



Patristic Writers

by Eugene Rice

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2004, 2006, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Christian authors who flourished between the beginning of the second century C.E. and the end of the sixth are commonly called "fathers of the church" or Patristic Writers. "Patristics" is the study of their teachings.

None of the fathers wrote positively about same-sex preferences or same-sex acts--quite the reverse: their importance in the history of homosexuality was to appropriate, accentuate, and help perpetuate currents of hostility to homoeroticism in pagan thought and attitude and use them to strengthen the prohibitions of Leviticus and Paul. But as well as being borrowers they were intemperate inventors.

Contra naturam

A striking instance of patristic borrowing from pagan philosophy is the adoption by Christians of the notion that same-sex intercourse is unnatural.

The idea goes back to Plato's *Laws*: "When male unites with female for procreation, the pleasure expressed is said to be according to nature (*kata phusin*), but contrary to nature (*para phusin*) when male mates with male and female with female." The empirical evidence he adduces is that among animals male does not mount male for sexual purposes. Another argument rests on a comparison of male-male anal intercourse to a farmer who sows seed on stony ground, where it will never take root and grow and multiply.

Later Platonists, Stoics, and Hellenized Jews repeated Plato's agricultural metaphor and embraced his misplaced faith in the "natural" behavior of animals. For example, the great Jewish philosopher Philo (*ca* 20 B.C.E.-*ca* 50 C.E.), an older contemporary of Paul, frequently called same-sex acts "contrary to nature" (*para phusin*). If left to themselves, he added, pederasts will depopulate the world.

Christians, too, found such views congenial. Beginning with Paul's letter to the Romans (1: 26-27), the opinion that same-sex intercourse is "against nature" (Latin: *contra naturam*) appears everywhere in early (and later) Christian literature.

Writing in the first decade of the fourth century, Lactantius (*ca* 240-*ca* 320) offered a standard Christian explanation of why same-sex acts are unnatural. "When God invented the plan of the two sexes, he endowed the bodies of men and women with a vehement carnal desire for each other. In the pleasurable union of the two sexes, a child is conceived, our mortality is overcome, and the race of living beings saved from extinction. The satisfaction of sexual desire is natural when it serves this purpose. But there are also men, inspired by the devil, who actually join themselves to other males (*mares maribus*) and practice abominable intercourse against nature and against the institute of God. Such men abuse their own sex. Yet among themselves, they regard these practices as peccadilloes and almost honorable."

Procreationism



Top: Clement of Alexandria.



Above: Augustine of Hippo as depicted in a painting in the Lateran Church in Rome (*ca* 400-500 C.E.).

The emerging Christian sexual ethic owed a second great debt to Greek philosophy: the doctrine that has come to be known as procreationism.

The idea originates with Pythagoras of Samos (ca 570-480 B.C.E.), whose ethical teaching placed a heavy emphasis on sexual restraint and moderation. At Croton, a Greek colony in southern Italy, he actually persuaded the men of the city to practice monogamy and give up their concubines.

Followers of Pythagoras in the Hellenistic period (Aristoxenus of Tarentum or Ocellus Lucanus, for example) made plainer the procreationist core of the Pythagorean sexual ethic: "The first postulate," wrote Ocellus in *On the Nature of the Universe*, "is that sexual intercourse should never occur for pleasure, but only for the procreation of children."

A stricter version explicitly prohibited every sexual act committed outside of marriage, including "all unnatural connections, especially those attended with wanton insolence [e.g., pederasty]," thus linking the idea of what is natural in sex to a normative demand for procreation as its end.

Both Jews and Christians accepted the procreationist dictate. "What are our laws about marriage," asked Josephus (ca 37-ca 100 C.E.), historian of the Jews: "The Law [of Moses] allows no other union of the sexes but that which nature has appointed, of a man with his wife and this for the procreation of children only. And it abhors the intercourse of male with male, and if anyone do that, death is the punishment."

Clement of Alexandria (ca 150-ca 215), head of the catechetical school in that city, offers an early Christian example of the same doctrine. Marriage is a legal transaction between a man and a woman that exists for the single purpose of procreating legitimate children in a reverent, disciplined act of will, not of desire. "To indulge in intercourse without intending children is to outrage nature, which we should take as our instructor."

What remains distinctive about the Judeo-Christian appropriation of these precepts is that what began as philosophical counsels of moderation, temperance, and self-control have been transformed into commandments of the biblical God.

A New Commandment and a New Vocabulary

The fathers gave added weight to the Levitical and Pauline prohibitions in two more original ways: by adding a prohibition of pederasty to the Ten Commandments (the sixth: "Thou shalt not commit adultery") and by coining terminologies in Greek and Latin designed to inscribe in the language itself Christian hostility to the same-sex acts already judged abominable in the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26).

The *Constitution of the Apostles*, a collection of ecclesiastical law compiled in the late fourth century, but containing earlier material, records the expansion of the sixth commandment like this: "*Do not commit adultery*: for you divide one flesh into two: For . . . husband and wife are one by nature, concord, union, affection, life, and habit, and separated only by sex and number. *Do not abuse boys (oude paidophthoréseis)*: for this vice is against nature and had its beginning in Sodom, a city consumed by fire sent down from Heaven. Let such a man be *cursed and the whole people say: So be it, so be it.*"

The Greek homophobic neologisms are compounds of *pais* (boy) and *phthora* (abuse, corruption): the noun *paidophthoros*, the verb *paidophthoreo*, and the class noun *paidophthoria*.

Paidophthoros, like Paul's *arsenokoitai*, was probably coined by Hellenized Jews. The word does not appear in either the Septuagint or the New Testament. Christians adopted it in the second century. Neither it nor

its relatives appear in the literature of the Gentiles.

To be sure, pagan moralists and legislators had strong views of their own about honor and shame, consent and coercion, and they had words like *hubris* and *stuprum*, each capable of registering a wide range of disapproval with which to reprobate sexual behaviors they considered illicit: for example, any effort to coerce or buy a freeborn boy, the seduction of boys too young to be legitimate players on the sexual scene, or the failure of an adult lover to protect with tact the masculinity of his adolescent boyfriend.

The innovation of the early fathers of the church was to make the crucial move of labeling pederasty itself an abuse. So Greek Christians learned to say "boy-abuse" (*paidophthoria*) instead of "boy-love" (*paiderastia*), "abuser of boys" (*paidophthoros*) instead of "lover of boys" (*paederastés*, *paidophilos*), and "to abuse boys" (*paidophthoreo*) rather than to love them (*paidophilein*).

The Myth of Sodom

The same ideological climate caused Christians to accept without challenge the homosexual interpretation of the Sodom story that Philo had taught Greek-speaking Jews. By the end of the fourth century, the Latin fathers had fixed permanently in the folklore of the West the links between male-male sex, the lewdness of Sodom, God's anger, and the city's incendiary punishment.

The male inhabitants of Sodom wrote St. Augustine (354-430), "burned with unspeakable lust for one another." Their offense was "abusive intercourse with males" (*stuprum in masculos*), and God punished them by raining fire from heaven on their sinful heads, a foretaste of the divine punishment to come. The crimes of the Sodomites are against nature (*contra naturam*) and must be everywhere and always hated and punished. The relationship we ought to have with God is violated when the nature of which He is the author is polluted by perverted desire.

Augustine's influential disciple, the historian Orosius, stressed that the crime of the Sodomites was precisely their choice of male sexual partners. Sodom and Gomorrah were rich. From abundance sprang luxury, and from luxury, sexual depravity, "males with males working shame" (*masculi in masculos operantes turpitudinem*, Romans 1:27), indifferent in their lust to any consideration of place (public or private), condition (free or slave, rich or poor), or age (adolescent or adult).

The homosexualization and acceptance of the Sodom story spawned a new sexual vocabulary in the Latin West, corresponding in meaning and intent with the *paidophthoros* family in the Greek East. The noun "sodomite" (*sodomita*), the adjective "sodomitical" (*sodomiticus*), the verbal phrase "to fornicate in the manner of a Sodomite" (*more sodomitico*) began to circulate in late antiquity. Their frequent attestation in the sixth century signals the beginning of a new period in the history of homosexual nomenclature.

From a queer perspective, the most important legacy of the Christian fathers to the modern West is the unconditional condemnation of all non-procreative acts as unnatural, immoral, and unlawful. The corollary is also true: in sexual contexts, "unnatural" and "against nature" come to mean "without procreative potential."

Bibliography

Bailey, D.S. *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*. London: Longmans, 1955.

Boswell, John. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the*

Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Brooten, Bernadette J. *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Brown, Peter. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Fox, Robin Lane. *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century A.D. to the Conversion of Constantine*. London: Penguin, 1986.

Gaca, Kathy L. *The Making of Fornication: Eros, Ethics, and Political Reform in Greek Philosophy and Early Christianity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Guthrie, Kenneth Sylvan. *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library: An Anthology of Ancient Writings which Relate to Pythagoras and Pythagorean Philosophy*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Phanes Press, 1987.

Kueffler, Mathew. *The Manly Eunuch. Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001.

Riedweg, Christoph. *Pythagoras: His Life, Teaching, and Influence*. Steven Rendall, trans. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005.

Thesleef, Holger. *The Pythagorean Texts of the Hellenistic Period*. Abo: Abo Akademi, 1965.

Ward, Ray Bowen. "Why Unnatural? The Tradition behind Romans 1:26-27." *Harvard Theological Review* 90 (1997): 263-84.

About the Author

Eugene Rice, who died on August 4, 2008, was Shepherd Professor of History Emeritus at Columbia University. His last book, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, was awarded prizes by the American Society of Church History, the American Catholic Association, the American Academy of Religion, and the American Historical Association. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, he instituted Columbia University's first "Seminar on Homosexualities" and served as an adviser to Columbia University Press for its series on gay and lesbian studies. At the time of his death, he was working on a history of Western homosexualities.