James Bible web site returns 30 verses over ten books. Most importantly, the great prophet Isaiah and even Jesus himself speak at length of eunuchs—not in one-liners or offhand phrases, but entire parables.

In the Hebrew Testament, Isaiah teaches, "For thus saith the Lord unto the eunuchs ... unto them I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name" (Isa. 56:4, 5). In the Christian Testament, Jesus describes three kinds of eunuchs: those "which were so born from their mother's womb," those "which were made eunuchs of men," and those "which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake" (Matt. 19:12).

Jesus' characterization of eunuchs matches the Roman description that lumps people who were intersexed (born eunuchs), who were castrated (manmade eunuchs), and who became eunuchs on their own into an all-encompassing category. This category included gender-variant people like the Cybelean priestesses and others who switched gender, usually under religious auspices. Jesus does not describe eunuchs further, but in the next verse continues with his inclusive message, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me; for of such is the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 19:14). Because of the proximity of the verses, we surmise that eunuchs would be welcome too.

An explicit instruction to include eunuchs within the church appears later, in Acts, where baptism is detailed. The apostle Philip met a "eunuch of great authority" who was returning from Jerusalem, where he had gone to worship. He was sitting in his chariot reading Isaiah. The Spirit told Philip to approach the chariot, and the eunuch invited Philip to travel with him. "And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him" (Acts 8:26-39). This baptism welcomes one who is not only a eunuch but a black-skinned foreigner as well, setting a standard of inclusiveness that the Christian church has struggled to attain ever since.

No one disputes the Bible's extensive endorsement of eunuchs in both the Hebrew and Christian Testaments, but gay-persecutors might argue that the ancient category of eunuchs is obsolete and has nothing to do with the gay, lesbian, and transgendered people of our times. In fact, the Roman description of eunuchs contains our contemporary categories. Some eunuchs were feminine-identified. Firmicus Maternus reported, somewhat disparagingly, on eunuchs who



Feats of Magic #3, 2003.  
Collage on paper, 4" x 5 1/4".

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Eve, Rediscovered, 2002.  
Collage on paper, 6" x 6".

*To speak openly about  
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## COLUMN A AND COLUMN B

*By Jacob Slichter*

**D**espite my best efforts, I have never been able to shield my sex drive from my conscience. It was bad enough that I was shy around girls in high school, where I lagged behind my friends' experiences. By the time I got to college, the combination of my shyness with my growing spiritual practice effectively walled me off from the realm of dating and sex. I belonged to a radical evangelical fellowship, one that preached a very strict gospel of social justice and abstinence from drugs, alcohol, and premarital sex. From the others in my fellowship I hid the only relationship of my college years: three weeks during my sophomore summer with a woman who made love to me while saying "Jeff!" Other than that I had no dates, no relationships, no sex.

From my secular friends I hid the strict personal regimen my fellowship prescribed for its members. I also concealed the emotional and spiritual anguish that plagued me as I compared myself to others in the fellowship. I did not speak in tongues; I came from a privileged background; and I played the drums and wanted to be a rock star, an ambition that ran afoul of the fellowship's dim view of pop culture.

While my nonreligious friends enjoyed relationships and traipsed through flings and one-night stands, I stood back, wrestling with the rightness or wrongness of acting on my desires. My friends were amazed when I failed to exploit a smile and friendly conversation from an attractive woman. "Jake, what are you waiting for?" I couldn't tell them that I wasn't sure if God would approve. Besides that, bringing a woman to my apartment was out of the question: one of my roommates was the leader of my fellowship. (For several months our other roommate was a homeless man we had taken in during a blizzard, another secret I kept from my secular friends.)

My anxieties sent me into a tailspin. I feared I might blaspheme the Holy Spirit, commit suicide, or do something else that would result in my eternal damnation. Visions of hell, a silent white void from which there would be no escape, soon spawned acute insomnia. I walked the streets of Cambridge and Boston at three and four in the morning, trying to exhaust myself to the point of sleep. After three sleepless months I had a nervous breakdown, and one of the college chaplains walked me over to the campus infirmary as tears streamed down my face. When my secular friends

came to see me in my hospital bed or my family called on the phone, I couldn't tell them why I had lost my mind. "I'm OK. I just needed some rest." When the psychiatrists came by to talk to me, I kept my fear of hell under wraps. I knew such thoughts would be written off as crazy, one more reason for a nonbeliever to dismiss religion. I could imagine those psychiatrists and my friends saying "Poor guy, if only he didn't believe in all that religious mumbo jumbo." To speak openly about my inner turmoil, I thought, would be to slander God.

As I emerged from my breakdown, I reexamined my fear of hell and began to dismantle it. This spiritual reassessment continued after college, when I moved to San Francisco and joined St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church. I felt a growing sense of God's affirmation, which allowed me to examine the irrationality of my fears. "If I'm supposed to go around all day thinking about how to avoid hell, how will I ever do anything?"

Still, I felt that God had standards, and that some of those standards addressed sex. Could I allow myself to have sex with someone I might not marry? After fumbling in shyness for another three years, I found someone. Unsure if my interest in her would someday lead to the altar, I decided that I was sufficiently serious about her to have a relationship that included sex. Lots of mad, wild-eyed sex. "OK, God, I know this isn't exactly kosher," I thought, "but I can't wait any longer." Alas, the pleasure of sex mingled with guilt. For instance, one Saturday night while my girlfriend and I were having sex, the phone rang. For some reason, perhaps the late hour, I panicked and jumped out bed to answer, and suddenly I found myself talking to one of the evangelical preachers connected with my old college fellowship. He was calling just to say hello, but I felt as if God had placed this late-night call to say, "I see what you're doing!"

My girlfriend was already perplexed about my church life and irritated by how much time it absorbed. (The one time she came to church, for an Easter vigil, she walked out in tears, feeling terribly out of place.) So I kept my deliberations about sex and God secret. That I thought our sex life might be open to God's moral examination would have enraged her. After a few months we broke up. Church seemed to figure in our break-up, prompting me to wonder if I should date only Christian women, or religious women, or at least spiritually inclined women.

Resolved that I wasn't going to wait to be married to have more sex, I looked for a new relationship, while continuing to search for the ever-elusive set of guiding principles. Voices from my college fellowship echoed in my mind. Their theology of sex was strict: there's column A, missionary-approved sexual intercourse between married couples, and column B, everything else. I understood that I had already crossed the line by having premarital sex, but it seemed unreasonable to me that even husbands and wives were forbidden from exploring some of the sexual acts listed in column B. Surely the first few items in column B could be cut and pasted over to column A. I thought about what my two columns might look like. But in spite of my tinkering, column A always seemed too short while column B held my fascination.

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The Annunciation, 2002. (From the "Water Goddesses" series.)  
Collage on paper, 4 1/4" x 6".

## ABOARD THE DISCO BOAT QUEEN AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES ALISON

*Edited by Dave Hurlbert*

*It must be obvious that it's the heterosexual majority that is most likely to cause problems with marriage, rather than gay people. You would expect that a serious attempt to alter American society in favor of marriage would surely include an attempt to prohibit divorce.*

**T**he English Catholic theologian James Alison has been called one of today's most lucid and exciting writers on our relationship with the divine. He has lived and worked in the U.K., the U.S., and South America and is the author of several books, including *Knowing Jesus*, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, and *Raising Abel*. Of his most recent, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*, Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams said, "The very best theological books leave you with a feeling that perhaps it's time you became a Christian; this is emphatically such a book." Writes another reviewer: "These 'fragments' are bombshells, exploding religious idols and making way for a whole new appreciation of the place of desire in our life with God."

In February 2005, St. Gregory's Rector Donald Schell and his daughters, Sasha (a lecturer in history) and Maria (a freelance radio journalist), conducted this interview with Alison.

**DS:** *Today we have a struggle for moral values, in the Anglican Communion and in secular life as well. Sexuality appears to be the focus of the struggle. Why does sexuality—and homosexuality in particular—provoke so much righteous indignation in so many people here in America, in Britain, and across the world?*

**JA:** I'm not convinced that it's got to do with sexuality. I think that's a red herring. Sexuality, as Joan Roughgarden points out [in her writings and in her article in this issue], is a highly fluid reality. I think the real problem has to do with talking. And that's what's new and threatening. I suspect that most people really don't mind what other people do. But when we talk about it, this starts to create different social spaces. The line for most conservative people is, "I don't care what you do, but must you say it?"

An example: a couple of years ago, Egyptian security forces arrested 50 gay men on a disco boat on the Nile. I think the boat was called *Queen*, appropriately enough. These guys were charged with some ludicrous crime against Islam by the supposedly secular Egyptian government—which doesn't have such a crime on its law books—and they were beaten up and forced to confess. Eventually, after two years and lots of international protests, they were almost all let go. The whole thing was farcical.

Now, what you had was a supposedly secular Egyptian government offering bait to the Islamic fundamentalists. And what really irked the fundamentalists was not what these people were doing but that they called themselves gay. In other words, there were people saying, "I am." And that's what was intolerable.

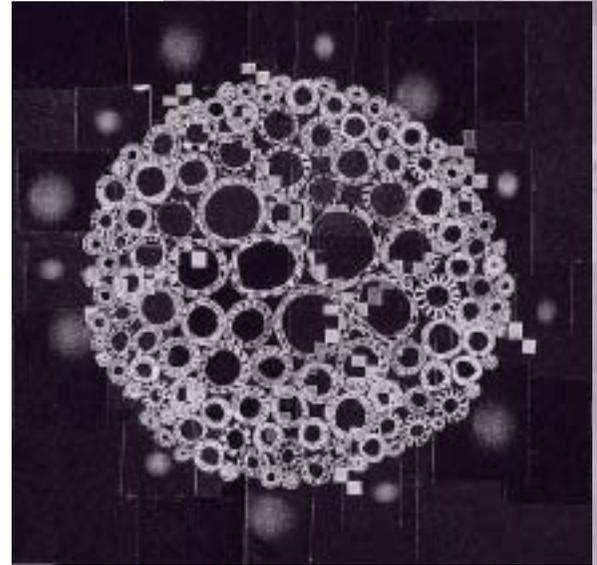
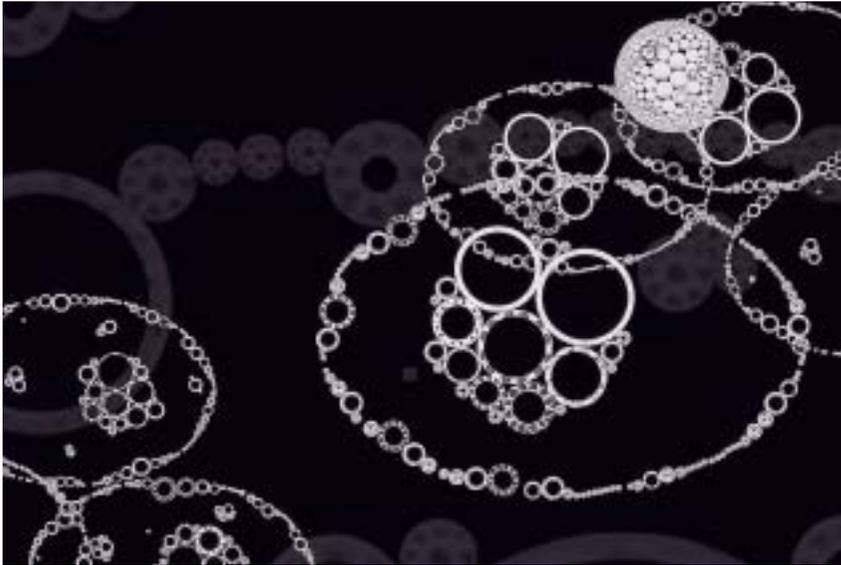
It's no accident: President Mubarak clamping down on the boat could have been any state governor here in America, wanting to curry favor with the local Jerry Falwell crowd. There really is no difference.

**DS:** *So would you make that connection between the boat on the Nile and the lobbying for an anti-gay-marriage amendment to the U.S. Constitution? Is it the same thing?*

**JA:** If it were not the same thing, you would surely have a significant body of people insisting that, along with the anti-gay-marriage amendment, there must be a Constitutional prohibition on divorce and remarriage. It must be obvious that it's the heterosexual majority that is most likely to cause problems with marriage, rather than gay people. You would expect that a serious attempt to alter American society in favor of marriage would surely include an attempt to prohibit divorce. You have a very high divorce rate. As I understand it, Bible Belt states tend to have a higher divorce rate than most other states.

**DS:** *Thinking about what one says rather than what one does, I'd like to know your reaction to what happened last year to Jeffrey John. As you know, he was appointed Anglican bishop of Reading, but because he is gay (though evidently celibate), there was a huge reaction from evangelicals, and he was forced to decline.*

**JA:** I think that what the evangelicals got right and the liberals didn't understand is that the appointment of Jeffrey John, an openly gay man, as a bishop was a *de facto* change of doctrine. I think it was desirable, but still, a *de facto* change of doctrine was sprung on people as though it were simply a matter of increased honesty. In an earlier case, a leading Anglican archbishop was forced to make a press announcement to say that his sexuality was "a gray area." The difference



between that world and the world of Jeffrey John is not about sexual practice; it's about being able to represent who you are. The notion of "the good" has changed.

**MS:** *What do you mean by "good" and the notion of goodness?*

**JA:** From the point of view of the constituency of the evangelicals, it means that someone who was previously considered to be a "bad thing"—not him personally but what he symbolizes—has now become a normal or a "good thing." Whereas previously the other guy [the archbishop] had the decency to keep the old system of goodness alive by agreeing to pretend to be a "bad thing." Now that's a change of world.

**DS:** *"I'm a sinner; my sexuality is a gray area, I do my best"—that preserves the other way?*

**JA:** Yes. And which is still the official position, as far as I can see, of the U.S. military, which is a body that teaches a masculine context. One thing they don't tolerate in the military is people saying "I am." But this is just the old rule of how all-male institutions worked until 50 years ago. That's changed; today you have women serving in the armed forces.

And now in Iraq you get a woman in that most male of activities, the public sexual humiliation of male prisoners. It just shows the fluidity! When I saw that picture [of PFC England humiliating male prisoners], I thought of another picture published at nearly the same time: a lesbian couple coming down the steps of city hall in Boston with a marriage license. I wanted to put both of those pictures on a Christmas card and send them to all the bishops in my church, saying, "Which of these two is Sodom?"

**DS:** *What's the religious dimension on this?*

**JA:** I don't think there's a separate thing called "religion" in that sense. Any form of identity politics is always going to tend towards the religious, ultimately. There's never going to be a clear distinction. It's worth remembering that the central icon of Christianity—the only viable image of God we have—is a crucified criminal. It is not a comforting icon for a law-and-order religion.

It is scarcely surprising that some people want there to be very clear things which make them right and other people wrong—things that make a clear difference between "us" and "them." Among some heterosexuals I think there has been a displacement of the real difficulty about being a man and a woman together onto people who—provided we don't know them personally—are "ruining everything."

**DS:** *And now we are seeing a newer discourse and a new norm emerge. How much of this de facto change has been the result of gay rights activists within and outside of the church?*

**JA:** It's not as though it's been an outbreak of courage on the part of lots of individual queers. It seems to me to that the capacity of gay males to start to consider ourselves normal is the direct result of women having started to become equals or comparative equals within previously all-male groups. So the way the male group holds itself together doesn't work anymore.

*Above left: Detail of Untitled (Cells), 2004. Digital print, 40" x 60". Above: Study 5, 2002. Collage on paper, 2" x 2". (Both from the "Edge of Space" series.)*

*The line for most conservative people is, "I don't care what you do, but must you say it?"*

*The more worked up people get about something, the sillier the rhetoric gets. And they're forced back into reality. Just think how the whole debate has moved towards some sort of concession in many areas, that of course you need civil rights and perhaps even domestic partnership.*

## ABOARD THE DISCO BOAT QUEEN

*Continued from page 13*

You could imagine men sitting in a club in the 19th century saying, "What's-his-name here: an exciting fellow; not the marrying type." That was a world in which blind eyes would be turned. Maybe certain things would happen: you tipped off the new serving boy to be a little careful when he was around So-and-so. Everything was managed discreetly; you avoided scandal. If there really were a scandal you would give the chap a revolver and say, "Go and do the right thing." Not that long ago, in the 1930s, when King George V was told about somebody who was gay, he said, "I thought people like that shot themselves!"

Now women come into the midst of all-male societies, and they're simply not bothered by the same things. Donald, in your lifetime the Episcopal Church started having female clergy members, and they don't mind who's gay. They must have found sometimes that it's easier to get on with fellow clergy who are gay.

**SS:** *So is this about men performing masculinity in front of women, who aren't actually that bothered by this performance?*

**JA:** Curiously, I think that part of the difficulty is men's shame at not knowing how to perform masculinity, once the rules of the game are over. That is a real insecurity, because no one really knows what it is to be a man anymore. You could be a man when there was such a thing as "queers," and you weren't one. But now there's such a thing as "gay," and whether you are or aren't, it means that being a man is more of a risky enterprise, and there aren't clear ground rules. Males have far less of a fixed identity than females, isn't that true? Our comparative biological uselessness makes it much more difficult for us to work out who we are and what we're supposed to do. Paternity is not a biological thing to the same degree that motherhood is.

**DS:** *Women are shifting their place in the culture, and that is driving this debate about sexual roles. I have thought that we've spent the last 2,000 years trying to figure how to live out St. Paul's words: "In Christ there is neither slave nor freed, Jew nor Greek, male nor female." They're all terms about "the other."*

**JA:** If my memory serves me, in that list of dualities the crucial duality is not phrased "male nor female" but "male and female." That is even more radical. It's saying, "no longer a world divided between two."

**DS:** *Is it a vain fantasy for a theologian or a clergyman to look and say, "St. Paul is telling us that the coming of Christ is going to turn our world upside-down," and that we are living out the consequences of that message today?*

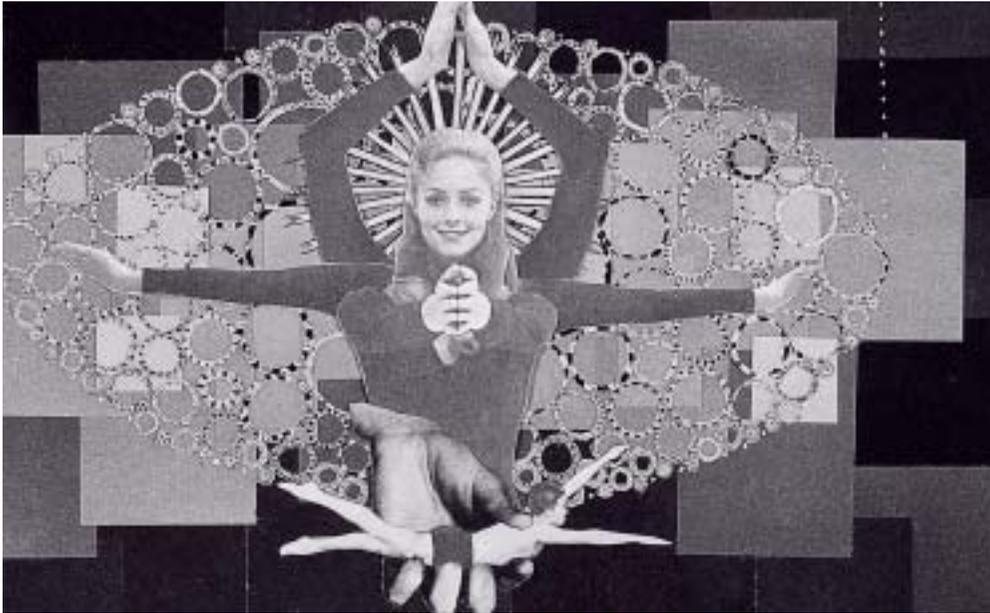
**JA:** We have no resolution. All attempts at resolution are failed sacrifices, attempted by people who know they shouldn't, because the one true sacrifice has already happened. So all attempts to resolve things into a neat "good" or "bad" are always going to be undone. This is both terrifying and a key to our freedom. It's what I call "navigating wrath."

What you would expect to happen as each taboo goes down is for the next thing to surf past and hit you on the head. That's the picture that Paul gives: of people escaping from wrath, quite literally. But the wrath became an anthropological phenomenon: the wrath of people who wanted a world in which the good was the good and the bad was the bad.

**DS:** *One thing I notice is that public discourse about this conflict is framed largely in terms of two camps: people who claim they care about moral values and people who are—as the press frames them—tolerant and blasé. What difference does this make?*

**JA:** The more worked up people get about something, the sillier the rhetoric gets. And they're forced back into reality. You can see that. Just think how the whole debate in this country has moved towards some sort of concession in many areas, that of course you need civil rights and perhaps even domestic partnerships—just so long as it isn't "marriage."

But how are we going to give a soft landing to those people still living in the old reality? How are we going to let them off the hook? That's the key to all these things. And that's what I've spent some time thinking about in my own [Roman Catholic] church. I think many of my own church authorities know perfectly well that they've lost this argument in the long term. We need a line of reasoning so they can not feel humiliated, and can take part in the discussion. That means moving forward to a position of extreme spaciousness, saying, "I don't know whether I'm getting this right or wrong, but I know that it's bigger than me. I don't particularly mind losing, but let's see what we can do."



Kali Girl #7, 2005.  
Collage on paper, 9 1/2" x 6 1/2".

## NATURAL GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE BIBLE

*Continued from page 7*

“feminized their faces, rubbed smooth their skin, and disgraced their manly sex by donning women’s regalia.... They nurse their tresses and pretty them up woman-fashion; they dress in soft garments.” Apuleius said that such eunuchs renounced their previous masculine identities and called one another “girls” in private. Such eunuchs were evidently marrying as women too. Other eunuchs were boyish and partook of homosexual relations with older men. And still other eunuchs were successful in the public space of men, holding powerful positions as ministers in imperial court and leading military campaigns. Eunuchs were common enough that writers referred to them with phrases such as “a crowd of eunuchs, young and old,” “armies of eunuchs,” “troops of eunuchs,” and so forth.

The human sexual diversity that we see in today’s America has always existed, on the streets of ancient Jerusalem and Rome as now in San Francisco. These are the very people to whom Isaiah offers “a place and a name,” whom Philip affirms “thou mayest” receive baptism, and whom Jesus accepts as having “made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake.”

Searching the Bible for affirmation of “homosexuality” is a waste of time. Homosexuality as a category of personal identity emerged relatively recently—during the late 1800s in Europe. The Bible doesn’t speak about MP3 players, bonobos, or gays. These are contemporary categories. The underlying spectrum of human diversity is located in more ancient categories, and the Bible’s affirmation of all those people is relevant to us now.

How can we follow the Bible’s teaching to give a place and a name to all people? Beyond simply allowing all people who believe in God and Jesus to be baptized, confirmed, married, ordained, and installed in the church, we need to develop a special liturgy to bless gay, lesbian, and transgendered people when they “come out.” Few people in the straight, gender-normative majority can appreciate the sense of fear, failure, and disease that people experience when they come out. In some Native American cultures, coming out took place in a public ceremony that endorsed the person’s value and future role in society. In our culture, coming out is secret and solitary. Instead, let’s imagine a community of faith that, when a person says, “Let me hold up this about me,” responds with “Let us hold this together.” In this way we can follow the teachings of Isaiah to give “within my walls a place and a name” for lesbian, gay, and transgendered people.

*Joan Roughgarden is Professor of Biological Sciences and of Geophysics at Stanford University. Her latest book, Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People, is published by the University of California Press.*

### FURTHER READING

- Dover, K. J. 1978. *Greek Homosexuality*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Helminiak, Daniel A. 1994. *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*. Alamo Square Press, New Mexico.
- Kuefler, Mathew. 2001. *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity*. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago, Illinois.

*Let’s imagine a community of faith that, when a person says, “Let me hold up this about me,” responds with “Let us hold this together.” In this way we can follow the teachings of Isaiah to give “within my walls a place and a name” for lesbian, gay, and transgendered people.*

## COLUMN A AND COLUMN B *continued from page 9*



Offering Wisdom, 2001.  
(From the "Altar Boys" series.)  
Collage on paper, 5 3/4" x 3 1/2".

Interestingly, I learned that members of my old college fellowship were not as offended by my premarital relationship as I had feared. "As long as it's with a woman," one of them told me. (Evidently I was OK in columns A and B as long as I didn't hop over to column C.) The more I thought about the project of classifying various sexual practices as good, bad, and really bad, the more medieval it seemed—like snipping out pictures from *The Joy of Sex* and rearranging them to form a sexual version of Dante's circles of hell.

As I went on to new relationships, I kept my ruminations on the morality of sex to myself. I didn't want to say to my church friends, "I'd love to have sex with \_\_\_\_\_, but I don't know if I could ever marry her. What should I do?"

On the other hand, when I moved to Minneapolis to pursue my rock-music career, talking with my secular friends wasn't much easier. If I said, "\_\_\_\_\_ is really sexy, but I don't think I want to have a relationship with her," those friends would look at me with amazement. "So sleep with her! She's an adult." I didn't want to pry open the awkward subject of my faith and say that I thought the commandment to love one's neighbor might demand that I abstain from a purely sexual relationship, even if both parties signed off on the idea.

As much as I tinkered with my moral criteria for sex—far more liberal than those of my evangelical friends from college, far more conservative than those of my secular friends—I remained snared in the same old legalistic game: "What am I allowed to do?" As I continued my cautious course of dating and infrequent sex, my libido and my conscience continued their agonizing tug of war, neither side ever achieving a complete victory.

My engagement (to a nonbeliever, as it turns out) brought all of that to an end. Once committed to my fiancée, I felt "legal" (and somewhat cowardly for needing to feel that way). I set aside the question, What am I allowed to do? I saw a new question in its place: What if God is there not to restrain my desire but to liberate it?

Since transgression, column B, is always more tantalizing than obedience, column A, perhaps I should examine exactly what I'm

choosing to obey or transgress. What idols have enslaved me? Have I allowed those idols to imprint their false authority so deeply into my conscience that liberating myself from them would feel wrong? In that case, maybe the thrill of transgression is something to embrace.

For example, I know that, every day, I put on the false authority of being male. It's as if I'm wearing a cloak with stitching that reads, "Just a friendly reminder that you should take me more seriously than you take her." That cloak confers upon me inestimable benefits. As I think of stripping it off and surrendering myself to a new order of things, I feel the erotic charge that accompanies any dive into a threatening but exhilarating unknown. To know that I would be defying a false authority only deepens the thrill.

Though I have not so much dived as dipped my toe into those waters, at least now I can see that hiding my sex life from my religious friends and hiding my faith from my secular friends were two responses to the same assumption. The statements "God is there to rein in your desire" and "All this belief in God is keeping you from having a good time" are like a photograph and its negative. They present the image of a god who seeks to confine us rather than to set us free. To say "I see God differently" is to defy a deeply rooted and frightening authority within me. Some older part of me shouts out a warning: "Wait! What if you're wrong?" I could be wrong, but the thrill of shaking off that voice tells me otherwise.

*Jacob Slichter, a member of St. Gregory's Church since 1984, is a musician and a writer. His recently published book, So You Wanna Be A Rock & Roll Star, details his experiences in the music business as drummer for the rock band Semisonic. He lives with his fiancée in New York City.*

**LETTERS** *continued from page 2*

Hi,  
I read a story in your magazine in which a song or hymn called "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam" was mentioned. I've only heard this song performed by Nirvana and I would really like to know the original Christian lyrics. I've searched the Internet for it but I can't seem to find it. You wouldn't by any chance know them? The story was "I sing a song of the saints of God" by Dave Hurlbert from November 2003.

Per [last name withheld by request]  
*via e-mail from Sweden*

*Author Dave Hurlbert was surprised to learn of the Nirvana connection and happy to share the words to his Southern Baptist childhood favorite.*

Dear Editor,

The inspiring vision of the Gospel-at-work that is being lived out at St. Gregory's gives me hope that the church can change to better incarnate the work and mission of Christ!

As a seminary student at the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas, I am currently writing a research paper on re-envisioning preparation for baptism and table fellowship. After viewing a film of St. Gregory's liturgy in one of my classes, I wanted to know more about the theology supporting it. In an article entitled "The Font Outside Our Walls," I found a reference to an article by Rick Fabian entitled "Patterning the Sacraments after Christ" from *God's Friends*, March 1, 1995. As the magazine index [on *God's Friends* website] does not extend that far back, could you help me find that article?

Thanks and blessings,  
Hilary Martin  
*Austin, Texas*

*It's good to know that articles from a decade ago are still reverberating. Thanks, Hilary.*

**GREGORY OF NYSSA**, a fourth-century bishop, theologian, and patron of St. Gregory's Church, saw life as unending progress towards discovering God at work among humanity, and sin as refusal to keep growing in this discovery. In this journal, which takes its name from his writings, we aim to further Gregory's vision by featuring two kinds of work:

- ⊕ essays on liturgy and church practice, focusing on fresh and ancient approaches to corporate worship that honor human experience as an opening to God;
- ⊕ writing and art by people who are searching for truth in their lives.

We are committed to the sharing of authentic personal experience as opposed to ideas or opinions. We welcome the voices of Christians, people of other faiths, and people of no particular faith.

**GOD'S FRIENDS** is published three times yearly by St. Gregory's Episcopal Church. Articles from past issues of *God's Friends* are posted on our website: [www.godsfriends.org](http://www.godsfriends.org). Certain articles appear exclusively on the website.

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Forthcoming issues will focus on

- ⊕ Drawing Youth to the Table
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- ⊕ Recovery

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**T**his is true perfection: not to avoid a wicked life because we fear punishment, like slaves; not to do good because we expect repayment, as if cashing in on the virtuous life by enforcing some business deal. On the contrary, disregarding all those good things which we do hope for and which God has promised us, we regard falling from God's friendship as the only thing dreadful, and we consider becoming God's friend the only thing truly worthwhile.

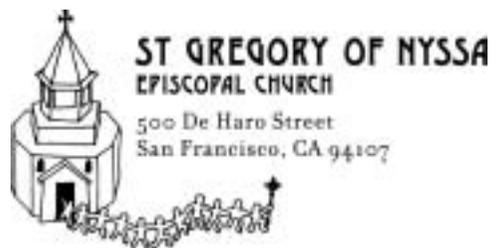
GREGORY OF NYSSA



Bodyguards for Her, by David King, 2002. (From the "Air Goddesses" series.)  
Collage on paper, 8 1/4" x 7 1/4"

## THE FEATURED ART continued from page 2

world we live in. So I've created my own icons of faith. My angels and goddesses are the saints that help guide me on my journey." David's collages have been shown in Europe and much of the U.S. He is proud to be participating in the exhibit Visual Aid at 16, opening April 15 at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. More of his work and information can be found at [www.davidkingcollage.com](http://www.davidkingcollage.com).



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