Sex, Sin, and the Church: The Dilemma of Homosexuality

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ABSTRACT: A parallel is suggested between the way blacks have been treated in this country with the way some people view homosexuality. A critique of the origins of the homosexuality taboo and of the argument that homosexual persons are uniquely pathological follows. Though the Judeo-Christian tradition seems to have played a negative role in the past, the contemporary church, in concert with other institutions, can generate a moral force to help overcome homophobia.

About two centuries ago a rebellious British colony promulgated a document of historic significance. The American Declaration of Independence asserted a "self-evident" truth: "That all men are created equal. . . ." To Jefferson, its principal author, it meant that each man was entitled to "certain unalienable rights" which derived from God. All men were equal in opportunity, equal before the law, entitled to the dignity of full personhood. But the social community was based, in part, on slave holding. Blacks were chattel, devoid of rights, merely property.¹ The European settlers also were surrounded by Indians who, by Old World standards, were considered savages. When Jefferson was confronted with these obvious inequalities in his society, he resolved the dissonance by suggesting that only science could find the answer.

The new "science" of anthropology hastened to find answers, checking bibli- cal sources and data from medical lore and natural history. The effort has been described in William Stanton's The Leopard's Spots.² Some contemporary experts held that humans were divided into several species, descending from white Europeans, the highest, to blacks, the lowest. Another decided that the Indian was a lower order of human because life tended to regress in America. Still another suggested that the brains of blacks developed only as far as those of seven-months-old whites. And Jefferson's friend, Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, maintained that the dark skin of blacks stemmed from a form of endemic leprosy. If the "disease" could be cured, blacks would attain both equality with whites and happiness. The latter outcome would follow, he averred, since blacks would prefer to be white.

Rush's view of two centuries ago resonates into the present, for the argument is frequently made that homosexuals would rather be heterosexuals. Sci-
ence must again be called upon to unearth the causes of homosexuality; then homosexuals can submit to "cures." There has been no lack of suggested approaches to cures, from hormone shots to aversion therapy, to religious conversion, to resolution of the Oedipus complex. Homosexuality has been tabooed, and science legitimates that taboo.

The taboo has its origin in our Judeo-Christian heritage. It developed during the great period of Jewish nationalism, when the Hebrews undid their existing cultural norms, which previously had regarded homosexual behavior as natural and acceptable. So had their neighbors. The Jews, like the Canaanites and Chaldeans, had imparted religious significance to homosexual acts through the use of male homosexual temple prostitutes.

During their early nationalistic period, the Jewish tribes were small and surrounded by large, powerful neighbors. Survival depended upon rapid population growth. This can account for the transformation of their sexual attitudes and the decision to taboo the expression of homosexuality, birth control, and other nonreproductive sexual acts. Homosexuality was equated with idolatry, proscribed, and penalized by death. Later, during the early years of Christianity, Paul linked homosexual behavior with "outsiders," in this case the Greeks and Romans. By the thirteenth century homosexuality and unorthodoxy had become so closely related that a single English word, "buggery," applied to both heresy and sodomy. During both the Catholic inquisition and the Protestant witch hunts, "heretic" and "sodomist" were interchangeable charges. One charge implied the other. A modern counterpart may be found in the late Senator McCarthy's association of homosexuals with the new heretics, the Communists.

Homosexuality, like heresy, was a religious offense, until Henry VIII took over the church and made sodomy a separate civil infraction, a felony carrying the death sentence. Since then the sentence has been mitigated but the act remains a crime in England, and the United States Supreme Court recently reaffirmed the constitutionality of the Texas sodomy statute.

Since the 1895 imprisonment of Oscar Wilde for homosexual offenses, the debate has been joined over whether religion has the right to impose its concept of "sin" on the entire population. At least since the rise of the utilitarian concept of law, there has been some question whether the state has the right to legislate private morality and to judge the private consensual behavior of adults. Quite logically, this has led to the questioning of the sodomy laws. Thanks, however, to social inertia, the influence of the religious right, the ambivalence of the medical profession, and the timidity of mainstream religion, homosexuality remains an essentially unacceptable sexual orientation.

A still powerful religious and philosophical convention persists. The Judeo-Christian tradition has consistently held that the sex act is intended for procreation. Thus only heterosexual activity is proper.

Thomas Szasz has written persuasively that criteria for and definitions of mental health reflect community mores more than they do objective, immutable standards. During the Golden Age of Greece, amidst the widespread, apparently prevailing bisexual patterns, should the healers of the time have made efforts to "adjust" heterosexual males to bisexuality in furtherance of "normalcy"?