

Homosexuality and Christianity

Regina Soares Jurkewicz

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Sexuality, culture and politics A South American reader

Although mature and vibrant, Latin American scholarship on sexuality still remains largely invisible to a global readership. In this collection of articles translated from Portuguese and Spanish, South American scholars explore the values, practices, knowledge, moralities and politics of sexuality in a variety of local contexts. While conventionally read as an intellectual legacy of Modernity, Latin American social thinking and research has in fact brought singular forms of engagement with, and new ways of looking at, political processes. Contributors to this reader have produced fresh and situated understandings of the relations between gender, sexuality, culture and society across the region. Topics in this volume include sexual politics and rights, sexual identities and communities, eroticism, pornography and sexual consumerism, sexual health and well-being, intersectional approaches to sexual cultures and behavior, sexual knowledge, and sexuality research methodologies in Latin America.



A Historical glance

Lex Scantinia (Westermack, 1939, p. 731-372) was a seldom enforced Roman law condemning homosexuality, which existed before the expansion of Christianity. With Christian hegemony this law (which studies indicate was not enforced) started to be applied in cases involving the abuse of minors. Later on, Christian empires based on Roman law created new and more rigorous legislation condemning homosexuality. Initially this legislation was restricted to the abuse of youths and prostitution, but new legislation became progressively more rigorous and condemned every homosexual act. Eventually, homosexual prostitution became punished by penalties up to and including burning at the stake.

Catholic literature between the seventh and eleventh centuries contains a guide regarding the severity of sins for priests and lay people called *The Penitentials*, in which homosexuality was condemned as a serious sin, with penalties varying between 3 and 15 years of imprisonment. In this book, homosexual acts were categorized for the first time, including touching, affection, masturbation, adopting active and submissive roles, and habitual or occasional homosexuality. The penalties for clergy or monks were more severe than for laymen and comments about female homosexuality also appear. The penalties for this sort of activity were less than those for male homosexuality, however.

In the Middle Ages, St. Thomas Aquinas categorized homosexuality as a sin “contra naturam” (against nature), along with masturbation and bestiality. It was understood to be more serious than sins “secundum naturam” (according to nature), such as adultery, violation and seduction—although these latter sins were understood to be in stark opposition to the principles of charity. For Aquinas, the natural order was established by God and its violation offends the Creator. This is understood to be worse than offending one’s neighbor.

Other theologians continued to work upon the foundations laid by Thomas Aquinas, whose influence on this topic was vast in Christian spheres. Homosexual behavior was historically categorized as against the natural order determined by God, since procreation was understood to be the sole purpose of sex (Vidal et al., 1981).

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** PhD. Research coordinator for Catholics for Choice, Brazil.

Nonetheless, there are studies suggesting that in the Middle Ages there was more tolerance towards homosexuality than what the evidence previously revealed indicated (Boswell ap. Ryan, 1999).

What are Christian churches saying today?

Contemporary discussions about homosexuality in churches usually look for behavioral instructions in biblical texts, rather than for nuances to improve its understanding. For many Christians, this issue is still considered taboo and they will not even discuss the matter. Biblical texts are referred to when a simple and direct answer is sought. Generally, it is not considered that biblical authors originally wrote for their times and that assumptions regarding sexuality vary significantly from culture to culture and age to age.

Some theologians start with Genesis 2:24: “Man leaves his father and mother and is united unto his wife and they become one flesh” (New International Version), interpreting this passage as implying that when God created Man he also created a heterosexual monogamous template. According to these theologians, this pattern is part of the created order and is not subject to cultural or historical change. This understanding of sex as companionship and reproduction, based upon the notion that somehow men and women complement each other, is properly termed the *creationist* point of view. These scholars also maintain that no other model of sexual expression can be *natural* or morally acceptable. This model is thus law and, therefore, sexual relations between persons of the same sex are perceived as immoral.

However, this is not the only approach taken by Christian theologians. Religious discourse in relation to homosexuality is not monolithic. Dr. William Countryman—New Testament Professor at Church Divinity School of the Pacific, Berkeley, California, USA—is among those who are opposed to the creationist approach. He establishes that the biblical passage quoted above does not intend to create an ethical imperative, since the verses before and after do not have that purpose. One of those verses, for example, is Genesis 2:3 “Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.” (New International Version). Here, supposedly, the practice of keeping the Sabbath would have been forever established, presuming that these words were intended to be read imperatively. The majority of Christians ignore this ordinance, however. In other words, Christians do not keep Sabbath not because of the authority of the Bible, but because of tradition. Why, then, would other parts of the creation narrative remain as absolute and unchangeable moral rules?

For Countryman, Genesis 2 is stating that sexuality is essential for human beings: it does not state that heterosexuality is. It is not a rule, but a demonstration of God’s generosity in creation.

This is just an example which shows how the Bible requires interpretation. Biblical texts showing heterosexuality as the usual model of relationship between two persons does not mean a rejection of other possibilities. Much of the religious debate on homosexuality puts a great effort in finding out what the Bible says about the topic. Using the fundamentalist approach to biblical narrative does not seem to be the best way to find ethical guidance for the expression of sexuality, however.

Most of us were probably raised learning and assuming that a homosexual orientation is bad and that sexual practices between same sex individuals are sinful. Today, there are a vast number of people who question that point of view.

Homosexuality is no longer seen as a disease and homosexual individuals are not understood to be less healthy than heterosexual ones: they just have a different erotic/sexual orientation. Behavioral studies have discovered heterosexual and homosexual practices in different species, showing that homosexuality is an aspect of the natural world. Cultural anthropology has shown that human societies have different ways of understanding homosexuality. In other words, science shows that homosexuality is simply a part of the world we know and it is not good or bad in and of itself. This scientific approach questions dogmatic religious definitions of homosexuality.

High levels of prejudice against homosexuals can still be noticed among devout Christians, but as the homosexual social group has become more visible, the tolerance of the devout has increased. Especially in Catholicism, the need to discuss the issue became inescapable, even though the Vatican continues to condemn homosexual practices. The Churches' pedophilia scandal, made public in the first months of 2002 in several places around the world, has triggered discussions about homosexuality among Catholics, although homosexuality and pedophilia are entirely different phenomena.

At the beginning of 2003 the Vatican published a polemic glossary of sexual terminology called "*Lexicon on Ambiguous and Colloquial Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions.*" The chapter on homosexuality and homophobia states that homosexuality comes from unsolved psychological conflicts, that homosexuals are not normal and that countries that allow same sex marriages are inhabited by individuals with very disturbed minds.¹ The Catholic Church position remains homophobic, creating tensions. However, as mentioned above, this position is not unique among Catholics or among Christians. Different positions exist in Christianity and even among members of the Catholic hierarchy.

¹ *Jornal Zero Hora*, Porto Alegre, 01/04/2003. This newspaper announced the release of the glossary, coordinated by Colombian Afonso Lopez Trujillo, one of the most conservative Cardinals in the Vatican.

Diverse positions among Christians regarding homosexuality

There are three different Christian reactions regarding homosexuality. There are those who think that homosexuality should be rejected, since it is supposedly an unnatural and sinful conduct. Those who advocate for this position refer to Genesis 1:28's injunction to "be fruitful and increase in number" (New International Version) as God's will regarding sexual relations. Although these people understand homosexuality to be a perversion, they do not want to punish homosexuals and believe that churches should welcome them, once they recognize their need for help in order to change their behavior.

Another belief found among Christians is that homosexual conduct is acceptable, although it is considered an inferior option. Representing this idea is the Lutheran theologian Helmut Thielicke (1975). He considers homosexuality to be a pathological result of the Fall and concludes that people of homosexual orientation are mostly incapable of changing. Thielicke exhorts the homosexual to adjust to a heterosexual lifestyle as much as possible, but if *conversion* is impossible and abstinence becomes too difficult, he advises them to "channel your sexual activity into a stable, ethically responsible couple relationship..." (Ecumenical Pastoral..., 1997).

But there are also Christians such as the Anglican theologian Norman Pittenger, who advocates that homosexuality is as honorable as heterosexuality. Those who advocate this position are convinced that the Bible is not supposed to be the law for all times and places. That even in the Bible, there is evidence homosexuality was sometimes tolerated without criticism. They state homosexuality in and of itself is not a sin: the sin is to exploit another person. This, of course, can happen in heterosexual relationships as well. In this way the same set of moral rules apply to both heterosexual and homosexual activities. What matters is that the relationships are responsible, tender and respectful, promoting the well-being of both parts so no one feels abused. John McNeil (1979), a Catholic theologian, said "I am inclined to think along the same lines as Norman Pittenger, when he said that between consenting adults there exist only three classes of sexual relationships: good, better and excellent (the best sexual relation)".²

Reverend William Countryman asks:

But if homosexuality is not necessarily sinful, does it mean it is necessarily good? In a certain way, yes. God said that all of Creation was good, including Creation's sexual aspects. Homosexuality is in reality *good* in the same sense that all sexuality is good. It is one of the great gifts God has given us since the beginning. It is the

² These themes are well developed in John McNeill's book, *Taking a change on God: liberating theology for gays, lesbians, and their lovers, families, and friends*. McNeill was silenced and expelled from his Jesuit order in 1987 after publishing his first book, *The Church and the Homosexual*, where he asks the church to reconsider its position on homosexuality.

gift of delight, wonder and of connection to and with one another. It is the gift of transcendence; it is the gift of humanity...³

Another contribution to this topic was developed by the theologian Penelope J. Ryan.⁴ In her book, *Practicing Catholic: The Search for a Livable Catholicism*, she offers reports of priests and bishops who are sympathetic to homosexuals and challenges the Catholic hierarchy to doubt their moral certainties on this theme:

... [W]ith the realization that many priests are homosexuals, a raised consciousness surfaces that this is a matter of people, compassion and justice. The many ways by which the homosexual community has elevated the human race through their art, science and leadership gives witness to the creative power of this group of people... (Ryan, 1999, p. 180).

It is therefore possible to validate the practice of sexuality in its various expressions utilizing Christian thought itself. The ecclesiastical hierarchy has not listened to its theologians' contributions, to its members, or to science. This attitude only distances communities of faith from the world without creating any dialogue. For this reason, we make ours the words of poet Fernando Pessoa: "Love is the important thing. Sex is an accident. It can be the same, it can be different."

³ Excerpted from the treatise written by the Rev. Dr. William Countryman, originally published by Integrity, Washington, DC, USA.

⁴ Penelope J. Ryan, Ph.D., Catholic, professor at Fordham University. Her classes are well attended and she was nominated teacher of the year twice. She is also responsible for the religion curriculum of the School of the Holy Child, Rye, New York.

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