

CONCLUSION

Our story concludes here, at the moment when executions finally cease in Europe. Looking back over twenty-four centuries, what pattern can we see in the dozen societies we have examined? Most striking, certainly, is the divide between those that called themselves Christian and those that flourished before or independently of Christianity. In the first we find laws and preaching which promoted hatred, contempt, and death; in the second, varying attitudes, all of them (barring Islam, which, like Christianity, inherited the lethal tradition of the Hebrew scriptures) to a radical degree more tolerant.

In sharp contrast stands ancient Greece, in this matter at an unimaginable distance from the three great Abrahamic religions. Institutionalized in Sparta, extolled in Athens on account of its tyrannicide-heroes, and exploited in Thebes as the basis for that city's redoubtable Sacred Band, love between males was honored as a guarantee of military efficiency and civic freedom. It became a source of inspiration in poetry and art, was applauded in theaters and assemblies, and was enthusiastically commended by philosophers who thought it advantageous for young males to have lover-mentors. Indeed, the Platonic school, whose rejection of physical relations was hardly shared by Greek society as a whole, figuratively exalted the male Eros to the skies.

In Rome no comparable idealization held sway. Male homosexuality was not in itself a cause for condemnation, since relations with slaves were legally and socially acceptable. But the association of homosexuality with slavery made the passive role, according to the rules of Roman sexual politics, unacceptable to a freeborn Roman, since it compromised his status as a dominant male. Accusations of passivity might lead to a loss of civic rights (*infamia*) and were common coin in Roman politics, leaving few leaders in the late republic and the early empire untarred. Nevertheless, nearly every Roman poet of note wrote love poems to boys, and Virgil in the *Aeneid* attempted to naturalize "Greek love" in the story of Nisus and Euryalus. He did not succeed, though the Greek ideal gained some favor in second-century Rome. Yet the *cinaedus* ("faggot") remained an object of popular contempt, and this

special form of homophobia—which condemned one partner but not the other—helped pave the way for the death penalty at the beginning of the Christian era.

It is when we turn from the classical world to societies influenced by biblical law that we find a great divide. The roots of Levitical ferocity toward male lovers remain obscure, though their likeliest origin appears to have been rivalries with Near Eastern cults that honored transvestite shamans. Whatever its source, the virulence of the Mosaic dispensation is all but unique among ancient religions. Under its influence, Philo of Alexandria—the only ancient Jewish writer whose surviving works treat the subject in detail—could invite mob violence by urging that suspect effeminate men should not be allowed “to live for a day or even an hour.” Unfortunately, with the ascendancy of Christianity, this deadly tradition which held that all male homosexuals should be ruthlessly exterminated became dogma in European states for some fourteen centuries.

Philo’s wish seems to have been realized under Constantine, Rome’s first Christian emperor, who, we are told, exercised his authority by exterminating the effeminate priests Philo had inveighed against in Egypt. Such a campaign accorded with the endorsement of the Levitical death penalty by such early Christian writers as Tertullian, Eusebius, and the authors of the Apostolic Constitutions. It was also furthered by the fateful transformation of the Sodom story in religious teaching from a tale of selfish greed and mistreatment of aliens to an indictment of all consensual homosexual acts. By 390 the fanatical emperor Theodosius felt it incumbent to rid Rome “of the poison of shameful effeminacy” by consigning passive men to “avenging flames in sight of the people.” At that same moment Saint John Chrysostom, preaching in Christian Antioch, called for all homosexuals to “be driven out and stoned,” an inflammatory cry of hate that bore terrible fruit in the Eastern Empire when Justinian launched his bloody campaign against bishops, rich laymen, and political enemies a century later, causing the death of many.

Justinian’s laws, which cloaked avaricious cruelty in the language of pastoral solicitude, generalized the Sodom legend by blaming homosexuals for “earthquakes, famine, and pestilence.” Such fears were to proliferate in Western Europe in the Carolingian age. So the Council of Paris (829), terrified of marauding Vikings and Saracens, predicted defeat by the infidel if sodomitical sins were not punished and called for the death penalty, quoting Saint Paul’s dictum in Romans that such deeds were “worthy of death.” By a further turn of the screw, the Middle Ages linked homosexuality with doctrinal heterodoxy, speaking of “heresy of the spirit” and “heresy of the flesh.” As a result, thirteenth-century religious confraternities in Italian cities were enjoined to deliver both kinds of sinners to the newly inaugurated Papal Inquisition. This linkage also gave color to Philip IV’s persecution of the Templars, in which the double accusation of sodomy and heresy was

used to destroy the order and deliver their wealth into his hands. In Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella burned sodomites and confiscated their estates; in Protestant England, Henry VIII's agents used the charge of sodomy to justify his pillaging of the monasteries. Two centuries later Montesquieu had ample cause to deplore the abuse of sodomy laws by tyrants.

During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, harsh legal sanctions against homosexuality routinely found their justification in Christian teaching. Angry sermons spewed hate, predicted catastrophes, blamed sodomites when these occurred, incited mobs, called for stonings or burnings, and expressed gratification when these took place. How did a church which taught mercy and compassion justify such extreme measures? The adoption of the death penalty by the priestly authors of Leviticus may have been no more than contingent; nothing in the theology of ancient Judaism made this inevitable. No reason is given for such severity other than calling lying with a man an "abomination," a term used so generally of anything disapproved that we can only speculate as to the roots of the prejudice.

Medieval Christianity, by contrast, prided itself on reconciling faith and reason. Hence Thomas Aquinas felt the need to present a rationale for making homosexuality a horrendously serious sin. He did this by appealing to the Greco-Roman notion of natural law and calling all non-procreative sex acts treasonous rebellion against God. As church and state, recovering from the chaos of the Dark Ages, became more efficiently organized in the thirteenth century, men could be more systematically hunted down by inquisitors or civic officers. So a contemporary English legal treatise decreed, in one sweeping ordinance, that "the inquirers of Holy Church" should seek out apostates, heretics, and sodomites to put them to death. This was also an age of codifications, when sodomy laws were first systematically incorporated into collections of statutes in England, France, Spain, and Italy. These laws routinely invoked Leviticus, quoted Paul, and played on superstitious fears. Some were ingenious in their cruelty, as in the case of the *Fuero Real* of Alfonso X of Castile (1255), which ordered that convicted men should be castrated and then, three days later, hung by their legs until they died.

Nor were these idle threats. Though records are often scant and research has just begun, we know of executions in medieval Switzerland, in Spain, in the Low Countries, in France, and in Italian cities, most notably Venice. In the name of Christianity San Bernardino promoted executions in fifteenth-century Siena, and Savonarola in Florence. Nowhere, however, was the church's involvement in the persecution of homosexuals more direct than in Spain during the most active years of the Spanish Inquisition. In Aragon, Catalonia, and Valencia more than a thousand men were tried by the Inquisition for sodomy, and in certain decades more were executed for sexual than for doctrinal heresy. The secular authorities were also active in France and

elsewhere in Spain, convinced that the burning of sodomites had the full backing and approval of the ecclesiastical authorities.

Not only Latin Christendom witnessed these persecutions, which must have made life a fearful trial for many: the Bible-centered faith of Protestants committed them to a similar routine of terror. Executions became commonplace under Calvin and his successors in Geneva, and in the Netherlands a nationwide pogrom was launched so that, as the authorities put it, "God might not punish the iniquity of the land with his terrible judgments." Nor is there any doubt that executions in England, which reached their peak in the early nineteenth century, were the result of a century of campaigning by clergy who called upon the nation to "exterminate the monster."

It can hardly be argued that these horrors were a necessary stage in the development of civilized societies. In China and Japan the philosophical wisdom of Confucianism and the religious teaching of Buddhism did not foster them. Indeed, China was more tolerant than ancient Rome, lacking that empire's deep-seated fear of male effeminacy; and Japan, in its Samurai code, produced an ethos remarkably akin to that of classical Greece. In contrast, to look back on the history of homosexuality in the West is to view a kaleidoscope of horrors: Justinian's castrated bishops; the dangling corpses of Almería; the burning of the "married" couples in Renaissance Rome; the priests starved to death in cages in Venice's Saint Mark's Square; women burned, hanged, or beheaded on the charge of lesbianism; men tortured and burned by the Spanish Inquisition; Indians savaged by Balboa's mastiffs or burned in Peru; the deaths at the *quemadero* in Mexico City; the men and boys of Faan; and the scores of men and adolescents hanged in Georgian England. All these atrocities were committed with the certainty that they were the will of God, necessary to stave off the kind of disaster that had overwhelmed the Cities of the Plain.

Homosexuals, of course, have not been the only victims of faith-inspired intolerance. Historically, crusades against heretics, Muslims, Jews, and witches—all justified on biblical grounds—led to far more deaths than laws against homosexuality. Cruel and unjust institutions such as slavery were, in the not-too-distant past, defended by theologians, including Protestant clergy in the United States. But religious leaders also deplored such crimes and today decry them. It is to the credit of Christianity that it has been able to abandon convictions strongly held for centuries, admitting past errors and seeking reconciliation. So the Vatican has expressed regret for anti-Semitism and the persecution of religious dissent, and America's Southern Baptists for their endorsement of slavery in the nineteenth century and racial segregation in the twentieth.

The debt owed by civilization to Christianity is enormous. How can we not be grateful for its works of compassion, its service to education, and its

contribution to the world's treasury of great art, architecture, and music? We must recognize those church leaders who throughout the ages have worked for peace and the alleviation of human oppression, and give thanks for the countless priests, nuns, and Protestant clergy who have labored selflessly—sometimes at the cost of their lives—in the service of humanity. A religion that preached both love and hate has left most of the hate behind. Christianity has proved itself a creed with a conscience, not lacking in men and women of good will. Even in the case of homosexuality there have been Christian Christians, though they are still a prophetic minority disconcerting to church officialdom.

About the future one may be modestly hopeful, though the controversy will doubtless be long and impassioned. But scholarship has now brought to light the long sad record of oppression and abuse, and men and women who call themselves Christian can no longer plead ignorance or avoid the burden of a deplorable, long-obsured past.

NOTES

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