

Irrational Fear of Gay People – 21st Century American Beliefs As Shaped By 17th Century English Superstitions

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There has been an extraordinary amount of hand-wringing and legislative attempts by religious right-wing factions in recent years to counteract the gains made by the gay community. The target that has received the most attention has been that of gay marriage. While the more strident religious leaders have voiced their opposition to any kind of gay rights, events over the last thirty years indicate that most Americans, if not in direct support of basic gay rights, at least are not strongly opposed to them. This has been evidenced in many of the legal and cultural changes that have occurred. However, the struggle over gay marriage has sparked a furor and a powerful backlash. This has been difficult for rational, clear-thinking people to understand. Why do many people feel so threatened by gay marriage, to the point that they believe the very institution of marriage to be endangered by it? If two men or two women are legally married, how does that have any effect whatsoever on the marriage of a man and a woman? Will straight men suddenly trade their machismo for feather boas and start singing Cher songs, or debutantes leave their cotillions and start driving 4X4 pickup trucks? Perhaps men and women will stop getting married and having children altogether. For years religious people have decried the promiscuousness and debauchery of the gay lifestyle; yet when two gay people want to commit to each other in a sanctioned relationship, that is not acceptable either. The message here is that they simply do not want gay people to exist at all.

Notwithstanding that these are all stereotypes, no one is going to embark on a lifestyle that is contrary to their nature in either direction. The religious belief that being gay is a sin doesn't seem to fully explain this uproar. There are many activities believed by the church to be sins, yet few garner such intense reactions as this subject. One could argue that people fear anything different from themselves, but again, this does not seem to get to the heart of this deep-seated anathema. There must be a more primal historical underpinning.

To understand this phenomenon, one must travel back to seventeenth century England. The settlement of North America by white Europeans began in earnest in the seventeenth century, and they brought their beliefs and prejudices with them. Throughout its history, the United States has stayed near to its Puritanical roots, so an examination of that time reveals much regarding current religious attitudes.

It is first important to note that most of the references to same-sex acts in Stuart England refer to those between men. This does not indicate an acceptance of lesbian behavior, but rather less of an interest at the time in the behavior of women.

The total abhorrence with which same-sex acts were viewed cannot be understated. The contemporary writings which survive continually expressed revulsion and horror, making apologies for simply mentioning the subject.¹ The literature of the time depicted complete fear and loathing, and these acts constituted a felony punishable by death.² Homosexuality was not only considered to be one of the major sins, but to be a dire and

ultimate consequence of other sins. It was widely believed that homosexuality resulted from drunkenness³, “pride, excess of diet, idleness, and contempt of the poor”⁴. The very terms used to refer to same-sex acts, such as “buggery” and “sodomy”, were also associated with bestiality and whores⁵. However, there was no identification of a person as homosexual; rather it was believed that all people were susceptible to this temptation, like any other. William Bradford, known as the Pilgrim leader of the Plymouth colony in Massachusetts, wrote of “our corrupt natures, which are so hardly bridled, subdued, and mortified”⁶.

The absolute horror with which this particular sin was viewed becomes apparent in light of its association with evil supernatural figures. Homosexuality was closely tied to witchcraft, and people committing same-sex acts were identified with werewolves, basilisks, and sorcerers, and considered to be their companions. These people were also seen as analogous to heretics, and in turn to Catholics (or Papists, as they were referred to), who were considered enemies of “true religion” in Protestant England. Catholic priestly celibacy was considered a cause of homosexual sin (insinuating that marriage would prevent succumbing to this common temptation), Catholic monasteries were therefore thought of as little more than male brothels, and in turn, perpetrators of homosexual acts were seen as enemies of the state.⁷ Some even believed sodomites to be enemy agents of the King of Spain.⁸ (A similar bizarre logic was used in the United States in the 1950s when gay people were targeted in the McCarthy era “witch-hunts” under the House Un-American Activities Committee, arguing that since they could easily be blackmailed, they were therefore likely candidates as communist spies or for other espionage.) A common belief was that a child conceived by a witch and the devil would be a sodomite. However, since sodomy was so evil, the devil would fear his own son, and he would therefore have no place in either heaven or hell, indicating that homosexuality was more evil than Satan himself.⁹

Writers spoke of sodomites in terms so far removed from everyday experience that it created a profound, even metaphysical fear. Then as now, it was easier to hate a bizarre stereotype than an individual who might be a person whom one knows personally as an acquaintance, friend, or family member. In stark contrast to this ghastly image, the actual experience of a same-sex encounter would most likely have occurred with someone who lived in the same town or village, or even under the same roof. In those days of limited travel, someone from the next county was viewed as a foreigner, so personal contacts were by necessity local. Most homes employed at least one servant, and servants of the same gender usually slept together. Many encounters were between servants, or between servants and masters. Similar experiences occurred at boarding schools and universities where students shared rooms. Hypocritically, there was an unstated acceptance of homosexual prostitution, as well as this institutionalized homosexuality in the household and education system.¹⁰

The outward view of homosexuality then was that it was a break with the natural order of things, just like the sorcery and magic with which it was associated.¹¹ However, actual prosecutions were rare and the courts’ concern with the regulation of homosexual behavior was slight.¹² While some prosecutions were the result of malicious intent by an individual¹³, many involved a breach of the peace or social order, especially if violence was involved. Many complaints were by outraged parents.¹⁴ There were few prosecutions for cases between masters and servants (again, unless undue violence was

involved) or where prostitution was involved, despite its high frequency.¹⁵ The true offense was against the stability of the social order and parental rights. As long as same-sex acts stayed within the boundaries of the previously mentioned established social institutions, the courts were not concerned with it, again displaying great hypocrisy.

This casting of a blind eye toward hidden homosexual behavior was not tolerance. The willingness of the culture to place homosexuality into a disconnected supernatural framework diverged from its unwillingness to do so in actual practice. Rather than tolerance, this was denial, a refusal to accept the terrifying sin of sodomy.¹⁶ Despite situations which provided seemingly obvious evidence of the occurrence of same-sex acts, since the idea of it was so far removed from people's minds, it was never even considered as a possibility, any more than they would expect to find their friends and families to be witches and werewolves. This allowed both the participants and those close to them to avoid the psychological problems that would be inherent in a same-sex relationship or experience at the time, by keeping the incident casual and undefined. Since the beliefs were so contrary to the actual experience, it was easy to disconnect the two.¹⁷ Society as a whole was no more likely than the individual to recognize the sodomite when the picture that had been painted was so detached from the reality.¹⁸ People don't see what they don't want to see. Moreover, this arrangement also provided a stabilizing influence on society. Since there was a long time gap between puberty and the average age of the first marriage, one sexual outlet was homosexuality. In the eyes of many, this hidden practice was preferable to sexual liaisons which produced illegitimate children, whose financial care often fell on the local community. In order for this solution to work, they had to keep the connection between the myths and symbols and the actual same-sex acts to a minimum.¹⁹

The mythological symbols did serve a purpose, however. When problems and disasters strike, most people, especially those who are deeply religious, will look for a scapegoat in order to explain why the all-powerful God to whom they prayed has failed them. In seventeenth century England, people often blamed witches for individual misfortunes, such as the death of a cow or the collapse of a chimney. It was convenient to say that an unfriendly neighbor was a witch who caused these minor tragedies by casting a spell. However, when large scale disasters occurred, such as epidemics or natural disasters, society tended to blame sinners, the worst of whom were the sodomites.²⁰ It was believed that such wide-spread misery must be God's punishment on a society that would allow such dreadful sin to occur. Everyone believed that God had already done this, first by destroying the entire world in the Great Flood, and again by destroying the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah with rain of fire. In 1665 the plague swept across England, killing 20,000 people in London. The following year nearly 80% of central London was destroyed by the Great Fire, burning 430 acres and 13,000 houses.²¹ It was widely believed that these horrific events were inflicted by God on a sinful society. If this were not true, then the religious mind could not grasp how an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God could allow such a thing to happen.²² Modern extremist Christian leaders have stated the same views. Jerry Falwell laid the blame for the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the gay community, Pat Robertson stated that God punished New Orleans for its sinful culture with the Katrina hurricane, and Fred Phelps believes that God is killing American troops in Iraq because of acceptance of the gay community.

The idea was that there exists a divinely organized form of nature and the world. Same-sex acts were outside of the natural order. This disorder in sexual relations could break out anywhere at any time, bringing with it catastrophe and suffering.²³ The fear was that the chaos of the first day of creation when “the earth was without form, and void” may come again, and that homosexuality was an early indication of this event. Therefore sodomy was not only perceived to be outside of the created order, but actually contributing to its dissolution.²⁴ This supposition essentially killed two birds with one stone. It not only provided a cause for a specific calamity, it showed that the calamity itself, rather than undermining the concept of a single divinely-ordained universal order, actually strengthened it and the established social order.²⁵ Instead of the disaster being a chaotic event outside of God’s control, God was seen as taking a corrective action against a behavior that was working against his natural order. Each individual was seen as a microcosm of the whole world and the universal order, so the actions of one individual could bring about a universal disaster. The remedy was to remove the (visibly) wicked man. This was analogous to the idea of sacrificing a virgin to the volcano to appease the gods. Everyone was subject to this temptation, and homosexuality was seen as only one component of the sin of debauchery, “a vice to which men’s natural corruption and viciousness is prone”.²⁶ In other words, one bad apple spoiled the entire barrel, so it was necessary to remove the bad apple, lest it contaminate all the others, as well as to placate a vengeful God.

When one understands this historical context, it starts to become clear why there is so much fear surrounding gay marriage. The reason it doesn’t make sense to so many is that there simply is no direct correlation between gay marriage and the demise of traditional marriage. There has been much social progress, as seen in more widespread acceptance of gay people and their civil rights. However, some of the old superstition remains and is triggered by this issue. The concept of marriage leaves the realm of civil rights and crosses over into the arena of religion and church sacrament. People may accept living around gay people and granting basic civil rights, but gay marriage is still perceived as being outside of the natural order. Because it crosses the religion line, it rekindles the old belief that God may visit retribution on a society that condones gay marriage. For those who believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible, since they believe that God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah over this issue, then they also believe it is required of him to do the same again when the same circumstances occur.

The recurrent theme that is woven through this entire logical progression is fear. In seventeenth century England, fear was the natural result of disasters on an unprecedented scale such as the plague and the fire. In the twenty-first century world, there have recently been earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, SARS, bird flu, and that of which we are constantly reminded, terrorist attacks. People still see these as a threat to their ordered world, despite the occurrence of events such as these throughout history. There has never been a time when these types of tragedies have not taken place. Yet in each period of history, there are those who fear these as signs of the end of the world – as they know it. The Bush Administration has purposely and shamelessly fostered a culture of fear in order to create and maintain power and control, perpetrated by the media and shared by the clergy. When fear such as this exists and people perceive a menace to their small orderly sphere of existence, they often react irrationally and search for someone besides themselves to blame. Gay people have been at the front of the line for centuries.

The best defense against superstition is continued education to raise people above ungrounded beliefs. The world makes social progress only when people release their grip on irrational thinking and cease being duped by those who seek to control them. Each of us can contribute by remaining stalwart in promoting thought based on reason. As Edmund Burke said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

Notes

This essay owes its existence primarily to the book *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* by Alan Bray, Gay Men's Press, 1982. Page references here refer to this work unless otherwise noted.

- ¹ p. 61
- ² p. 62
- ³ p. 16, George Turbervile
- ⁴ p. 16, Edward Coke
- ⁵ pp. 14-17
- ⁶ pp. 14-17
- ⁷ pp. 19-20, 26
- ⁸ p. 57
- ⁹ pp. 21-23
- ¹⁰ pp. 56-57
- ¹¹ p. 21
- ¹² p. 71
- ¹³ p. 72
- ¹⁴ p. 73
- ¹⁵ p. 74
- ¹⁶ p. 75
- ¹⁷ p. 76
- ¹⁸ p. 77
- ¹⁹ pp. 78-79
- ²⁰ p. 27
- ²¹ <http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia>
- ²² p. 28
- ²³ p. 29
- ²⁴ pp. 24-25
- ²⁵ p. 30
- ²⁶ p. 31

“Some evangelicals see it as a spirit or a demon of homosexuality that invades you, that it’s an almost personified thing that will completely strangle and kill you. Not even so much as a choice, but something you give in to, something that can afflict anybody.” - Randy Roberts Potts, Oral Roberts' gay grandson. Details Magazine, January 2011.
<http://www.details.com/culture-trends/critical-eye/201202/preacher-oral-roberts-grandson-randy-roberts-potts-the-gay-agenda>