



A medieval depiction (ca 1270) of Pope Gregory IX, who called sodomites "abominable persons -- despised by the world."

## Homophobia

by Vern L. Bullough

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

The term homophobia was coined by George Weinberg, a psychotherapist, and self-identified heterosexual. Taught to treat gay men and lesbians as though they were inherently sick, he found that some of his teachers were so "phobic" about homosexuality that they judged it reasonable to torture homosexuals by treatments such as electric shock in the belief that this would cure them.

In 1967 Weinberg began calling some of his fellow clinicians homophobes. He developed the concept more fully in his book *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*, published in 1972. In it he defined homophobia as a "dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals."

Though Weinberg used the term in his talks and articles in the gay press, also claiming some credit for the use of the term is K.T. Smith, who in 1971 published an article entitled "Homophobia: A Tentative Personality Profile."

The term was almost immediately adopted both within and without the gay and lesbian community to describe those individuals who both fear and dislike homosexuals. Others extended the meaning. Mark Freeman, for example, defined it as an "extreme rage and fear reaction to homosexuals."

Homophobia is often seen as an extreme form of heterosexism or heterocentrism, attitudes that privilege heterosexuality or consider heterosexual values as universal. Homophobia is also sometimes used to designate any form of anti-gay bias, from distaste for same-sex sex acts to overt discrimination against homosexuals.

Given its coinage within a psychological context, perhaps the most significant aspect of the term, despite its rather slippery definition, is that it turns the table on those who equate homosexuality with mental illness. The problem, the term implies, is not with homosexuals or homosexuality, but with those who hold negative attitudes toward homosexuals and homosexuality.

### **Why Homophobia?**

Why homophobia? Some argue that homosexuality and homosexuals disrupt the sexual and gender order supposedly established by natural law or by God. Particularly feared and condemned are homosexuals whose behavior seems to be atypical; effeminacy in homosexual men, and mannishness in homosexual women are particularly feared and disliked. There is also real fear among many that the social conduct of homosexuals disrupts the social, legal, political, ethical, and moral order of society, a contention which they claim is supported by history and confirmed by religious doctrine.

Clearly, homophobia represents many different prejudices, and a more accurate term might be "homophobicias." Elisabeth Young-Bruehl in her *Anatomy of Prejudice* examines what she calls primary prejudices: sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia. She classifies them as falling into one or another combination of categories: obsessional, hysterical, or narcissistic.

Of the prejudices she examined, only homophobia fell into all three categories, making homosexuals all-purpose victims. In the eyes of homophobes, homosexuals were regarded as clannish and therefore dangerous, sexually obsessed and predatory, and the males were seen as like women and therefore not like real men, while the females were thought to compete with men for women.

Homophobia has also been explained in terms of "homosexual panic," the fear of homosexuality in oneself. There is certainly belief in the gay community that the most rabid homophobes are often repressed homosexuals. Another explanation relates homophobia closely to erotophobia, a fear of sexuality itself.

### **Internalized Heterosexuality**

Homophobia is not limited to heterosexuals, but exists among homosexuals as well. Internalized homophobia probably results from the negative ideas about homosexuality that many gay men and lesbians absorb from the larger society.

The effects of internalized homophobia can be severe. Studies conducted in the 1990s have shown that homosexuals who suffer from homophobia also tend to suffer from low self-esteem, depression, and isolation. Such individuals may be prone to increased use of alcohol and drugs and often fail to engage in safe-sex precautions. Internalized homophobia has also been seen as the cause of high suicide rates among gay and lesbian teenagers.

### **Homophobia in History**

If one examines history for instances of homophobia, it appears to be as widespread as homosexuality itself. In what might be called Western history, homosexual behavior was accepted--and within limits approved--in much of the Greco-Roman world, but after the rise of Christianity homophobic attitudes came to triumph.

The concept of sodomy and its evil derives primarily from Judeo-Christian writings heavily influenced by Neoplatonism. The change from the Greco-Roman world is emphasized in the Justinian code and the subsequent western canon and civil law drawn from it. Pope Gregory IX called sodomites "abominable persons--despised by the world." The first recorded victim of the new state and church sponsored homophobia took place in 1292, when a "sodomite" was burned at the stake.

Although the intensities of hatred waxed and waned, hostility and fear remained. Inevitably, perhaps, social discrimination and legal repression often gave rise to a distinct identity and a way of expressing this identity began to develop. Interestingly, there is comparative little interest in what women did, and lesbianism is almost ignored in the law and in public discussion in the early modern period.

Some brave individuals, such as Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), argued that consensual sodomy ought not be a crime, but the legal breakthrough came not in England but in France and the rest of Europe. In 1791, the French Revolution decriminalized all sexual acts, providing consent was given and the individuals were of age to give consent.

Though most of the countries of Europe that came under Napoleon's domination in the early eighteenth century accepted this revision, those parts of Germany that had not been under French occupation, notably Prussia, did not. Neither did English and American law.

After Germany was united in 1871, led by the kings of Prussia, it imposed traditional German anti-sodomy code on the entire country, including those parts that had abandoned it. In response, homosexuals in Germany came out into the open to agitate, unsuccessfully, to repeal this law, known as Paragraph 175. This concern led to an explosion of research into homosexuality and ultimately to the foundation of

homosexual rights organizations. Though the demand for rights nearly succeeded during the Weimar republic (1919-1932), the rise of Hitler led to the destruction of the movement and the ultimate arrest and confinement in concentration camps of large numbers of Germans who were identified as homosexuals.

Homophobia increased not only in Germany but also in post-World War II United States, where conservative Senator Joseph McCarthy mounted his campaign against gay men and lesbians as subversive. Not only did a significant number of gay men lose their jobs, but also around the country there was a markedly increased incidence of harassment and arrest of homosexuals by local officials.

The resulting repression had the effect of encouraging some gay men and lesbians to organize and they did so, first in Los Angeles, then in San Francisco, and across the country.

In the late 1940s, American sex researchers, particularly Alfred Kinsey, began to challenge traditional hostility to homosexuality. The study of homosexuality became a dominant theme in sex research from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century.

By the 1950s, the evidence that discrimination against homosexuality was widespread, and probably unconstitutional, led organizations such as the American Law Institute, the American Friends Service Committee, and the American Civil Liberties Union to agitate for legal change. Their example was followed by changes in attitudes in such professional groups as the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Sociological Association.

Motivating the change was not only new research but increasing pressure from a growing number of gay organizations that argued that homosexuality was simply a part of human behavior, a conclusion that led to challenging many of the laws regulating private sexual conduct. The culmination came in *Lawrence v. Texas*, the 2003 United States Supreme Court decision legalizing sodomy.

Homophobia has by no means disappeared, but it is somewhat less respectable to be homophobic now than it was in the past, and the law in most countries no longer underpins homophobia.

In recent years there have been a number of books devoted to historical and cultural studies of homophobia. Particularly important is the work by Byrne Fone.

### **Bibliography**

Bullough, V. L. *Sexual Variance in Society and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.

Fone, Byrne. *Homophobia: A History*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000.

Freeman, Mark. "Homophobia: The Psychology of a Social Disease." *Body Politic* 24 (June 1975): 19.

Smith, T.A. "Homophobia: A Tentative Personality Profile." *Psychological Reports* 19 (1971): 1091-94.

Weinberg, George. *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972.

Young-Bruehl, Elisabeth. *The Anatomy of Prejudice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996.

### **About the Author**

**Vern L. Bullough**, a SUNY Distinguished Professor Emeritus, also founded the Center for Sex Research at California State University, Northridge. He was the author, co-author, or editor of more than 50 books, about half of which deal with sex and gender issues. A past president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, he earned numerous awards for his writing and research, including the Kinsey award. He wrote

more than 150 refereed articles, and hundreds of others. During his career, he lectured in most of the 50 states, and in more than 25 foreign countries.