In recent decades, most Christian communities have experienced heated debates on homoerotic relationships. Very often the Bible is quoted. This article seeks to clarify the concepts involved and recommends a fresh, gospel-based approach to the issue.

Many Christians think that the Bible forms the basis of our moral universe. However, the historical evidence points in a different direction. As stated by Joseph Monti, classical Christian sexual morality is a product of the patristic age, not the Bible. Two thousand years of theological reflection have placed an ideological filter between the Bible and its modern readers. What today’s Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians say on sexuality is largely based on the medieval writings of celibate male clergy some of whom were misogynous and of advanced age. In addition, most Church Fathers took inspiration from anti-erotic strands of Greek philosophy. The hierarchical gender views of antiquity placed masculinity at the top of the scale and femininity at the bottom. All such extra-biblical elements have influenced Christian thinking on sexuality.

To take a fresh look at the issue of homoeroticism in the Bible, we need to discuss the terms involved. Are the well-known words ‘homosexuality’ and ‘Bible’ compatible? They came about at very different times in history. ‘Bible’ has ancient Greek origins while ‘homosexual’ was coined in 1869. Furthermore, no word in the Bible translates as the modern term ‘homosexuality’. Hence it is anachronistic to speak of homosexuality in biblical contexts. A flexible terminology with little or no cultural bias is preferable. Personally I tend to use the more neutral term ‘homoerotic’.

Despite this terminological confusion, a fierce controversy over the Bible and homoeroticism has rocked the entire Christian world for several decades. Interestingly, most scholars agree on exegesis, for example in the case of Leviticus 18: 22 (‘With a male you shall not lie down...’). However, discrepancies arise in the conclusions drawn from the texts. Simply put, three theological schools exist. Some argue that the Bible condemns any expression of a homoerotic nature. Others suggest that the scriptural prohibitions echo specific social and cultural contexts of the ancient world, which are irrelevant for people today. A third trend argues that the very idea of biblical condemnation of homoeroticism belongs to the post-biblical age.

Scripture and Sexuality

Most Old Testament texts were written in Hebrew prior to the Christian era. The Greek Old Testament translation known as Septuagint (LXX) appeared in Alexandria around the year 200 BCE. The influence of the Septuagint on Christian attitudes to homoeroticism is evident in Leviticus 18: 22. However, discrepancies arise in the conclusions drawn from the texts. Simply put, three theological schools exist. Some argue that the Bible condemns any expression of a homoerotic nature. Others suggest that the scriptural prohibitions echo specific social and cultural contexts of the ancient world, which are irrelevant for people today. A third trend argues that the very idea of biblical condemnation of homoeroticism belongs to the post-biblical age.
sexuality was immense. In the early Church the LXX completely replaced the original Hebrew Bible.\textsuperscript{viii} All New Testament writers quoted the Septuagint.\textsuperscript{ix} Today’s Orthodox churches still venerate the Septuagint as their official version of the Old Testament.\textsuperscript{x} With the Roman conquest, Latin joined the languages of ancient Palestine, which already included Classical Hebrew, Late Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The Latin \textit{Vulgate} translation of the Bible appeared towards the year 400 CE and eventually became the official Catholic Bible.

The Church Fathers, particularly Augustine of Hippo who wrote in Latin (354–430 CE), elaborated on Paul’s ideas on original sin in Romans 5: 12.\textsuperscript{xii} This concept holds a central place in Christian theology in relation to sex. By contrast, Jewish theology completely lacks the notion of human sinfulness. According to rabbinic tradition, Genesis 3 describes the natural development of human consciousness between puberty and adulthood.\textsuperscript{xii} The difference between Christianity and Judaism in this regard is largely based on interpretations of the Greek Septuagint and the Hebrew Bible, respectively.

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century launched the motto \textit{sola scriptura} (‘scripture only’). The Reformers proposed to return to the biblical sources in the original languages in order to distance themselves from Catholic tradition.\textsuperscript{xi} However, except for celibacy, in most Protestant circles the restrictive medieval approaches to sex have remained stable into the twenty-first century, especially in regard to homoerotic relationships.

\textbf{Christianity and Homoeroticism}

A recent survey in the United States showed the personal views on Christians held by young non-believers.\textsuperscript{xiv} The majority said that modern Christians were anti-gay, intolerant, and hypocritical. This is understandable given that many churches regard the rejection of homoerotic relationships as fundamental doctrine.\textsuperscript{xv} According to this view, a homosexual person cannot be a Christian (= no Christian can be gay). In practice, the churches have introduced an imaginary Eleventh Commandment saying, ‘You shall not have homoerotic relationships’.

The anti-gay position in current Christian thought is supported by a large number of Bible versions, commentaries and dictionaries. All make it very clear that the Old and New Testaments prohibit homoeroticism. Generally speaking, today’s gay and lesbian believers are given the following choices: (1) pray continually; (2) deny their erotic impulses by marrying an opposite-sex partner; (3) relinquish sexual intimacy by becoming celibate; or (4) undergo lengthy ‘Christian’ psychotherapies for the purpose of changing their sexual orientation.\textsuperscript{xvi}

The problem with these options is that none has proved convincing. Many lesbian and gay Christians have tried, but no matter how sincere or fervent their daily
prayers for change may be, their erotic impulses do not change. Those who marry an opposite-sex partner do not find happiness. Instead, they and their spouses suffer. The divorce rate in this group is high. Moreover, forced celibacy is a heavy burden. Some sign up for psychotherapy, but years go by without any noticeable change occurring. A state of depression is often the result. Tragically some of these lives end in suicide.\(^1\) In recent decades, psychologists and psychiatrists have realized that homoerotic inclinations are not a mental disorder requiring treatment. Today sexologists classify homosexuality as a natural variant of the human sexual spectrum along with heterosexuality and bisexuality.\(^2\)

‘By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them’

Another interpretation of this situation is suggested by the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Matthew 22: 37–40 Jesus draws attention to the supreme commandments of the Old Testament: Love God with all your soul (Deuteronomy 6: 5) and your neighbour as yourself (Leviticus 19: 18). This road leads to life (Luke 10: 28). In other words, the Christian way of life is to practise love (John 13: 35). At other times Jesus invites his listeners to examine what religious teachers preach: ‘By their fruits ye shall know them’ (Matthew 7: 16). If this hermeneutical principle is applied, it becomes clear that the fruits produced by Church persecution of lesbian, gay and bisexual people have been bitter and stale. Traditional biblical interpretation has not delivered. It has ruined the lives of thousands of women and men by coercing them into a constant state of fear, introspection and brainwashing.\(^3\)

Moreover, the churches ignore a very important fact: lesbian, gay and bisexual people do not identify with the alleged anti-gay texts in the Bible. LGBT people feel unduly attacked and unfairly accused. Thomas Bohache\(^{\text{xvii}}\) compares the current Christian approach to homoeroticism with the issues discussed by Paul in his letter to the Galatians. The apostle rejects the idea that Gentiles should convert to Judaism before joining the Christian community. According to Paul, what matters is faith in Christ. No circumcision is required because it would contradict the inclusiveness of the gospel message (cf. John 3:16). Similarly, Bohache argues that those who want to place special burdens on LGBT people are opposing the fundamental doctrines of Christianity.\(^{\text{xviii}}\) Christians should not submit to pressures from their social environment.\(^{\text{xix}}\) Paul says, ‘Am I now seeking... God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ’ (Galatians 1: 10).

Unfortunately a very large part of Church discourse on human sexuality ignores the solid academic research published in recent decades.\(^{\text{xx}}\) An empirical factor of great

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1 In Canada the rate of attempted suicide for all youth is seven percent. For lesbian and gay teenagers the rate is approximately 32 percent.


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importance should be noted: homo- and bisexual relationships exist all over the animal kingdom. Among hundreds of species of mammals, birds, and insects, zoologists are documenting widespread bisexual activity as well as the existence of long-term couples formed by two females or two males. The statistical frequency of homo- and bisexuality among animals corresponds roughly to the proportions found among human beings.

Relevant Bible Texts

In order to find a way out of the current theological deadlock, it will help to take a fresh look at the relevant texts in the Bible. The key texts are found in both Testaments: the opening chapters of Genesis, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18–19), Leviticus 18: 22 (+ 20: 13), Deuteronomy 23: 17–19, the drama of Judges 19–20, and some Pauline letters in the New Testament (Romans 1: 26–27; 1 Corinthians 6: 9; 1 Timothy 1: 10). The role of Bible translation is crucial whenever the issue of homoeroticism in the Bible is discussed. Unfortunately many serious mistakes are being committed. For example, in Genesis 2: 21–22 the word ‘side’ has become a ‘rib’; in Genesis 4: 1 and 19: 5 ‘know’ has been replaced by ‘have sex’, and in 1 Corinthians 6: 9 translators inexplicably suggest that Paul speaks of ‘homosexuals’—despite the fact that the unusual Greek words used by Paul (arsenokoitai and malakoi) do not appear in Greek homoerotic literature. Clearly a large number of English Bible translations are biased whenever they are dealing with perceived homoeroticism.

At the same time, the Bible includes a number of optimistic texts of great importance to discussions on homoeroticism. While these biblical passages have been ignored by Christian tradition, their literary, historical, cultural and social aspects are well worth scrutinizing. Such texts include: The book of Ruth (two women called Ruth and Naomi); Samuel 1 and 2 (two men called David and Jonathan); Psalm 118: 22 (the cornerstone); Isaiah 56 (a prophetic invitation to outsiders); Micah 6: 8 (what God requires); Matthew 8: 5–13 (two men blessed by Jesus); Matthew 19: 12 (eunuchs); Luke 8: 19–21 (the family of Jesus); Luke 17: 34 (two males in one bed); John 3: 16 (all believers); John 11 (the Beloved Disciple); Acts 8: 26–39 (the African eunuch); Acts 10 (what God has purified); Galatians 1 & 5 (Christians should not be circumcised); 1 Corinthians 13 (the greatest thing is love).

Conclusion

Ever since the days of antiquity a number of cultural, literary, historical and theological factors have influenced the way in which Christians read scripture. When it comes to human sexuality, a considerable proportion of today’s biblical interpretation is indebted to the theological currents of the patristic era and the Middle Ages. This situation is particularly poignant for lesbian, gay and bisexual
people who in many countries are subjected to fierce discrimination in Christian churches.

Several key factors should be considered: (1) The Christian majority has relegated believers who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual to a theological void; (2) Some exegetical problems in the original texts have never been sufficiently solved; (3) Translations of such passages are often incomplete or misleading; (4) The literary, theological and human richness contained in the Bible has not been duly appreciated; (5) A fresh approach to the Bible is needed for heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian and gay readers to engage with the biblical texts in an attitude of curiosity, dialogue and respect.

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xvi Tony Green, Brenda Harrison, and Jeremy Innes, Not for Turning: An enquiry into the ex-gay movement, (Published by authors, UK: 1996) 89–90.

xvii Thomas Bohache, “To Cut or Not to Cut: Is contemporary heterosexuality a prerequisite for Christianity?” in Goss and West Editors, 2000, 229.

xviii Cf. William Countryman (2006: 752): ‘We should be intent on making sure that we work with the help of the trust we have already experienced as a gift from God and refuse to accept the idea that there are additional requirements if we want to stand in God’s presence. There are no additional requirements. We already stand there’.

xix Thomas Bohache, “To Cut or Not to Cut: Is contemporary heterosexuality a prerequisite for Christianity?” in Goss and West Editors, 2000, 232.


About the Author

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