

HISTORY OF SAME-SEX MARRIAGES

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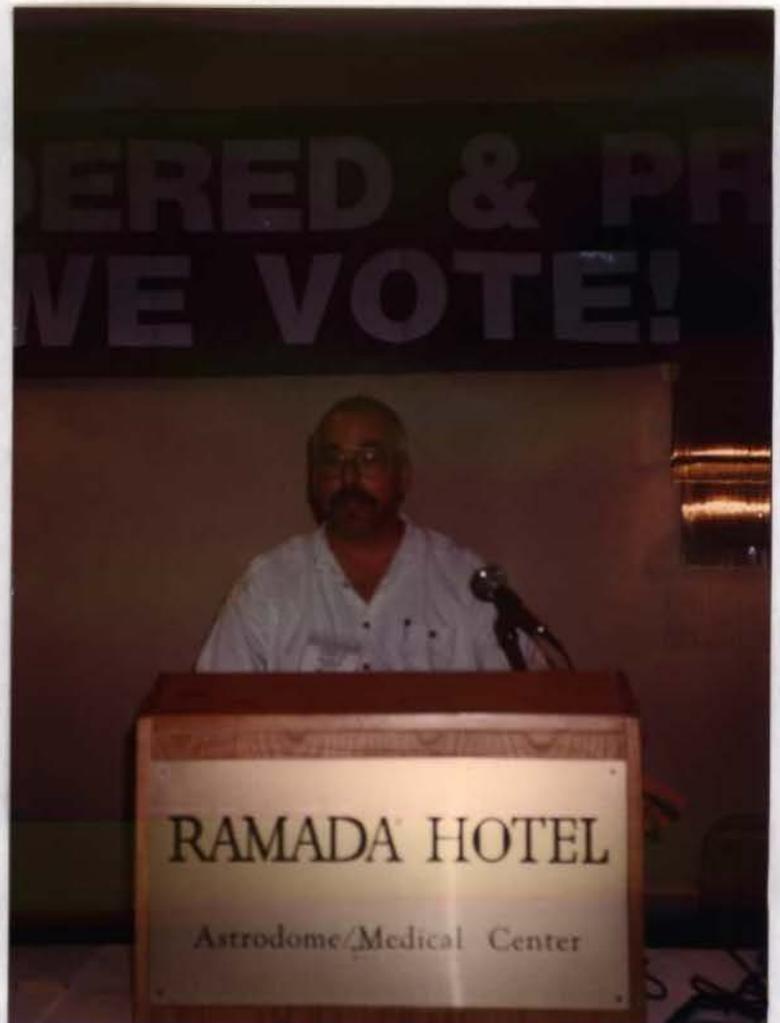
A Historical Precedent for Same-Sex Marriages

One week ago I was at a wedding. The ceremony was proceeding with all due solemnity until the priest read the following lines from the Book of Common Prayer.

The union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and when it is God's will, **for the procreation of children** and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord.

This reading was immediately followed by uproarious laughter throughout the whole church. Why were these lines so funny in that context? It is because both persons in this couple were well over 80 years old. Everyone in the congregation knew that there would be no children; yet, there was no protest march outside the building; the couple were not condemned by society; their marriage was not declared illegal, or null and void; and no one hounded them about their sexual activities; nor did the state legislature of Hawaii cite "procreation as a compelling interest" for insisting that their marriage was not in the best interest of the state. In other words, the usual arguments advanced by the DOMA people were not applied here in spite of the fact that their wedding was in defiance of the usual DOMA arguments: that marriage is for the procreation of children, etc. Why then does one marriage in which children are not likely invoke benign laughter rather than the usual vociferations? The answer is twofold: first, the attitude of the church since its inception. Second, a misunderstanding about what marriage actually is in the eyes of the law and of history.

Oddly enough, the very concept of marriage lacks a clear legal or even religious definition, as we shall see. Even though everyone is caught up discussing marriage, what marriage actually is "surprisingly vague under close scrutiny" (xxii). "Most of the time, a definition of marriage is totally subject to whether or not one is a Roman Catholic, a Jew, or a Protestant, or even what a nonreligious lawyer says it is. As John Boswell writes in Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe, there is almost no unanimity about what constitutes marriage in modern societies, as the welter of legal cases. . .demonstrates. Even the two parties involved. . .often dis-



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more patriarchal and rigid. The result is that the state of androgyny came to mean "sexless" rather than "unified."

Originally, the church wanted **no** marriages performed. As the letters of Paul demonstrate, any marriage was viewed as a human weakness. The church argued that everyone should attempt Christ-like perfection and eschew marriage altogether. It was only eventually that Christians realized that the millennium they were predicting was not going to come about immediately. So, recognizing that there would not be any more Christians if they forbid reproduction, they grudgingly began to allow their members to marry. In fact, the concept of a wedding in a church is relatively recent. Before the year 1000 weddings were performed only as favors, which the church always had the right to refuse to anyone (Boswell 162), regardless of sexual orientation. Even then, marriages were seen as mere controls for human weakness. This attitude is reflected in the admonitions of those early times; couples were counseled not to have sex for three days after their weddings took place, and they were forbidden to enter a church for at least 30 days after because having had sex made them so impure (Boswell 168). Unfortunately for us in the 20th Century, it is often overlooked how many same-sex unions were common in those days when procreative marriages were discouraged.

In contrast to the church trying to discourage heterosexual marriage, the three earliest hagiographies in the Christian era have an amazing resemblance to modern gay or lesbian love stories, and of the three, two of them even involve crossdressing. These stories are the stories of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas, Saints Serge and Bacchus, and Saints Nearchos and Polyeuct. For the sake of brevity I will cite only the story of Saints Serge and Bacchus.

The following story is quoted from John Boswell's Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe.

Serge and Bacchus

Serge and Bacchus were Roman soldiers of high standing in the late 3rd/early 4th century who enjoyed such close friendship with the emperor that they were able to have a friend appointed as a provincial governor. They were also Christians, united in their love for each other in a way that recalls description[s] . . . of a Christian heterosexual married couple.

It was then that Serge and Bacchus, like stars shining joyously over the earth, radiating the light of . . . Jesus Christ, began to grace the palace.

Being as one in their love for Christ, they were also undivided from each other in the army of the world, . . . singing and saying, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to abide in oneness."

In time, in fact, they provoked the envy of those less favored. The worst their enemies could think of as a denunciation was that they were Christians, which did provoke the wrath of the emperor.

Immediately the emperor ordered their belts cut off, their tunics and all other military garb removed. . . and women's clothing placed on them; thus they were to be paraded through the middle of the city to the palace. . . .

This was a classic mode of embarrassing males in a society obsessed with warrior masculinity (it had been used. . .on Hercules); it had nothing to do with Serge and Bacchus being a "pair." However, it . . . failed to embarrass them, since they expected, as Christians, to put on the clothing of "new people"

The . . . emperor. . . sent Serge & Bacchus off to the remote province to which he had appointed their friend as governor. He wrote a letter saying that if they repented [of]...their "unholy religion" [they would be pardoned]. On their way, "the two chanted psalms together ... as if with one mouth". . . [This echoes descriptions of heterosexual marriages.]

Bacchus was then flogged to death. The Duke. . . ordered that [Bacchus'] remains not be buried, but thrown out and exposed as meat to the dogs, beasts, and birds outside the camp. . .

Meanwhile the blessed Serge, . . . wept and cried out, "No longer, brother. . . will we chant together, 'Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brothers to abide in oneness!' You have been unyoked from me and gone to heaven, leaving me alone on earth, now single. . . .

After he uttered these things, the same night the blessed Bacchus suddenly appeared to him with a face as radiant as an angel's, wearing an officer's uniform, and spoke to him. "Why do you grieve and mourn, brother? If I have been taken from you in body, I am still with you in the bond of union, chanting and reciting. . .

Hurry then, yourself, brother, through beautiful and perfect confession to **pursue and obtain me**, when you have finished the course. For the **crown** of justice for me is to be with you.

Bacchus' promise that if Serge followed the Lord he would get as his reward not the beatific vision, not the joy of paradise. . . **but Bacchus himself** was remarkable by the standards of the early church, privileging human affection in a way unparalleled during the first 1000 years of Christianity. Moreover, Serge and Bacchus were not biological brothers, and no one ever claimed they were, so the appellation "brother" must be understood as reflective either of ancient usage in erotic subcultures or as reflecting biblical usage (particularly Greek versions). Either way it would have distinctly erotic connotations.

There are also hints in the text that Serge & Bacchus maintained a single household. . . .

Serge and Bacchus came to represent to subsequent generations of Christians the quintessential "paired military saints, they were usually referred to and often pictorially depicted together (sometimes **rubbing halos together and with their horses' noses touching**), and they became the preeminent "couple" invoked in the ceremony of same-sex union discussed below. Severus of Antioch said in the early 6th century that he had to mention Bacchus with Serge because "we should not separate in speech those who were joined in life." In what is the most common version of their lives, Serge is referred to as the "sweet companions and lover of Bacchus."

[Severus writes] that they not only loved each other but actually resembled each other in size, appearance, greatness, and youth of body and soul. [Author's footnote: Of course these are all obvious generalities of Greek erotic writing. . . .]

I have included this rather lengthy quotation to substantiate the idea that condemnations of same-sex marriage are really an invention of modern civilization: the concept of homosexuality, it is to be remembered is an innovation of German psychiatry. Furthermore, the few documents pertaining to church marriage found prior to the year 1215 (at which time marriage was declared a sacrament) contain four ceremonies: one for betrothal, 2 for heterosexual marriage, and one for uniting two men (Boswell 178).

Another problem that gets in the way of understanding historical constructs of same-sex marriage is that the Eastern branches of Christianity did not share the same antisex bias as the Western one. When celibacy and sexual purity are mentioned in the Greek texts, the normal interpretation of them in modern English is closer to "fidelity" than to the usually-accepted idea of no-sex-at-all. It is

agree 'vehemently' about whether it was a 'marriage' or not. It is idle to appeal to definitions or dictionaries: . . .the courts find these inadequate" (9-10)

By way of example, the Christian Right may want to ponder exactly what the Bible means when it talks about Solomon's 700 wives. Why is it that religious fundamentalists have no problem accepting this as a marriage? In addition, we must examine another definition of marriage: the idea that it must involve exclusion. Most studies show that over 50% of all married people commit adultery; yet, once again, no one argues that these people are no longer legally married.

One expectation cited against same-sex marriages is that they are somehow "unnatural" because of a mismatch of the genital organs. These arguments must be struck down: in the past this alleged mismatch has been used as an argument against interracial marriages involving whites and blacks, or whites and Indians, or even between Christians and Jews or women and eunuchs, as in the proclamations of the Synod of Elvira in 305 CE. Again, closer scrutiny breaks these arguments down. If an interracial marriage is somehow "wrong", why is it that the laws forbidding them were one-directional? William Apress writes in An Indian's Looking-Glass for the White Man that in his time, white men could marry anyone whom they chose, but white women did **not** have this privilege. A look at history will provide some insight into all these unjust distributions of the right to marry.

Most of our attitudes towards marriage were inherited from the Romans and from the early Christians. Under Roman law, **only** Roman citizens had the right to get married at all. Anyone else was perfectly free to live together, but there was no chance of any marriage. Why was this so? And why did the arrival of Christianity change that?

It was commonly understood in Roman times that marriage was strictly a financial arrangement, or an arrangement of property rights. Therefore, marriage was possible only for property owners. Certainly, no one expected slaves and foreigners to go without love and sex; there was simply no hope of owning property, so it didn't matter if they married or not.

Furthermore, there is a problem in studying Classical precedents for same-sex marriage in view of these Roman laws concerning property rights and ownership: because marriage was strictly a property arrangement in the eyes of pagan Romans, or simply a ceremony marking the transfer of a bride from one household to another, as Augustine saw it, we will never know either how many same-sex couples there were, or even how many stories in the Bible are actually about same-sex couples. Also, these relationships were invariably described in terms of brother/sister relationships. The stories of David and Jonathan, or of Jesus and James were described in such terms. There is a temptation to view these descriptions of brotherly affection as being strictly platonic; however, a cursory glance at modern literature belies this. Later on I will give some examples that show that what is described as "brotherly love" has highly erotic overtones.

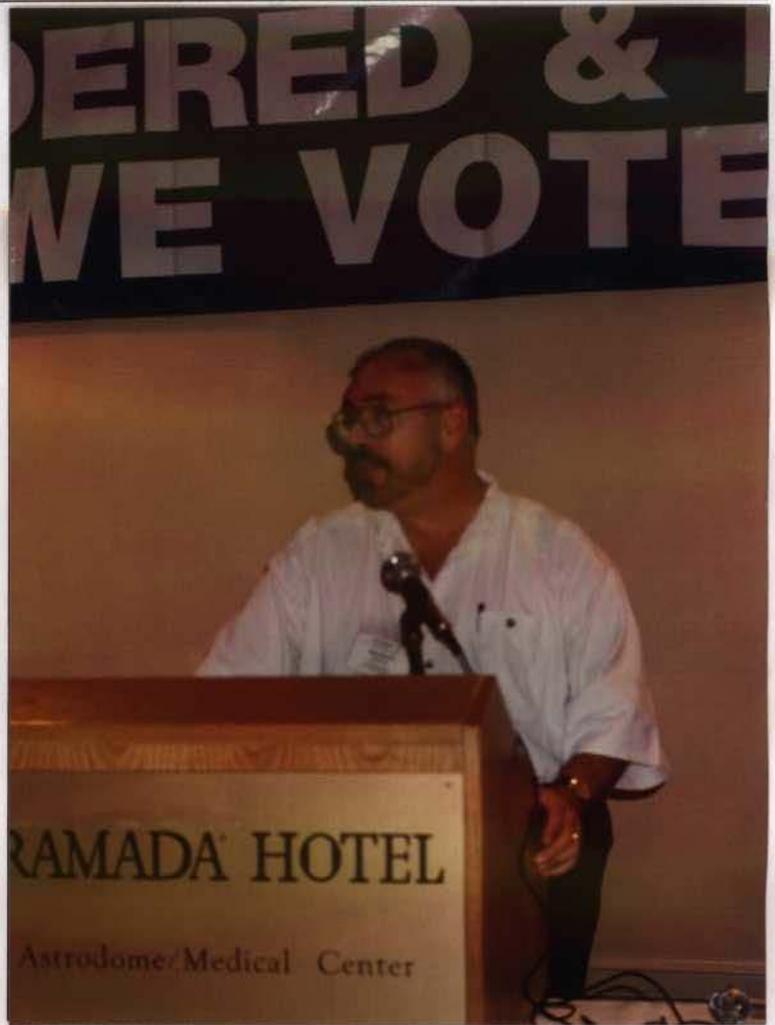
It was not until the later part of the Classical era that same-sex relationships began to be described in terms of marriage. Juvenal frequently complained in his Satires that he had yet another same-sex wedding to go to.

Our attitudes toward marriage, especially same-sex marriage may have turned out differently but for the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. The original church fathers had only one model of perfection to follow, and that was a kind of androgyny. Originally, the concept of androgyny was understood to be a coming together of all the hitherto incompatible components of the psyche an idea related to what we call gender-bending in its present usage. (See Galatians 3:28.) Unfortunately, the semantic mapping for this term diluted as the focus of Christianity became

important to realize that many of these Greek ideas in Western Christianity are due to the isolation of the Apennines which assured a certain conservatism in the texts. Thus, many Italian monasteries were strongholds of these older ideas. I keep mentioning Greek texts for a reason; whenever the Roman Catholic church disapproved of a concept, it destroyed any manuscripts that allowed the idea to be documented. However, most Roman clerics were illiterate in Greek, with the result that they did not realize that they were allowing the survival of certain so-called heresies. In fact, manuscripts for blessing same-sex unions survived, not only in Greek, but also in Slavonic and Arabic. None survived in Latin, in other words, the only language in which the Roman clergy was literate.

Even in those areas where certain sexual practices were condemned, it must be borne in mind that they could not be taken too seriously. For example, the same edict that forbids one order of monks from performing same-sex marriage also forbids them to make loans (Boswell 242). The law against masturbating another man called for a one-year penance as punishment, whereas the law against celebrating New Year's Day on the wrong date prescribes a three-year penance! The fact remains: many same-sex marriages were performed throughout the Middle Ages. In Gerald Wales' Proof of Iniquity Against the Irish, the burden of his arguments is the fact that the Irish drank blood during same-sex weddings. The accent here is not on the fact that the weddings took place; it is rather on the fact that they were still drinking blood like their pagan ancestors. I recommend reading the Appendices to Boswell's book for a look at the manuscripts of the actual ceremonies. It was not until the 14th century that a widespread revulsion towards homosexual marriage took place. No one is sure what happened. The only reasonable theory that has been put forward is that the whole construct may be based on a loose reading of Dante's Inferno.

The reason that Dante has been blamed for possibly inciting the sudden revulsion against homosexuality is that he placed sodomites in a special level of his Hell. However, no one equated the condemned sodomites with male homosexuals until the later Middle Ages, when, for some reason, thinkers began to define sodomites as effeminate. In fact, there are frequent signs from the Renaissance on that bias against same-sex couples was based on faulty translations of ancient texts, the Bible included. On the other hand, we should not be overly surprised that the Church began condemning homosexuality when it did. The church had slowly been caving in to pressure to allow heterosexual marriage. It should be remembered that the only real innovation of Christianity over



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the other Mystery religions that were spreading throughout the Roman Empire was the advocacy of celibacy (Boswell 280). Obviously, once the Church had grudgingly given in to the urge of most of its member to reproduce themselves, the only sexual conduct left for the Church fathers to protest was the performance of those sexual acts that do not result in procreation. And, from that time until now, the condemnation of those acts has been carried out with a vengeance.

In spite of the fact that Western religion has overtly condemned acts of non-procreation (if I may coin a term), the tradition of blessing same-sex unions has continued, and it is to these little-known ceremonies that we gays, lesbians and transgenders need to turn our attention when we finally come into our own and are allowed to live life according to the laws of our own being. Perhaps it is Christopher Isherwood who best shows us where to look: Central Europe, including Germany and the Balkans. In 1720, an Italian nobleman, Alberto Fortis witnessed a lesbian wedding in a church in Dalmatia (Boswell 265). No wonder Isherwood's heart throbbed when he floated down the Danube in 1933, in anticipation of being in that place where "male marriages [are] celebrated by priests" (Christopher and His Kind). In fact, the German practice of Wahlbrüderschaft, with its corresponding ceremony ("Do you take X to be your brother. . .). is obviously germane to same-sex marriage. As proof that these blood brother ceremonies were not the platonic rituals that the religious right wants us to believe, we need remember only two things: first, that monks were prohibited from being joined in these bonds (they were still expected to maintain celibacy) and obviously, the ceremony had highly erotic overtones, or else the monks would not have been prohibited from joining in. Secondly, these ceremonies for making brothers (or sisters) (adelphopoiesis) also carried with them a mechanism for divorce, or breaking these same bonds.

One final note: even though I have focused on the term "brother" when discussing these rituals, it is just as easy to say that they are used for making "sisters." In Greek, the language in which most of these texts have survived, there is no discrete morpheme for "brother" or "sister." Instead, there is a masculine or feminine ending appended to the root "adelph-", the same root that gives us the city of brotherly (or sisterly) love "PhilADELPHia". The original Greek term, "adelphopoiesis" (literally: making of brothers or sisters) is completely gender-free and it is to be hoped that we can soon find ourselves in a society free of gender bias.

As a way of closing, I would like to distribute a copy of the ceremonies that Boswell found, in order to show you how beautiful, moving, and obviously homoerotic these rituals were.