

BY KATIE SHERROD

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James Alison: Scapegoats, Class Fairies, and God



Note: This article is based on the lectures and books by English Roman Catholic theologian James Alison, a face-to-face interview on May 1, 2006, and follow-up discussions via e-mail.

- *Befriending a Vengeful God.*
ABC Radio National program, Encounter
October 2004
<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/enc/stories/s1222837.htm>
- *Blindsided by God: Reconciliation from the Underside*
Presentation for "Anatomy of Reconciliation" Conference, Trinity Institute, New York City,
30 January – 1 Feb 2006
<http://jamesalison.co.uk/texts/eng26.html>
- *Collapsing the Closet in the House of God: Opening the Door on Gay/Straight Issues*
James Alison
Cardoner Lecture at Creighton University (Omaha, USA), 27 September 2005
<http://jamesalison.co.uk/texts/eng16.html>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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James Alison. *Photo used with kind permission of itsintheair-twincities.com and jamesalison.co.uk.*

From time immemorial, one of the ways humans have tried to create and keep social order is by sacrificing “the wicked other,” the scapegoat. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, it took the Cold War down with it. This meant the loss of the West’s most reliable scapegoat—communism.

But other scapegoats were available, and what’s more, almost crying out to be so named by daring to act as if they were human. Add the AIDS crisis into the mix, and the vacancy didn’t last long.

Yes, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people were a perfect fit for a post 9/11 U.S., post 3/11 Spain, post 7/7 London-train-and-bus-bombing world obsessed with a need for order and security.

So when LGBT people stepped out of the closet, they stepped into the bull’s eye of a global-sized target.

Indeed, we are aware of the existence of “the closet” only because increasing numbers of LGBT people refused to stay there.

Instead, they starting acknowledging that, yes, they are gay or lesbian or bisexual or

transgendered, and that is that. For too long the question for LGBT people was not, “How do I fit in?” but rather, “Am I allowed to be at all?” For these hundreds of thousands the answer to that question is a resounding “Yes!”

They are ready to stake their lives on it.

In doing so, they teach us that being in the place of scapegoat, the place of shame, can be survived. Indeed, time after time they demonstrated that people “just being” lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered can flourish.

This courageous act repeated hundreds of thousands of times around the globe in the last few decades constitutes a genuine anthropological discovery about what it is to be human. It explodes “traditional” notions of human sexuality, family, and, perhaps most unsettling of all, about goodness.

The Anglican Communion has not been immune to the effects of this anthropological discovery. The opening of the closet door has reverberated across worldwide Anglicanism like shock waves after an earthquake, threatening to split it apart.

Given that LGBT people are not going to just go away, and given that many parts of the Anglican Communion believe LGBT people are true children of God just as they are, how does the Church navigate these changes?

Since the subject of human sexuality set off the recent controversy one place to begin is with someone we all know—the class fairy, the class faggot.

You know who I mean: the boy (it is usually a boy, but all-girl institutions have class fairies too) who everyone picks on because he is “queer.” This is the person who’s life we make a living hell.

We erase him or her as human. This person is the designated scapegoat, and everyone in the playground/class/workplace/home/seminary/church who isn't athletic, or big, or handsome, or pretty, or whatever the going trend is, prays that he or she will not end up there. At some level, we all know there is nothing redeeming about this person's suffering in this place of shame in which we've placed him or her. But in some inchoate way every schoolchild feels the necessity of someone occupying that space. We define ourselves as good by not being him.

It is a sad old story we all know too well.

But Roman Catholic theologian James Alison, who is a gay man, tells it in a new way that offer clues to navigating the changes.

In his story, the class fairy, Fernando, suddenly goes away to another school. His classmates find they don't know how to play any more without their "bouncing rugby ball in human form." But soon they pick another class fairy to kick around and all is right in their world.

There are two obvious poles in this story: the blind persecutors and the victims.

For the Jocks, Alison says, "This was rugby by other means as far as they were concerned, and for whom this was just boys being boys."

For Fernando, "This was a sink or swim experience—either he would have been completely destroyed and either killed himself or been embittered for life, or else he will have emerged as some people do from this experience, immeasurably stronger."

But then this two-pointed story becomes triangular, for Alison brings in the third

party—the almost-rans.

"This is the group of people for whom it was quite important that the finger fall on Fernando."

For them, this isn't sport by other means. Fernando being persecuted means they are spared.

"Now for those people, this classroom incident, which is repeated in a thousand playgrounds in schools of both sexes and mixed sexes in all the countries of the world as far as I know, this is a very profound place of psychological, moral and spiritual formation, because people don't just do such things, they become someone as a result of participating in such things, which is true of all of us," Alison said on an October 2004 ABC Radio National program, *Encounter*, entitled "Befriending a Vengeful God."

But then Alison offers other chapters. In one Fernando's father suddenly becomes a governor and Fernando visits his classmates as the son of a powerful man.

Well, the classmates can deal with that—"when we had the big stick, we beat him up, now he's got a big stick, he's going to beat us up; that's part of the same world."

In another, Fernando comes back hurt and angry and wounded. The classmates can deal with that. They might wonder why he came back at all, but "it's still quite comforting to know that it hurt. He is still part of the same world. The way in which we made ourselves good by having someone bad like him, it's still stable."

But in the last chapter Fernando returns completely happy.

The classmates don't handle that well at all. Indeed, there are people for whom this return of Fernando is "seriously

destabilizing.”

Why? Because Fernando is not respecting the place of shame. And by not respecting it, he is threatening the whole system of goodness that depends on having someone “bad” against whom we can define ourselves as “good.”

“This begins to be very destabilizing because it’s not someone who fits within any of the relationships of power that we’re used to. It’s someone who appears to be just there, occupying this space. And that causes a very considerable amount of unease, because actually I really quite depended for my ability to relate to other people on it being really bad to be there, and on avoiding being there myself, and so the way I formed a bond with other people, and my way of belonging with them, actually is quite dependent on that. And he seems to be saying it doesn’t matter. That’s quite disturbing.”

But it gets worse, Alison says, because this bloody Fernando doesn’t leave.

“He continues to be happy and he’s there for several days and after a bit, something even more awful begins to dawn. It was a set-up. We had thought that we were the ones who were the protagonists in this story, and that Fernando was the butt of our humour and our athletic prowess and all that. But it begins to emerge that actually Fernando had allowed himself to occupy that space deliberately. This has actually been planned.”

Yes, indeed, it seems that Fernando did plan to allow himself to occupy the place of class fairy. He knew the others need someone to be there, because they have no other way to form group togetherness.

When others grasp this, perceptions shift. All the while we thought we were the ones

writing the script someone else actually had been in charge, making use of our own plot to help us see that the story doesn’t have to be this way.

As St. Paul is trying to tell us, Alison writes in *Blindsided by God, Reconciliation from the Underside*, “Jesus gave himself up to be killed by us, finding himself in a role in a typical scenario of the very worst kind of our human behaviour, where we most violently and stupidly blind ourselves to who we are and what we are doing, but he has entered in not as a puppet master, but as the victim, one who understands in advance what was to happen, and explained it to his disciples.

“To be killed takes no power at all—in fact it is the very symbol and meaning of powerlessness. However, to be able to occupy the place of powerlessness, shame and death publicly, within a given developing human narrative tradition, but taking, and living out that narrative tradition in a direction it had never fully imagined; and to do it deliberately, and as a creative act, this takes more power than a human can imagine. And this is because it is a power that works at the human level, and yet is not in rivalry with, and not run by, death.

“In short, there is no ambivalence, no caprice, and no ‘out-to-get-you’ in the power that enabled Jesus to live into his death in the way he did. It is pure, unambivalent ‘I am for you starting where you are.’”

This has consequences. In this new reality, Alison tells us, all anthropological structures in which identity depends on “the other,” indeed all rivalries, squabbles, fights, are revealed as illusion.

And this suggests “a spaciousness, a lack of rivalry, a liking, a desire to be with, that suggests that really the purpose of forgiveness is the possibility of creating a new we, something that didn’t exist yet.”

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Here is a place where reconciliation can begin, even among those most estranged.

"Our starting place is that of people who are being forgiven," Alison says.

The Fernando story brings up dimensions of forgiveness that challenge us, because usually when we think of forgiving someone, we think of forcing ourselves to be nice to jerks. Aren't we the virtuous ones! We're in control of the struggle.

So when someone we've victimized comes toward us we flinch, expecting vengeance. Then they disarm us by forgiving us instead of trying to dominate us.

What's more, Alison tells us, they are "calling forth in you a you that you didn't know was there. They're not treating you as what you thought you were, but as something else, which you then find yourself becoming. Being forgiven means being let go. Someone is letting you go. Not in the sense of dismissing you but unbinding you from a whole series of things that you had thought were part of you. A new me is being created that I'm the recipient of, rather than the person who's running the show."

What Alison is talking about here is grace, this spacious creating of us as a new "we" that is more than we ever were.

We do not control this process, we only inhabit it.

This is salvation as a process instead of a one-time event. And it's a lot more work.

Here's why.

Alison offers the simple, but startling insight that any system of goodness that sets up a

world of good and bad, blessing and curse, cannot be from God, because God is only blessing, only good.

Such a system is dangerous, a "sacred trap," because it makes being moral dependent on there being a wicked "other" against whom we can derive our identity as being good. Rather than promulgating love and peace, such a system divides us into "good" and "bad", with the "good" insiders able to feel quite virtuous in persecuting the "bad" outsiders.

Of course, this system is also crazy making, because each of us works with, lives with, and loves people that someone somewhere in such a system is defining as good and someone else as bad. We ourselves are most likely judged "good" by some people and "bad" by others.

In the Anglican Communion, such a system means there are hearty attempts by some people to make lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people the "bad" ones against whom we can all be "good." There are equally hearty attempts by others to make the conservative orthodox the "bad" ones who will make everyone else "good." Then there are those who approve of women's ordination and those who do not, those who think remarriage after divorce is just fine and those who think it anathema, those who . . . well, you get the idea.

The same thing is happening in the civic discourse of the United States as we busily divide each other into red or blue camps.

This system of goodness as judged over against wickedness compels us to find a scapegoat, someone to occupy the place of shame, the place of the curse. It compels us, in fact, to hate our neighbor.

"This anthropological structure would leave us in the terrible situation of being

permanently divided against ourselves, since even when we want to be good, we find that our very being is over against others, and leads us to treat them in a way that makes it impossible for us to be good. In fact, it makes us haters of our neighbours, and reduces us to the level of our hatred, however little we want it to. That would be the world of permanent scandal, the inescapable double-bind, of dangerous goodness, and there would be no escape from the “other” over against whom I define myself so as to receive goodness,” Alison writes.

This sounds drearily familiar to anyone in the Anglican Communion, this world of “permanent scandal, of dangerous goodness.”

That’s why it is here that we begin to get another glimpse of how Alison’s story of the class fairy might help the Anglican Communion as it struggles toward reconciliation. But this can work only if we think of the Anglican Communion as a collection of human beings, not as some abstract churchly institution.

As Alison said in a recent interview, “This is not churchly work. In the first instance, it’s human work. It’s not actually structural, it’s about a certain way of being human. It’s anthropological, not ecclesiastical and the anthropological cannot be sorted out by clerical proxy. And we can’t resolve this by having a human rights argument.”

Alison thinks the consecration of Gene Robinson, while important, has worked as a cosmetic protection, enabling people on both sides in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion to avoid having to work through this issue in other ways.

But the work is being done—in PFLAG, in civil unions, in gay proms, in people loving a gay friend, a lesbian daughter, a gay son.

“The human work is pushing the institution. The churchly question is how do we navigate the change?” Alison said in an interview.

The answer should be obvious to us all—the Holy Spirit.

“This is exactly how the Holy Spirit seems to have been operating as it collapses the closet, and opens the door. What for many long years was a characterization of people as necessary ‘bad guys’ within a system of goodness, has been collapsing with astonishing speed over the last fifty years or so.”

Alison declares that it is only as we begin to live in the midst of this process, this anthropological discovery of what it means to be human, will we be able to work out new ways of relating to each other in the midst of what once seemed an impossible reality.

Indeed, the world has been living in the midst of this process for more than a generation, and acknowledged or not, this fact is changing individuals and, in turn, changing institutions.

“Encouraged by the growing good will shown by the civil governments [toward LGBT people] in our own and other continents, some of us, amongst whom I count myself, are proposing we let drop a link in the chain of that implacable opposition, and suggesting it is quite possible that the Church can, without any damage to its divine doctrine and mission, change its characterization of gay and lesbian people, and changing its characterization, change also its position with relation to the civil laws which normalize the lives of such people,” Alison said in an essay in *Opening up: Speaking out in the Church*.

But we are in new territory here, he cautions. We must move slowly in this terrain where tectonic plates of various doctrines are

pushing against one another.

But we must move, for he reminds us that many people are struggling to live holy lives in the midst of this collision of elements of Catholic doctrine.

"When people say to gay and lesbian people, 'You should just be obedient to the teaching of the Church' it is no frivolity to reply 'Sure, but which one? To the uninterrupted teaching about grace and original sin? Or to the recent characterization which the Vatican Congregations now consider necessary in order to maintain the traditional prohibition? Because both together, at the moment it's not clear how that can be done.' And since all parties to the discussion are in agreement that the teaching on Grace is the most important, the conflict is reduced to one concerning the characterization. Either it is true to affirm that the homosexual inclination is objectively disordered, or it is not.

"That is to say, one side has got it wrong, and one side has got it right. And the field of possible error is in the area of what really is. The whole argument turns on the veracity or otherwise of the characterization of what is. Either being gay is a defective form of being heterosexual, or it is simply a thing that just is that way."

And if it is "a thing that just is that way," then in and of itself it can lead to human flourishing.

"This means there are no reasons of faith which stand in the way of our carrying on in our search for which of the two positions be closer to the truth, and both parties can participate in the discussion and in the process of learning in good faith," Alison writes.

We know already that the orientation of LGBT people does not appear to prevent

people flourishing economically and socially. But what about personal flourishing?

Alison suggests this criteria for discerning such flourishing: "Does a person of homosexual inclination who accepts himself as such tend, because of this, to be more capable of personal responsibility, of developing interpersonal relationships in a serene manner, of truthfulness, of compassion, of acting in a non-possessive way, of overcoming rivalries, and of generosity extended over time, or less?"

The Church can no longer put off seeking the truth of this matter, for the people of the church, straight and gay, are living the experiment Alison suggests.

Upping the ante, Alison reminds us that, "The challenge is for us, for Christianity, is that we are forbidden to have some group or some people who are completely other, who are another over against whom can define ourselves. Our being forgiven means our undergoing a process of discovering together, with other people who we don't want to consider are like us, how like them in fact we are, and how we can learn together with them to create something that is good together, not over against anybody."

The stakes are high here, because "any picture of salvation in which there is a necessary 'bad other' is running the risk of violence. And we do see that in our world around us, and there are some ways of interpreting Christianity where Christians are people who are saved, which means that they suddenly become part of the good guys, and they know quite clearly who the bad guys are and they can wage a war against the bad guys."

So if in Christianity the only "wicked other" is us, and we're all being forgiven together, that means our problem is not LGBT people. Like Pogo, we've met the enemy and he's us—us

and our reluctance to learn to, as Alison puts it, “make peace with the other and refusing to allow ourselves to acquire an identity as good over against them.”

This is a Christian problem, and it is a human problem, but it is in embracing this problem that we will find our greatest joy. It is this problem that is propelling us back into the heart of the original story of Christianity.

Alison maintains that not only is humanity redeemed from our bondage to violence and death by Christ’s dying on the cross, but amazingly we also are invited to work with God the ongoing process of creating a new heaven and earth.

That is the wonderful promise. The cost, however, is a high one. To do this, we have to give up our old ideas of social order.

“Order is a human thing, and usually a human thing produced in nasty ways. But that is not what God is about at all. God is the one who is bringing everything into being and making it clear...”

“If you have a religion in which it’s necessary that God show forth his power by manifesting victory at every stage of the way, you’ll never learn that God has nothing to do with social order, because you’ll always think that social order is sacred.”

Alison contends that “it’s only when you hold fast to faith in God at a time when your bit of social order has been destroyed that you begin to understand that God has nothing to do with social order, but is the condition of the possibility of there being any order at all. It’s in a time of persecution when you can’t believe in the God-given nature of the order of the world, that it begins to become possible to imagine God as having nothing to do with the order of the world, including the order of death.”

This is why LGBT people are able to help us into this new understanding. They have been given more opportunities than most to grasp this.

“And the extraordinary thing about this is that it is the anthropological possibility of us taking seriously, looking around us and seeing what can we make of this. We can learn if you like, how not to be run by conspiracy theories regarding nature and destiny and fate, and power and death, which means that we can actually discover what things really are and take responsibility for them.”

It is the Creator showing us that “it is possible to live as if death were not, thereby creating the possibility for us to have belief—faith which enables us to walk as if death were not, and therefore to be able to run the risk, saying, ‘Well, since it won’t all end with me, I can take a stand for justice, I can refuse to participate in a cover-up...because I’m part of something that is generous and that is coming towards me, and that I’m being part of and it’s going to go on.”

“It makes of morals something exciting, rather than a return back—‘Oh, because you’ve been saved, you’ve got to go back and behave as it was in the beginning’—however it was in the beginning. None of us have any notion of how it was in the beginning! That’s not the point of Creation. No. The exciting thing about morals is, what is it going to be like to create justice in the world, to cause goodness to flourish, to enable there to be springs in desert places. What is this creative activity going to look like?”

So how do we navigate the change and engage this creative activity? Alison offers this guidance:

- Acknowledge that systems of goodness that set up a world of good and bad,

blessing and curse, cannot be from God, for God is only blessing.

- Let go of the need of a scapegoat.
- Acknowledge we each play a part in Fernando's story, indeed, play all the roles—persecutors, victim, also-rans.
- Accept that we are all being forgiven.
- Give up old ideas of social order.
- Acknowledge that this is a Christian struggle, not a human rights argument.
- Acknowledge that individuals have to do the work before the institution can.

And as we do the work, here are some questions Alison suggests we consider:

- What does family mean?
- What is the proper place in the public sphere for same-sex couples?
- How does healthy socialization for adolescence look for LGBT young people, especially related to courtship, if they are able—just like their straight peers—to aspire from childhood on to a shared life with, in their case, a same sex partner?
- What sort of a gift to family, Church, and society are same-sex couples going to be?
- What sign of divine blessing and creativity are they going to be?
- In what ways are gay and straight couples and families going to be “for” each other in the future?

For too long, the Church has allowed conversations about Family—both in the Church and in the political sphere—to play out in the system of goodness that marks

“family” as good and LGBT people as “bad”, as threats to the family.

This means, Alison points out, that while there are increasing numbers of families where LGBT people are deeply and warmly loved, the notion of family can be terrifying to some, because there seems to be no space for them to exist inside it once they discover themselves to be gay.

“These [false] premises diminish us all, and create as much misery among those heterosexuals who find that the system of goodness condemns them to a deep ambivalence towards their gay children and siblings, as it does among those children and siblings for whom ‘family’ is turned by the system of goodness into a synonym for ‘annihilation of being.’”

But it turns out real families—as opposed to theoretical families—are very resilient in the face of institutional efforts to shore up the system of goodness. These families have chosen to do the hard work of “learning to love its gay and lesbian offspring over time, including being pleased with and protective of the legal protections which their offspring and siblings are beginning to receive, rather than go along with the easy morality of absolute definitions and consequent hatred and separations which the system of goodness has sought to reinforce,” Alison writes in *Collapsing the Closet in the House of God: Opening the Door on Gay/Straight Issues*.

Because LGBT couples cannot rely on the support of tradition for their relationships the way heterosexual couples can, they have had to invent new ways of being together in love. Alison suggests that because of this, same-sex couples may have much to teach heterosexual couples about navigating the shifting patterns of power, desire and money that are at work in all human relationships.

"It will, I suspect, be only over time that, by dwelling in the place of shame without reactivity, and without resentment, letting go of superficial bids for approval and short-term solutions, that we will begin to glimpse the shape of our vocations to create living signs for each other in this sphere," Alison states.

The reality for the world, and the Church, is that LGBT people, by pushing the edges of what it means to be human into new places where it is possible for them to thrive, by being willing to occupy the place of shame without resentment or hatred and without being destroyed, are calling us all to remember the new story that Christ brought us when he moved into midst of our violent scapegoating.

God moves toward us in love, gathering the most powerful of us along with the least of us into new life for everyone. No one is left outside the circle of God's love and redemption.

No one.

We have forgotten that story for too long.

Alison suggests to us that it is the only hope for reconciliation. Increasingly, the individuals who make up the Anglican Communion are discovering that "the other" is not "the obstacle in the way of my coming to be, but is what makes that coming-to-be possible."

When we learn this, we discover that reconciliation isn't the loser's game, isn't a second prize.

"Rather it is the only way of coming to be, and even of wanting to become, something much greater than I could imagine," Alison tells us.

"This is what is surprising: that we have no

access to being created which doesn't pass through our allowing ourselves to be reconciled. And being created is adventure, delight, and irresponsibility, since we aren't in charge; it is lightness of spirit, undeserved security, luck and fortune. And along with this, as we allow ourselves to be stretched into this spaciousness, there comes a greatness of heart, a magnanimity that is playful, because trusting, since we have discovered, rather despite ourselves, that there is no greater victory than the mutual enrichment of those who are not frightened of losing themselves in the other, but who know that on the flourishing of the other depends their own capacity to be and to enjoy what they really are on their way to being, with all their heart."

Let the work begin, with God's help.

Claiming the Blessing is an intentional collaborative ministry of leading Episcopal justice organizations (including Integrity, Oasis, Beyond Inclusion, and the Episcopal Women's Caucus) in partnership with the Witness magazine and other individual leaders in the Episcopal Church focused on promoting wholeness in human relationships, abolishing prejudice and oppression, and healing the rift between sexuality and spirituality in the Church.

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