

Same-sex unions: Wisdom from the past

Review by
JERRY BARTRAM

JOHN Boswell's new book, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, contains much fascinating history and offers considerable room for speculation about the sex lives and social institutions of classical and post-classical European society.

But perhaps the most intriguing reference in this intelligent, lucid and deeply learned study points to the future. In a brief epilogue, Boswell notes: "While I was preparing this study, I received a visit from a well-known prelate, who remarked to me that heterosexual matrimony had become such a ragged institution in the second half of the 20th century, that it hardly constituted a useful model for same-sex couples, who might better devise something entirely new."

GOOD advice from the unnamed prelate (Catholic? Anglican? Orthodox?). And one of the best things about Boswell's book is the intelligent care with which he pieces together, out of the past, a path for same-sex couples that has some of the best characteristics of conventional marriage — but its own unique features, too.

Boswell, a Yale history professor, has proved once and for all that intensely emotional and permanent same-sex unions were widely celebrated in both the Eastern and Western churches for about a thousand years.

One can debate whether or not these unions included sexual activity. Clearly, Boswell thinks they often or usually did, and he is successful in demonstrating that they were generally associated with the idea of marriage. Others — moved, perhaps, by ideology more than reason — may disagree. There is no absolute proof either way.

The liturgies he collects and translates stress an exclusive spiritual friendship — which makes both religious and practical sense, given the moral and legal prohibitions against homosexual acts throughout the period.

But some of the stories — particularly those concerning the Byzantine Emperor Basil I — clearly point to gay love.

And Boswell shows that the whole idea of men forming such exclusive partnerships flows, in a continuous line, out of classical antiquity, where the same relationships were clearly and actively sexual, and where these partnerships were widely viewed as more noble and more stable than heterosexual love could ever be.

It is this exalted sense of spiritual and moral partnership — a friendship that enlarges and improves each

partner — that offers most challenge and most hope to contemporary relationships (same sex or otherwise). It is here that the well-known prelate may find his answer.

The study is necessarily lacking in information on partnerships between women, although Boswell finds hints of such associations — in one of the paired saints still invoked in the longer version of the Roman Catholic mass (Felicity and Perpetua), and in possible references to paired nuns. There is a double reason for this: lack of information about women's lives, and their own lack of freedom to dispose of themselves according to their own liking.

SAME-SEX UNIONS IN PREMODERN EUROPE

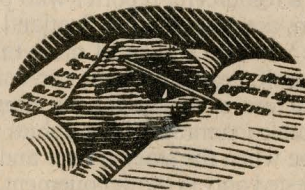
BY JOHN BOSWELL

Villard, 412 pages, \$33.50

While focusing on same-sex unions, Boswell's book advances historical research on the institution of late classical and early Christian heterosexual marriage. He shows that the Western Church's insistence on procreation as the end of marriage was merely a side effect of its more serious rejection of both marriage and sexuality. The truly holy man (or woman) was celibate, like Paul. Indeed Paul, who expected the immediate end of the world, did not associate procreation with marriage: The institution was merely preferable to unregulated lust.

LATER writers, no longer as convinced that the Second Coming was near, retained Paul's view of the inferiority of marriage to celibacy, but determined that if you had to have sex, you had better do it as infrequently as possible, and only in order to have children. Thus the lack of early Christian interest in marriage as a sacrament (a much later development) or even in developing marriage liturgies (most early Christian marriages took place outside the church).

By placing this Christian ascetical tradition within the context of classical marriage institutions as they were lived, Boswell gives us a glimpse of two churches. There was the official one, proposed and propagated by the teachers who remain almost the only source of information we have. And there was the unofficial one, about which no one ever wrote, in which ordinary people did their best to survive, mostly following the new religion, but also living sexual lives that expressed themselves in living arrangements and civil contracts no different from those of the late pagan empire.



NOTA BENE

From *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* — an excerpt from an 11th-century Greek service for same-sex union:

"The priest shall place the holy Gospel on the Gospel stand and they that are to be joined together place their right hands on it, holding lighted candles in their left

hands. Then shall the priest cense them and say the following:

In peace we beseech Thee, O Lord.
For heavenly peace, we beseech Thee, O Lord.
For the peace of the entire world, we beseech Thee, O Lord. . . .

That these thy servants, N. and N., be sanctified with thy spiritual benediction, we beseech Thee, O Lord.

That their love abide without offense or scandal all the days of their lives, we beseech Thee, O Lord.

That they be granted all things needed for salvation and godly enjoyment of life everlasting, we beseech Thee, O Lord.

That the Lord God grant unto them unashamed faithfulness, and sincere love, we beseech Thee, O Lord."

(In our own time, these two different churches persist, with a hierarchy preaching a set of absolute sexual prohibitions that the mass of Catholic people ignore.)

Boswell's conclusions are surprisingly modest: He draws no great lessons for the future, and does not attempt to answer the prelate's provocative suggestion. That is not, in his view, the historian's job.

For him, it is enough to have es-

tablished — in the face of considerable denial and obfuscation on the part of earlier anthropologists and social historians — that same-sex relationships were blessed in churches, and that they bore strong resemblances to heterosexual marriages. He has reclaimed a portion of the gay community's patrimony, and that is a substantial achievement.

His history also challenges contemporary church practice with an

implicit question: If you blessed these unions for hundreds of years, why not re-institute the practice now? And he publishes sample liturgies, for all to review — and adapt, and use.

Jerry Bartram is the former editor of B.C. Catholic newspaper, and author, under the pen name Alex Brown, of the award-winning play *The Wolf Within*.

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