

Book Review

Men, Homosexuality and the Gods

Ronald E. Long
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‘War is sex and sex is war’

The author promises the reader ‘can expect from this book three things’. These three things are:

- an introduction to some of the major religious variations with respect to the question of (male) homosexuality
- some insight into an understanding of such differences
- a new perspective on the warfare of religion versus (male) homosexuality

Any reader of ‘Sexual Health’ might well wonder what relevance such questions have for him or her and why this book merits a review in a journal of sexual health medicine. To say that the subject matter is a little erudite seems an understatement and indeed there are sections of this book that for an average sexual health practitioner are heavy going. Opaque sentences, admittedly fairly rare and sparsely scattered throughout the text, like ‘love for the beautiful, however, not only reveals that which is desired in desiring anything – but actually opens upon the prospect of attaining that which we desire, if indeed such aspiration can be satisfied’ (p. 37) can’t endear the author to the reader! Yet the warfare between religion and male homosexuality is very real and if the author can cast light on the underlying factors behind this ancient animosity he will have perhaps gone some way in helping us understand and assist our gay clients.

Even in these days when religion lacks the authority over the lives of ordinary secular Australasians it may once have held, its attitude to homosexuality (and especially male homosexuality) still exerts a deep and powerful societal force.

An anecdote recounted early in the book of a fairly irreligious (American) father’s response to his twenty-something son’s coming out will bring to mind stories most of us have heard from our clients. The father’s first exclamation is: ‘but that’s the kind of guy other guy’s beat up!’ followed soon after by: ‘but it’s a sin!’. Father, though not a religious observer, almost as a primal response when faced with an unwelcome reality makes an appeal to religion as ultimate authority.

EM Forster, with characteristic skill, in his early but posthumously published novel ‘Maurice’ describes in his portrayal of the character Clive the dilemma faced by the young would-be Christian who happens to be homosexual. Clive is ‘deeply religious, with a living desire to reach God’

yet had in him ‘the impulse that destroyed the City of the Plain’. ‘Between Clive’s temperament’ (homosexuality) ‘and that religion’ (Christianity) ‘there is a secular feud. No clear headed man can combine them. The temperament, to quote the legal formula ‘is not to be mentioned among Christians’, and a legend tells that all who shared it died on the morning of the Nativity’. Andrew Sullivan, an American conservative but ‘classic liberal’, in favour of a gay rights rather than a gay liberation approach to gay politics, goes rather further than Forster as quoted in Ronald Long’s book: “the act of openly conceding one’s homosexuality is in some ways an act of faith, of faith in the sturdiness of one’s own identity and the sincerity of one’s own heart”.

The author of this book has looked at the approaches of various religions and cultural authorities towards homosexual behaviour and love down through the centuries including the Sambians of Papua New Guinea, Plato from ancient Athens, the Nth American Indian berdache, the Jewish tradition, Christian thinkers particularly St Paul and St Augustine, Tao, Moslem, Buddhist, and Shinto religions. He has sought for commonality in these diverse traditions and has come up with a main thesis based on the study of all these religious groups. His thesis can be fairly simply described; namely that the chief threat, indeed danger of male homosexual behaviour for cultures and religions is its perceived tendency to de-masculinise men. ‘Real’ men are penetrators, never the penetrated. “It is his sexual penetration alone that defines what it means to be a real man. Real men are aggressive tops who penetrate passive bottoms. Therefore, bottoms cannot be understood as fully adult, ‘real men’”. Religion has an invested interest in upholding the masculinity of socially significant males in the community and so is threatened by males who are willing to be sexually receptive. This idea has its origins in the warrior state where in battle a man penetrates the enemy with his weapon ‘as one might penetrate another with one’s penis’. An army containing females (biologically penetrable) and male bottoms who are willing to be sexually penetrated (rather than acting in the aggressive penetrator mould) will be substantially weakened. Real men are expected by society to be warriors in the bedroom as well as on the battlefield. In this mythical and symbolic sense, war is indeed equated with sex and sex with war.

Without the haunting images of sexual domination and humiliation of enemy prisoners from Abu-Ghraib prison in Iraq returning to my mind as I read these chapters, I might

have found this thesis somewhat far fetched. But with them in mind, who could disagree with the author's call for a sound debunking of this 'magical' association between sex and war. In the author's way of thinking it is the modern gay homophile movement and today's 'gay bottoms' in particular who are redefining masculinity in a revolutionary way. Further he argues that the gay rights movement at its core is a spiritual movement capable of playing a part in healing the damage done to society's fabric by the deeply held notion of aggressive penetrator masculinity. Whether he has sufficiently made this case will be for the reader to decide. The book however is designed to make one think, and contains much of interest along the way. Unfortunately I am inclined to agree with EM Forster that 'what the public really loathes about homosexuality is not the thing itself but

having to think about it'. Much easier to accept the time-honoured norms of society as handed down by religion and culture as the great Australian public (but thankfully perhaps not the New Zealand public) tends to do, than to think through these difficult issues and make a stand (as all clear thinking people must) for a new approach based on true justice and equity for all citizens whatever their sexual orientation.

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