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Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century

John Boswell

University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill., 424 pp., \$27.50

This very erudite volume is a history of gay people not only from the beginning of the Christian era, but earlier, going back to Ancient Greece and Rome. It is a work of painstaking scholarship, revealing the attitudes of the people to homosexuality in many different parts of Western Europe over a long period of time. In general, the author documents his assertions copiously; learned footnotes are found on practically every page and several appendices provide discussion about the difficulties of Pauline Greek terms and supply complete documents or generous excerpts from important works on the subject. But with all its learning the book suffers from a lack of objectivity in its interpretation of the data. This is not surprising, inasmuch as the author makes it clear from the opening chapters that he regards the gay or homosexual community as a historically discriminated-against minority. He seeks to show how this came about during the first 1,300 years of Christianity. He develops the thesis that intolerance of homosexuality was not an essential part of Christian teaching. "Much of the present volume . . . is specifically intended to rebut the common idea that religious belief — Christian or other — has been the *cause* of intolerance with regard to gay people" (p. 6). It occurred, however, in several periods of the Church's history, namely from the middle of the 4th century to the 6th century, in the 13th and 14th and in the subsequent centuries until the 19th. From the beginning of Christianity to the middle of the 4th century and from the early Middle Ages until the 13th there were long periods when the overt expression of gayness was accepted, or at least warmly tolerated in many parts of Europe.

The author does not claim to have an explanation for these trends from tolerance to intolerance and back to tolerance again, but he does view gay activity as something accepted as good, or at least not seriously wrong, in both pagan and Christian contexts. Before looking more closely at his arguments, I would like to point out that the author dislikes the word "homosexual" and prefers the term "gay." He believes that homosexuals themselves would prefer to be called "gay." Whether the majority of homosexuals feels this way is a moot point, but there is evidence that many heterosexuals resent an old English word being pre-empted by a minority and given a new meaning. As Keith Thomas says in his excellent review of Boswell's book: "For centuries the word (gay) has meant (approximately) 'blithe,' 'lighthearted,' or 'exuberantly cheerful.' To endow it with a wholly different meaning is to deprive ourselves of a hitherto indispensable piece of vocabulary and incidentally to make nonsense of much inherited literature" ("Rescuing Homosexual History," *N. Y. Review of Books*, Dec. 4, 1980, p. 26).

In the introduction, the author points out the pioneering nature of his study, acknowledging the probability that later generations will recognize "many wrong turns, false leads, and dead ends mistakenly pursued by those who had no trails to follow, whose only landmarks were those they themselves posted" (p. 39). This is an honest admission that when one is trying to reconstruct the past on the basis of necessarily incomplete documentation of sociological trends, one can draw conclusions which are not at all certain. How does one tease out the skein of motivations in the distant past so that one can say that intolerance to a given form of behavior (in our case, homosexual) was inspired by social, economic, environmental, psychological considerations, but not by religious or ethical convictions? Yet this is what Boswell attempts to do.

In the chapter on definitions, the author describes well the difficulties of classification of persons along the homosexual-heterosexual spectrum, the obscurities of language, both ancient and modern, in describing various forms of sexual behavior; for example, "It is thus often impossible on the basis of words alone to discern whether a particular figure in Greek or Latin sources 'loved' or 'was in love with' another person It is likely that ancient societies recognized fewer boundaries between 'friendship' and 'love' than modern ones, and for the researcher to suggest that a clear dichotomy existed or to place a particular relationship on one side of it is usually anachronistic and inaccurate" (p. 47). Boswell, however, does not observe his own precautions in his analysis of allegedly gay friendships in the 12th century.

As groundwork for his thesis, Boswell makes the claim that in the ancient Greek and Roman world, the dichotomy prevalent today between heterosexual and homosexual was virtually non-existent. "In the ancient world so few people cared to categorize their contemporaries on the basis of gender to which they were erotically attracted that no dichotomy to express this distinction was in common use" (p. 59).

Despite his efforts to be objective, Boswell allows his bias to show in reflecting upon the ancient world's seeming non-dichotomy between heterosexual and homosexual: "Why some societies make *invidious* (emphasis added) distinctions on the basis of race, religious belief, sexual preference, or other personal idiosyncracies while others do not is a complex matter still awaiting elucidation" (p. 59). Why is a distinction based on "religious belief" invidious? And is religious belief merely an idiosyncrasy?

In the whole volume the author never really shows *why* the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual is invidious. Such a distinction is based upon psychological orientation toward the same or other sex. In itself, it says nothing about moral worth of the person so orientated, or about his behavior.

Boswell, moreover, regards the homosexual or gay person as belonging to a minority in the same way that medieval Jews did. The homosexual, however, belongs to a minority in a different sense, in that he becomes *known* as homosexual principally through free human activity, whereas the Jewish or black person belongs to a minority by condition of race or heritage.

This raises a further methodological question concerning Boswell's enquiry. Is it the homosexual orientation or the homosexual behavior or is it both which are tolerated or not tolerated at different periods of the Christian era? In eras of intolerance, such as the 13th and 14th centuries are alleged to be, was the intolerance directed primarily to homosexual behavior, and, if so, is it possible that moral convictions, rightly or wrongly, were at the root of the intolerance? In the 11th and 12th centuries, was the toleration of homosexuals equivalent to approval of their behavior? Boswell does not address these questions, because he assumes that the ancient and medieval worlds were primarily concerned with behavior as opposed to motivation, and he also assumes that disapproval of a homosexual

style of life must arise from some sort of prejudice, and not from religious or ethical conviction.

After showing that the Roman world into which Christianity was born was very tolerant of homosexuals, Boswell comments on the Scriptures and homosexuality. He finds no text which ruled out homosexual activity for Christians. To prove his point, he attempts to repudiate the position taken by many writers that the Sodom story (Genesis, 19) does refer to homosexual activity; here he repeats the arguments of Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, and of John McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*. That argument was that Sodom was destroyed for inhospitable treatment of visitors sent from the Lord. In this interpretation the sexual overtones of the story are minor, and the predominant meaning of the passage centers on the violation of hospitality.

Argument Not Convincing

His argument is not convincing, and the question remains controversial. In my judgment, the Genesis passage does refer to homosexuality, because the effort to interpret the passage *purely* in terms of hospitality is forced. It does not make any sense to take the sexual element out of the story; indeed it makes nonsense of the rest of the narrative. As Dr. Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse observes, "If the men of Sodom had no sexual intentions towards Lot's visitors, why would Lot have replied, 'I beg you, my brothers, do no such wicked thing. Listen, I have two daughters who are virgins. I am ready to send them out to you, to treat as it pleases you. But as to the men, do nothing to them, for they have come under the shadow of my roof' " (Genesis 19:7-9; *Homosexuality: A Symbolic Confusion*, p. 190).

John Mahoney, an English Jesuit, also believes that the effort to weaken the force of the Sodom narrative is unsuccessful. "There can be little reasonable doubt that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah expresses a judgment, however dramatic, of divine displeasure upon the homosexual behavior of its inhabitants, and in so doing only serves to echo the explicit condemnation of such behavior in *The Holiness Code of Leviticus*" (*The Month*, May, 1977, p. 167).

The difficulty raised by Boswell and others that numerous other references in Holy Scripture do not identify the sin of Sodom as homosexual activity can be dealt with. It may be assumed that the readers of these scriptural passages knew what the sin was. Again, there is no reason why the sin of Sodom cannot denote homosexual behavior, inhospitality, and wickedness. The effort by Boswell, moreover, to interpret Jesus as believing that Sodom was destroyed for the sin of inhospitality is very strained (p. 94). The reference (Matt. 10:14-15; Luke 10:10-12) is to Jesus' warning that it would be worse for the house or city which refuses to receive His disciples than it would be for the inhabitants of Sodom on the day of judgment. Really, Jesus was speaking of the punishment of those who refuse to believe, a more serious matter than inhospitality.

Boswell fares no better in his effort to reduce the explicit prohibitions of Leviticus (18:22; 20:13) against homosexual activity to the level of ritual impurity. Scriptural scholar George Montague confronted this reductionism in his commentary on the famous CTSA report, *Human Sexuality*: "Sexual morality is often connected with the cult, but this does not prove that sexual sins, such as homosexual acts and bestiality, were condemned only because they were part of the Canaanite worship. While the book of Leviticus does have a cultic framework, the legislation of Leviticus does not give idolatry as the reason for avoiding the sexual practices of the Canaanites. Quite the contrary. The reason given for why the Lord is driving the nations out of the land is not their worship of false gods, but their abominable sexual practices (Leviticus 18:24-30; 20:23) The strict

prohibition of the sexual practices of the Canaanites indicates that more than the cult was at issue. The priestly authors of Leviticus (18-20) had at hand the technical terms for cultic prostitutes, male and female (Deuteronomy, 23:18) and the pejorative substitute 'dog' for the male (Deuteronomy 23:19) but they chose not to use them. Their statement thus concerns homosexual activity in general . . . Leviticus 18:22; 20:23. To say that the concern of Leviticus 'is not ethical, but cultic [or in Boswell 'ritual impurity'] is a gross oversimplification, and even more misleading is the statement: 'The condemnation of homosexual activity in Leviticus is not an ethical judgment' " ("A Scriptural Response to the Report on Human Sexuality," *America*, pp. 284-285).

With regard to New Testament passages, Boswell argues that I Timothy 1:10 and I Corinthians 6:9-10 are either not about homosexual practices at all, or refer only to male prostitution. If I were to concede Boswell's interpretation of these passages for the sake of the argument, then I can concentrate on Romans 1: 26-27, where it is clear that St. Paul is describing homosexual activity among men and among women. Here Boswell does not deny that there was homosexual activity, but only that it was morally wrong. In his understanding it is wrong only for *heterosexuals* to perform homosexual acts.

The words of Sacred Scripture are so clear, "The men, leaving the natural use of woman, burned in their lust toward one another" (Romans 1:26-27) that it is difficult to see how one can avoid seeing St. Paul's condemnation of such activity for either the men or the women. To say that St. Paul is condemning *heterosexual* men or *heterosexual* women performing homosexual acts is to engage in a line of purely gratuitous reasoning. Since one may assume that St. Paul did not have the modern psychiatric knowledge of homosexual tendency, he could hardly have been speaking of heterosexual men engaging in homosexual acts. In no way does he approve of such activity; in no way does he make a qualification that it is all right for homosexual persons to engage in homosexual acts, a qualification which both John McNeill and John Boswell wished that he had made. But he did not do so. Without qualification St. Paul condemns homosexual acts, whether they are performed by heterosexual or homosexual persons. To be sure, he does not attempt to analyze their subjective dispositions (heterosexual or homosexual) but only to condemn homosexual actions.

I do not believe that St. Paul's condemnation of homosexual activity in Romans can be offset by the fact that he used the term *natural* in different senses in different parts of Romans. The important point is that he condemned homosexual activity as immoral, along with various other actions. Those who refuse to acknowledge the one true God slip into these forms of moral deterioration. Again, McNeill and Boswell cannot have it both ways: (a) St. Paul did not know enough about those who were homosexual from their earliest years to make a moral judgment about them; and (b) St. Paul knew so much that he was able to distinguish homosexual actions done by heterosexuals as evil, and homosexual actions done by homosexuals as good. Surely, both McNeill and Boswell are not willing to confront the obvious meaning of the passage.

Finally, in this section, there is one sentence which must be challenged: "Sexuality appears to have been largely a matter of indifference with Jesus" (p. 114). How can one say this when Jesus spoke so clearly, even about the immorality of interior lust, as He did in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:28)? Jesus' strict position on divorce and no remarriage is well known. His view on divorce alone hardly shows indifference. Moreover, He instructs the woman taken in adultery to "sin no more."

Boswell's effort to do away with the meaning of Genesis 19, Leviticus 18 and 20 and Romans 1 in regard to the condemnation of homosexual acts is a failure. The first and obvious meaning of all three passages cannot be explained away. In short, both Old Testament and New Testament passages condemn homosexual

acts without entering into the psychology of the homosexual person.

As we move into the early patristic period in chapter 5, we come across some questionable statements; for example, Boswell says that Ausonius was "passionately loved" by St. Paulinus, bishop of Nola (p. 133). Further down on the page, he adds: "There is no evidence that the relationship between the two men was a sexual one." Why raise the point, then, when their friendship was not truly homosexual in the sense of indulgence in genital relationships? Erotic, yes, *perhaps*; but not genital.

In his description of the early Middle Ages, Boswell stresses the fact that most of the enactments against homosexual activity came from the civil government without consent of the ecclesiastical authorities who, in general, regarded homosexual relations as similar to adultery. Those involved in homosexual relations, including the clergy, generally managed to keep the issue private. Among the Franks, moreover, passive homosexuality (being passive in the act) was frowned upon, but active homosexuality was not reprehensible, according to Boswell.

Among the members of the court surrounding Charlemagne and presided over by Alcuin there was a "distinctly erotic element." Alcuin uses passionate and erotic terms in his poetry, but it is necessary to interpret his feelings in the context of his religious friendships and the total milieu in which he lived. Perhaps Alcuin engaged in homosexual relations in his youth, but Boswell provides no evidence to prove such. His inference that such relationships were acceptable for those not bound by celibacy is without foundation.

Research Uncovers Phenomena

No doubt, Boswell has uncovered all kinds of interesting phenomena in his research, like the Spanish-Muslim world dressing pretty girls to look like pretty boys by cutting their hair short and clothing them in male attire: "The women who participated in this unusual form of transvestism were obviously available to be appreciated as females." He also points to the Christian clergy in Spain, who, according to Muslim sources, were addicted in a particular way to homosexual practices (p. 195). At the same time he selects incidents from the sources which give the impression that the Christians in Spain regarded homosexual activity as sinful but not too sinful. Seemingly, the more important problem was not to mix too closely with the Muslim infidels. "It was not 'unnatural' for men to relate sexually to men, but simply 'unseemly' for Christian men to relate in any personal way to pagan men" (p. 200).

At the same time he admits there were theological objections to homosexual unions, although they were rare. He is correct, moreover, in stating that sodomy was used not only to describe homosexual acts, but also heterosexual anal intercourse and various other abuses not clearly described. Some authors reduced homosexual activity to a form of fornication or adultery. It is significant, however, that these writers continued to condemn homosexual acts. For this reason one may grant Boswell's conclusion that during the early Middle Ages in the areas which Boswell researched, attitudes toward homosexual activity became more tolerant. Toleration, however, is not approval of a particular kind of act, and Boswell is unable to show that churchmen considered homosexual acts as morally good.

Boswell attempts to correlate the emergence of a distinct gay subculture in southern Europe with the revival of major urban centers during the period between 1100 and 1250 A.D. It was also a period when a large proportion of literature was concerned with erotic passion and "courtly love." This revival of love themes included gay people and their passions, no less than other people. Clerics frequently tended to regard love as valuable in spiritual contexts outside of marriage. Such relationships were idealized. Thus, two groups arose within the Church: (1) "A small, vociferous group of ascetics revived the violent hostility of

Chrysostom, claiming that homosexual acts were not only sinful, but gravely so, more comparable to murder than to gluttony and fornication" (p. 210). The majority of churchmen, however, turned a deaf ear to the complaints of this group. (2) Another party within the Church began to assert the positive value of gay relationships and to celebrate them in an unparalleled outburst of gay literature in the Western world.

Having painted this picture (in which Chrysostom is made to appear to be the lone Father of the Church opposing homosexual practices), Boswell relates the correspondence between St. Peter Damian (part of the noisy group mentioned above) and Pope St. Leo IX. St. Peter had denounced homosexual activity among the clergy who were lacking in penitence. He asked that severe penalties be leveled against churchmen found guilty of homosexual acts. The Pontiff responded that he would deprive of office only those guilty of the most heinous homosexual acts. From this incident Boswell draws the conclusion that the official church was "soft" on homosexual activity. He also finds indications of this leniency in the fact that another reformer, Ivo of Chartres, failed to prevail upon the pope, Urban II, to refuse to seat a certain John as bishop, although he was a notorious homosexual. Other bishops known to be homosexual continued in office.

Without denying the truth of these incidents or the alleged indifference toward homosexual actions on the part of many bishops, it still cannot be said that these ecclesiastics approved of homosexual activity as good. Nevertheless, Boswell raises the problem why members of the hierarchy acted indifferently with regard to homosexual behavior. Perhaps this indifference was fused with mercy and compassion toward the sinner. In any case, the Church's attitude toward homosexuality at this time was one of a tolerance in some instances bordering on indifference, at least in the countries researched by Boswell. As Boswell admits, he is able to present only an incomplete picture.

Abundant quotes from medieval writers, like St. Anselm and St. Aelred of Rievaulx, tend to confirm the author's view that this was an age when humans were preoccupied with love and friendship. Boswell sees many of these friendships as homosexual. Aelred, he claims, was gay, although as far as historic records go, he led a chaste life despite any longings he may have had and was able to teach many the value of chaste celibate love and friendship.

Friendship was not a purely intellectual matter, but also struck deep in the heart, said Aelred, who then shows how we ought to express our feelings toward neighbor. Rightly, Boswell observes that this notion of friendship was a great advance over previous views of chastity, which had forbidden any kind of touching of the beloved. Aelred, on the contrary, did not discourage physical expressions of affection among celibates; for example, he allowed his monks to hold hands. Such an idealization of love between men was a dramatic break with the traditions of monasticism, which had urged for centuries that particular friendships of any sort, especially passionate ones, were a threat to monastic harmony and asceticism.

Although Boswell does not say that Aelred approved of genital relationships between members of the same sex, he contrasts Aelred's position with that of the opponents of gay sexuality. Here it should be noted, as Peter Lineham has indicated, that the spirituality of Aelred is too complex for Boswell, who fails to see the distinction which Aelred made in his *Speculum Charitatis*: "I embrace you, beloved brother, not with my flesh but with my heart. I kiss you, not with oral contact but with the affection of my mind" ("Growing Hostile to Gays," *The Times Literary Supplement*, Jan. 23, 1981, p. 75). Lineham also notes that Boswell's treatment of St. Anselm of Canterbury is both tendentious and misinformed.

According to Boswell, tolerance of homosexuality spread between 1050 and 1150, despite movements in opposition to gay sexuality. Nonetheless the evidence

he provides does not warrant the insinuation that 12th century canonists "consciously omitted discussion of an issue which they either considered of little moral import or better left vague in light of contemporary mores" (p. 227, emphasis added).

Boswell continues the same line of argumentation by claiming that since homosexual behavior is not mentioned by Peter Lombard in his famous *Sentences* it could hardly have been regarded as serious. After all, he continues, literature of the period refers to the prevalence of such behavior among the laity, and churchmen kept silent. He further notes that Richard the Lion-Hearted slept with the King of France, Philip, despite indications that Richard was a devout Catholic. Although he admits that Richard repented of his sin, Boswell implies that this was really only a slight matter.

In short, Boswell stresses how widespread homosexual practices were in England, Italy, Germany, Spain, and the Scandinavian countries during this period. Among the wealthy, the poor, and the clergy, homosexuality was allegedly growing. If opposed, it was apparently not for religious reasons. Boswell contends that even contemporary writers who were not gay expressed a "positive" attitude toward gay sexuality. God merely laughs at clerics involved in gay activity. Thus Boswell's argument advances.

Throughout this section Boswell fails to distinguish carefully between the different kinds of affective, but non-genital, love in his description of 12th century Christian literature. He may be correct in saying that this century celebrated the importance of affectionate friendships in all levels of society, and that these friendships tended to transcend all other relationships and obligations, legal, moral or familial. But this does not prove that a significant number of such friendships were expressed genitally. Erotic love may have been more stressed in the literature of the period, but again there is no substantial evidence that expression of gay love in genital relationships was any more prevalent than it is today. The record is incomplete.

Positive Values Found

Boswell is really saying that in the milieu where homosexual relationships were at least tolerated, if not approved, many other positive values were found in abundance: personal freedom, the flourishing of minority cultures, and public tolerance of idiosyncratic individuals. We have come a long way from the "patristic theology" of purely functional sexual relations (p. 240). What a gross distortion of the Fathers!

Further analyzing the gay literature from the middle of the 11th century into the middle of the 12th, Boswell claims that its magnitude had not been seen since the first century A.D. and would not be encountered again until the 19th. Without being able to discern the causes of this body of gay literature, the author stresses that the writers of such material were orthodox in matters of doctrine and morals, excepting for romantic interest in persons of their own gender.

Boswell considers as illustrative the poem, *Ganymede and Hebe*, claiming that it shows that gay people of this period regarded their preferences as innate and thus inculpable. "This idea, if widespread, could account for the nearly total absence of negative moral theology during this period" (p. 261).

As Boswell moves into a description of gayness in the 13th and 14th centuries, he shows that social intolerance toward homosexuals was part of a larger pattern of cultural narrowness, for example, the reduction of theology to systematic formulas, the emergence of the Inquisition, the rise of absolute governments, codification of canon law to bring about uniformity. How Boswell can regard the masterful synthesis of theology during the 14th century as a pattern of cultural

narrowness and a reduction of theology is quite wondrous, and it is symptomatic of his approach and bias. In any case, Boswell notes that during this period gay people were now the objects of hostile measures by civil governments, as were the Jews and the Albigensian heretics. "Between 1250 and 1300," he writes, "homosexual activity passed from being completely legal in most of Europe to incurring the death penalty in all but a few contemporary legal compilations" (p. 293). Extremely few instances of capital punishment, however, for the simple crime of "sodomy" are recorded in published sources.

Despite these new strict laws there is little noticeable change in Church practice throughout the 13th century. In some instances, sodomy became a "reserved" sin, which meant generally that it could be absolved by the bishop of the diocese. But between 1150 and 1350, a definite change in attitude toward homosexual activity had taken place. Instead of accepting the gay lifestyle as a minority preference in all ranks of the Church, homosexual activity in many places merited the death penalty. One act was sufficient to bar one from ordination to any clerical rank. The charge against the powerful Knights Templar, that they were involved in homosexual behavior, was instrumental in their dissolution, according to Boswell.

Even kings were not safe, as can be witnessed by the violent death of Edward II of England. The barbaric persecution of homosexuals led to the disappearance of a gay subculture in Europe by the mid-13th century, and this in turn, according to Boswell, led to exaggerated claims about the harmful effects of gay sexuality. From then until the 19th century, gay culture would be completely submerged.

Toward the end of his volume Boswell takes up the question of arguments against homosexual activity based upon "nature," referring to the curious comparisons of the weasel, hare, and hyena as engaging in homosexual activity. Boswell believes that this kind of biology affected the moral conclusions drawn by many concerning homosexuals. Boswell capitalizes upon the confusion in the use of the terms "nature" and "natural" to formulate the theory that in the 13th century nature became a goddess who fostered and approved of heterosexual activity and fecundity exclusively; nature "represented . . . an exclusively heterosexual constituency" (p. 312). The popular acceptance of the goddess "Natura" as the champion of heterosexual fecundity had a deep impact on the development of moral theology in the 13th century, argues Boswell; it led to the exclusion of homosexual behavior from the area of the natural; it even caused Christian society to equate the "good" with the "common." Boswell goes on to qualify the charge that Christian society equated the good with the common. It was true "to a certain extent," claims Boswell (p. 313). The claim here is absurd, as will be seen by investigating Boswell's charges against St. Thomas Aquinas, whom he clearly regards as *the* key figure in Christian theology contributing to an anti-gay mentality.

According to Boswell, Aquinas accepted the 3rd century Roman jurist, Ulpian's, understanding of natural law, one that views the natural law as that which nature teaches all animals. Because of his acceptance of Ulpian, whose view of natural law Aquinas, Boswell claims, used as if it were the only definition of the notion (p. 313), "Aquinas resorted again and again to animal behavior as the *final* arbiter in matters of human sexuality" (p. 319, emphasis added). Because of his Ulpianistic understanding of natural law, Aquinas could regard fornication (which, after all, was not contrary to the manner in which animals by nature copulate) as no more serious than gluttony, except that it could lead to serious harm to any child begotten — and *this* is what makes fornication morally wicked (p. 321, referring to *S.T.*, 2-2, 154, 2 ad 6). Moreover, continues Boswell, if Aquinas had realized that the erotic inclination to one of the same gender is "natural" to the gay person, he would have been forced to conclude that "homosexual acts were 'appropriate' to those whom he considered 'naturally' homosexual" (n. 87, p. 327). Finally, Boswell claims that Aquinas's opposition to

homosexual activity is ultimately a concession to popular sentiment of the period (p. 328).

Here it can simply be said that Boswell does not understand, or even give evidence of making an effort to understand, the thought of St. Thomas on the "natural law." It is instructive to note that the text that Boswell cites as positive demonstration that Aquinas accepted Ulpian's definition as if it were the only way to understand "natural law," is taken from the section of the *Summa* devoted not to a study of "law" but to a study of "right" (*S.T.*, 2-2, 57,3). Nowhere does Boswell attempt to provide a systematic understanding of what Aquinas has to say on the question of "law" and "natural law" in the *Prima Pars* of the *Secunda Secundae*, qq. 90-94. There, Aquinas makes it quite clear that for him "natural law" is not a matter of natural instinct, something common to animals and to men. "Natural law" is above all a work of practical human intelligence, consisting in a set of true propositions about the good that is to be done and the evil that is to be avoided by human persons in determining their lives by their free choices (on this, cf. Germain G. Grisez, "The First Principle of Natural Law: A Commentary on the *Summa Theologiae*, *Prima Secundae*, Q. 94, a. 2," *Natural Law Forum* 10 [1965], pp. 168-201; and William E. May, "The Meaning and Nature of the Natural Law in Thomas Aquinas," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 22 [1977] pp. 167-189). St. Thomas does in truth incorporate the Ulpian definition of natural law into his majestic synthesis (cf. the celebrated distinction 33, q. 1, a. 1, ad 4 of his *Scriptum In IV Sententiarum*), but he makes note in this very place, as scholars have shown, that the natural instincts we possess are *the subject matter to be governed and measured by the rule of law*, of human intelligence (as conformed to the divine intelligence). We act morally, according to Aquinas, not when we act compulsively according to natural instincts (such as the instinct to copulate either heterosexually or homosexually), but when we choose to act in ways which respect the *goods* of human persons and the goods to which we are naturally inclined, seeking them in ways determined by reason made right, both through truthful judgments (cf. the virtue of prudence) and by the rectification of desires.

Boswell simply ignores all this in the thought of Aquinas in his effort to paint him as *the* theologian who is responsible for the intolerance manifested toward homosexual activity in the subsequent centuries. There are problems in interpreting Aquinas, to be sure, and there are weaknesses in his thought, but the grotesque caricature of it presented by Boswell hardly counts as scholarly. Moreover, the gratuitous claim that Aquinas took the position he did on homosexual activities (and note that he held freely chosen homosexual acts to be immoral, not persons who experience erotic inclinations toward individuals of the same sex) because this fitted in well with the popular sentiment of the day is pure drivel. *Quod gratis asseritur, gratis negatur*.

Church Conservatism Transmuted Position

In Boswell's view, the increasing conservatism of the Church about this time transmuted Thomas's position into a form of Church dogma, which one could not oppose without being suspect of heresy. Boswell offers no real evidence for such an assertion, overlooking the fact that after the death of St. Thomas his works were subjected to considerable criticism by his fellow theologians. It was hardly a time of theological regimentation. And, while it may be true that there were strictures against gay people, Jews, witches and other groups in the 13th and 14th centuries, it cannot be proven that the position of the Church against homosexual practices was primarily the result of later medieval theology joined with the vehement antipathy of the masses. While Boswell attempts to show that over the

centuries social intolerance of homosexual lifestyle fluctuated between extreme intolerance and mild intolerance, he is not able to show that at any time in the teaching of the Church, homosexual actions were declared to be good.

Under the heading of "Conclusions," Boswell wisely says that such is too strong a term. He prefers to speak of generalizations. As throughout the volume, Boswell here follows the same pattern of attributing the attitudes of churchmen and the general populace toward homosexual practices to a variety of social, economic and political factors, while downplaying conscience and moral considerations. The possibility that theologians, government officials, bishops, clergy, and the laity might have opposed homosexual activity because they believed it to be morally wrong, and not because they disliked gay persons, does not receive serious treatment in this volume. Thus, for example, in his "conclusions," Boswell writes that "neither Christian society nor Christian theology as a whole evinced or supported any particular hostility to homosexuality" (p. 333) from the 3rd to the 6th centuries. This statement says nothing about what the Church *taught* during this period. Yet he adds almost immediately, "But both reflected and in the end retained positions adopted by some governments and theologians which could be used to derogate homosexual acts" (*ibid.*). These "positions" were not expressions of hostility, but conclusions of theologians and lawyers based upon their understanding of the moral order. These authors thought homosexual acts ought to be "derogated" because they were considered to be morally defective.

Boswell, moreover, is not able to prove that from the latter half of the 12th century onward a "virulent hostility" toward gay people affected theological and legal writings in such a way that such writings reflected the newly aroused hostility rather than a long-standing traditional position.

Very skillfully, Boswell has created the overall impression that contemporary prejudices against homosexual persons and their behavior are the continuation of centuries of intertwining sociological and psychological factors, in which moral reflection has played only a small part.

Conclusions of the Reviewer

As noted in this review, Boswell presents a sociological history of Western Europe's attitude toward homosexual behavior, while sedulously obscuring the teaching of the Church on the morality of homosexual acts. The impression sustained throughout the book is that disapproval of homosexual activity is equivalent to hostility toward homosexual persons. Tolerance or intolerance toward gays in different periods of Christianity are seen as degrees of prejudice which in turn are generated by a complex of factors, the least of which are religious.

Although Boswell makes use of Bailey's *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (1955) he does not show, as Bailey does, that the Fathers who are cited are against homosexual activity. Whatever the flaws in their reasoning, they agreed on the immoral nature of homosexual acts. It was not merely Augustine and John Chrysostom who warned the faithful against the homosexual lifestyle. Beginning with the *Didache*, and throughout the Apostolic Age and the patristic period one lists other authors who condemned homosexual acts. Examples are *The Epistle of Barnabas*, Gregory of Nyssa and Basil (Bailey, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-100).

Again, Boswell shows the bewildering complexity involved in the use of the terms "nature" and "natural." This is a good point, but he overplays it, creating the impression that arguments against homosexual activity based upon man's human nature are of no value.

In this regard, it is more profitable to seek an understanding of nature as it is found in contemporary moral theology than to argue over its many diverse uses in St. Thomas. The works of Germain Grisez, John Finnis, William E. May and others have contributed to the development of a natural moral law ethic which

analyzes the meaning of homosexual activity. Homosexual acts are forms of bodily massage which share in the nature of masturbatory activity, and yet are more than masturbatory acts, since they do reach out to another person. They do not achieve, however, physical union; on the contrary, their acts lack bodily coadaptation and this lack of physical complementarity symbolizes the deeper defects on the psychological level.

Nowhere does Boswell discuss the meaninglessness of homosexual activity: its sterility, lack of family history, increasing preoccupation with physical beauty, and ruthless competition.

While Boswell admits the incompleteness of his study, considering its vast historic sweep, he does not stress sufficiently the bias of selectivity which causes him to single out John Chrysostom and Peter Damien as "hostile" opponents of homosexual activity. His usually scholarly approach is hardly in evidence in the unsuccessful way he asserts that St. Thomas played to the crowd in condemning homosexual acts as against nature. No documentation is provided for this position. Nor does he show that Thomas's position broke with the past Christian tradition.

The book should be read for its erudition, unfortunately marred by bias.

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How Brave a New World? Dilemmas in Bioethics

Richard A. McCormick, S.J.

Doubleday & Co., New York, N.Y., 1980.

This is a collection of the writings of Richard A. McCormick, S.J., centering around the general topic of bioethics. All but one of the chapters have been previously published. The unpublished chapter deals with the question of policy regarding sterilization in Catholic hospitals. The collection is headed by a chapter devoted to general reflections about bioethics. The author then takes up the subjects of proxy consent to experimentation, abortion, contraception, technological reproduction and genetic engineering, the preservation of life and the quality of life. An appendix is attached in which the author explains and defends proportionalism as a moral methodology or general moral norm.

Father McCormick allows for proxy consent to experimentation (on children) where the risks, pain, inconvenience, etc., are minimal. His chief opponent in this issue is Paul Ramsey who argues that proxies have no authority to give consent to experimentation that is not in the immediate interests of the patient. On the subject of abortion, the author states that the "substance" of the traditional position regarding killing leads one to conclude that abortion is permissible where another human life or the equivalent is at stake. The author does not accept the traditional opinion regarding contraception and sterilization, but would allow both where there are serious reasons for family limitation. He suggests a hospital policy regarding sterilization which can be interpreted either as acceptance of sterilization or legitimate material cooperation.

While condemning AID and IVF outside of marriage, McCormick would allow, at least theoretically, AIH and IVF within marriage for couples who cannot other-