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Christianity's Influence on Attitudes towards Homosexuality in the Roman Empire

A few months ago, the state of Oregon legalized same sex marriage and prompted an intense storm of celebration and retaliation. This legal action overturned a ban on same-sex marriage that had existed for decades, and which continues to exist in much of the rest of the country. Where do such strict laws regarding marriage come from? To get a glimpse of an answer, it is instructive to look all the way back to the emergence of Christianity in the Roman Empire, and examine its implications on society's view of sexuality. The Roman Empire's transition from a polytheistic to Christian society corresponded with and likely contributed to its growing intolerance of homosexuality in social mores and written law; this aligns with the general trend that polytheistic societies have freer attitudes toward sexuality than monotheistic ones.

Cosmology, whether it is institutionalized religion or general beliefs about the deities that exist in the universe, cannot be separated from the social values and expectations of a given civilization. As in the case of attitudes towards sexuality, cosmology and social values are often interrelated—usually with cosmology influencing the attitudes. Before examining the effect that Christianity's rise had on attitudes towards sexuality in the Roman Empire, it is useful to examine the backdrop against which this occurred.

Before Christianity in the Roman Empire, major civilizations had for many centuries adhered mostly to polytheistic religions (as in the cases of Sumer, ancient Greece, and pre-

Christian Rome), as well as one monotheistic religion (the Hebrews, although they had a smaller influence on the Christian Roman Empire than Greece and the pre-Christian Roman Empire).

Polytheistic religions are those in which multiple deities, or gods, exist; in ancient Greece, for example, there was Zeus, the king god of the Earth and skies; Poseidon, god of the sea; Hades, god of the underworld; Athena, goddess of wisdom; Aphrodite, goddess of love; and so forth. On the other hand, monotheistic religions are those in which there is only one, singular God.

Judaism and Christianity are examples of monotheistic religions.

When examining religion's influence specifically on attitudes toward sexuality, the general trend is that ancient polytheistic civilizations had freer attitudes towards sexuality than ancient monotheistic civilizations. To explain this pattern, in "Vices, Gods, and Homosexuality: Cosmology as a Mediating Factor in Attitudes toward Male Homosexuality", De Cecco and Shively analyze the many ways in which religion interacts with social norms. For polytheistic societies, a sexually charged universe created an environment in which no single act of sexuality was intrinsically forbidden, and where gender was often blurred. For example, in Sumerian, Greek, and Roman mythology, various types of sexual relationships—including adultery, masturbation, and homosexuality—occurred within the divine world, and polytheistic male gods like the Mesopotamian Anu were often pictured with female parts. In addition, giving birth was not restricted to females—Dionysus, for example, was born of the Greek god Zeus (De Cecco 33). This context blurred the lines of gender and sexuality, so polytheistic religions generally allowed for open attitudes toward sexuality. As a result, ancient polytheistic societies like the Greeks were accepting of homosexuality, though they wouldn't have thought of it as homosexuality, and various types of sexual relationships. In fact, the relatively open attitudes towards sexuality of the ancient Sumerians, a polytheistic ancient civilization, are evident in

some of the Western world's earliest literature. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the king of Uruk, Gilgamesh, appears to have a male lover Enkidu, with whom he has sexual relations (Gilgamesh 95). However, ancient Sumerians probably would not have considered this a homosexual relationship; rather, it was a display of the love of a great friendship (Nissinen 74). In any case, such a relationship fits well within the context of a polytheistic culture.

In monotheistic societies, by contrast, sexuality was largely removed from the divine world. In ancient Hebrew culture, for example, the cosmos are completely desexualized. De Cecco and Shively write that "...Yahweh creates by his word rather than through any sort of sexual intercourse" and "...he never acts in a sexual way" (De Cecco 36). Because Yahweh, the one and only god, never expressed any sort of sexuality, this monotheistic religion failed to promote openness toward various types of sexual behavior. In addition, gender in ancient Hebrew culture was reduced to a much more rigid construction. As early Judaism is the only monotheistic religion discussed in "Vices, Gods, and Homosexuality: Cosmology as a Mediating Factor in Attitudes toward Male Homosexuality", some caution must be yielded in extending these conclusions to other monotheistic religions. However, the analysis behind why monotheistic religions tend to be less open towards sexuality remains non-unique to ancient Hebrew society.

Pre-Christian Roman religion was polytheistic: it was shaped largely by Greek mythology, which features several gods who had sexual relationships with each other and with mortals. Like other polytheistic religions, ancient Greek mythology featured a variety of sexual relationships and the blurring of genders. An example that illustrates both of these characteristics is the story of how Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, was born from Zeus's thigh. Such stories and the gods themselves were transferred virtually seamlessly into the pre-Christian

religion of the Roman Empire. Thus, within the context of Roman polytheism, it would be expected that attitudes toward sexuality in the pre-Christian Roman Empire displayed a significant amount of tolerance.

Indeed, examples of tolerance toward homosexuality and various expressions of sexuality are evident in the early Imperial Empire: in social expectations, literature, and written law, it appears that homosexuality was not viewed as a crime. First, popular opinion held that various expressions of sexuality were acceptable; in *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, Brundage writes that “Romans generally tolerated a wide variety of sexual practices. Prostitution, concubinage, masturbation, and homosexual relations all carried no social or moral opprobrium” (Brundage 44). In other words, the pre-Christian society of the early Imperial Empire showed little sign of the sexual ascetism and anti-homosexuality that would later arrive with the development of Christianity. Literature from pre-Christian Rome shows a similar indifference towards sexual preference: in *Clitophon and Leucippe*, a novel read by Romans of the third century, homosexual and heterosexual romantic love appear as absolutely indistinguishable—with the factor of gender treated merely as an accident (Boswell 86). In fact, the existence of literature with homosexual relationships and the indifference with which sexual orientation is treated in it even suggests that same-sex relationships were quite common. In any case, both these pieces of evidence reflect a society that was comfortable with various expressions of sexuality and homosexual relationships.

However, perhaps the most concrete evidence of the early Roman Empire’s tolerance of homosexuality comes from the written law. In the early Empire, same-sex relations were definitely legal; institutionalized same-sex relationships were actually becoming more common

just as long-term, different-sex marriages were growing in popularity. In *Christians, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, Boswell describes the period:

By the time of the early Empire...many homosexual relationships were permanent and exclusive. Among the lower classes informal unions like that of Giton and Encolpius may have predominated, but marriages between males or between females were legal and familiar among the upper classes...[B]y the time of the early Empire references to gay marriages are commonplace. The biographer of Elagabalus maintains that after the emperor's marriage to an athlete from Smyrna, any male who wished to advance at the imperial court either had to have a husband or pretend that he did...marriage took place under the same law that regulated marriage between men and women" (Boswell 82).

Thus, same-sex marriages were legal and commonplace across social classes prior to the emergence of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Strict distinctions between how the genders were treated, as well as the overt repression of homosexual relationships were conspicuously absent in the early Roman Empire. Boswell even provides a comprehensive statement that

...Roman society was strikingly different from the nations which eventually grew out of it in that none of its laws, strictures, or taboos regulating love or sexuality was intended to penalize gay people or their sexuality...gay people were in a strict sense a minority, but neither they nor their contemporaries regarded their inclinations as harmful, bizarre, immoral, or threatening..." (Boswell 87).

This means that the polytheistic, pre-Christian Roman Empire—following the general trend about cosmology's influence on social attitudes that underlies this paper—had relatively open attitudes towards sexuality and homosexuality.

These open attitudes then undergo slow but steady changes as Christianity emerges as the dominant religion in the Roman Empire. Christianity is a strictly monotheistic religion with a singular transcendent God, who is quite similar to the god Yahweh of the Hebrew tradition. In contrast to the polytheistic, sexually charged universe of ancient Roman religion, the singular Christian God does not reproduce or have sexual relations. Christianity's growing influence in the Roman Empire constitutes a broad trend lasting for centuries, but is punctuated by Emperor Constantine I's conversion to Christianity, as well as the institution of Christianity as the Empire's official religion. Constantine, who lived from 272 C.E. to 337 C.E., was the first Roman emperor to claim conversion to Christianity (Chambers 158). His rule served as a major transition period for the Roman Empire; while pre-Christian Roman gods like Apollo and Hercules were still recognized and sacrificed to, Christianity also began to gain a solid foothold. In 380 A.D., following the split of the Roman Empire, Christianity was recognized as the official religion of the Empire by the emperor Theodosius and his western counterpart Gratian (Chambers 159).

With the growth of Christianity, the Roman Empire grew less tolerant of homosexuality and expressions of sexuality than the earlier Empire had been. This increasing intolerance found expression both in the writing of the earliest Christian thinkers, as well as in the written laws of the late Roman Empire. First, the philosophical tradition of dualism—the idea that there are good and evil forces warring for control of a man's soul—significantly influenced early Christian attitudes toward sexuality. As Boswell writes,

Saint Augustine had been a member of a dualist sect...for many years before his conversion to Christianity, and many Christian moralists were consciously or unconsciously affected by powerful dualist intellectual currents of the later Empire.

Dualists deprecated all forms of sexuality as weapons of the evil forces against the good...[H]omosexual pleasures were seen by some as worse than heterosexual ones, since they did not accord with the design of the Creator in regenerating the human race” (Boswell 129).

Thus, from the beginning, anti-homosexual sentiment and a general intolerance of sexual expression was associated with Christian moral codes. Eskridge furthers this idea in “A History of Same-Sex Marriage”, writing that “The early church fathers—most notably Clement, Jerome, Origen, and Augustine—developed a philosophy of sexual abstinence that problematized any sexual activity done for pleasure itself.” Both Boswell and Eskridge contend that Christianity’s growth in the Roman Empire at least coincided with, if not directly influenced, the development of a culture of sexual abstinence. The philosophy at the time was that sexual activity’s only purpose was procreation; homosexual relationships obviously were not acceptable under this framework. Thus, as early Christian tradition advocated companionate different-sex marriage, it is possible that the incompatibility of procreation and same-sex relations resulted in anxiety about homosexual relations (Eskridge 1448).

Though one might argue that the ideas of early Christian thinkers like Augustine do not reflect popular sentiment, the law provides even more evidence of critical attitudes toward homosexuality in the monotheistic Roman Empire. In summary, “...all Roman antihomosexual legislation from the 4th century on was introduced by Christian emperors...” (Greenberg 527). First, in 342 A.D., the Roman Empire adopted a statute proclaiming that those who entered into same-sex marriages would be subjected to “exquisite punishment” (Eskridge 1447). Next, during and after the collapse of the Roman Empire, attitudes towards same-sex unions grew even more inhospitable. As Eskridge furthers, “In the surviving Eastern Empire, the Justinian Code of

533 A.D. flatly outlawed same-sex intimacy, placing it in the same category as divorce and adultery—all of which violated the Christian ideal of companionate different-sex marriage” (Eskridge 1449). These laws make the contemporary attitudes towards homosexuality explicitly clear. Moreover, in the language of the codes themselves, Roman emperors expressed their opposition to homosexuality in religious terms and employed Christian rhetoric (Boswell 172). This means that according to the legal codes passed during Christianity’s early period of rapid growth, the development of increasingly intolerant attitudes towards homosexuality was rooted in Christian ideals. Moreover, this hostility was aimed not just towards homosexuality, but also towards various other forms of sexual activity, like concubinage, masturbation, and adultery (Richlin 555). Clearly, by this point in time, the same-sex relations and expressions of sexuality to which the Romans had once been indifferent have become not only taboo, but also illegal. Both early Christian thought and anti-homosexual legal codes point to a Roman society that had recently become much less tolerant of expressions of sexuality.

This comparison between the pre-Christian Roman Empire and the Christian Roman Empire illuminates some of the stark differences between the two societies’ attitudes towards sexuality. The pre-Christian Roman Empire evidently was quite open to homosexual relationships and expressions of sexuality, while the period of Christianity’s growth in the Roman Empire corresponded with increasing intolerance towards homosexuality. Such a transition aligns nicely with the thesis put forth by De Cecco and Shively, which was that polytheistic societies tend to have more liberal attitudes towards sexuality than monotheistic societies.

While it is difficult and problematic to assert that the emergence of Christianity is solely responsible for these changes in attitudes towards sexuality, it is important to note that it is

certainly a plausible explanation. First, the justification for hostility towards homosexuality and sexual expression often explicitly appeals to Christian ideals. Second, even when Christian moral codes aren't directly invoked in historical records, its monotheistic nature may have had a significant, if implicit, influence on attitudes towards sexuality. This paper began with an exploration of De Cecco and Shively's "Vices, Gods, and Homosexuality: Cosmology as a Mediating Factor in Attitudes toward Male Homosexuality" because it outlines the warrants behind why polytheistic societies tend to be more open towards sexuality than monotheistic ones: namely, polytheistic religions include a sexually charged universe where the gods partake in a variety of sexual activities, while the monotheistic cosmos has largely been desexualized. Building off of this analysis, the case study of Christianity's emergence in the Roman Empire may be viewed as the empirical evidence that supports the same thesis. Of course, supporting such a thesis with one case study is problematic, but examining multiple cases for cosmology's influence on attitudes towards sexuality would be far too ambitious for the nature of this paper. Thus, instead one case study has been examined in detail.

The emergence of Christianity corresponded with and likely prompted stricter attitudes toward sexuality in the Roman Empire. This set the stage for the Church's harsh repression of homosexuals during the Middle Ages and beyond. In fact, it set the stage for the repression of homosexuals that continues today: this paper remains relevant because as we fight an uphill battle towards acceptance of homosexual relations and the dissolution of a gender binary, religion is inseparable from the conversation. Furthermore, in the United States and other parts of the Western world, our attitudes towards these topics are largely informed by a collective Christian conscience—even if many of us do not identify as Christians. Examining the roots of Christianity and its intolerance of variability in sexual relations helps to contextualize the current

debate. Implicitly, it may also help us frame sexuality in a more objective way: once we recognize that our attitudes toward sexuality are highly influenced by institutionalized religion, rather than by some inherent or universal truth, we can think more critically about our beliefs.

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