



ARE WE QUEER? ARE WE MEDIEVAL? THE NEED TO BE ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law—not being without the law toward God but under the law of God—that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

(1 Cor. 9:21–22)

All too often medievalists ignore ‘queer’ issues and all too often ‘Queer Studies’ ignore or make serious errors when dealing with the Middle Ages. Queer Studies and Medieval Studies both operate with ghetto mentalities and need to reach out, broaden their scope. When we do reach across academic boundaries to each other, there still remains the problem of my self-identity: am I a medievalist who plays with things queer or am I a Queer Studies person who plays with things medieval? It is too simple to see the world in black/white, gay/straight dichotomies. While specialists are clearly needed in all fields, scholars need to become both more ‘renaissance’ (‘multidisciplinary,’ as a descriptor, also comes to mind) in their approaches and, in the words of the Apostle Paul, become ‘all things to all people’ in order to communicate with those outside their specialized field(s).¹ In becoming all things to all people, scholars (medieval, queer, or both)—when they do reach out to use other fields to illuminate their own work—must be more careful than others not to make careless mistakes or misstatements when applying other approaches to their own disciplines (which mistakes make it that much easier to dismiss the whole endeavor they are working on). As one of my favorite guides to preaching says, ‘Simple charity requires that one not offend them [those that already know something about your subject] gratuitously.’² It is the ‘common sense’ approach which must be embraced if we are to begin to understand any aspect of the shifting ambiguity we call ‘human experience.’

I would like to take as a case in point John Boswell’s *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*.³ Impossible to ignore, it won supporters and detractors immediately. The detractors were able to claim shoddy work, ‘advocacy scholarship,’ and that Boswell let ‘propaganda and casuistry impede the objective search for truth.’⁴ The refutation of these accusations was not helped by the mistakes of Boswell himself (excluding typos) in dealing with his material using approaches he was not adept in.

The very community that was in a critical position to best evaluate Boswell’s work on Orthodox liturgical texts, with the most to both lose and gain, was the Orthodox Church itself. If there was any community that Boswell should have taken pains to avoid offending gratuitously, it was the Orthodox. A mul-

titude of Orthodox statements concerning the material reviewed in *Same-Sex Unions* might have been expected, in a renewed debate of sexuality in general and same-sex behavior in particular, prompted by the release of Boswell's book. In fact, the 'Orthodox response' was limited to the review of the book in the journal *Sourozh*. Published in England by the Russian Patriarchal Diocese of Sourozh (currently headed by Metropolitan Anthony Bloom), the February 1995 issue contained Archimandrite Ephrem's (the Review Editor) evaluation of Boswell's work. Fr. Ephrem insists that he reviews the book precisely because 'I have received requests from serious and responsible readers in America asking that we should say something because the book is causing waves over there.'⁵ He knows that he is writing at least the first (maybe the primary?) self-consciously Orthodox salvo in a debate over *adelphopoiia*. 'Moreover,' he continues, 'to judge by the press, these have already crossed the Atlantic,' and he cites several articles or cartoons in British publications dealing with the book. He is writing to clarify the issues for the flock on both sides of the Atlantic and to expose the fraud that he fears is being perpetrated on them. Fr. Ephrem also admits:

I have been following this business ever since a colleague asked me some dozen years ago to comment on a lecture that Professor Boswell had given on the subject in London. I was dubious of the claims he was making then and concluded from reading his text that the author had little knowledge of Orthodoxy and in particular of Orthodox liturgy.⁶ (When I studied with Prof. Boswell at Yale, I appreciated his skills as a researcher and instructor but discovered that he was, in fact, very disdainful of Orthodoxy and unacquainted with either medieval or modern mainstream Orthodox theological thinking.)

Taking up six pages (an unusually long review for *Sourozh* to publish), Fr. Ephrem spends most of those pages cataloguing the mistakes Boswell made in translating or explaining the canons associated with and the rubrics of the *adelphopoiia* services. Granted that he was already dubious of Boswell's claims and looking for reasons to reject the book's thesis, he was able to dismiss these claims (and avoid discussing if the services were in fact ever used to sanctify sexual relationships between men) by simply pointing out the myriad errors in the way Boswell handled the rubrics and canons. Because he is able to demonstrate that Boswell cannot even properly translate a simple rubric or canon, 'why should he be trusted in anything he says elsewhere in the book?' is Fr. Ephrem's implied conclusion.⁷

Boswell's translations of the *adelphopoiia* services into 'liturgical English' rather than modern English only helped convince (non-Orthodox) reviewers looking to reject the book (the non-Orthodox equivalents of Fr. Ephrem) that *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* was indeed engaging in 'advocacy scholarship.' By casting the translations in language usually associated with church rites, it was an easy step to say that these translations were not offered for clarity or academic purposes but were to facilitate the actual use of these services by those so inclined. The question of ecclesiastical obedience

therefore rears its head and comes into play: was the publication of *Same-Sex Unions* meant to encourage violation of current church practices and norms or was it offered to spark scholarly debate on a subject long ignored? Provoking a discussion is one thing, while fomenting 'open rebellion' is something else again. Varying opinions in an academic or theoretical discussion may be acceptable but flagrant disregard for church law demands a less tolerant response from those in positions of pastoral or ministerial authority. Those in such a position of authority might feel able to 'look the other way' if necessary in an academic debate but would feel compelled to respond swiftly and negatively if ecclesiastical obedience appeared threatened.

The Greek Orthodox Theological Review published a 'Review Essay' in the spring 1996 issue by Kenneth Kemp and Robert Kennedy.⁸ I will not go into the bulk of this review, which has been examined and discussed by Paul Halsall elsewhere.⁹ Although the bulk of their review does not deal with the detailed examination of rubrics that Fr. Ephrem devotes himself to, it does attempt to show Boswell's inability to translate Greek properly.

Although published by an Orthodox theological journal and feared by Halsall 'to be used by RC and Orthodox clergy in future years to 'refute' Boswell and show how incapable and unreliable he was,' this review has not had the 'shelf life' anticipated. It is Fr. Ephrem's one review that remains the 'official' Orthodox statement on *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* and Fr. Ephrem's word remains final.¹⁰ (The only other response—albeit indirect—that I am aware of is the informal *anathema* [a denunciation implying excommunication] of Paul Halsall by a cleric of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia¹² for defending Boswell's thesis.)

If Boswell had any hopes that his ideas would be received or evaluated fairly, he needed to have an irrefutable argument. Any mistakes in any portion of the text would be seized on and used to discredit the whole. In a perfect world, anyone dealing with these rites would be a master of Byzantine social and political history, as well as Eastern Christian liturgical practice and history, theology, dogmatics, ethics, canon law, and spirituality. At the very least, one would hope that a knowledgeable editor would check for the accuracy of assertions about standard Orthodox liturgical terms and practices. Every researcher or author has his or her own particular idiosyncrasies and quirks; while Boswell provided us with an invaluable service by raising the subject of services to sanctify sexual relationships between men, it is unfortunate that his own personality traits got in the way of the work.¹³

Many of Boswell's detractors, however, seem as unfamiliar with Eastern Christian practice as Boswell himself. Robert Wilken asserts that there 'were clear prohibitions in medieval Eastern Christendom against homosexual activities, often imposing severe penalties. It is most implausible that the church would bless in its liturgy what it forbade in its laws.' This, however, flies in the face of the Orthodox pastoral practice of *oikonomia* and the fact that second marriages were subject to penalties just as severe—and often more severe¹⁶—than those for 'homosexual activities' and that a rite for blessing these second mar-

riages was developing at the same time that the *adelphopoiia* services were taking shape. I point this out simply to demonstrate the danger of bringing an unexamined and unacknowledged Western Christian mentality and assumptions to the study of Eastern Christian texts; both Wilken's and Boswell's refusal to 'queer' the normative stance of Western Christianity is problematic for all concerned.

Perhaps, though, rather than attempting to do too little (he omitted or abbreviated discussion of Orthodox wedding customs and rites, the variety of wedding services in Orthodox practice, the history of *adelphopoiia* in the Orthodox canonical texts, etc.), Boswell attempted to do too much. Rather than discuss the entire history of love, marriage, and 'brotherhood' in both Eastern and Western Europe from the beginning until now, perhaps he should have focused on a few much more narrowly defined aspects of these topics and dealt with those in a more thorough and systematic fashion.

Or should scholars of the 'queer middle ages' even bother trying to be all things to all people? Should we throw up our hands, saying that there will always be people who reject the history they don't like and that we shouldn't even try to communicate our discoveries, insights, and ideas to them? I think, however, we would all agree with Shaw's closing paragraph of his (albeit unfavorable) review, that the 'data of the past may not be all that happy...[B]ut tinkering with the moral balance of the past is a disservice to the study of history...The past is dead. We cannot change it. What we can change is the future; but the way to a better future requires an unsentimental and accurate understanding of what happened in the past, and why.'¹⁷

We can neither ignore what we would now call 'homosexuality' in the Middle Ages nor assume (at the other extreme) that any reference to an intense emotional relationship between men means they had a sexual relationship as well. As we 'queer the Middle Ages'¹⁸ and rethink how the categories medieval/modern/postmodern relate¹⁹ or re-vision how the people of the Middle Ages related sexually, we must also rethink the ways in which we attempt to share our re-thinking and re-visioning. Before re-thinking and re-visioning, we must be clear about what we are thinking about and looking at in the first place. (We need to 'queer' our modern western assumptions even about religious history in Western Europe, as pointed out recently in a 'Letter to the Editor' in the *New York Times Book Review*:

I enjoyed Robin Wright's review of Gilles Kepel's *Jihad* very much. However, I would like to take issue with this statement: 'In the West, Christianity went through a Reformation that paved the way for the Age of Enlightenment and the birth of modern democracy.' I understand this may be very convenient for Protestant nations to believe in, but it really is an untrue cliché. If anything, the Reformation was a fundamentalist movement, in that it tried to re-establish revelation over interpretation in its practice of Christianity...The Enlightenment had to do with putting man at the center of things, and was therefore a much more interpretationist stance.

Indeed, the centers of Enlightenment...were not the same as the centers of Reformation. Quite the contrary: Enlightenment starts essentially in Roman Catholic and Jewish centers such as France, Flanders, Austria, Italy, Spain, etc.²⁰).

Any interrogation of Orthodox texts has to begin by communicating an Orthodox context, whether my allegiance is to Medieval Studies, Queer Studies, Theological and Liturgical Studies, or whatever other department we find ourselves in or whatever we happen to be wearing to satisfy a funding requirement. We must both attempt to do more-than-enough to communicate our vision and yet not become so focused on minutiae that we lose sight of the whole that we wish to present. Rather than trying to explain the whole world at once, perhaps we should begin by dealing with only one very small aspect or corner of it at a time. We must become all things to all people, that by all means available we may communicate with as many as possible.

—Stephen Morris, *New York*

¹ See the Orthodox hymnography (the *aposticha*) for Matins of Tuesday in Holy Week; also Romans 12:6–8 and I Cor. 12:7–11.

² O.C. Edwards, *Elements of Homiletic* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1982), p. 107.

³ I would like to express my gratitude to Paul Halsall who has compiled an amazing website dedicated to the discussion of Boswell's book and includes links to most—if not all—its major reviews, both favorable and unfavorable, on-line at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/index-bos.html>. My research for this paper was greatly facilitated by Halsall's collection.

⁴ Camille Paglia, 'Review of John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*,' *The Washington Post* (July 17, 1994).

⁵ Archimandrite Ephrem, 'Book Reviews,' *Sourozh* 59 (London: Russian Patriarchal Diocese of Surozh, 1995): 50.

⁶ Archimandrite Ephrem, 'Book Reviews.'

⁷ Orthodox rubrics are notoriously cryptic remarks rather than clear and straight forward directions, taking the form of 'gentle reminders' to the clergy, singers, and readers engaged in the performance of the services and who seem presumed to already know what to do. It was a common remark when I was a senior student in seminary, made in only semi-jest, that just when a newly ordained deacon would most need a clear textual direction as to what to do next, the rubrics would read, 'The deacon goes to the usual place at the usual time and does the usual thing in the usual way.' By not having someone experienced in the 'translation' or 'unpacking' of the rubrics in the brother-making rites check his attempts to fill in the gaps, Boswell was setting himself up for disaster.

⁸ Kenneth Kemp & Robert Kennedy, 'Review *Essay of Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*,' *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 41.1 (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, 1996): 57–80.

⁹ See the archives of the BYZANS-L@lists.missouri.edu, for February 6 and 7, 1997.

¹⁰ Paul Halsall, posting to the BYZANS-L@lists.missouri.edu on Feb. 7, 1997.

¹¹ In the fall of 1996 when I asked a faculty member of St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary in New York for his opinion of Boswell's book, he gave me a copy of Fr. Ephrem's review with the comment that he had nothing else to add.

¹² A small schismatic group, which broke communion with the Moscow patriarch in the 1920s, which is currently headquartered in Manhattan. An *anathema* is normally directed at some person or group who claims at least nominal membership in the Orthodox Church; as Paul Halsall is not, and never claimed to be, a member of any Orthodox church the act of the ROCOR clergyman (on an internet discussion group/list) is ecclesiastically dubious at best and simply demonstrates the intensity of the emotional response to the whole question raised by the study of *adelphopoiia*.

¹³ I also acknowledge the pressure Prof. Boswell may have faced in terms of time constraints; he no doubt wanted to finish the project before his health made it impossible for him to continue.

¹⁴ Robert Wilken, 'Procrustean Marriage Beds,' *Commonweal* 121 (September 9, 1994): 24.

¹⁵ Patricia Karlin-Hayter, 'Further Notes on Byzantine Marriage: Raptus – ἀρπαγή – μνηστεύει?' *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 46 (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research, 1992), pp. 133–5, esp. p. 134.

¹⁶ See Eve Levin, *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs, 900–1700* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

¹⁷ Brent D. Shaw, 'Review of *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*,' *The New Republic* (July 18, 1994): 34–41.

¹⁸ *Queering the Middle Ages*, Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

¹⁹ In addition to re-thinking how modern or post-modern concepts do not arise out of medieval experience but rather color our attitudes to such an extent that we frame the questions we ask of the medieval experience and so define that experience in terms of our modern categories and concepts (Burger and Kruger, p xi–xiii), perhaps we need to 'queer' the idea that modernity equals tolerance, broadmindedness, a progression from worse to better and re-think modernity in terms of a clamping down, rigidity and uniformity, more control and less tolerant attitude which has better technology available—beginning with printing—to impose the 'correct' views and behavior on the nonconformists.

²⁰ Luis M. Rocha, 'Letter to the Editor,' *New York Times Book Review* (Sunday, June 23, 2002).

