

Title: Revisiting Boswell's Legacy: The Reception and Impact of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*

Introduction

Published in 1980, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (CSTH) by Yale University historian Dr. John Boswell was both groundbreaking and controversial. Its provocative title suggests a cultural critique, but the book presents a detailed historical investigation. One reviewer aptly described it as “revisionist history governed by patient determination to listen to the sources, not by ideological agenda or methodological obsession.” Boswell himself declared: “It is the province of the historian not to praise or blame but merely to record and explain.” CSTH meticulously traces attitudes toward same-sex relationships in Western Europe over more than a millennium. Upon release, it ignited intense scholarly debate, praised and criticized by academics, LGBTQ activists, and religious conservatives alike. This essay explores four key themes from CSTH—social intolerance, sexual identity, Roman historical distortion, and biblical interpretation—and assesses their academic reception and continued relevance.

John Boswell: Life and Scholarship

John Boswell (1947–1994) was a historian at Yale University known for his work on marginalized communities, particularly at the intersection of religion and sexuality. A devout Catholic and an openly gay man, Boswell navigated a complex personal and academic identity. His first book, *The Royal Treasure*, examined Muslim communities in medieval Spain. CSTH, his second major work, received the National Book Award and the Stonewall Book Award in 1981. His final book, *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*, was published shortly before his death from AIDS-related complications.

Boswell's scholarship sought to recover suppressed narratives and challenge dominant interpretations of religious and cultural history. His meticulous analysis of primary sources, conducted in over a dozen languages, demonstrated a formidable scholarly rigor. Boswell argued that tolerance and even celebration of same-sex love existed in various historical contexts, particularly in Late Antiquity and the early Christian Church.

Key Themes in CSTH and Their Reception

1. Social Intolerance Is Not Unusual

Boswell begins CSH by contextualizing intolerance toward gay people within broader patterns of societal prejudice—against Jews, women, and other marginalized groups. He argues that hostility toward same-sex love is not inherently religious, but rather a product of popular bias. As he observes: “In the very same list which has been claimed to exclude from the kingdom of heaven those guilty of homosexual practices, the greedy are also excluded. And yet no medieval states burned the greedy at the stake.”

This argument resonated with scholars like Vern Bullough and Kenneth Dover, who supported Boswell’s efforts to disentangle religious doctrine from popular morality. However, it was met with skepticism by others who questioned the broad applicability of his claims. Critics argued that Boswell sometimes overstated the tolerance of medieval society or underestimated the influence of church institutions in promoting homophobia.

Even so, Boswell’s framing marked a paradigm shift. Rather than asking why Christian Europe was intolerant of homosexuality, he asked why it had been tolerant in certain periods—a radical reframing that challenged both religious leaders and historians to reexamine their assumptions.

2. Homosexuality Is Not Always "Gay"

Boswell differentiates between “homosexual”—a term denoting behavior—and “gay,” which involves self-identification and cultural consciousness. He argued that same-sex encounters in antiquity do not necessarily constitute a “gay identity” as understood today. This nuanced perspective drew fire from scholars like Robert Padgug and David Halperin, who accused Boswell of projecting modern identity categories onto the past.

Padgug, writing from a Foucauldian perspective, argued that sexuality itself is a modern social construct and that applying terms like “gay” to premodern individuals is inherently flawed. Halperin criticized Boswell for being insufficiently attentive to the power dynamics and social scripts that defined ancient sexual practices.

Despite the backlash, Boswell’s distinction between behavior and identity helped catalyze the emergence of queer theory in the 1990s. His work laid the foundation for scholars to explore premodern sexualities on their own terms while acknowledging the difficulty of translation across cultures and eras.

3. The Distortion of Roman History

Boswell contends that Roman attitudes toward homosexuality were largely tolerant, and that modern historians have often misrepresented this reality. He refutes claims that same-sex acts were criminalized during the Republic, arguing instead that Roman law focused on protecting the rights of freeborn citizens, regardless of gender.

He also challenges the narrative that homosexuality contributed to the fall of Rome. Instead, he attributes this perception to an imbalance in surviving sources—more documentation exists from the Empire than the Republic, leading to a skewed understanding of Roman sexuality. Boswell cites Roman authors like Cicero, Catullus, and Ovid to demonstrate the integration of same-sex love into public life.

Boswell's claim that early Christian leaders, including bishops and saints, were often sympathetic to male-male affection added further complexity. He presents evidence of affectionate letters and intimate friendships, even ceremonies that may have functioned as same-sex unions. Although controversial, his reevaluation of Roman and early Christian sources continues to influence scholarly discussions on the fluidity of sexual norms in antiquity.

4. The Bible Is Not Inherently Intolerant

In Chapter Four, Boswell critiques the use of biblical texts to condemn homosexuality. He argues that these passages are often vague or misinterpreted, such as the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, which he believes concerns hospitality rather than sexuality. He also points out that the biblical canon wasn't officially settled until the 16th century, and early Christians embraced a broader range of texts.

This argument remains one of the most hotly contested aspects of CSTH. Liberal theologians and historians have supported Boswell's view, while conservative scholars such as Robert Gagnon continue to interpret the same passages in line with traditional doctrine. Robin Scroggs, meanwhile, argues that biblical prohibitions targeted exploitative practices like pederasty rather than consensual same-sex love.

Boswell also notes how translation and editorial choices have skewed scriptural interpretations. Words like "abomination" or "unnatural" were often later interpolations or mistranslations of more ambiguous Greek and Hebrew terms. His critique called for a more historically grounded and less doctrinaire reading of the Bible, encouraging both scholars and believers to reassess long-held views.

Legacy and Continuing Influence

Despite its critics, CSTH remains a seminal work in both LGBTQ and religious studies. Valerie Abrahamsen notes that Boswell's scholarship significantly advanced understanding of church history, sexuality, and politics. His meticulous research revealed how historical documents had been deliberately altered to obscure same-sex relationships—changing pronouns, omitting names, and recasting narratives to fit heteronormative frameworks.

Boswell's work paved the way for future scholarship by "posting landmarks where there were none before." Even if some of his interpretations have been revised or rejected, his influence is undeniable. His assertion that history should recover voices erased by prejudice continues to resonate.

Boswell's courage in confronting taboo subjects and his dedication to archival truth helped expand the boundaries of academic inquiry. Today, his work is frequently cited not only in historical studies but also in theology, gender studies, and cultural criticism. His legacy endures as a testament to the power of scholarship in challenging prejudice and expanding human understanding.

Conclusion

John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* remains a foundational text in the study of sexuality and religion. Through its exploration of social intolerance, identity, classical history, and biblical interpretation, CSTH challenged entrenched beliefs and inspired new lines of inquiry. While scholars continue to debate its claims, Boswell's courage in confronting taboo subjects—and his commitment to letting historical sources speak for themselves—ensured his work left an enduring mark on both academia and culture.

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