

History, Homosexuality and God

Alan Bray

An adapted version of a paper given in Oxford at the 1986 conference of Friend. Friend is a national organisation dedicated to the counselling and befriending of homosexuals.

Historians are accustomed to listening to the debates of theologians, but the theologians they listen to are usually those of the past; and they do not normally join such debates. I do not propose to alter that. But one of the workmanlike tasks of historians (as it is of philosophers) is sometimes to put aside their own books and see to the task of making tools others use in their work, and if they are to be taken seriously in a wider college of learning they need sometimes to fulfil this obligation. Sometimes they need to pay the rent.

In a small way that is what I would like to do in this paper, and the audience I have primarily in mind is composed of those moral theologians and practical pastors who are troubled by the tension that exists between homosexuals and the Christian Church. Inevitably, though, what I have to say is not equally relevant to all Christian churches. I have less to say to those who are ready to construct their moral theology afresh, from the beginning. For good or bad they are free of the past. But for many Christians, in varying degrees, this is not a possible option, and it is fundamentally not a possible option for Catholics, for whom an appeal to scripture and tradition—a willingness to listen to the past—is unavoidable.

That is why I think an historian may have a word to say in this debate and for several years now historians have been studying and writing about attitudes to homosexuality (and sexuality more broadly) in the past. They are not the first to do so. The roots of the contemporary work lie in the earlier (and sometimes forgotten) writings of Victorians such as J.A. Symonds. But it was at the beginning of the 1970s that modern historical scholarship first began—tentatively—to be applied to this subject and during this decade and a half some broad conclusions have begun to emerge.

They are, though, somewhat surprising and in several ways disturbing and it is these broad conclusions which I hope to illuminate here. It is not, however, entirely natural to an historian—and certainly

not to me—to talk about history in the abstract and I hope you will bear with me if I come at these conclusions indirectly and endeavour to explain what it is this research has shown by looking at an historical example, the society of England at the turn of the sixteenth century, and at relations between men rather than between women. As I hope to show, wherever one begins one is drawn to the same broad and sharply pointed conclusions.

Elizabethan England

One small instance of the surprise (and perhaps disturbance) which I mentioned lies in the fact that for the great majority of men and women in Elizabethan and Jacobean England the sodomite—the word they used—was also very likely a papist.

...the Church of Rome is that Sodom wherein the two prophets were slain (Revelation 11:8). It is there so called because it matcheth Sodom in her sins in that it teacheth the sins of Sodom in making laws to inhibit lawful marriage in sundry sorts of men, to tolerate fornication and such filthiness. Yea, not only by the scriptures but in many other sundry, ancient, and some of their own records it is manifest that Rome is a Sodom.¹

That is William Perkins writing in his commentary on the Epistle to Jude but it is a familiar charge. It would not be difficult to give a great many such examples of this kind. In the writings of Englishmen of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Pope of Rome tolerates the sin of Sodom among his priests, his obdurate followers in England are likely to be not only traitors but sodomites also, and the sin of Sodom is brought from one to the other by that infernal, papistical crew the Society of Jesus:

These take upon them to justify all the errors and abominations of Antichrist. Yea, their idolatries and sodomitical uncleanness they will defend and maintain.²

There is an assumption in this that popery and sodomy are companions: that the one is evidence of the other. When the Earl of Castlehaven was tried for sodomy and a rape upon his wife in 1631, his Catholicism, in the words of his prosecutor, pointed already to his guilt ...for when once a man indulges his lust and prevaricates with his religion, as my Lord Audley has done, by being a protestant in the morning and papist in the afternoon, no wonder if he commits the most abominable impieties; for when men forsake their God it is no wonder he leaves them to themselves.³

Catholic Spain

This was a link a protestant Englishman was inclined to make. It was of course a link no Catholic would make, and yet far away in Catholic Spain the Inquisition also saw in the sodomite the figure it feared. It was a different figure, but it was nevertheless equally fearful. The Inquisition records in Valencia are particularly revealing in this aspect. Valencia is one of the cities where the archives of the Inquisition have been well studied with this question in mind⁴; and the shadow in the mind of the Inquisition in that city was the Morisco population, that lingering remnant of Moslem Spain which the Spain of the Inquisition wished to forget. One can see in the statistics in these archives that, for the Inquisition, the images of the sodomite and unassimilated Morisco blended. In 1588, for example, a year in which the figures of sodomites arrested reached one of their peaks, more than half of those arrested were Moriscos. Generally among those arrested in Valencia for sodomy the Moriscos frequently appear. Behind these statistics, as much as in the anticatholic propaganda of Elizabethan England, one can see the same kind of figure. It was the figure of the alien, the Other, a figure of fear certainly but also the other by which we define ourselves.

It fitted the propaganda of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation well. It was useful to all sides. In his autobiography Fr Augustine Baker, the English Benedictine, recalls the sodomitical behaviour of the students of Oxford in the 1590's.⁵ It is a passage based on his personal experience. His time at Oxford was before his conversion and, as he tells us, this sodomitical behaviour was then part of his own life also. So he confesses. But there was also a political purpose in this and he adds that twenty years later, when he visited the city, his hostess still complained of the same vice among the students. The point is that the university he was describing was the intellectual centre of the Anglicanism he had rejected and a seminary for its priests. He was adapting the propaganda of the Reformation to his own purposes. It was the charge which lay universally to hand.

Crimen Laesae Majestatis

The charge was so ready because of what 'sodomy' meant. It was not merely a sexual crime: it was also a political and a religious crime. It was, according to Edward Coke,

...crimen laesae majestatis, a sin horrible committed against the king, and this is either against the king celestial or terrestrial...⁶

It was an act of rebellion, as much against the social order as against the divine order which society ought to reflect. Was it not therefore entirely credible—and to be expected—that the popish traitor would also be a sodomite?

But it was just that, an act, in this case akin to treason: something you did, not something you were; a temporary aberration, not a permanent condition. In principle it was something anyone might fall into.

...thy mind is a nest of all the foul opinions, heresies that ever were vented by any man; thy heart is a foul sink of all atheism, sodomy, blasphemy, murder, whoredom, adultery, witchcraft, buggery ... It is true thou feelest not all these things stirring in thee at one time ... but they are in thee, like a nest of snakes in an old hedge. Although they break not out into thy life, they lie lurking in thy heart.⁷

Like the idea of murder, one could abhor it and indeed perhaps feel far from it and yet be willing to recognise that the possibility was inevitably there. When Governor Bradford mused in his narrative of the Plymouth Colony why 'sodomy and buggery (things fearful to name) have broke forth in this land oftener than once' the first answer he gave was simply this:

our corrupt natures, which are so hardly bridled, subdued and mortified.⁸

A Sect of Brutish Creatures

That is what 'sodomy' meant in Elizabethan England. It was more than a merely sexual sin. It was a catastrophic apostasy into which, potentially at least, anyone might fall. But by the end of the seventeenth century this is replaced by a more familiar concept, that the sodomites were a certain kind of person inhabiting a way of life of their own, distinct and separate. An author in 1729 wrote:

The late proceedings in our courts of law have furnished us with ample proofs that this town abounds too plentifully with a sect of brutish creatures called sodomites ... They have also their walks and appointments to meet and pick up one another and their particular houses of resort to go to because they dare not trust themselves in an open tavern. About twenty of these sort of houses have been discovered, besides the nocturnal assemblies of great numbers of the like vile persons.⁹

The change is from human nature to your nature or mine. The same change is apparent also in the reaction of the authorities. If your fear is of rebellion or the threat of it then the remedy is eternal vigilance. Who knows who will succumb next? But if your fear is directed rather towards an identifiable group within society the temptation is to seek it out and destroy it, and that is the change one sees in the workings of the courts at this point. In England, Holland and France at the beginning of the eighteenth century one sees arrests, trials and executions of large

numbers of sodomites sought out in this way: first one is found and brought by torture or questioning to incriminate others and they in their turn lead to yet more.

This is something one does not see in the court records of these countries before this time and the social organisation these investigations reveal in the large cities of England and its neighbours—London, Paris, Amsterdam and so on—is a separate clandestine culture marked and distinguished by homosexuality.¹⁰ The new conceptions of homosexuality have replaced the old.

What Happened in Faan

But not always. In 1731 in a village in northern Holland called Faan a series of incidents took place which are mightily revealing.

The country judge there, a man called Rudolph de Mepsche, initiated a campaign similar to those which had been carried out in the cities of Holland. It began when a blind boy of 13 was brought to de Mepsche accusing another boy of attempted sodomy. The two boys were arrested and questioned; and the stables of de Mepsche's house gradually began to fill up with an increasing number of suspects, who in their turn were beaten and brought to incriminate an ever widening circle of suspected sodomites drawn from this small community. What de Mepsche was doing was a replica in miniature of what the courts in Amsterdam or Utrecht had been doing, but the events in Faan contrast sharply in two important respects with what had been going on elsewhere. In the evidence here we do not see the clandestine culture of Amsterdam or Utrecht; rather what we read of in this village are casual and unconnected acts of homosexuality: two labourers in a field after a day's work—'Shall we play the whore?' one of them says—or two men coming home after visiting a tavern. Equally striking is the violently different reaction of the surrounding community to the acts which were brought to light. The discovery in places such as Amsterdam of the sodomitical subculture was met with a widespread horror evident in the contemporary popular literature, but in Faan it was the judge, not the sodomites, who was the object of the community's anger. They knew these men as good fathers and sons and the village refused to give de Mepsche's discoveries the significance he gave them. Certainly men do all sorts of bad and silly things, that is their nature; they had confessed and there it was. That was the reaction. But that this should all add up to a dark and monstrous conspiracy—a hidden sodomitical confederacy—was for these villagers an incredible idea; and the community reacted with an anger remembered by them for many years when de Mepsche had his prisoners strangled and burnt, as he subsequently did. It was then de Mepsche and not those executed, as elsewhere in Holland, who became a black legend in popular folklore.

A History of the Imagination

In the incidents in Faan we can see the clash of two quite different conceptions of homosexuality: one an older one that lingered on in this isolated rural area, the other a newer conception that was elsewhere in Holland replacing it. It would, though, be quite wrong to think of this newer idea of the sodomite as the origin of our contemporary notion of the 'homosexual'. Despite its similarities it lacked the psychological and biological overtones of the 'homosexual', a nineteenth-century concept; and it is rather in the social upheavals of the Second World War that we can trace the emergence of the structures of homosexuality and the ideas about it which we now have.¹²

But the contrast between these two very different conceptions of homosexuality illustrates the extreme cultural relativity of ideas about homosexuality, our own no less, which history shows.¹³ Some societies have the idea of homosexuality as part of a distinct identity, and for some homosexuality is also part of a separate culture within society. Others have one of these ideas but not the other and some have neither; and when either does recur the differences are often quite as striking as the similarities. The historical study of attitudes to homosexuality is not the study of a linear and continuing element in history, sometimes persecuted, sometimes tolerated. It draws us rather into the apparently inexhaustible capacity of the human mind to classify and categorise the world about it and then to live out those definitions and distinctions in a seemingly endless variety of ways. It is part of the history of the imagination.

History and Moral Theology

What then does this have to say to the moral theologian? Two things, I would suggest, and the first is about method. It tells us how we can (and cannot) appeal to the moral judgements of the past. If we wish to understand a comment from the past about sexuality we need to establish first, with the sensitivity and laborious patience of scholarship, in what ways the society in which it was expressed understood sexuality and in what ways it lived out that understanding. Not to do so is wildly unhistorical. Only after such a careful reconstruction can one make the link with our own world.

But the history of sexuality has a second implication also for the kind of moral debate I have been seeking to address indirectly here. It is one which emerges more slowly from it but it is of a far higher order. It is why I think such a study deeply matters and repays the labour it requires. It is that as one reads these fragments from the past apparently bearing on sexuality and as one struggles to find the underlying structures in them which will enable us to relate them to our own notions of sexuality, one is steadily drawn into questions that are radical to any culture. What

is the nature of sexual identity? What is the distinction between the sexual and the nonsexual? And how are such distinctions made? The history of sexuality will not provide the answers to the moral problems surrounding these questions. But it will raise them and it will allow us to explore them. Its effect is to break the agenda we may have brought with us unwittingly to this moral debate, from whichever side we come, not knowing that there could be others; and it enables us to begin constructing a new and perhaps more appropriate agenda. For those who will listen, it is a new beginning.

- 1 William Perkins, *The Workes of ... Mr W. Perkins*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge 1609) p. 532. All the quotations in this paper have been modernised according to the rules in *H.R.E.* (see note 13 below) p. 115.
- 2 Ephraim Pagitt, *Heresiography*, London 1647, p. 139. I have discussed the connection between popery and attitudes to sodomy at greater length in *H.R.E.* pp. 13–32.
- 3 Quoted in Caroline Bingham, 'Seventeenth-Century Attitudes Towards Deviant Sex', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 1 No. 3, p. 456.
- 4 Ricardo Cardia-Cárcel, *Herejía y Sociedad en el Siglo XVI: La Inquisición en Valencia, 1530—1609*, Barcelona 1980, p. 291.
- 5 *The Life of Father Augustine Baker, O.S.B.*, ed. Dom Justin McCann, O.S.B., London 1933, pp. 42–43.
- 6 Edward Coke, *Twelfth Part of the Reports*, London 1656, p. 37.
- 7 Thomas Shepard, *The Works of Thomas Shepard*, Vol. 1, Boston 1853, p. 28 (from *The Sincere Convert* of 1641).
- 8 William Bradford, *Bradford's History 'Of Plimouth Plantation'*, ed. Wright & Potter Printing Co., Boston 1898, p. 459.
- 9 *Hell Upon Earth: Or The Town in an Uproar*, anon., London 1729, pp. 41 and 43.
- 10 Arend H. Huussen 'Sodomy in the Dutch Republic during the Eighteenth Century', and Michel Rey, 'Parisian Homosexuals Create a Lifestyle, 1700—1750: The Police Archives', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, Vol. 9 No. 3 pp. 169—178 and 179—191. Alan Bray, 'Molly', *H.R.E.* pp. 81—114.
- 11 L.J. Boon, 'Those Damned Sodomites: Public Images of Sodomy in the 18th Century Netherlands', *Among Man, Among Women: Sociological and Historical Recognition of Homosocial Arrangements, Supplement No. 1* pp. 19—22, University of Amsterdam 1983.
- 12 John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940—1970*, Chicago 1983.
- 13 This is brought out most clearly in the writings of Michel Foucault and Jeffrey Weeks. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: *An Introduction*, London 1979; the second volume of his *History of Sexuality* has been translated into English as *The Use of Pleasure*, Harmondsworth 1986, and is particularly relevant to the moral questions indirectly addressed in this article. Jeffrey Weeks's *Sexuality*, Chichester 1986, is an excellent introduction to his writings. A seminal work on homosexuality was Mary McIntosh's 'The Homosexual Role', reprinted in *The Making of The Modern Homosexual*, ed. Kenneth Plummer, London 1981, pp. 30—49; my own *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, London 1982, abbreviated above as *H.R.E.*, shares the approach of these writers. Not all historians have accepted the culturally relative view of sexuality presented in this article, especially in the U.S.A. Its most intelligent (and readable) critic is John Boswell, whose *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, Chicago 1980, is written from the standpoint of the sociobiology of E.O. Wilson.