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## John Boswell: Posting Historical Landmarks at the Leading Edge of the Culture Wars

Jeffery Cisneros

*University Of Texas At San Antonio*

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# John Boswell: Posting Historical Landmarks at the Leading Edge of the Culture Wars

JEFFREY CISNEROS

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT SAN ANTONIO

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most enduring and controversial figures in the field of history is John E. Boswell. His work on homosexuality and the history of the Christian Church was published at a key time during the Stonewall Riots in the late 1960s and the removal of homosexuality from the list of diagnostic mental disorders in the mid 1970s. This social upheaval created a dynamic that not only influenced Boswell personally but contributed to the vehement reaction to his book *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. Written in 1980, this book has profoundly influenced theological debates in numerous Christian denominations, particularly in the United States.

Boswell earned his PhD at Harvard in 1975 and was immediately hired in a tenure-track position at Yale University (*curriculum vitae*, Boswell Papers). His first book was based on his doctoral dissertation, *The Royal Treasure: Muslim Communities Under the Crown of Aragon in the Fourteenth Century*, which displayed his gifts as a medieval philologist working in Catalan, Aragonese, Castilian, French, and Latin with equal facility. The book investigated *mudejeres* (later called *moriscos*), Muslims living under Christian protection prior to 1492 who did not convert to Christianity. The book received favorable reviews, and Boswell developed a reputation as an Iberian scholar with a talent for languages and an interest in the religions of medieval Western Europe. He also seemed to have special insight into the challenges of being the outsider within a dominant Christian culture, a talent that would be important to his second monograph, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (hereafter CSTH), published in 1980.

Boswell's private papers illustrate the controversy surrounding the publication of *CSTH*, the heart of which centered on his contention that Christianity was not always hostile to homosexuality. This contention was poorly received by secular gay activists on the left, who were negative about the Church, as well as by religious conservatives on the right, who were negative about homosexuality. Boswell's book created a moment in time when politically odd bedfellows worked together to defend outdated but cherished ideas about how Christianity historically treated homosexuals.

### **THE ARGUMENT OF *CHRISTIANITY, SOCIAL TOLERANCE, AND HOMOSEXUALITY***

Boswell writes in the introduction to his book that his intent is to “rebut the common idea that religious belief—Christian or other—has been the cause of intolerance in regard to gay people” (*CSTH* 6; this and all other citations of *CSTH* refer to the University of Chicago edition of 1980 unless otherwise noted). Boswell divides his book into four sections and twelve chapters. The first two chapters handle the introduction and definitions. The exposition starts in the third chapter on Rome, which is the foundational chapter, and proceeds chronologically through the ninth on the High Middle Ages. Boswell uses the final three chapters to analyze and conclude his argument.

Boswell argues in Chapter Ten that proscriptions against homosexuals came about as a result of social change, but, unlike what had been claimed previous to the publication of *CSTH*, he argues that the legal prohibitions had been the result of a general interdiction in Europe against all groups that did not conform. What is remarkable about this argument is not that it is new but that it reiterates an argument that medieval historians generally agree on: that restrictions on groups that did not conform were on the rise in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Prior to *CSTH*, few had acknowledged that homosexuals were caught up in this shift in sentiment in Western Europe. Boswell mentions two key events that had a profound influence on the shift: the Third Council of the Lateran in 1179 and the Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215. Both of these proceedings were adopted almost seamlessly into secular law and were particularly harmful to gays, Muslims, and Jews (*CSTH* 272–75).

In Chapter Eleven, Boswell presents an analysis of the argument put forward by scholars in the High Middle Ages that marshaled denunciations of homosexuality, associating it with animal behavior and featuring the central claim that homosexuality “violated nature” (*CSTH* 303–10). This natural law argument has been prevalent in Christian teaching against homosexuality since St. Thomas Aquinas successfully molded elements of Greek philosophy, late Roman law, post-classical bestiaries, and medieval medical judgments into a cohesive but contrived argument (Henry 440). Generally, the

natural law argument has taken elements of animal behavior and equated it to human behavior, making the partial assertion that, since animals do not engage in same-sex couplings, it is unnatural and wrong that humans do. The problem with this argument is that it falls apart under scientific observation, which reveals myriad examples of same-sex coupling in the animal kingdom. Joan Roughgarden, a distinguished evolutionary biologist, has published articles arguing that same-sex pairing behavior is observable in all areas of the animal kingdom. The culmination of her primary work, which began in the early 1990s, is *Evolution's Rainbow*. Her monograph provides insight into how genes and hormones control diversity in sexual selectivity and constructs a scientific refutation of natural law arguments cherished by Darwin and embraced by the Church since Aquinas. Admittedly, Aquinas did not possess the sophisticated tools that Roughgarden has used in the compilation of her data, but the modern Roman Church does. Roughgarden's study supports Boswell's argument from a scientific viewpoint and has done much to dispel the authority of the natural law argument that the Church has cherished.

But Thomistic arguments have not been the only source of medieval antipathy toward homosexuality. Alain de Lille's twelfth-century *Complaint of Nature*, for example, features the goddess *Natura* in the role of complain-er-in-chief. *Natura* bemoans unmanly behaviors in society as an example of unnatural incontinence: "For the human race, derogate from its high birth, commits monstrous acts in its union of genders, and perverts the rules of love by a practice of extreme and abnormal irregularity" (*Prose IV*). Boswell observes in CSTH, "Alain was very much influenced by the hostility to non-conformity which was sweeping through Europe in his day, and he consciously tried to erect an intellectual structure which could support it" (CSTH 310).

Thematically, Boswell argues that the rise in secular hostility was what ultimately led to church proscriptions, not the other way around as had been argued prior to CSTH. Thus, Boswell argues, Aquinas arrayed the secular elements of natural law as a series of leading questions and proscriptive, authoritative answers in his *Summa Theologiae* (CSTH 318–330). Aquinas's answers have been used as the basis for natural law arguments against homosexuality all the way into the present, a period of approximately seven hundred years. CSTH, while certainly not the first salvo in the war against the natural law argument, came at a time when the combination of political and social forces provided a dynamic opportunity for Boswell's arguments to be made.

## **THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF *CHRISTIANITY*, *SOCIAL TOLERANCE*, AND *HOMOSEXUALITY***

The publication of CSTH came only eleven years after the Stonewall Riots in New York on June 28, 1969, the moment in history that marks the beginning of the modern gay rights movement. The events of Stonewall occurred early in the morning and continued over the following days. It began when drag queens and a group of gay patrons were harassed in a bar and refused to cooperate with police, refused to get into paddy wagons voluntarily, and ultimately forced the outnumbered police officers and detectives to barricade themselves inside the Stonewall Inn. The initial riot ended at about four in the morning with thirteen arrests and four police officers injured. The riots and civil unrest continued over the week, galvanizing a community that prior to Stonewall had been meek and restrained. Homosexuals had finally fought back and embarrassed the New York Police Department.

Social upheaval was not the only sign that changes to the lives of homosexual men and women were on the way. The scientific community had been pursuing answers to the question of whether homosexuality was a pathology. After years of study that started with the groundbreaking work of Alfred Kinsey and Evelyn Hooker, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of diagnostic mental disorders in 1973, with full ratification in 1974, and the American Psychological Association followed suit in 1975.

Kinsey's groundbreaking studies in 1948 and 1953 are typically credited with the beginning of the study of homosexuality. While it is true Kinsey's study revealed that many more adults than previously expected had engaged in homosexual behavior or had same-sex fantasies, Kinsey's study was quite general and was not geared to a specific empirical study of homosexuality; it merely set the groundwork ("Facts about Homosexuality"). The first study that directly refuted homosexuality as indicative of psychopathology was conducted by Evelyn Hooker in 1957. In brief, Hooker recruited two groups of men matched for age, IQ, and education at the time of the study. None of the men in either group was in therapy at the time of the study, and Hooker used a double-blind procedure that asked experts to rate the adjustment of the men without any prior knowledge of their sexual orientation ("Facts"). Projective tests—Rorschach, TAT, and MAPS—were conducted. The Rorschach experts put two thirds of the heterosexual group and two thirds of the homosexual group in the top three categories of adjustment. When asked to identify which tests were obtained from homosexual men, the experts could not distinguish sexual orientation at a level better than random chance ("Facts"). The results for TAT and MAPS also did not differ significantly.

Hooker concluded that homosexuality was not a clinical illness and that homosexuality was not associated with psychopathology. Her results have since been replicated by other researchers using a variety of research methods. Thus, while Kinsey was important, Hooker's study was the true basis for why psychiatrists and psychologists altered their views.

While the medical community was clarifying and demystifying homosexuality, the Church was resisting this scientific evidence, setting the scene for Boswell to confront the traditional ecclesiastical argument. In 1976, Pope Paul VI, via the Society of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, announced the Vatican's response to the statements of the "psychological order" by both the APA and the Church (*Persona Humana* Sect. VIII). In brief, Paul conceded that a change in pastoral care was needed to care for gay members of the Catholic community, but homosexuality was still "intrinsically disordered and in no case can be approved of" (*Persona* VIII). The Church was invested in the continuation of the over seven-hundred-year-old Thomistic argument surrounding natural law that would later figure prominently in Boswell's book.

Another feature of the cultural landscape that lay behind Boswell's book was the anti-gay rhetoric that became prominent in the modern culture wars. Anita Bryant became the public face of the anti-gay movement in 1977 with her "Save Our Children" campaign in Miami, where she openly advocated the repeal of Miami's ordinance banning anti-gay discrimination; her attempt was successful by a margin of 69% to 31%. Bryant's campaign ultimately resulted in a law passed by the Florida legislature that absolutely banned gays from adopting children.

At the same time on the other side of the country, Harvey Milk was elected as a San Francisco city-county supervisor, only the third openly gay U.S. politician to serve in any capacity. Milk's eventual assassination along with that of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone in 1978 by former supervisor Dan White gained nationwide attention as did White's acquittal on the charge of first-degree murder—after the so-called "Twinkies defense" that he had eaten too much sugar—and his conviction on the lesser charge of voluntary manslaughter (Shilts).

Bryant and White epitomize two political sides at war over the issue of fundamental rights. One side was religious and socially conservative, and the other side was secular and socially liberal. Csth emerged to gain the attention of the general audience and became an immediate topic of public debate that loosed a firestorm of criticism from deeply opposed political sides that agreed on virtually nothing except that John Boswell was wrong.

## **THE RECEPTION OF *CHRISTIANITY, SOCIAL TOLERANCE, AND HOMOSEXUALITY***

The University of Chicago Press could scarcely have predicted the demand for C<sup>STH</sup>. In its first year of publication, C<sup>STH</sup> was reprinted six times, and the demand for the book was greater than the publisher could supply (undated letter from the UCP editor to Boswell, Boswell Papers). The book is still not out of print. C<sup>STH</sup> was reviewed in popular magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time*; Boswell enjoyed a measure of celebrity; and requests for speaking engagements and public appearances far exceeded his ability to fulfill them all. I reviewed a large file of such requests in his papers and discovered no less than a hundred politely worded letters in which Boswell had to refuse requests to appear because his schedule was booked as far out as two years in advance (Boswell Papers). Yet Boswell's flirtation with celebrity did not result in universal acceptance of C<sup>STH</sup>.

C<sup>STH</sup> had and still has a large number of public detractors. In a review published in the *New York Times Literary Supplement*, Peter Linehan, a distinguished Fellow of St. John's College at Cambridge University whose research specialty is the medieval Church, takes Boswell to task, calling his account of St. Anselm of Canterbury "as much tendentious as misinformed . . ." (73). Throughout his strongly critical review, Linehan cites examples from C<sup>STH</sup> and asserts academic bias, arguing that Boswell's book is guilty of "claiming too much, by insistently, and at times recklessly, crowding out other considerations in its concern with the centrality of its theme" (73). Linehan frequently asks rhetorical questions within the body of the review to question Boswell's motivations and cast Boswell in a negative light. For example, in his response to Boswell's interpretation of St. Anselm, Linehan asks rhetorically, "Even if such language be allowed to be understood literally, is it safe to judge the archbishop's actions solely in the light of private correspondence of twenty to forty years before? (Would a historian, or a journalist, judge those of a statesman solely in the light of his war-time, public school crushes?)." These questions combine with frequent assertions that Boswell is "too hasty."

However, Linehan does manage to ask some interesting questions and register some legitimate concerns. He points out, for example, that St. Peter Damian's *Liber Gomorrhianus* (1051 CE) expressed official disapproval of clerical homosexuality; indeed, Damian is frequently cited as the originator of the argument against same-sex physical relations between priests. Though Boswell contends that Pope Alexander II (1061–73) suppressed the *Liber* (C<sup>STH</sup> 216), it seems clear that the pendulum was beginning to swing toward proscriptions and thus that Linehan's critique of Boswell has some substance.

Another of Boswell's vocal critics was the late Louis F. Crompton. Crompton was generally regarded as one of the early fathers of what is now called Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies. Crompton took issue with Boswell's contention that the Church did not always proscribe gay persons. Crompton's review dedicates the first column and a half to citing examples of executions of gay persons ranging from Emperor Justinian's *Institutions* in 538 CE to the first known execution for homosexuality in Western Europe in 1277 (338). A potential counter-argument to Crompton, however, can be found in Eva Cantarella's *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*, which suggests room for doubt that Justinian's writings had any significant effect outside of religious law: no proof has been found of executions for homosexuality during Justinian's reign although Justinian was no doubt hostile to same-sex physical intimacy (181–83).

After a lengthy introduction wherein Crompton asserts that the Church was always anti-gay, he mounts his major argument against Boswell. Crompton draws a line from Leviticus 18:22 ("Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination") to Corinthians I 6:9 ("Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor catamites, nor sodomites . . .") and from there to Romans I, which he calls ". . . the real prop of legal and moral condemnation" (339). The "prop" Crompton refers to is Romans 1:26–27, "For this cause God gave them up into vile affections . . . also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another." In the review, Crompton states halfway through the third column, ". . . despite all of the scholarly exegesis, his [Boswell's] arguments left the reader unconvinced" (339).

Crompton's personal resentment of Boswell is discussed in a personal letter from Mel Goldstein of the University of Hartford to Boswell himself: "You finger my apprehension precisely when you refer to Crompton's animus toward you, which may be reflected in his response to my article. . . . Though I find myself in the role of peacemaker and hope Crompton will mellow out on some issues I wouldn't bet on it" (Boswell Papers). Crompton's language in the review is clearly judgmental and seems to reflect his resentment in statements such as this one: "Concerned to get Christianity off the hook, Boswell is perplexed to explain the increasing intolerance of homosexuality after the fall of Rome" (340).

In an at least equally personal critique, Richard Hays, a New Testament scholar of the Duke Divinity School, wrote a response to CSTM wherein he claims that Boswell's interpretation of Romans I: 26–27 "has no support in the text and is a textbook case of reading into the text what one wants to find there" (214). Hays deploys his antipathy in language such as "I am sure . . .

that Boswell's exegesis of Romans I: 26–27 is in error; I am strongly suspicious that his historical construction may be equally in error . . ." (215). Arguments about scriptural exegesis and scholarly construction aside, Hays and others allowed their personal feelings to influence their interpretation of the texts, in my opinion weakening the scholarly credibility of their reviews.

The final example of a critical review is a commentary written in 1994 by Father Richard J. Neuhaus on the website *First Things*, a site for religious traditionalists and conservative religious scholars of all denominations. Father Neuhaus takes Boswell and his work sharply to task. Neuhaus writes about "revisionists of the Boswell school" and alleges that Boswell's work was used uncritically by religious denominations to justify a more tolerant position on homosexuality, a position opposite to the one taken by the Gay Academic Union. Neuhaus cited the 1993 draft position of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as an example of uncritical acceptance of Boswell's book. Neuhaus concludes in his March 2009 column titled "In the Case of John Boswell" for *First Things* that "despite his assiduous efforts, what Boswell's historical scavenger hunt does not produce is any evidence whatever that authoritative Christian teaching ever departed from the recognition that homosexual acts are morally wrong," as if his pronouncement is the end of the matter. Neuhaus never cites any of his own evidence but recycles the arguments of Richard Hays and David Wright, both conservative religious scholars of the traditional mold.

Like other negative papers and reviews of Boswell's work, the emotional undertone of Neuhaus's polemical reviews tends to be truculent and dismissive, as in this passage from "In the Case of John Boswell":

Christian history is a multifarious affair, and it does not take much sniffing around to discover frequent instances of what is best described as hanky-panky. The discovery process is facilitated if one goes through history with what is aptly described as narrow-eyed prurience, interpreting every expression of intense affection between men as proof that they were 'gay.' A favored slogan of the contemporary gay movement is 'We Are Everywhere!' Boswell rummages through Christian history and triumphantly comes up with the conclusion, 'They were everywhere.'

Neuhaus did have valid points to make, but he became too emotionally involved to remain objective; this is apparent in his unsupported claim that Boswell's book was accepted uncritically.

Over the years, hostile criticism of Boswell has turned into a cottage industry, and Neuhaus's twenty-nine-year history represents the most extreme example. With all of the accusations from both conservative

religious scholars and secular progressives that Boswell was guilty of hasty, tendentious, or faulty scholarship, I was not surprised to encounter similar sentiments in an interview I conducted with John Lauritsen in March 2011. Lauritsen accused Boswell of knowing and deliberate academic dishonesty. Lauritsen, Boswell's self-described harshest critic, along with R. Wayne Dynes and the late Warren Johansson, formed the core of the Gay Academic Union (GAU) and represented the political left of the gay community. Of these three men, only R. Wayne Dynes has a PhD; Mr. Lauritsen earned an AB from Harvard, and Mr. Johansson was a non-degreed linguist. None of the three men was a credentialed historian.

In the interview Lauritsen stated that he and his fellows had been academically blacklisted for their views, ascribing the blame to Boswell and other academic apologists for the Church. At several points in the conversation, Lauritsen recollected being disallowed from presenting his views at conferences. Without the weight of evidence otherwise, it seems more likely that Mr. Lauritsen was not invited to speak at certain venues because he had only received a baccalaureate degree and was not sufficiently credentialed; any other number of academically valid reasons other than his opinions could have led to his not being invited to speak.

Although Lauritsen was unfailingly polite to me in our interview, he was like Neuhaus in that he effectively undercut potentially legitimate points with his personal bitterness toward Boswell and unsupported assertions of outright academic dishonesty. One of the milder examples of his resentment follows:

It is not surprising that Professor Boswell has been hailed enthusiastically by the gay Christians, to whom he appears as a new Savior who will rescue them not only from the queer hating religionists, but from gay liberation secularists as well, by demonstrating historically that it's alright to be a gay Christian. Well before publication of the book, Boswell was in demand as a speaker before meetings and conventions of Dignity (gay Roman Catholics) and Integrity (gay Episcopalians). In time *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* may become a fifth gospel to gay Christians, to be inserted behind the Book of the Beloved Disciple. (Culpa Ecclesiae")

This kind of negative review from both political and religious sides makes it clear that the controversy started early as a result of arguments not against the book but against Boswell himself perhaps motivated by jealousy at the public adulation Boswell received. Boswell's celebrity rendered him a convenient target for public critics and was a source of discord among some of his colleagues in the professoriate, many of whom were positive about his work.

One example of a balanced and mostly positive approach is a review of CSTH by John C. Moore of Hofstra University in the April 1981 issue of the *American Historical Review*. Moore recommended CSTH as a “splendid piece of scholarship” (382). One of his main reservations concerns Boswell’s interpretation of the story of Lot in Genesis: Moore is not entirely convinced by Boswell’s argument that the sin of inhospitality is the sole crime being condemned. Moore also questions Boswell’s assertion of the moral neutrality of the phrase “beyond nature” uttered by St. Paul.

Specialists like Moore, who generally favored Boswell, and Hays, who opposed Boswell’s argument, have reasonable but opposing viewpoints about Boswell’s translations. For a clearer understanding of his translations, I read Appendix One in the 1981 Phoenix edition of CSTH (335–353) entitled “Lexicography and St. Paul,” which provides multiple interpretations from differing sources besides his own to demonstrate his diligence in interpretation. Based on this lexicography, I judge that his translations are not all that different from other reliable sources. For example, the Masoretic text Jeremiah 5:8, Septuagint (LCC) contains the sentence “They became horses and mad after females”; the Jerusalem Bible translates the same phrase as as “They were well-fed, lusty stallions”; and the New English Bible translates it “Like a well-fed and lusty stallion” (CSTH 336). I found that, in service of scholarship, Boswell was scrupulously honest in presenting alternative translations, but whether he was correct in his translations is for expert philologists to decide.

The issue of translation aside, Moore asserts that Boswell “argues responsibly, plausibly, and with remarkable erudition” (382); he compliments Boswell for a study that is “admirably dispassionate and objective” and judges CSTH fundamental for future studies of sexual attitudes in the West (382).

In another positive response to Boswell’s work, the late John F. Benton presented a paper at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in December of 1981 assessing the arguments Boswell presented about the late eleventh and the twelfth centuries. In his paper, Benton concurs with Boswell’s argument that indifference toward gay people had begun to dissipate and was being replaced by two opposite approaches. In the first approach, a small but vociferous group of ascetics revived the violent hostility of Chrysostom and claimed that homosexual acts were not only sinful but gravely so, comparable to murder; the second approach began to assert the positive value of homosexual relations (CSTH 210). Benton views these approaches as a valuable corrective to the idea that St. Peter Damian’s *Liber Gomorrhianus* was a “typical, rather than an eccentric product of the eleventh-century reform movement and that the great twelfth-century codifiers Gratian and Peter

Lombard concerned themselves with homosexuality.” Benton goes on to compliment Boswell, observing that, although Boswell has a point of view and the book has an argument, there is a “striking commitment to following historic truth wherever it leads” by including arguments contrary to his own. In the latter half of his paper, Benton offers an alternative explanation to Boswell’s suggestion of a close association of urban revival and increase in homosexual activity. Benton posits that homosexuality did not increase but became more visible due to the development of written literature after 1050. Benton provides thoughtful discussion and posits reasonable alternatives, not just a positive evaluation of CSTH.

The most balanced and collegial response to Boswell’s work has come from Marcia Colish, an expert on the Stoic intellectual tradition and Peter Lombard whose academic history includes a thirty-eight-year career at Oberlin College as the Frederick B. Artz Professor of History and who is a Fellow and past president of the Medieval Academy of America (hereafter MAA). Having reviewed Boswell’s use of literary and philosophical sources, Colish offered a paper at the 1981 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion as an attempt not to undermine CSTH but to strengthen it. Her paper notes that her remarks “will be suggestions for correction that can be found in publications that appeared too recently for Boswell to use.” Colish addresses Boswell’s idea of urban revival, the rise of autocracy, and the decline of the nuclear family (CSTH 207–10). She initially concedes that Boswell used this causative chain guardedly although she also asserts later that he used it throughout the book as a “canon of explanation.” Colish cites three reasons why Boswell’s assertion is untenable: (1) historians of the family agree that the extended family was normative throughout the period; 2) weak, decentralized, and constitutionally limited rule was more likely to coincide with ruralism than urbanism prior to the modern age; and 3) many of the groups Boswell cited evidence from were not town dwellers. Although Colish disagrees with Boswell on these points, she also compliments him for having “written an important and welcome book, one that brings to light a wealth of information ignored, misconstrued, or even deliberately suppressed by previous authors.”

One of the common features of the positive reviews is that they address the quality of Boswell’s sources and research. There is almost universal acclaim among the positive comments, papers, and reviews regarding Boswell’s ability to follow sources where they lead him rather than presupposing an outcome. His erudition is also a common theme in both the mixed and positive reviews. The major difference between the positive and negative views is the tenor of the comments.

## CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING *CHRISTIANITY, SOCIAL TOLERANCE, AND HOMOSEXUALITY*

The International Congress of Medieval Studies (IMC) is held annually at Western Michigan University (WMU) in Kalamazoo, Michigan. At the 1989 IMC, Marsha L. Dutton presented a panel presentation titled “Aelred of Rievaulx and John Boswell: A Scholarly Scandal.” Dutton, an Aelred scholar, was then employed at the University of Michigan and is currently Chair of the Department of English at Ohio University. In my investigation into her paper and its aftermath, I refer to a series of letters written by L. J. Andrew Villalon (currently employed at the University of Texas) to Boswell, to Rozanne Elder of the Institute of Cistercian Studies (ICS) at WMU, and to Dutton. I also refer to the Cistercian Institute’s response to Professor Villalon and Boswell’s letter of complaint to the Director of the Medieval Institute, the late Otto Grundler. All of this correspondence is to be found in the Boswell Papers at Yale. I sought a written response from Dutton to either Villalon or Boswell but found none.

Dutton presented her paper as a rebuttal to Boswell’s contention that Aelred might be gay (CSTH 224–25). In my investigation, I discovered personal correspondence where Boswell was angered and wounded over allegations of academic dishonesty. Dutton accused Boswell of plagiarism in his use of material from Douglas Robys’ work on Aelred without citing it. In Rozanne Elder’s response to Villalon, this incident in particular was discussed, where Elder informed Villalon she was discomfited by Dutton’s assertions (Elder to Villalon, 25 May 1989). In fact, Boswell consulted with Robys on his book, and Robys is included in the author’s personal thanks; to my knowledge Robys never accused Boswell of using his work in an unattributed manner. Nevertheless, Dutton continued on after Boswell’s death with a paper written in 1996 for *The American Benedictine Review*, where she argued, “. . . there is finally no way of knowing the details of Aelred’s life, much less his sexual experience or struggles. . . . The question of Aelred’s sexuality is the wrong question” (432). The title of the article is “The Invented Sexual History of Aelred of Rievaulx, A Review Article.” This article takes on Boswell and also Brian Patrick McGuire, author of *Brother and Lover: Aelred of Rievaulx*. Dutton makes a persuasive argument that it is difficult to prove Aelred’s sexual orientation and that, without the weight of clear and compelling evidence, any discussion about the possible sexual orientation of Aelred is, at best, educated guesswork.

On May 11, 1989, Villalon wrote a letter to Boswell recounting the IMC panel presentation that Dutton had recently delivered and reported, “I found the overall tone of her talk both insulting and patronizing, not only to you, but

to gay history as well.” The panel was also attended by Ruth Mazo Karras, one of Boswell’s former graduate students, and Dutton terminated her attempt to defend Boswell mid-sentence, providing no opportunity for a complete rebuttal. Boswell (who was at the IMC, but did not attend the panel) wrote a letter to the panel organizer expressing his concern, part of which states, “I am told Marsha Dutton accused me of falsification and fraud. . . . [A] responsible institution would not allow a participant in a session of this sort to attack by name a living scholar without making sure he had the opportunity to respond” (Boswell to Grundler 11 May 1989). Boswell closed his letter as follows: “. . . only two persons spoke on my behalf, and Ms. Dutton interrupted and terminated the rebuttal offered by Professor Karras. I hope this does not mean that you consider Ms. Dutton’s remarks or behavior appropriate.”

I searched for a letter from Boswell to Dutton in Boswell’s papers and found none, but Villalon describes the event in his letter to Dutton: “As you are well aware, the discussion of your paper was cut off rather abruptly (with a totally inadequate quip about continuing it at the happy hour), and never taken up again” (Villalon to Dutton 11 May 1989). Villalon’s letter also expresses his objection to the title of the paper, which he asserts is quite rude. Initially, he had considered the title as some sort of inside reference, but, after attending the session, he has come to a different conclusion. Villalon also defends Boswell against a charge that “permeated” Dutton’s paper: “that in order to ‘prove his thesis’ he purposely slanted or omitted evidence to deceive his audience.” He offers a corrective to Dutton, suggesting that perhaps it might have been better to issue an invitation to Boswell and to provide him with a copy of the paper for a response as well as time to present a rebuttal.

Villalon’s letter to Rozanne Elder of the ICS offers the same corrective and takes the ICS to task for not living up to their responsibility in the process (21 May 1989). In reply, Elder takes full responsibility for the lack of oversight of the paper and, even though she offers a brief scholarly defense of Dutton’s paper, admits that she had been “quite unprepared for the rather different thesis and for the tenor of Professor Dutton’s paper. And I must admit that, as a scholar and as a sponsor, I was discomfited by it” (25 May 1989). In other words, Elder defended the scholarship of the paper but was upset with its tenor.

I am not privy to any correspondence between Elder and Dutton, Elder and Boswell, or Dutton and Boswell; none was to be found in the papers although I searched diligently. However, based on what I have read and what I now know about the incident, I believe that Dutton did indeed act in a rude manner at the Congress; both Villalon and Karras took her to task for it. I can only speculate that, perhaps in the zeal of her responding to Boswell, Marsha

Dutton forgot her academic good manners. Her major error was to accuse Boswell of falsification and fraud both in public and *in absentia*, and Dutton would continue to take on Boswell after his death by taking an academic swipe at his work in her review of Brian Patrick McGuire.

Another incident was the public attempt by the Gay Academic Union to discredit Boswell. GAU maintained an unshakeable belief that Christianity had always treated homosexuals intolerantly and, moreover, that this intolerance had included a consistent application of punitive measures against homosexuals. When Boswell, a self-identified gay man of faith, produced a study that countered their belief, it was not surprising that they would react defensively and lash out. John Lauritsen was their spokesperson and self-proclaimed critic of Boswell. During my interview with Lauritsen, he asserted that the scholarly reception of CSTH was “highly critical”; however, based on the evidence available, the reaction among scholars was mixed, a fact that can be confirmed by Paul B. Halsall, who maintains a collection of reviews of Boswell’s work. In my interview with Lauritsen, he overstated his case against Boswell on more than one occasion; for example, late in the interview Lauritsen said, “[T]o me it is dishonest to do what Boswell did, to pretend that there was no homophobia in the Christian religion.” This statement is factually inaccurate; Boswell acknowledges in the introduction to CSTH that religious beliefs may indeed cloak intolerance (CSTH 6–7). Boswell’s argument stems from the difference between “conscientious application of religious ethics and the use of religious precepts to justify oppression . . .” (CSTH 7).

Although most of Boswell’s academic critics exhibited courtesy and fair play when taking him to task, more than one incident reveals the contrary. The late David F. Wright of the University of Edinburgh, who was Professor of Patristic and Reformation Christianity, wrote articles and scholarly papers that attempted to discredit Boswell. In much the same manner as Richard Neuhaus, Wright was a very conservative evangelical who was uncomfortable with homosexuality according to Paul Halsall, then a graduate student and witness to some of Wright’s speaking engagements on the topic. Over the years, Wright published at least four papers that invoked Boswell and his work. In his definition of “homosexuality” for the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Wright placed the following statement: “The conclusion must be that for all the interest and stimulus Boswell’s book provides in the end of the day there is not one piece of evidence that the teaching mind of the early Church countenanced homosexual activity” (Halsall). This entry, supposed to be definitive, is biased since scholars are still divided on the issue years after Boswell’s death.

Wright also critiqued CSTH by employing philological arguments about specific words in Attic Greek uttered by St. Paul, such as *malakoi* and

*arsenokoitai* (“Homosexuals and Prostitutes”), without acknowledging that scholars have debated the patristic use of those words for well over a century with no definitive answer forthcoming. Boswell argues, for instance, that *arsenokoitai* might mean “male prostitute,” and Wright contends it means “homosexual.” In fact, William L. Petersen in *Studia Patristica* criticizes both Boswell and Wright for their translations of *arsenokoitai*. Wright on four occasions wrote papers disagreeing with Boswell’s translation of *arsenokoitai* as “male prostitutes.” With this academic debate currently unresolved and the definition of the Greek terms murky at best, any evidence Wright presented in his attempted refutation of Boswell is inadmissible. Whether he was correct or not, Boswell properly presented evidence and discussed the reasoning for his definition in Appendix One of Csth (346–53). (For the specialist reader I recommend A.W. H. Adkins, *Moral Values and Political Behavior in Ancient Greece*, London 1972, and Andre Pellicer, *Natura: etude semantique et historique du mot latin*, Paris 1966, 17–35.)

Each of the incidents above involves a person who accused (or is still accusing) Boswell of academic dishonesty, plagiarism, falsification, fraud, or deliberate deception. I will note that in over thirty years not one of these charges has ever been confirmed as accurate, and I view such charges as spurious. The accusers hail from very different political and academic backgrounds: John Lauritsen is politically active on the gay left; Marsha Dutton is a medieval academic of indeterminate political and religious status; and the late David Wright was a conservative, evangelical Patristic scholar. What they have in common is how they reacted to Boswell, leading to the question of a possible conflation of the man and his work.

## **CHRISTIANITY, SOCIAL TOLERANCE, AND HOMOSEXUALITY IN A THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT**

Boswell’s work threatened firmly entrenched political arguments from both sides of the political spectrum. The GAU’s arguments assume that the Church and religious community are completely hostile to the homosexual community. For the conservative religious community, Boswell’s book and his personal popularity call into question over six hundred years of the majority interpretation that homosexuality is a mortal sin, punishable at the very least by being denied a place in heaven. The Fourth Council of the Lateran (1215) was the blueprint for secular law in Western Europe, and St. Thomas Aquinas gave his answers in Part II of the second part of the *Summa Theologiae* (1265–74). The various Christian reformation movements did not formally set aside the answers of Aquinas and, until the period just prior to the publication of Csth, never embraced same-sex intimate behavior.

From the Stonewall Riots in 1969 to the removal of homosexuality from the list of diagnostic mental disorders by the American Psychiatric and Psychological Associations in 1975/76, organized religions have felt compelled to justify their theological positions. The publication of CSTH added an important historical dimension to these theological debates, helping to change the terms of the discussion from if and how the individual homosexual could be saved to a discussion about the historical place of homosexuals within Christianity. Prior to CSTH, it was simple enough for a religious denomination to state or publish a position based on scripture outside of historical context, but, with the publication and major success of CSTH, churches were put into the unusual position of having to respond to a detailed academic argument that also had the merit of being a mainstream publishing success. The research simply could not be ignored or dismissed out of hand.

Events leading up to the publication of CSTH indicated the beginnings of a fundamental shift in how churches and their parent denominations would address the question of homosexuality during these debates. On December 29, 1975, the Catholic Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (SCDF) issued a “Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics.” Published within the Papal Decree *Persona Humana*, this extraordinary document directly addressed the Vatican’s position on homosexuality and dedicated an entire section to its reasoning. The fact that the Vatican felt compelled to reissue pastoral guidance on homosexuality is extraordinary enough, but to do so in response to pressures within its own congregation was remarkable. Not only was this document issued in response to social changes that permeated western society, but it also addressed the judgment of secular authority about sexual orientation. The first paragraph of Section 8 of *Persona Humana* observes,

At the present time there are those who, basing themselves on the observations in the psychological order, have begun to judge indulgently, and even excuse completely, homosexual relations between certain people. This they do in opposition to the constant teachings of the Magisterium and to the moral sense of the Christian people.

This opening statement is followed by a restatement of church opinion relating to “. . . homosexuals whose tendency comes from a false education, from a lack of normal sexual development, from habit, from bad example, or from other similar causes, and is transitory, or at least not incurable . . .”

Clearly the Church was responding to the judgment of the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association; in fact, the section concludes: “In Sacred Scripture they [homosexual relations] are condemned as a serious depravity and even presented as a sad consequence

of rejecting God. . . . Scripture does not of course merit us to conclude that all those that suffer from this anomaly are personally responsible for it,” but “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of.” This statement attempted, first, to diminish or not recognize the judgment of medical professionals in the eyes of the worldwide congregation and, second, to confirm a hierarchical order that emphasized the religious order over the secular world. For the first time, this pastoral instruction softened the language in its instructions in regard to homosexual orientation, but lesbian and gay American Catholics started to splinter off from the main church and leave communion with Rome, concerned about their place in the Catholic community (Jordan 238). A group of openly gay Catholics called Dignity, founded in 1973, responded to the SCDF in their February 1976 newsletter condemning the statement and asking the Church to “appoint a committee of theologians, social scientists, and gay persons to more adequately study the question of homosexuality (and) its implications for Church and society” (National Office of Dignity).

The Roman Catholic Church was not the only body interested in responding to the decision of psychiatrists and psychologists. Less than a week after the SCDF, the United Methodist Council on Youth Ministry released a report that formally called for a church-wide study on human sexuality in anticipation of a three-year period of mandatory education within the United Methodist body. Along with other biblical scholars, Boswell participated in a public forum on December 29, 1976, that strongly affected the outcome of the report. As one observer noted, “Dr. Boswell’s presentation offered what may well be new and persuasive evidence in this arena to challenge the church’s traditional injunctions against the practice of homosexuality” (United Methodist Council). The progress of the United Methodist denomination has been incremental over a period of decades, and perhaps some of the incremental progress is owed to Boswell and other social scientists who conducted studies that attempted to bring to light the hidden history of gays and lesbians within Christianity. While the current policy, as determined by the quadrennial meeting of United Methodist delegates (called the General Conference), has evolved over the decades, the United Methodist denomination has since 2001 called for gays and lesbians to serve openly in the armed forces of the United States, relaxed prosecutions of ministers blessing same-sex unions (although such blessings are still not legal), and called for equality in pastoral care for every person (United Methodist Church).

Despite the statement of the SCDF, some in the Roman Catholic Church reacted favorably to the publication of Boswell’s work. In a review of CSTH, Father Paul K. Thomas, who worked for the Catholic Archbishop of Baltimore, wrote in the *Catholic Review*, “Today’s Christian ministers can

reduce or eradicate the suffering associated with intolerance by being responsive toward well-founded interpretations of scripture and tradition, by becoming cognizant of new theological perspectives, and by remaining open to modern scholarly research” (n.p.). The Bishops Committee for Pastoral Research and Practices (hereafter CPRP) invited Boswell to send comments on a proposed pastoral statement that would “articulate more clearly the gospel principles that underlie the Church’s teaching on sexual morality, elaborate on some of the new positive developments in sexual morality, while still affirming the Church’s teaching of moral norms, (and) contrast the difference between the high standards of Christian morality and those of a secular society such as ours” (Lessard to Boswell, Papers).

The chair of the CPRP and Bishop of Savannah, Raymond W. Lessard, communicated with Boswell, but, while Boswell’s input was taken into account, nothing fresh emerged from the Bishops Committee. In fact, a more aggressive policy of silencing dissident voices in the Church emerged at the diocesan and archdiocesan levels. One of the most prominent voices for Catholic social justice came from Fr. John J. McNeill, S.J., and he was officially silenced and prohibited from speaking on the matter of homosexuality in 1979. McNeill had a long history with Dignity and even gave the keynote address at Dignity’s first U.S. convention in California in 1973. The keynote reads in part, “All too often in the past the Church and its moral theologians have made *a priori* statements concerning the morality and lifestyle of homosexuals without any serious effort at dialogue.” McNeill published his first book, *The Church and the Homosexual* (Beacon, 1976), and received *imprimi potest* (formal permission for publication) from the Vatican only to have it retroactively taken away two years after publication. McNeill’s comments would prove controversial and would set him on the road that eventually led to his expulsion from the Society of Jesus in 1988 by order of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who was then in charge of the SCDF and later became Pope Benedict XVI. McNeill refused to remain silent after his expulsion from the Jesuit Order in 1987 and has published a number of books in addition to *The Church and the Homosexual*. This list includes *Taking a Chance on God* (Beacon, 1993), *Freedom, Glorious Freedom* (Beacon, 1995), and his autobiography, *Both Feet Planted Firmly in Midair* (Westminster Press, 1998).

Boswell was active in Dignity, and, while his work owed more to Derrick Sherwin Bailey’s *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1955) than to McNeill’s *The Church and the Homosexual* (Beacon, 1976), Boswell admired McNeill’s work and frequently quoted from it in Csth (406). Boswell owed his work to those who came before him and some who would survive him among gay people of faith. While the conservative elements of religious academia mostly

panned Boswell's work, some positive reviews were posted in academic religious journals.

In the *Bulletin de Theologie, Ancienne et Medievale*, an important annual journal of ancient and medieval theology that compiles studies on the Church from the New Testament to early seventeenth century, an anonymous reviewer gives a positive review of CSTH, referring back to the statement of the SCDF in 1975 as a starting point in reappraising pastoral care of homosexuals in the Church. The reviewer agrees with Boswell throughout, once again demonstrating a remarkable tendency of reviewers either to embrace Boswell's work fully or to reject it utterly. The reviewer speaks of Boswell's closing his work at the fourteenth century not as a dividing line but as a natural end point. The reviewer's assertion is that Church policy did not change significantly over a seven-hundred-year period after St. Thomas of Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* (*Bulletin*).

Another example of positive responses to Boswell's book is a more restrained but still positive review in the July 1985 issue of *St. Luke's Journal of Theology* by Stanley Hauerwas of the Duke Divinity School, a review that is in substantial disagreement with Richard Hays's response to the book (184–186).

At the outset, Hauerwas qualifies his review and sets the terms of his comments carefully: “. . . [T]he reader must be warned that Boswell's book is not morally significant because it is about a subject most assume involves moral questions. The book more importantly takes the form of a moral argument that depends for its cogency on the historical analysis” (228). According to Hauerwas, Boswell challenges the assumption that an issue “. . . like homosexuality can be determined by formal or abstract philosophical and theological considerations” (228). Hauerwas gets to the very heart of why Boswell is so intensely polarizing: his book challenges comfortable stereotypes and theological positions that had allegedly been settled for over seven hundred years. This fact brings into focus why some gays of the secular left attacked Boswell: his work attacked the settled notion that gays could not realistically be people of faith because, in their notion of history, the Church had always been intolerant of gays. According to Mark Jordan, only a gay historian of faith, determined to reset the record, could have done this work. Boswell could have gone too far, writing what his heart wanted to say, but instead he goes to the heart of matter and seeks out the truth, no matter how painful the results. At the same time, Hauerwas points out that Boswell is not writing a “value-neutral” history (229). Boswell has a point of view, and he argues it—a fact that, as we have seen, pleased some of his readers and angered others.

Hauerwas singles out for special notice chapter six of CSTH, where Boswell discusses moral and theological rationales—specifically the

comparison, during the third through sixth centuries, of human to animal behavior in order to “. . . justify the attitude toward homosexuals . . .” (230). Hauerwas goes on to assert that this notion was “simply bizarre” (230) and that what is now commonly referred to as the “Natural Law” argument was not sufficient to turn the tide of opinion against homosexuals. Hauerwas points out that Aquinas argued that “homosexuality is against nature but that ‘nature’ cannot refer to the act itself since nocturnal emission is natural” (230). We see only carefully selected elements of the natural law argument deployed in Thomism. Since the argument was selective, it did not have the same weight as the secular argument for punishing nonconformity by various groups. In this period, the fear of “the other” had been firmly established in both the secular and religious communities. Muslims, Jews, and heretics were noteworthy victims of this attitude. It did not take much effort to demonize and whip up fears of the homosexual as also being other. Thomas codified and justified this othering by “natural law” but only by making tortured and qualified assumptions about the rationality of animal behavior (231). This argument is a threat to conservative religious scholars for the same kind of reason the secular left felt threatened: Boswell is disturbing long-settled theological questions and expressing a rational argument about Thomas that no self-protective Catholic theologian would make.

Hauerwas closes his review by complimenting Boswell for “. . . putting the issue in the right context” (232). He also makes a powerful plea that “. . . we must return to the fundamental vision of community characteristic of the early church. It is the gospel imperative that must determine the issue, not concentration on particular Scriptural passages and/or arguments about how homosexuality is or is not natural” (232).

In *Church History*, the journal of record for the American Society of Church History, Patrick Henry of Swarthmore College wrote a positive review of CSTH that notes: “Like all good historical argument, Boswell’s case is orderly, but not easy to summarize.” Henry nevertheless homes in on Boswell’s surprising historical judgment that “it would be misleading to characterize Christianity as somehow peculiarly liable to antigay feelings or doctrines” (CSTH 127–28) and agrees with Boswell that, in the latter half of the thirteenth century, homosexuality passed from being “completely legal in most of Europe to incurring the death penalty in all but a few contemporary legal compilations” (CSTH 293). At this juncture one must ask, why was this the case? Henry summarizes Boswell’s argument with Aquinas:

The natural law which underlies Saint Thomas’s teaching on homosexuality, which for centuries has been the grounding of *the* Christian teaching on the subject of homosexuality, is shown to be a

hodge-podge of Greek philosophy, medieval bestiaries, social convention, and Roman law. (449)

Prior to Boswell, all a Christian religious denomination had to do was either quote Aquinas or quote biblical scripture out of context and leave it at that. Boswell changed the modern landscape by being a religious, gay academic who used the intellectual gifts at his disposal to challenge conventional wisdom, and it helped that he was also was a witty, charming man who used his personal appeal to bolster his argument.

### ***CHRISTIANITY, SOCIAL TOLERANCE, AND HOMOSEXUALITY IN AN ACADEMIC CONTEXT***

While CSTH had a significant effect on the study of male homosexuality, it had little to no impact on the study of female homosexuality. The book sparked an explosion in the study of homosexuality in all fields, but it inadvertently contributed to theoretical differences in how homosexuality was to be studied.

With higher visibility for work in the theological history of homosexuality, parallel work was coming to fruition in the field of literary analysis. While Boswell's book gained the lion's share of public attention, developments in the field of literary theory had gone almost unnoticed until prominent writers started promulgating "queer theory." Queer theory builds upon the work of Michel Foucault and structural theorists who attempted to destabilize simple conceptions of gay or lesbian identity, departing from the essentialist theory of historians who maintain that certain phenomena are natural, inevitable, universal, and biologically determined. Boswell and essentialists maintain that homosexuality is genetically determined, an argument that is still prominent today. Structuralists argue that biology is only one of a number of factors that determine sexual orientation. Structuralism does not deny that biology is a significant factor, but it allows for the elements of nurture and choice in its arguments.

The split in academia between essentialist historians and queer theorists represents a shift in how the study of sexual history and identity would continue to play out even after Boswell's early death, and these theoretical differences have sometimes made interdisciplinary conversations difficult. Boswell and Foucault were friendly with each other, but Boswell adamantly opposed the social constructivist views presented by Foucault as a reemergence of medieval nominalism. In a review of David Couzens Hoy's *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, Boswell expresses an equal measure of affection and frustration with Foucault. Even though the review is ostensibly about

Hoy's book, it turns into a rumination about Foucault's *The Care of the Self*. At times critical and other times admiring, Boswell observes:

Two explanations occur to me. By canonizing these texts [in brackets, you need to explain briefly what texts Foucault was talking about here] as a kind of "patristics" (both a sacred literature and a statement of the authority conferred by age and gender) of human sexuality, Foucault may have been making a wry comment on truth as a scholarly artifact; or the vastness and complexity of sexuality in Rome may have seemed to him not reducible to comprehensive treatment, so he simply excerpted and selected texts to make the points he considered important without even trying to explain their context. The two are not incompatible, and either or both would constitute a worthy epistemological riddle from the author of so many previous challenges to the way we understand thought, language, history and their interaction. ("Good Sex at Home")

This disagreement remains even though the men responsible for beginning it have passed on; I suspect, as in most disagreements, the truth lies somewhere in between the two sides.

Boswell's work was groundbreaking and important because of the debate it opened in both academia and the general public. As with all historical works, it is the responsibility of historians to reexamine, refine, and build upon the work that preceded theirs, as Boswell indicates in Chapter One of CSH:

Once the terrain has been better mapped, it will be possible to improve initial surveys very substantially; early studies may appear in retrospect absurdly roundabout or totally useless. To this ineluctable hazard of early research is added the difficulty in the case at issue that a great many people believe they already know where the trails *ought* to lead, and they will blame the investigator not only for the errors of first explorations but also for the extent to which his results . . . do not accord with their preconceptions on the subject. Of such critics the writer can only ask that before condemning too harshly the placement of his signposts they first experience for themselves the difficulty of the terrain. (39)

## CONCLUSION

In the study of history we often bandy about the word "objectivity" as the chief goal of all historical inquiry, but this "objectivity" may stifle genuine inquiry by imposing a false expectation on the historian. Peter Novick writes that the principal assumptions of objectivity for the profession of history

. . . include a commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and above all, between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation: the value of an interpretation is judged by how well it accounts for the facts; if contradicted by the facts, it must be abandoned. Truth is one, not perspectival. (1–2)

Why do we as historians find these aims desirable? Novick argues that:

. . . the foundation of an historical profession—a community of the historically competent—was . . . an indispensable prerequisite for the establishment, identification, and legitimation of objective historical truth. (52)

Judy Hensley argues that elements of the discipline of history “were tangled with assumptions about science and the nature of professional consensus and comity.” It seems that some in the profession of history tend to treat the discipline as a hard science, setting up problematic and unrealistic expectations that historians should divorce themselves from their point of view.

Boswell had a strong point of view, but it did not compromise his pursuit of fact-based truth. He was engaged in two worlds, that of an academic and that of a man of deep, personal faith; his sexual orientation was an integral part of both worlds. His convictions drove him: both his sense of duty as a “thinking Christian” and his academic duty to answer the questions he found along the way. These convictions motivated him to stay on the path to truth. Despite the accusations of his critics, he did not have a “secret” agenda, did not play fast and loose with the facts to arrive at a pre-determined outcome, and did not “make up” history as Marsha Dutton charged on at least two occasions.

Why would Boswell expose himself to critics on both sides who were demonstrably offended by his arguments and conclusion? A partial answer was provided by Boswell himself in his private musings: “it’s a question of conviction, but what sort of conviction if I sometimes find myself in substantial disagreement with the church I adhere to?” (Papers). He later clarifies this dilemma in relation to his being part of a Catholic community: “I am as much the church as anyone else; it’s not me disagreeing with ‘them’ (the hierarchy, theologians, Rome, more conservative Catholics); it’s ‘us’ disagreeing among ourselves” (On Being a Thinking Christian in a Post Christian World” in the Boswell Papers). Motivated by his strong convictions, he pursued the truth with no intention of being divisive in either the theological or the academic world, but critics in both worlds saw him as a threat

to their cherished assumptions, and, given the volatile times in which he was writing, his book both propelled him to renown and opened him to attack.

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The author may be contacted at

[jwcisneros920@gmail.com](mailto:jwcisneros920@gmail.com).