

## ***Whack-A-Mole, And Other Cultural Games A Historical Analysis of Same-Sex Marriage***

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As a child I can remember going down to the riverfront for the carnival every summer. "Riverfest" was always an event to look forward to for the community of Brockville, Ontario. Screams of excitement and terror flooded the banks of the St. Lawrence as thousands of children and parents enjoyed the rides and games of the season. One particular game remains wedged in my memory and has probably had more of an impact on me than I care to admit. It was called "Whack-A-Mole". For twenty-five cents you were given three chances to knock a wooden mole back down into its hole before it retreated on its own. I can remember the feeling of excitement I got when I was handed the cloth-covered baton. It was my chance to win the water pistol and all I had to do was pound one of those moles back down into its hole. The trick was knowing where the mole was going to pop up next. There were many holes and sometimes a wave of moles would rise above the surface. At first glance the game seemed very chaotic but if you watched closely, over a period of time you could see a pattern of activity emerging.

From a certain vantage point "Whack-A-Mole" could be seen as the oldest game in history. There have always been people being whacked and people doing the whacking. Which one of us, from the child at play to the games we play as adults, can honestly say that we don't engage in literal or more metaphoric embodiments of the whack-a-mole game every once and a while. Perhaps it is not as dramatic as beating someone over the head, but how much of our latent whacking is a silencing of the voices and/or erasing from view people who would otherwise come out?

Throughout history cultural patterns have programmed both heterosexual and homosexual people in our responses to one another. The staggering influence of cultural patterns can be seen in activity as casual as watching Archie Bunker re-runs on television or in action as particular as a man getting thrown off a bridge in Ottawa because of his sexual orientation. Our ways of thinking and acting are culturally constructed and inscribed in us. As Geertz explains,

*Culture patterns--religious, philosophical, aesthetic, scientific, ideological--are "programs"; they provide a template or blueprint for the organization of social and psychological processes, much as genetic systems provide such a template for the organization of organic processes. (Geertz: 1973, 216)*

Geertz goes on to explain that these templates are necessary and that the particular pattern individual behavior takes is heavily influenced by cultural rather than genetic templates. (Geertz: 1973, 217-218) History plays an important role in the way that certain groups of people have been culturally patterned as the whackers and others as those who were to be whacked. Homosexual activity is a clear example of this. By examining, with a broad brush, how cultural patterns influenced the voices and visibility of the gay and lesbian community, we see that they have been treated much like wooden moles, struggling to find a place to surface only to retreat or get whacked back down out of sight.

The story of the gay and lesbian community will never fully be told. Individuals have either kept it secret for their own safety or been denied the full expression of their sexuality because it has never been fully acknowledged legally or religiously. There have, however, been glimpses of the gay and lesbian community surfacing at different points in history. Using the idea of culture

patterns we can briefly examine the wave of activity that has happened from classical Greece to modern times.

Classical Greece accepted homosexual relationships like no other period in history as we know it in the West. The cultural patterns during this part of history suggest that homosexual relationships were seen as a common public phenomenon. (Boswell: 1980, 49-56) In fact, "Aristotle described as admirable-but not bizarre or unexpected-a pair of male lovers who spent their whole lives together, maintaining a single household, and arranged to be buried beside each other." (Boswell: 1994, 60) There were also many references to a company of three hundred men, composed of pairs of lovers, known as the "Sacred Band of Thebes". (Boswell: 1994, 62) This company was known for the love that they had for one another. This love was what gave them their recognition as invincible. When they were finally defeated in the battle of Chaeronea in 338 B.C.E. the winner of the battle wept over the bodies when he realized this was the band of lovers. (Boswell: 1994, 62-64)

Literature does not seem to account for lesbian relationships very often. Boswell asserts that one reason is that all Roman writers were male. Gay writers were known to write about men as lovers. Men who were not homosexual in their orientation wrote about lesbians. Another reason for the down-playing of lesbian love may be the ambiguous understanding of sexual relationships between women as a form of adultery if one of the women were married. (Boswell: 1980, 82-84) It is interesting to note the double standard evident in the way men and women are treated in both the Old and New Testament regarding sexual activity. In the Old Testament a man could use the services of a prostitute but if a woman did she was a sinner. Men could be promiscuous but if a "bride" was not found to be a virgin she could be killed. (Deut. 22:20) The fact that Lesbos is an island is no accident. Privacy was still important concerning some relationships.

Formal public unions also took place between same-sex partners. The rite was comparable to what we know as a heterosexual marriage today. The Roman Emperor Nero who ruled from 54 to 68 C.E. was known to have been married to male partners two times publicly. Both unions were considered legal marriages. (Boswell: 1980, 82) One of the men Nero married, named Sporus, wore a veil, was given away as the "bride" and given the title "empress". At public gatherings Nero was known to show public displays of affection for Sporus. (Boswell: 1994, 80-81) If there had been a lack of tolerance for homosexual sexual relationships in this period, then as emperor, Nero would have been brought to task for his openness. As Boswell asserts,

*early imperial Rome may be viewed as the "base period" for social tolerance of gayness in the West. Neither the Roman religion nor Roman law recognized homosexual eroticism as distinct from - much less inferior to - heterosexual eroticism...It is extremely difficult to convey to modern audiences the absolute indifference of most authors to the question of gender. (Boswell: 1980, 73)*

Intolerance towards same-sex eroticism began to appear with the decline of the Roman Empire. There is a danger in assuming that there was a direct correlation between the two. Boswell says that "one must be careful not to confuse hostility to same-sex eroticism in particular with hostility to eroticism in general." (Boswell: 1980, 164) Although same-sex unions were legal until 342 C.E. (Boswell: 1994, 85-87) culture patterns began to shift with the advent of early Christian theologians who began to separate pleasure from sexuality. Augustine, Jerome, Origen, among others,

*explicitly rejected eroticism as a positive human experience, insisting that sexuality should be divorced from pleasure in a moral life and linked only to the function of procreation. Either we marry to have children, or, refusing to marry, we live in continence for the rest of our lives. (Boswell: 1980, 164)*

This shift took centuries before it was realized as a cultural pattern. In time people began to pack up their bodily needs and desires to heed the cultural call that procreation was the purpose for sexual union and fundamental to the need for populating the earth (e.g., Genesis 9:1, 17:4-6) As stated earlier, interpretation of Scripture, particularly Philo's interpretation of the story of Sodom's destruction because of same-sex activity (see chapter II, p. 14), had a profound impact on the shift of cultural patterns in relation to homosexual and heterosexual activity. This attitude prompted individuals to avoid the pleasure and loss of control during orgasm because it was seen as a sign of their fallenness. The practice of clerical celibacy was also an indicator that sexual relationships were valued less than the single state. By the end of the fourth century Christian asceticism and sexual renunciation (which took many different forms depending on the region) was a common culture pattern in most regions of the Christian world. (Brown:1988, 190-209)

Language also played a role in the shift of culture patterns. The fourth century was when Latin versions of the Bible were circulating in the West. By the fifth and sixth centuries the Greek language was no longer being used by Christian writers. As the language was lost so was the accuracy in translation. As Boswell illustrates,

*It was also during the fourth century that the word arsenokoitai became confused and lost its original significance, so that by the sixth century it was used to designate activities as different as child molesting and anal intercourse between husband and wife. (Boswell: 1980, 353)*

Boswell goes on to say that the first use of I Corinthians 6:9 in reference to homosexual activity was Macarius Aegyptus, an early medieval moralist, who seems to have understood the reference as involving prostitution as well. For four centuries the passage was not cited by a major theologian until Thomas Aquinas who used I Corinthians as scriptural basis for hostility to homosexual behavior. (Boswell: 1980, 353)

As culture patterns pulled sex and love apart, hostility towards eroticism grew and homosexual activity became less of a cultural norm. Constantine (288-327 C.E.) strictly enforced taxation laws for individuals engaging in homosexual sexual activity. It was not until 533 that homosexual sexual activity became a capital offence even though Christianity had been the state religion for more than two centuries. (Boswell: 1980, 171)

From this point forward all sexual activity that was not for procreation was either "whacked" by the law or retreated on its own for fear of going against the norm. It is important to note that homosexual relationships never, in any part of history, completely disappeared. Throughout Boswell's work on same-sex relationships, regardless of the period in history, he illustrates this assertion.

From about 400 to about 1000 of the Christian Era, literature was the domain of ascetic leaders of the new religion of Christian asceticism and sexual renunciation. It was not until the years from 1050 to 1150 that we see "the reappearance for the first time since the decline of Rome of evidence for what might be called a gay subculture." (Boswell: 1980, 243) Literature was re-claimed by individual writers who recorded their feelings of isolation. Claiming a voice

where they could, writers described their "common difference from the majority". (Boswell: 1980, 243) The crest of this wave of activity soon crashed. This uprising was short-lived in the larger historical picture. No other body of literature speaks out for the gay and lesbian community until the nineteenth century. (Boswell: 1980, 243) How and why this uprising took place remains to be more thoroughly investigated by most scholars. One theory is the influence of the culture pattern among heterosexuals that has come to be known as "courtly love".

In Central Europe during the eleventh and twelfth centuries the linking of sex with love begins to happen with the idea of courtly love. It has been described as

*a tradition of sexual passion...associated with a class of landless, unattached knights for whom the lady of the castle represented an ideal, if distant object of their love. (Turner: 1984, 128)*

Courtly love was, by its very nature, adulterous and sexist, challenging the status quo. Nevertheless, according to Adrian Thatcher,

*despite its many imperfections, courtly love became 'purified' and 'Christianized' during the Renaissance period and incorporated as a novel and transforming element into monogamous marriage. (Thatcher: 1993, 49)*

This shift from the focus on procreation as the goal of sexual relationships was a significant step towards intimacy and equality between partners and their sexual expression with one another. Courtly love became romantic marriage at this point in history so that "love and marriage" went together like "a horse and carriage". Unfortunately, this paradigm shift did not include the gay and lesbian community. After the twelfth century, evidence of a "gay subculture", as Boswell puts it, almost entirely disappears.

In 1179 the Third Lateran Council dealt explicitly with homosexual activity. Along with money-lenders, heretics, Jews, Muslims and mercenaries, homosexual people were condemned. The council's sanction read:

*Whoever shall be found to have committed that incontinence which is against nature, on account of which the wrath of God came upon the sons of perdition and consumed five cities with fire, shall, if a cleric, be deposed from office or confined to a monastery to do penance; if a layman, he shall suffer excommunication and be cast out from the company of the faithful. (Mansi in, Boswell: 1980, 277)*

Literally, this sanction could mean all non-procreative intercourse. As the shift in culture patterns took place during this period in history it was often used against non-procreative intercourse even though it was probably aimed at homosexual activity<sup>1</sup>. (Boswell: 1980, 278)

Thirty-six years later the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 C.E. met. At this council marriage officially became a sacrament and canonical rules were developed for the mode of its performance. In other words, the procreative role of the sexual union between two people was encouraged, thus excluding the gays and lesbians. (Boswell: 1994, 177-187) Any former

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the "aiming" is done through a cloaked reference. This dynamic is a common pattern throughout history and into modern day. It could be said that the ELCIC does the same kind of "aiming".

acceptance they may have had was effectively squashed at this point in history even though earlier liturgical manuscripts suggested otherwise. As Boswell's research has shown,

*the earliest Greek liturgical manuscript, probably written in the eighth century in Italy,...contains four ceremonies for sacramental union: one for heterosexual betrothal, two separate ceremonies (called simply "prayers") for heterosexual marriage, and a comparable "prayer" for uniting two men. (Boswell: 1994, 179)*

The similarities between the second heterosexual union ceremony and the ceremony for same-sex unions is seen by Boswell as evidence of "substantial mutual influence or parallel development". (Boswell: 1994, 179) The fact that these union ceremonies are not recorded in isolation across time and space is also an indication of the widely held acceptance of individuals in same-sex unions. As Boswell explains,

*In addition [to this eighth century manuscript] there are at least seven other known versions of such a ceremony from before the twelfth century...[and] seventeen surviving (in Old Church Slavonic and Greek)...The ceremony occurs in manuscript collections from all over the Christian world. (Boswell: 1994, 183-184)*

As stated earlier in the example of "Nero" and "Sporus", the union ceremony for same-sex couples was similar to what we know today as a "wedding". The rite often involved reading of scripture, holding hands, candles, communion, the Lord's prayer...all the aspects of ritual that we might consider obvious in the joining of two people. After the thirteenth century the ceremony was not considered a marriage because it was not sanctioned by the canonical rules of the Fourth Lateran Council. Religious, legal and social intolerance eventually reduced this ceremony to a rite of friendship and therefore a distortion of its original purpose. (Boswell: 1994: 194)

According to Boswell, as the teachings of Thomas Aquinas (1227-1278 B.C.E.) converged with the general intolerance of the time towards non-procreative sexual activity as "unnatural", the focus became homosexual sexual activity. Aquinas and other theologians in this period were influenced heavily by the pressures of popular morality rather than by the weight of the Christian tradition. Aquinas' original position on the issue of homosexuality was that he saw it among the sins of excess or wantonness. Due to the overwhelming intolerance Aquinas compared homosexual sexual activity with types of behavior like bestiality. The writings of Aquinas played on the fears of people already experiencing the repression by church and society in response to this kind of sexual activity. (Boswell: 1980, 318-330) As Boswell states, "the writings of Aquinas and his contemporaries continued to influence religious and moral attitudes well into modern times." (Boswell: 1980, 330)

Things haven't changed much since Aquinas. Although the Reformers tackled the issue of clerical celibacy they were nonetheless heavily "influenced by the Augustinian tradition regarding original sin and its consequences for human sexuality." (Farley in, Nelson and Longfellow: 1994, 63) Like Augustine and the Christian tradition that followed him, Martin Luther and John Calvin saw marriage and sexuality as intrinsically linked to the divine plan for creation. Any sexual activity beyond the traditionally sanctioned marriage was considered sinful. (Farley in, Nelson and Longfellow: 1994, 63-64) This history is still evident in our communities today.

It is easy to see the influence that culture patterns throughout history have had on both homosexuals and heterosexuals. Today we have come to a point in history where the cloth has come off the baton and the body has been shattered into pieces. In doing so we have shattered the very thing that creates us and gives us life--the gospel. As Margaret Miles suggests,

*Contempt for the body, a prominent feature of devotional manuals, is fundamentally inconsistent with the Christian doctrine of creation, the Incarnation of Christ, and the resurrection of the body. (Miles: 1990, 95)*

Although I have not specifically considered the suspicion of bodied existence that runs throughout history it does merit consideration. Miles reminds us about the problem of how we value the body as an object to be used and abused. As a result, instead of deepening our awareness of our bodies, we have deconstructed the goodness and integrity of physical existence with ourselves and with one another.

We can no longer be ignorant given this understanding we have of history. With this understanding we can address the hatred towards gay and lesbian people so prevalent in today's culture. First, we must begin to address our self-hatred which has fostered the hatred of others. We need to affirm, within ourselves, the complete union of sex and love which is consistent with a view of the wholeness of the body and the innate goodness of human sexuality as a part of God's creation.