An Archeology of Flesh and Blood: John Boswell's Books Sources and Critics: A Bibliographical Review Essay

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An Archeology of Flesh and Blood
John Boswell’s Books, Sources, and Critics
A Bibliographical Review Essay

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In 1980 and 1994 John Boswell, late professor of history at Yale University, wrote two books on the subject of Christianity and homosexuality. *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Boswell 1980; hereafter *CSTH*) earned its author a life-long reputation as *enfant terrible* (he published it when he was 35) with its bold claim that Christians had not always maintained an unchanging, unambiguous view that homosexual acts and orientations are sinful. *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (Boswell 1994a; hereafter *SSU*) renewed the disputes occasioned by his earlier book with its claim that some late antique and medieval Christians, particularly in Eastern churches, had celebrated liturgical union ceremonies between persons of the same sex which suggested strong gay or lesbian overtones. Both books offered fresh readings of well-known texts as well as editions and interpretations of previously little-known texts. Boswell’s evidence, interpretations, and terms of argument occasioned favorable and hostile discussions in both semi-popular and scholarly venues.
the place of ecclesiastical history in the contemporary theological curriculum.

Since these books have involved so much controversy, let these ground rules be stated beforehand. Regardless of the attitudes of Boswell’s critics, in this text positive assessments of Boswell’s evidence and interpretation do not constitute “special pleading” for any particular social group (any more than respectful and accurate delineation of St. Augustine’s ideas about grace constitute “special pleading” for Catholicism). In this text negative assessments of Boswell’s evidence or interpretation do not necessarily constitute a major critical attack on his books, nor necessarily disconfirm his theses. Neither positive nor negative critical assessments of Boswell’s evidence and interpretation necessarily entail any theological conclusions in this text.1 (Certain critics may believe otherwise, and speak for themselves.)

Boswell’s central claim in CSTH is not easy to locate in convenient form. Boswell sought to refute “the common idea that religious belief—Christian or other—has been the cause of intolerance in regard to gay people” (Boswell 1988:6). The topic of homosexuality (both in Boswell’s texts and in the reviewers) often seems to overshadow the topic of intolerance, of which homosexuality is a case study (Shelp 1982:256). At the book’s end Boswell briefly summarizes that (1) Roman society did not generally distinguish gay people from others and regarded homosexual interest as ordinary; (2) the early church did not appear to oppose homosexual behavior per se; (3) hostility to gay people increased during the dis-

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1 Martha Nussbaum’s logical exposure of fallacious arguments about legitimizing academic study is well worth repeating: “(1) For all x and all y, if y defends x as a legitimate area of study, y is (whether openly or secretly) a member of x; and (2) for all x and all y, if y defends a claim of justice involving a member of x, y is (whether openly or secretly) a member of x.” Such fallacies would suggest, in the theological curriculum, that every professor of Hebrew Bible is secretly a Jew, and that every professor of Christian Ethics who argues against Christian anti-Semitism is a secret Jew, or that every male professor who seeks to encorporate feminist-originated insights into his teaching is secretly a woman. See her “The Softness of Reason: A Classical Case for Gay Studies,” The New Republic 207 (July 13 & 20, 1992): 26-35.
solution of the Roman state; (4) gay people were rarely visible during the early Middle Ages and moral theology treated homosexual behavior as comparable at worst to heterosexual fornication; (5) the revival of urban culture was accompanied by a reappearance of gay literature and a visible and substantial gay minority which left a permanent mark on the culture of the age; (6) in the latter half of the twelfth century virulent hostility began to appear which coincided with the rise of intolerance towards other groups (such as Jews and heretics) and was reflected in and perpetuated by the theological, moral, and legal compilations of the later Middle Ages which influenced European society for centuries afterward (Boswell 1980:233-234).

One need only glance through the bibliography of CSTH to learn what an advance Boswell's 1980 book was over anything which had been written up to that time (Boswell 1980:4, 403-409). His basic narrative thread assembled an impressive array of texts, languages, terms, and methods. Several reviewers noted how far Boswell had raised the level of discussion of late antique and medieval homosexuality (Christiansen 1981:854; Grant 1981:60; Linehan 1981:73; Henry 1982:448; Hauerwas 1985:229; Seehan 1985:441). Several years elapsed after publication before the main objections of reviewers crystallized, in large part because Boswell's book ranged across such a breadth of linguistic, interpretive, and evidentiary competencies that it was not (and is not) easy to digest in detail. In retrospect, objections clustered around several foci and terms noted above.

Boswell's fundamental claim, that Christianity (or any other religion) has not been the cause of intolerance towards gay people, met a hostile reception from two very different critical camps. On the one hand, Christian scholars from several traditions regarded Boswell's claim as flying in the face of normative Christian tradition as promulgated by ecclesiastical authorities on the basis of Scripture and doctrine. David F. Wright concluded there was "little room for debate: homosexual behaviour was contrary to the will of God as expressed in Scripture and nature" (1989:333). Richard John Neuhaus concluded that Boswell provided "snips and pieces of 'evidence' divorced from their historical contexts and ... a fanciful interpretation that serves the argument being advanced" (1994:59). Despite their (largely rhetorical) arguments, these two authors (and others like them) essentially presented the tautology that because "orthodox" Christians now do not countenance homosexual activity, therefore they never could have done so in the past, and because they did not do so in the past, therefore they cannot do so now. Boswell's challenge of their received view of the Christian past therefore not only may be wrong, but must be wrong.

On the other hand, several gay scholars were equally dismissive from a diametrically opposed viewpoint, namely that Christianity most definitely has been (and by tautology must have been) the cause of intolerance towards gay people. The now-defunct Gay Academic Union issued a blistering attack on Boswell's spurious defense of Christianity from obvious association with centuries of hatred and violence; such mindless bigotry in the West could have had no other cause (Gay Academic Union 1981: 1 and passim; see also Boswell 1982:8) Such critics also vociferously criticized Boswell's use of the word "gay" to apply to persons in the distant past (1981:10), insofar as sexual categories (in one line of thinking) are produced by capitalist societies (Padgug 1979:13).

It is this second criticism which opens up methodological issues in the examination of historical sources. While such issues will be discussed further below, it is striking in retrospect how one of Boswell's major innovations, the use of the word "gay" in his subtitle (and carefully discussed throughout his text: see 43-46) is by now a commonplace. Whatever else Boswell's first book may have accomplished, or however it may be criticized, it demonstrated that persons who focused their sexual attentions primarily upon other persons of the same gender did in fact exist in the distant past and could be discussed historically using widely understood terms such as "gay" or "lesbian." Such terms, although they refer to varying combinations of behaviors, could facilitate study more than obfuscate it.

Boswell's first substantive historical claim, that Roman society did not generally distinguish gay people from others and regarded homosexual interest as ordinary) generally has not occasioned widespread objection (but see MacMullen 1982; Lilja 1982; Cantarella 1987, 1992; Dalla 1987; Hallet 1987; and Halperin's criticism 1990). It is now widely accepted that most ancient city-states (including Rome) considered particular sexual desires of little public and ethical concern, except when they interfered with the duties and privileges of citizenship for adult males who were citizens (Boswell 1993). Boswell later clarified his view that ancient Rome as a society appears "to have been blind to the issue of sexual object choice, but it is not clear that individuals were unaware of distinctions in the matter" (Boswell 1983:98). Many traditional Christian accounts of ancient Rome have essentially followed (or preceded) Gibbon's view of Roman
times to both homosexual and heterosexual stimuli” (D.F. Wright 1984:150, n.47; Dover 1978:1, n.1). Petersen concluded, “neither the amassing of parallel usages of ‘arsenokoitia’ in ancient documents nor the examination of the translations of the word into other ancient languages will remove the insurmountable obstacle that none of these agrees with the meaning of the modern noun ‘homosexuals’” (1986:189). He added, “discernment is a quality often lacking in Mr. Wright’s article” (Petersen 1986:191). The translators of the New Revised Standard and the New Jerusalem versions have rendered ‘arsenokoitia’ as ‘male prostitute’ or similar wording which emphasizes activity rather than identity.

A far more cogent and courteous critical response to Boswell’s claims about Christian Scripture was offered by Richard B. Hays, who concluded that Boswell tended to confuse normative with descriptive judgments, and confused exegesis with hermeneutics by concluding that “the New Testament takes no demonstrable position on homosexuality” (Hays 1986:203, 211, referring to Boswell 1980:117). Hays argued at length that St. Paul in Romans 1.26 does portray “homosexual activity as a vivid and shameful sign of humanity’s confusion and rebellion against God,” and offered a variety of hermeneutical strategies which might better delineate how later Christian tradition construed or misconstrued St. Paul’s thinking (Hays 1986:211). By 1986 Boswell’s lexicographical appendix had been superseded by Robin Scroggs’ widely-praised work, which moved discussion in another fruitful direction (Scroggs 1983; see also Burton’s pertinent criticisms 1985, and Furnish 1979).

Richard John Neuhaus cited Hays’ essay (a model of discerning, balanced, critical thinking) in his harsh assessment of Boswell’s work (Neuhaus 1994). Thereby hangs a tale which demonstrates the radical animosity which sometimes characterized criticisms of Boswell’s scholarship. Neuhaus represented Hays as saying, “Boswell’s interpretation, says Hays, ‘has no support in the text and is a textbook case of reading into the text what one wants to find there’” (Neuhaus 1994:58, citing Hays’ article). Neuhaus offered no page citation, for good reason: the alleged quotation never appears in Hays’ essay. Hays did write that “to suggest that Paul intends to condemn homosexual acts only when they are committed by persons who are constitutionally heterosexual is to introduce a distinction entirely foreign to Paul’s thought-world and then to insist that the distinction is fundamental to Paul’s position. It is, in short, a textbook
case of 'eisegesis,' the fallacy of reading one's own agenda into a text" (Hays 1986:200-201).

Neuhaus' "error" is more than merely a muddled quote. He took careful, discerning thinking and (one cannot but presume) deliberately garbled it to serve his own ends. Hays' point, valid as it is, is limited in scope, and his mention of 'eisegesis' included a definition for readers of _Journal of Religious Ethics_ (who conceivably might not be familiar with this technical term). Neuhaus transformed Hays' point into a blanket condemnation, intellectually (at least) bearing false witness. If historical scholarship is largely a cottage industry, Neuhaus has tried to poison the village well, that is, to undermine the good-faith conversation and mutual consideration which makes scholarship possible. Instead of trying to discern insight into the past by means of historical study, Neuhaus wishes to destroy the subject because it is inconvenient to his project of defending a traditionalist version of Roman Catholicism.

Adams, a medievalist and scholarly reviewer, questioned Boswell's functional concept of gay eroticism ("eroticism with a conscious preference" Boswell 1980:44). In the case of the friendship (literary and otherwise) between Ausonius of Bordeaux and Paulinus of Nola, Boswell admitted that "there is no evidence that the relationship between" them "was a sexual one (nor any indication that it was not)" (1980:133). They did employ language in their poetry which initially occurred in a cultural matrix in which male same-sex desire was quotidian and acceptable, and transmitted such conventions to succeeding centuries; their language "would no doubt have struck the average heterosexual Victorian—or FBI agent of the 1950s— as pretty suspicious, but what does that prove about the late fourth century?" (Adams 1981:352). Adams feared that Boswell stumbled "against anachronism" in his final step by proposing "a definition of 'gay' so broad as to be useless for social history, which must trace the linkage between attitudes and behavior" (1981:352). This is a serious and pertinent criticism, which hinges on whether or not the concept "gay" is regarded as permeable by other kinds of same-sex relationships than erotic. Is it not possible that Ausonius' and Paulinus' friendship was literary, spiritual, intellectual, theological, and physically erotic by turns only they could have described? If "gay" indicates a relationship which, once turned toward physical affection, may never be otherwise, then Adams' fear is both warranted and unanswerable, insofar as such private experience rarely (then or now) emerged into literary light.

Other reviewers criticized Boswell's fourth, fifth, and sixth major points. These concerned the interaction of Christian teaching and practice, and varying levels of social tolerance (or intolerance) and "homo- sexuality" (a modern term describing varying combinations of behaviors) in medieval Europe, roughly 700-1400. These points were (to repeat) that (4) gay people were rarely visible during the early Middle Ages and moral theology treated homosexual behavior as comparable at worst to hetero- sexual fornication; (5) the revival of urban culture was accompanied by a reappearance of gay literature and visible and substantial gay minority which left a permanent mark on the culture of the age; (6) in the latter half of the twelfth century virulent hostility began to appear which coincided with the rise of intolerance towards other groups (such as Jews and heretics) and was reflected in and perpetuated by the theological, moral, and legal compilations of the later Middle Ages which influenced European society for centuries afterward.

While Protestant scholars focused their dissent on Boswell's treatments of New Testament and early, patristic texts; Anglican and Roman Catholic scholars reserved most of their ire for Boswell's treatment of these medieval topics. "A case undemonstrated" was the judgement of J. Robert Wright, who believed that Boswell's claims could not be sustained "in terms of the biblical/patristic/historical evidence that is available" (J.R. Wright 1984:81-82). Wright's repeated criticism is that Boswell failed to consult such indexes as _Biblia Patristica, Index Bibliorum Corporis Iuris_

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2 Boswell's third claim (regarding growing hostility to gay people during the dissolution of the Roman state) received largely perfunctory notice except to note that the "rural ethos" which came to predominate during the dissolution of urban society seems doubtful (Hauertw 1985:220), and the more general criticism that Boswell neglected the penitentials or used them inadequately (Thomas 1980:28; Sheehan 1982:445). Very little currently orthodox Christian theology is implicated in such questions.

3 See Norman F. Cantor's insightful remarks (Inventing the Middle Ages: the Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century (New York: William Morrow 1991):287-96), especially p. 295 "It is precisely because the burden of the past is disseminated through the living [Roman Catholic] church of today that any assertions about the Middle Ages by a Roman Catholic has [sic] doctrinal as well as historical significance. Any publication based on research and interpretation about the Middle Ages is of central value to Catholic education and spiritual counseling." John Boswell was, of course, a liberal Roman Catholic.
"the monastic ideals of celibacy ... [with] extraordinary emotional relationships, first with Lanfranc [Anselm's teacher] and then with a succession of his own pupils" (Boswell 1980:218). St. Anselm desired not to apply the draft regulations of the Council of London of 1102 which designated (for the first undisputed time in England) homosexual behavior as sinful (see Boswell 1980:215). He indicated his hesitations in a letter to Archdeacon William; but as Sheehan points out, the letter was cast in broader terms, that the canons had not been properly discussed or drafted (1985:445). St. Anselm's motivations could have been more complex than indicated formally in this letter, but this interpretation "is at best a possibility ... that is weakened when the letter is put in context" (Sheehan 1985:445). Linehan found Boswell's account of St. Anselm "as much tendentious as misinformed" (1981:73).

Regarding St. Aelred, Boswell is probably on stronger ground. St. Aelred's extravagant amorous vocabulary, drawn from the Song of Songs and Cicero, does lend credence to the view that "his erotic attraction to men was a dominant force in his life" (Boswell 1980:222). Boswell's conclusion that "there can be little question that Aelred was gay" is both probable and problematic. He was deeply committed to monastic celibacy (obviously he could have been both gay and celibate; "a dominant force" does not logically entail a compulsive one). Did Boswell read a twelfth-century concept into his twelfth-century sources? While Russell is ready to dub St. Aelred "the gay abbot of Rievaulx," McGuire was not so quick (Russell 1982). Upon entering the monastery, he "transferred his search for male contact into the spiritual sphere" (McGuire 1994a:142). But McGuire did not "consider it essential to reach any final conclusion on Aelred's homosexuality" (McGuire 1994b:224). This suggests that if Boswell were ever justified in describing his subjects as "gay," St. Aelred was bound to be a compelling case (but see Christensen 1981:854). Was Boswell ever so justified? (see below).

Adams, on the other hand, felt that Boswell was on weak ground in claiming St. Aelred "as of the key instances of twelfth-century monastic sympathy for gay love" (1981:353). Boswell erred, Adams believed, in appearing to trivialize St. Augustine's "thoroughgoing opposition to homosexuality in any form... as a classic instance of the rural reaction that destroyed the sophisticated tolerance of Greco-Roman urbanity" (1981:353). St. Augustine's many misprisions were braided together in his attack on what he believed to have been the sin of the Sodomites in
Confessions 3.8; but Adams correctly points out that St. Augustine’s portrait of his own youth (Confessions Book 2) had more than a few homosexual suggestions. This matters because, Adams believed, in failing to give an adequate account of St. Augustine’s hostility towards homosexuality, Boswell slighted an “admittedly decisive” view for much of the next millennium of Western thought. When centuries later St. Aelred loaded his reflections on his own youth (which intimated more than little homosexual involvement) with echoes and verbatim borrowings from Confessions 2.1-2, the Cistercian’s “candor is all the more remarkable” if he consciously departed from Augustine’s specific verbal formulae (Adams 1981:353-354).

Respectful readers found many other minor criticisms, most with little long-term import. Sheehan, J. Robert Wright, Christensen, and Adams all discussed various short-comings of Boswell’s texts. Prominent among these were: (1) Boswell’s inattention to medieval penitentials (books of directions, questions, lists of sins, and model prayers for confessors) (Christiansen 1981:854; Sheehan 1985:445; Thomas 1981, 29); (2) Boswell’s somewhat facile use of the distinction between rural and urban types of civilization (Christiansen 1981:853); (3) Boswell’s lack of exploration of friendship between members of the same sex that is without erotic overtones (Sheehan 1985:443).

More generally, Sheehan noted one Boswell’s foibles, “nearly the tendency to overstate, and hence to weaken, the effectiveness of an observation” (Sheehan 1985:443). If a fair-minded reader might have been granted one wish for Boswell’s books, it might have been that Boswell curb this tendency. He repeatedly stressed that CSTH was a “provisional” study of the social topography of medieval Europe (1980:39); his early treatment of the historical phenomenon of the rise of intolerance “must be regarded as provisional” (1980:333). These two characteristics (tentativeness, and a tendency to overstate) when taken together can inject a coy tone into Boswell’s texts—for example, his treatment (above) of St. Anselm as “gay” without actually saying so. It is as though the author were winking to the reader, “I know but of course it’s all provisional.” It may have been this tone which partially accounted for the unreasoning fury of some of Boswell’s harshest critics, both of CSTH and the later books.

Occasionally Boswell also freighted a translation of an obscure and hard-to-interpret text too heavily. His treatment of the statements of the Councils of Châlons (813) and London (1102) perhaps stressed certain Latin statements too heavily; several of Augustine’s statements make good evidence without such burdens (Sheehan noted one instance 1985:444).

Do these objections, taken together, constitute a disconfirmation of Boswell’s core argument? This reader judges that the many objections to CSTH do not ultimately disconfirm its central claim that religious belief—Christian or other—has not been the cause of intolerance of gay people. Factors other than Christian belief per se came into play, such as particular construals of Roman law, Aristotelian natural law, the decay of cities, etc. But the six subsidiary claims around which Boswell organizes his sweeping narrative (from the Roman world and the early church to the rise of intolerance in the fourteenth century) need considerable further nuance. Boswell’s interpretation of the New Testament and several patristic authors either has been superseded by better hermeneutical and exegetical procedures, or needs re-casting. Boswell’s claims regarding the later medieval period need reconsideration in the light of the work of social historians of the liturgy such as Miri Rubin (1991), John Bossy (1983), and Mervyn James (1983): social exclusion of “deviants” (heretics, Jews, homosexuals) may have been intimately related to liturgies of inclusion (such as Corpus Christi processions).

These faults, freely conceded, still not do serve in toto to disconfirm Boswell’s core thesis about the rise of intolerance in middle and later western medieval Europe. No one except Neuhaus (who offers cant rather than argument) proposes that Boswell was actually wrong. Even the ill-tempered David F. Wright restricted his comments largely to his proper purview, the early church. “Unproven” is a verdict heard somewhat more often, and even then counter arguments proposed by Olsen and J. Robert Wright are hardly clinching. It is truly unfortunate that Boswell will not have the opportunity to revise and recast all his books. A more tightly focused CSTH, taking into account subsequent work in allied fields (such as New Testament and second-century hermeneutics) might well prove an overwhelming case regarding the rise of medieval intolerance.

The rise of virulent Christian intolerance towards heretics, Jews, homosexuals, millenial movements, and others is an uncomfortable story for nearly all readers, and especially for all Christian readers (Boswell 1992). The sixteenth-century Reformers (whether Protestant, Anglican, or Roman Catholic) inherited such intolerance and in many instances continued it; sixteenth-century martyrologies are predicated upon it. “Tracing the course of intolerance reveals much about the landscape it traverses, and for this
reason alone it deserves to be studied. Perhaps it is not too much to hope that its examination will yield ... insights of use to those who might wish to reduce or eradicate the suffering associated with it” (Boswell 1980:38).

(3)

The Kindness of Strangers (KOS) is certainly the runt of the litter of Boswell’s three books if measured by the amount of critical attention it has received; ironically it is also his longest. He had encountered arguments by Clement of Alexandria and Justin Martyr (while working on CSTH) that Christian men should not visit brothels or engage the services of prostitutes “because in so doing they might unwittingly commit incest with a child they had abandoned” (Boswell 1988:3). Was abandonment really so common that this was possible?

KOS is Boswell’s response to his initial bewilderment. Fundamentally it claims that abandonment was not only common, but quotidian, regardless of its moral status. Parents abandoned a child not to kill it, but to ensure its survival. They abandoned a child because of poverty, shame, and the desire to restrict the number of heirs, or in hope that someone of higher status and greater means might raise it, or because it was the wrong gender, or had ominous auspices, or because the parents were callous. Foster children usually became slaves, sexual servants, monastic oblates, or “alumni” (heirs not related by blood, marriage, or property)(Boswell 1988:118; 428-429). Many children died, although their mortality rate was not always much higher than children who were not abandoned. Nevertheless some children did prosper, so that the Latin term “aliena misericordia” acquires a double edge: both the “strange kindness” or “foreign mercy” by which the small but steady trickle of truly kind adoptive parents took on the care of foundlings, and the more ironic and menacing “kindness” which many children received at the hands of slave masters, pimps, and brigands.

Like CSTH, KOS proceeds from Boswell’s questions about an important topic in social history which is extremely difficult to document (in CSTH intolerance; in KOS child abandonment), to an intricate discussion of terms and related concepts. Boswell then documented legal, literary, and other evidence from the Roman Republic and Empire (with Greek antecedents), turned to the rise of Christianity, moved on to late antique, early medieval, and later periods. He cited an impressive array of legal, literary, theological, liturgical, and epigraphical evidence in many languages and across a wide variety of cultures.

Boswell’s chief difficulty lay with his sources. They are sparse, with no statistics until the eighteenth century (and even then only suspect ones), and a large evidentiary gap in the high Middle Ages. Boswell was quick to note corrupt texts, and was well aware of the hazards of interpreting laws, statutes, and prohibitions. He also garnered evidence from personal narratives, hagiographies, poetry, and fiction. The last category is notoriously hard to handle as historical evidence, and Boswell was fully aware of the “quicksand” problem (i.e., quicksand is “a familiar part of the fictional landscape” but “its role in fiction is not a realistic reflection of its importance” in actual lives; 1989:6-7). For certain aspects of the ancient Roman world, and the period called the High Middle Ages, Boswell had to turn to literary witnesses. While Thomas suspected “rhetorical sleight of hand” (1989:913), Knox thought that Boswell defended his method “with skill and telling effect” (1989:12). Stone found that “the general convergence of the different types of evidence is persuasive” (1989:31).

Boswell’s fundamental concept of child abandonment had necessarily to be broad (so as to fit a wide variety of evidence) and modern (so as to accommodate historical inquiry). He bought such usefulness, however, at the price of some imprecision (McCarter 1989:727; Ellsberg 1989:475). Abandonment “refers to the voluntary relinquishing of control over children by their natal parents or guardians” (Boswell 1988:24). The Latin expositio (or exponere) meant basically “to make public” or “to display” more than “to expose” to danger, death, etc. Children were usually “exposed” in public places (baths, plazas, dumps, church doors) so that they would be found (Boswell 1988:25). The English word “abandonment” does not quite do justice to the social complexity of expositio (though Boswell was surely correct to judge that “to expose,” in the sense of to endanger, is worse).

Critical reception of KOS was infinitely milder and kinder than that directed at CSTH. Most critical reservations have been noted above or are about particular matters. McCarter questions Boswell’s supposition “that the Renaissance Italian foundling home became the pattern for the rest of Europe” (1989:728). Medieval oblation (giving a child to a monastery to be raised as a religious) may not have automatically entailed abandonment. As Herlihy pointed out (1989:15) a child formally oblated to a monastery frequently came with a bequest, was expected to pray for his or her rela-
tives, and since (male) abbots were frequently chosen from the ranks of the oblates of patronal families, an oblate might wind up administering large portions of a monastic endowment in concert with the interests of his family. This may be child transfer, but it is not the “kindness of [otherwise disinterested] strangers” as implied in much of Boswell's book (see also Boswell 1984).

A few readers were troubled by the tone of the book. Ellsberry found that Boswell's “motif throughout ... is optimistic, if not exactly euphoric” (1989:474), and McLaughlin found Boswell's interpretation of the evidence “encompassing and positive” (1989:16) despite the records of so many desperate parents and children. Steiner found that “there attaches to this book a sheen of prudence—a clear-sightedness that verges on that of the voyeur.” He suspected this sheen sprang from Boswell’s “tonality, from coloration, from acrobatics of surface logic” (Steiner 1989:105). Perhaps these qualms also sprang from the vivid success of Boswell's historical vision: he absorbed so much of desperation of these parents that he could communicate it clearly to contemporary readers in a “low-keyed, scholarly, factual account” (Stone 1989:34)—an uncomfortable historical vision if ever there were one.

Only Michael Gorman dissented from Boswell's larger narrative: Boswell was “unable to acknowledge or account for the clear and consistent condemnations of [abandonment] in early Christian literature” (1990:33; but see Stone's disagreement 1989:32; and Knox's 1989:10). Granted that Gorman wrote a very short review, he offered no evidence to back up this assertion. Boswell did cover what evidence there is from the first three Christian centuries (not much, to be sure) and makes a defensible case that early Christian denunciations of any sexual act not intentionally procreative may unintentionally have exacerbated the problem of unwanted, surplus children. Surviving writings tend to reflect the concerns of the literate Christians, who were often from upper classes. Christian moralists who apparently condemned child abandonment were in fact condemning non-procreative sex. No one sought to excommunicate those who abandoned children. Certain Christian writers expressed dismay, but this does not amount to “clear and consistent condemnation.” (of abandonment per se) as Gorman alleged. The evidence is just too thin to sustain his viewpoint.

The lack of statistical and demographic evidence about abandoned and foundling children until the eighteenth century meant that Boswell (like every other scholar) had to resort to inference and approximation about the ubiquity of child abandonment and its social stratification and significance through time. His doubts sprinkled qualifications across the pages. But as Keith Thomas noted, “possibly” becomes “it seems likely;” “might have” gives way to “must have” in too many places (Thomas 1989:913-914; see also McLaughlin 1989:16; Ellsberg 1989:475). At times Boswell exhibited his previously-encountered foible of weakening a good argument by claiming too much for his evidence: did early Christians really transfer feelings for child abandonment to Jesus, his semi-founding birth and fostering by Joseph? While St. Paul obviously used “adoption” language (Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4; Galatians 4:5; the Pauline Ephesians 1:5), did Christians really believe that God “had given up a child to them”? (Boswell 1988:154-155) Was Constantine really “the last ruler of an empire that was sufficient stable and organized to support an elaborate bureaucracy”? (1988:73) What about the bureaucracy which St. Augustine encountered eighty years later? One occasionally encounters a truly infelicitous (and avoidable) phrase, such as the former “pagan Romans [who] were now Roman Catholics” (1988:177) not to mention those who became Eastern Orthodox or Monophysites.

While KoS makes controversial claims, it is not hard to see why it was regarded as so much less threatening. Obviously no one today recommends child abandonment, although the care of children in poverty is a contemporary topic. The behavior of desperate Christian slaves, freed persons, and other lower-(or upper)-class people in Christian antiquity (whatever approval or disapproval they received from their bishops) is moot for virtually all Christians today. Those who (like Gorman) oppose abortion today do not base their cases even in part on the social behavior of ancient and medieval Christians.

Boswell presented in KoS a disturbing narrative about social complexities in which ancient and medieval Christians thought and acted in ways which contemporary Christians (and others) find objectionable (see Crossley 1990:402). He received little critical challenge when he used the same methods and exhibited the same foibles for which he was excoriated when he wrote about homosexuals.
In 1982 someone wrote to Boswell about a ceremony published in Jacques Goar’s *Euchologion* (1730) which represented a “brother-making” ceremony for a sort of monastic union between two individuals of the same sex (Boswell 1994a:ix). Boswell found other manuscripts in European libraries including eight in the Vatican Library. From the beginning (following the tumultuous reception accorded to *CSTH*) he was wary. While working at the Vatican, “when people walked by me, I would hide what I was looking at” (Boswell 1994b:35). His work turned into *Same-Sex Unions (SSU)*, undoubtedly his most controversial book.

Denunciations of *SSU* have been so damning (and its praise sometimes so faint) that it is helpful to try to isolate Boswell’s major claims, most clearly stated in his epilogue (1994a:280-281). (1) Heterosexual matrimony in premodern Europe (which Boswell takes as roughly from late antiquity to the fifteenth century) tended to be undertaken primarily for dynastic or business reasons, and romantic love in it tended to arise after the (legal or erotic, or both) coupling. (2) Many ordinary people focused their passionate emotions into same-sex relationships: friendships, “brotherhood,” and partnerships of one kind or another (where much more is known about men than about women). (3) Christianity exacerbated doubts about the emotional significance of matrimony, privileged voluntary celibacy (even within marriage), and directed sexual desire implicitly or explicitly towards procreation. (4) Christianity transformed same-sex relationships, especially passionate friendships among paired saints and holy virgins, into “official relationships of union, performed in churches and blessed by priests” (1994a:280). (5) Although the nature and purposes of heterosexual marriage have varied widely in the past, the liturgy for this union functioned roughly like a “gay marriage ceremony.” A “permanent romantic commitment between two people [was] witnessed and recognized by the community” (1994a:281). Whether this union was sexual is hard to know (just as, historically, it is hard to know whether childless heterosexual unions between persons of child-bearing age involved sex; Boswell 1994a:189).

*SSU* is based on two sets of source documents which the author labors to set into context: narratives describing powerful personal bonds between men with no familial ties to each other, and liturgical documents (Cadden 1996:694). These sets of documents take up nearly one quarter of the book, several in both original languages and English. Like *CSTH* and *KOS*, Boswell began with an extended discussion of terms and concepts, not only to propose and clarify his own usage, but to introduce many readers to the very different expectations of heterosexual unions common in distant centuries. Boswell turned next to heterosexual matrimony in the ancient world, then to same-sex unions in the Greco-Roman world, traced the effects on them of the rise of Christianity, outlined the development of nuptial offices and compared same-sex and heterosexual union ceremonies, and attended (finally) to medieval Europe.

Like *KOS*, Boswell in *SSU* faced extraordinary evidentiary difficulties. Manuscripts were difficult to interpret and sometimes involved very rare and little-studied languages. The evidentiary trail in Latin Europe is extremely slim. The two core sets of texts originated in a Christian period remote from contemporary North America. While the personal narratives give reasonably good clues as to date and provenance, the liturgical texts are much harder to place (Boswell 1994a:179). The Greek texts in particular used an old and very subtle language which was good at veiling subsidiary meanings. Some reviewers’ confidence in their own assertions and arguments looks quite misplaced when confronted by these texts. Given the disorder of his sources, it is little wonder that Boswell’s book is sometimes hard to understand.

Cadden noted how carefully Boswell tried to relate his sets of sources to each other (in order to show that “these two types of evidence are about the same personal and social relations”) and thus to document “the existence and Christian sanction of the affective, personal union of a male couple, formally recognized as a social institutional and substantially parallel to heterosexual marriage throughout the premodern period, particularly in the East” (1996:694). In “neutral language” so as to avoid the charge of modern “constructivist” notions of sexuality (see Part 5, below), Boswell ironically found that same-sex unions were “more similar to modern marriage than were premodern heterosexual marriages—more free, more equal, and likely to be grounded in mutual affection and meaningful choice” (Cadden 1996:695, 694).

Cadden judged, however, that Boswell’s argument is unsuccessful, on three counts. Despite his professed neutral language, in fact “same-sex union” does come to function as a transparent euphemism for “gay marriage” (1996:695). Boswell did not entirely resolve the critique voiced by Halperin (1990:81-83) that modern notions of “homosexuals” impede ac-
curate readings of the premodern social and cultural dynamics in play in the sources. Boswell’s reluctance to join the theoretical issue (e.g. 1990:270-271) unfortunately foreclosed what might have been an immensely fruitful conversation. Finally, Boswell’s substitution of the phrase “same-sex union” for “brother” (or “brother-making”) obscured the connections of adelphoi and adelphopoiesis with adoption, blood-brotherhood, and “spiritual” (other than erotic) marriage. Although marriage’s “symbolic value was raidied by trafficckers in allegory” (Boswell 1994a:115, quoting Elliott 1993:39), Boswell inadvertently may have sold adelphopoiesis short. Cadden concluded that Boswell’s book is a significant, positive legacy for “the fruitful explorations of contexts and interpretations, leaving behind the Scylla of homophobic denial” (1996:695-696).

SSU did garner other positive reviews, although they are often bland (Warner 1994; Holsinger 1994; Bennison 1995). The negative critics often wrote in a manner that can only be called poisonous. Spending an evening reading these reviewers is a dismaying experience: one might have hoped for more from educated people. Some (Bray 1994; Kennedy and Kemp 1995; Viscuso 1994; Wilken 1994; David F. Wright 1994; Young 1994) offer little more than mudslinging. They basically refuse to take any of Boswell’s claims seriously in their (implicit or explicit) high anxiety about same-sex unions today. David F. Wright (1994:59), for example, peevishly complains that Boswell confused him (SSU:219, n.4) with J. Robert Wright. David F. should be happy to take erroneous credit, since J. Robert’s arguments (see above) are far more lucid and cogent. Wilken dismisses SSU as “historical learning yoked to a cause” (1994:26). Which cause does Wilken’s learning serve? From the Kenan Professor at the University of Virginia, this is disappointing. Kennedy and Kemp believe that, since Boswell’s languages and sources are obscure, “few scholars are likely to examine his evidence,” and that because of errors “we wondered if we could find even one important reference that was accurate” (1995:45). Scholars such as Cadden (1996) have indeed examined Boswell’s evidence carefully (undoubtedly to the amazement of Kennedy’s and Kemp’s simple minds), and this writer (as a professional librarian) can attest that, despite the unfortunate number of typos, Boswell’s bibliographical and material references do check out.

More serious reviewers, in the main negative, offer substantial objections. Despite Shaw’s hostility, he offers significant criticisms and noted a major paleographical difficulty (1994:36; see also Wilken 1994:24; Young 1994:48). A major manuscript source, Grottaferata Gamma Beta Two (11th cent.) displays a line drawn between “another prayer for same-sex union” and an ecclesiastical canon governing marriage attributed to Patriarch Methodius. Was this line placed by someone other than the copyist to distinguish two differing offices? Did the “brother-making” office end with declarative prayer declaring the two one, directly analogous (and worded substantially like) a heterosexual union? Boswell unfortunately consigned this major evidentiary discussion to a long, defensive footnote. It does constitute a major difficulty for his interpretive argument, which may only ever be resolved by re-examination by several recognized paleographical experts. Wilken’s conclusion that “someone, while reading the manuscript, realized that prayers from different rites had been mistakenly copied together” is as paleographically ill-founded and hasty as Gomes’ bland acceptance of Boswell’s argument (Wilken 1994:24; see also Shaw, above; Gomes 1994:91).

Another evidentiary difficulty is in the provenance and origins of the manuscripts. Many of them reflect distant or proximate origins in Greek-speaking Italy (e.g., Grottaferata) or Byzantium—very important Christian centers, but also places with distinct regional variations and identities (perhaps even warily co-existing with Muslims; compare Boswell 1977). Although Reynolds (1995:49) superficially asserts that “these ceremonies were peculiar to the liturgical traditions of Greece and the Balkans” (and implicitly unimportant for Westerners), medieval Greece and Greek-speaking Italy are important related cultures which need further exploration, not Reynolds’ dismissal.

No Latin manuscripts survive, though Boswell asserted (1994a:184) that the ceremony was performed in Ireland (whether Greek nor Slavonic would have obtained) on the strength of Gerald of Wales’ detailed denunciation (Boswell 1994a:259-260 with Latin and English text). Gerald’s Latin is notoriously difficult. Boswell set it in a context in which it is at least highly probable that Gerald was describing a same-sex or brother-making ceremony similar to Eastern ones. Elsewhere Boswell noted that mutilation of Latin manuscripts may have occurred (264) although this is only a moderately strong argument from silence. Montaigne may have witnessed such a ceremony, with little comprehension, in Rome in 1578 (Boswell 1994a:264-265). In the end, Boswell’s evidentiary trail for the Latin West is so slim as to be virtually uninterpretable.
Do all these criticisms (and other innumerable, disputed minor details) constitute a disconfirmation of Boswell’s core argument? Possibly yes, but in important ways it is too soon to tell. There is little denying that SSU is Boswell’s most troubled book; it shows numerous signs of intellectual and editorial haste, undoubtedly in part because the author was growing more seriously ill as the book neared its premature completion. Woods (1995) points out numerous difficulties and errors in Boswell’s handling of Slavonic sources, even at the level of transliteration.4 The later chapters rely on quite a different evidentiary base than the earlier, and give an episodic feel to the whole text (Linehan 1995:6)

The difficulties of interpreting liturgical texts, however, come to haunt both Boswell and his more serious critics. They all might have done better to read Paul Bradshaw’s caveats. In puzzling through the evidentiary conflicts and contradictions of the early church orders, Bradshaw has formulated “ten principles for interpreting early Christian liturgical evidence” (1992:56-79). Several of these are extremely helpful for consideration of later liturgical evidence as well, to wit (in Bradshaw’s numbering): (1) “what is most common is not necessarily most ancient, and what is least common is not necessarily least ancient”; (5) “when a variety of explanations is advanced for the origins of a liturgical custom, its true source has almost certainly been forgotten”; (7) “liturgical manuscripts are more prone to emendation than literary manuscripts”; (8) “liturgical texts can go on being copied long after they have ceased to be used”; (9) “only particularly significant, novel, or controverted practices will tend to be mentioned, and others will probably be passed over in silence; but the first time something is mentioned is not necessarily the first time it was practiced.”

In Boswell’s case, Bradshaw’s principles (7) and (8) go a long way in leavening debate: it is entirely possible (contra the cranky Wilken) that someone else drew a line in a crucial place in the manuscript called Grottaferrata Gamma Beta two, because it was “obvious” to a later scribe that the prayers would not belong together (an instance of “living literature”); on the other hand, it is possible that even by the time of this manuscript the liturgy was beginning to drop from usage. Bradshaw’s principles

4 A secular Slavist in Princeton, who does not share Woods’ traditionalist Roman Catholic anxieties, confirmed these difficulties, without sharing Woods’ overly broad conclusions.

(1) and (9) suggest (contra Reynolds) that it is entirely possible that brother-making or same-sex liturgical ceremonies did occur in the Latin West, but seemed unusual only to the dyspeptic Gerald of Wales. In regard to Bradshaw’s fifth principle, the variety of warrants and rubrics supplied in the manuscripts, and the variety of explanations offered by Montaigne, Goar, and even modern scholars is a sure sign that the true sources of these brother-making ceremonies have been obscured, and at minimum Boswell made a concerted effort to excavate the wreckage.

Whether Boswell’s central arguments are confirmed or not, another scholar (or several of them, given Boswell’s polymath abilities) needs to reconsider his texts, bearing in mind caveats like those Bradshaw suggested for similar work in another era. These texts are too important to be left to rusticate and might yet reveal much more about “brother-making” and other social matters.

The critical response accorded to CSTH and SSU is startlingly similar, even though the former is a far more successful book. On the one hand, Boswell continued to exhibit his besetting foible of asserting too much and thereby weakening a good argument. Is it in fact the case that “the principal and most idiosyncratic personal response of devout [early] Christians was celibacy?” (Boswell 1994a:110) Even in the context of “matters sexual,” is that not an overly bold claim? What about divorce? What about other personal matters, such as fellowship with the saints, care of the poor, and avoidance of idolatry?

On the other hand, Boswell’s critics, especially the hostile ones, demand an impossible degree of proof and a sometimes pedantic extreme of scholarly tidiness. A good example of both Boswell’s foibles and hostile over-response is offered by Robin Darling Young, a professor at the Catholic University of America. She charges Boswell with “the invention of precedent” for a contemporary cause (gay marriage). She clinches her case with a regrettable example of Boswell’s overstatement, by pointing out that Severus of Antioch (d. 538) would be aghast, “patrician Hellénophone that he was, to discover that he had composed his Homily of St. Sergius in Syriac” (1994:44). To be sure, Boswell wrote, “Severus, bishop of Antioch from 512-18, though a Monophysite, composed a beautiful homily in Syriac in honor of the two saints [Serge and Bacchus]” (1994a:155). Boswell made a mistake; the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (s.v.) notes that “many of [Severus’] works ... are mainly preserved in Syriac translations” (including this one). But does this really
constitute "insouciance about historical accuracy ... unacceptable in an undergraduate paper"? (Young 1994:44) May Prof. Young rap all our knuckles with her ruler. She never proposes any plausible alternative readings of the main points of Boswell's sources.

The reader encounters too often Boswell's other besetting foible, that of weighting a translation from a difficult source with too much freight. Boswell faulted Gerald of Wales' previous translator, Thomas Wright in 1881, with nineteenth-century English prudence, but Boswell's own translation renders its own questionable construals. Shaw makes a number of points about Boswell's likely miscontruals of the Roman legal Digest (Shaw 1994:37, 40).

When all is said and done, SSM needs substantial revision, not so much to retract Boswell's basic argument as to refine, strengthen, and qualify it, to rein in his less fortunate phrases, and to raise more clearly the evidentiary difficulties posed by his own readings and the alternative readings suggested by serious critics. Boswell's own unacknowledged assumptions about liturgical texts need as much correction as his critics', especially those who embrace a traditionalist Roman Catholic agenda.

The future raised by all three of Boswell's books raises provocative questions about historical methodology and the role of ecclesiastical history in theological and religious studies. In conclusion this text will turn to these questions.

(5)

Despite the numerous problems which have been identified by responsible critics of Boswell's last book (Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe), Boswell's major writings taken together offer an impressive and informed attempt to understand the soft tissues of the organic entity of human beings and human societies. "The flesh that provided size and shape, the skin and hair that determined appearance, the viscera that governed metabolism and growth, the brain that directed movement and invested life with meaning—all these are leached from the sediments" which, like paleontologists, historians usually study (Boswell 1988:5). The primary documents of history are frequently laws, letters, tax lists, ideas, and durable institutions. Boswell tried to find traces of evanescent human communities, "flesh and blood" in its most literal sense: children. A historian uses words, obviously, and if those words are hard to choose regard-

ing wills, testaments and tax accounts, how much harder are they to choose regarding love, procreation, and holiness!

In this extended "coda" to this bibliographical review essay, I wish to reflect on two questions forcefully raised by Boswell's writings: first, how might a historian justify the use of certain language in the course of historical study and writing; and second, what kind of impact might that language have on other interested communities of inquiry, especially the churches?

To rephrase the first question, to what extent do a historian's very words create his or her subject of study? Boswell himself spoke on this question, and I will attempt to represent his answer first, and then comment upon it from my own perspective.

First, two examples. When Boswell was studying the phenomena of re-distributing children among the nurturing households of the ancient and medieval worlds, he came again and again upon the phrase aliena misericordia. After a while, this phrase became almost a technical legal phrase, yet never lost its connections with everyday usage. How was he to translate it? A literal verbal translation would be something like "an alien mercy" or "a strange pity" terms which suggest either the uncanny or the extra-terrestrial to contemporary North Americans. A more syntactical translation would yield a paraphrastic: "a compassion which originates from a person previously unrelated by blood or law," not exactly an easy phrase to read. Boswell hit upon "the kindness of strangers" because although it is verbally and syntactically less immediate to the Latin, the phrase gets at the heart of the concept, which is "the motivation of persons who rescued abandoned children" (1988:xvi).

On the other hand, Boswell's translation of adelphopoiesis as "same-sex union" has become much more controversial. In the Greco-Roman world the terms "brother" and "sister" were used as terms of endearment for heterosexual spouses. The usage of words which suggested "sibling relationship or affective, intimate family ties (Latin affinitas)—rather than the terms of control related to power and hierarchy—constituted a hallmark of ancient lovers of whatever gender" (Boswell 1994a:69). So what to make of adelphopoiesis? Does "brother-making" admit sexual overtones and emotional endearment, or is it more typical of military or blood-brotherhood fraternal ties? The terms "my old man," "Momma," and "Daddy" have wandered far from their origins in North American culture where the prohibition of parent-child incest is strong, to say the least. Does the
English term “same-sex union” carry exclusively sexual overtones now, even though paraphrastically it could cover a variety of relationships? This raises the familiar disagreement between partisans of verbal fidelity versus partisans of conceptual fidelity. Boswell’s choice of “same-sex union” for *adelphopoeisis* is certainly no more linguistically daring than is “the kindness of strangers” for *alia misericordia*—although ultimately Boswell’s choice may be judged to obscure more aspects of *adelphopoeisis* than it illumines (see Cadden 1996:695).

In several lesser-known conceptual essays, Boswell (1982 1983, 1990a, 1990b) refined his thinking on such fundamental linguistic and conceptual fidelity to his sources. In 1983 he attempted to articulate his views in terms of the philosophical question about universals. He asked, “do categories exist because humans recognize real distinctions in the world around them, or are categories arbitrary conventions, simply names for things which have categorical force because humans agree to them in certain ways”? (1983:91) “Realists” tend towards the position that “universal” (or at any rate widespread) categories of sexual orientation recognize a real distinction in the world. “Nominalists” tend to the view that the category “sexual preference” (note the crucial difference) is a conventional category which names an agreed understanding of erotic desire as expressed in language; “whatever reality [such categories] have is the consequence of the power they exert in those societies and the socialization processes which make them seem real to persons influenced by them” (Boswell 1983:91).

It is not to hard to sniff the various scents of Foucault and linguistic analysis in Boswell’s formulation. In historical study, the dead hand of anarchism can grasp partisans of any view. Despite such scents Boswell was never a theory-driven historian.

The 1980s witnessed the so-called constructivist/essentialist debate. This debate tried to ask whether sexual orientation is a “construct” of “human society and therefore specific to any given social situation” (1990a:135); or whether it is “essential”, “that humans are differentiated at an individual level in terms of erotic attraction … in all cultures” (1990a:137), regardless of social and historical location. Like many academic debates the distinction is by turns both genuine and artificial. To a limited extent “essentialism” is a rhetorical foil created by self-described constructivists; “no one deliberately involved in it identifies himself as an ‘essentialist’” (1990a:133; see also 1990b:68). Boswell disavowed the notion that “some other force—genes, psychological influences, etc.—creates ‘sexuality,’ which is essentially independent of culture” (1990a:137). But he conceded that on a practical level, the supposition that “there have been in all Western societies ‘gay people’ and ‘non-gay people’ … was in fact, the working hypothesis” of COTH (1990a:137). Boswell never really addressed the objections, however, of scholars like David Halperin, who asks whether modern questions about “homosexuals” actually hamper reading and understanding the social and cultural dynamics of premorden cultures (Halperin 81-83).

So did Boswell inadvertently create a narrative by the definition and use of an essential term such as “homosexual” or “gay”? Did he reasonably speak of “gay” and “lesbian” persons, acts, and sexual orientations in premorden Europe? If I may put a few words in his mouth, I think that Boswell tended to see sexual behaviors as examples of “family resemblance.” Both heterosexual or homosexual behavior in premorden Europe is quite possibly equally distant from what we call hetero- or homosexual behavior now. But these behaviors are never simply one thing; they are combinations of many kinds of overt and covert acts, motivations, and desires. As such, these combinations of behavior can exhibit a family resemblance to each other without being identical. By comparison, geographically one can compare twelfth-century England and twentieth-century England, but one cannot compare ninth-century Neustria and modern Belgium even though they occupy some of the same space. The first family resemblance is reasonable; the second one is spurious because it is too distant to be plausible. But neither family resemblance claims identity. Medieval seem not to have formed any notion of “sexual orientation,” although of course they could distinguish among desires and acts. Boswell concluded that most such combinations of sexual behaviors and desire displayed something like “family resemblances.” They can be identified through historical study and do not require either formal definitions of “essentialist” or “realist” sexual orientation or constructivist, nominalist concepts of sexual preference.

As Boswell clarified his thinking about these issues, he later defined “gay persons” more simply “as those whose erotic interest is predominantly directed toward their own gender (i.e., regardless of how conscious they are of this as a distinguishing characteristic)” (1989:35). He continued to disavow rigorous “essentialism” however (“I was and remain agnostic about the origins and etiology of human sexuality”; 1989:36).
It is most ironic that Boswell’s functional concept of gay eroticism (informally essentialist, if at all) is probably an assumption shared (though not articulated) by his harshest and least respectful critics. Strictly speaking, an essentialist-like understanding of human sexuality based on a “realist” philosophical position (that sexual orientation is a real human characteristic) does not necessitate intolerance towards gays and lesbians. But such an understanding has often accompanied intolerance, at least in the European and North American past.

On the other hand, a broadly constructionist, nominalist (or nominalist-like) understanding of human sexuality might have been more congenial to Boswell’s study. Such a view might describe Boswell’s historical subjects as those persons who participated in the social construction of “culturally dependent phenomena” (e.g., sexual preferences) unique in their times and possibly without analogy in ours (Boswell 1989:35; see 1983:95; see also Halperin 1990:83). Had Boswell taken this view, he could have avoided Robin Darling Young’s charge of the invention of preconceptions (Young 1994:44). So for example, fourth-century Greek urban Christianity would tend to construct sexual identities which could not be reconstructed or regarded as preconceptions for a culture so different as our own. Such nominalist-like, constructivist-like distance comes at a very high price, however: the charge that this demonstrates that the past really does not matter, so that studying it is peripheral to our own moral conduct. For better or worse, Boswell’s core convictions and scholarly confidence prevented him from taking this easier way out (Boswell 1994b:36) He ironically quoted St. Thomas Aquinas in his epigraph to CSTH: “Because of the diverse conditions of humans, it happens that some acts are virtuous to some people, as appropriate and suitable to them, while the same acts are immoral for others, as inappropriate to them” (1980:vii).

As a working hypothesis, a historian has to employ concepts which would probably be incomprehensible to persons who lived in the time period under consideration, but are reasonably explanatory to contemporary readers. Imperial Romans knew quite well the effect of monetary inflation (as their coinage was literally debased), but would never have understood the modern concept. If Boswell can be faulted here, it is that (as in the case of Anselm of Canterbury) he may have claimed too much for his working explanatory concepts (see Linehan 1995:7). The semantic, political, and empirical arguments which Boswell advanced (1990a:141-162) defend his usage of his terms as well as a working historian needs to do. It is the nature of historical inquiry that other historians will make other choices.

I alluded above to two questions: how might a historian justify the use of certain language; and what kind of impact might that language have on other interested communities of inquiry, such as the churches? Language is at the heart of both questions. Amos Niven Wilder, the late theologian of language wrote, “There is no world for us until we have named and languaged and storied what it is,” and that is true for historians and ecclesiastics alike (1983:361). Language is essential to the churches’ cultural and theological transmission in each generation. This transmission is not mechanical, like water in a pipe, but is the result of the hard work of parents, teachers, preachers, bishops, and scholars—guided in and by the Holy Spirit, Christians claim. Like broader society, the church can be regarded as an imaginative culture with a distinctive story on the one hand, and on the other as a society with patterns of power, legitimacy, and authorized discourse very similar to those encountered elsewhere. For an ecclesiastical historian, the question is not just to write a cultural history of this ecclesiastical society (an account of its distinctive concepts, discourse, and ideology), nor only a social history of this ecclesiastical culture (an account of its patterns of hegemony, legitimacy, and exchange).

I assert that the ecclesiastical historian’s question is how to write a consciously incomplete account of stability and change, enduring cultural assumptions and changing patterns of discourse. The deep structures of society may well be the cultural structures of social imagination: the kind of world which is named, languaged, and storied.

Ernst Gombrich, an art historian, wrote in *Art and Illusion* that artists and their publics share visual “levels of expectation” shaped by elements he calls “schemata” or “formule” or “models.” “All representations,” he wrote, “are grounded on schemata which the artist learns to use” (Gombrich 1960:313). The parallel here with any kind of writing, including historical writing, is suggestive. The “schemata” of social imagination are the cultural perceptions and customs which a writer uses and in turn shapes; such schemata both constrain and aid cultural construction of new “levels of expectation.” Artists change visual schémas by noting the discrepancy between a model and reality as they perceive it. Images are not luxuries, but important aids for “the serious business of perceiving the world... It is precisely where the rainbow ends that art begins” (Gombrich 1982:170). Many such visual or intellectual schemata build up levels of
learned expectation of cultural legitimacy which provide social stability and enhance a safe arena for cultural challenge and change.

Broadly speaking, St. Thomas Aquinas called this pattern a habitus, a way in which God continually blesses God’s church (ST I.52.1,2; II-II.112.4). Scholars, like artists, use this repertory of many social and ecclesiastical habitus which both constrain and aid their contribution to the further development of cultural expectations. As the repertory of habitus changes, what is central might move to the periphery, and what is peripheral might become central.

What, practically, does all this reflection upon language and cultural discourse have to do with ecclesiastical history and the present-day life of the churches? Two particular metaphors have been invoked to answer this question, and in Gombrich’s language they are influential kinds of “levels of expectation” cobbled together from many kinds of “schemata” or models or stereotypes. They can be summarized as (1) defense of the deposit of apostolic faith; (2) the organic development of the idea of Christianity.

Robin Darling Young fairly represents the first of these metaphors. This metaphor suggests that the role of ecclesiastical history at the intersection of the discourse of ecclesiastical historical inquiry with the reflective language of faith in the churches is to assist with the defense of the deposit of apostolic faith. She charges that Boswell “uses [his documents] in a way that would be quite familiar to church historians of the era of “confessional” church history, famously represented by the Magdeburg Centuries among the Reformers and Caesar Baronius among the Catholics... Like them, Professor Boswell has set out to create a usable past” (1994:44).

What is “usable” in the past? Prof. Young never states what she actually thinks is the role of ecclesiastical history in the life of the churches, so her following summation will have to stand in for her unprofessed view. “For Christians,” she writes, “antiquity means the founding centuries of the Church, when apostolic teaching was preserved and elaborated and a body of thought assembled” (1994:44).

Note her emphasis (typical for a traditionalist Roman Catholic) on the preservation of thought—i.e., the Christian past is fundamentally intellectual history aimed at the identification of the deposit of apostolic faith and prayer and its preservation through time. Traditional Anglican and Protestant ecclesiastical historians have undertaken a small variation on this, and attempted instead to identify tendencies of thinking, praying, and preaching which anticipate or express doctrinal concerns associated with key

Protestant doctrines, such as justification by faith or the sovereignty of God. Without any doubt ecclesiastical history was taught this way in theological schools for many generations. Whatever such “usability” might omit, it certainly offers clear directions for what ought to be interesting to ecclesiastical historians, and what ought not. Usable discourse from ecclesiastical history is what enables theologians and bishops to establish clear criteria for orthodoxy, heterodoxy, or heresy.

This crisp concept of a “usable” past is analogous to the Whig view of history. This view of history holds that history is a marvelous development of various institutions and trends which produce, in turn, us. Politicians love Whig histories of their own countries and political viewpoints. A usable past, in this traditional view, is a past which features the preoccupations of powerful mainstream institutions in the present, such as the courts, the military, the church, the chief executive, or the academy. History sets clear precedents for school, state, and church, such as the canon of classical authors, the rise of accountable monarchs and representative democracies, the deposit of apostolic faith in Scripture, creed, and doctrine, whether Catholic or Calvinist (to suggest only two examples). In such a view, what is important about the past is usable, and the past is important precisely because part of it is deemed usable.

The second influential metaphor which seeks to describe the intersection of the discourse of ecclesiastical historical inquiry and the reflection language of faith in the churches is the metaphor of the organic development of the idea of Christianity. This metaphor can occur in the “hard” Hegelian form which speaks about the dialectic of historical reason in and through and beyond Christianity, and it essentially reduces history to providing examples of innovation and response which consort nicely with the needs of Hegel’s philosophy. No historian today really represents this “hard” version. But the “soft” version which emphasizes organic development and uses words such as growth, decay, and rebirth still reverberates through historical discourse, and can be found in the language of Hegel’s great theological rival, F.D.E. Schleiermacher. This kind of language has always been attractive to liberal Catholics and Protestants because it facilitates a shift from the language of doctrinal belief in the deposit of apostolic faith, to the language of trust in the apostolic essence of Christianity. While none of Boswell’s critics truly speaks from this metaphorical position either, the language of a hazily-defined trust is still attractive to some. Ecclesiastical history in the service of Christian trust
allows plenty of room for moral argument and evaluation without the necessity of doctrinal judgements.

I do not pretend for a moment that Stanley Hauerwas either overtly or covertly builds upon Hegel or Schleiermacher. His understanding of the rationality of Christian narrative breathes a very different spirit than Schleiermacher’s famous assertion that “religion begins and ends with history” (as quoted by Pelikan 1989:230). Despite their differences, Schleiermacher and Hauerwas both use the language of trust. Hauerwas’ understanding of moral argument founded upon narrative intersects at some point with the discourse of historical inquiry. He noted, for example, that CSTH “takes the form of a moral argument that depends for its cogency on the historical analysis... Implicit in Boswell’s method is the assumption that not only do we need better historical studies to understand the nature of Christian (and non-Christian) ethics, but history is intrinsic to the very nature of moral argument and understanding” (1985:229). In Koinonia Journal he straightforwardly asked “does ‘history’ produce knowledge we ought to trust as Christians?” (1994:108) If Hauerwas means, do historians produce a kind of knowledge which Christians should trust for their eternal salvation? then many historians would undoubtedly recoil from such a notion. How could any scholar presume so much?

Hauerwas implies a broad syllogism about Christian uses of history implicit in the continuing echoes of the metaphor of the organic development of the Christian idea of essence. This syllogism might be stated thus: (1) Christianity is based on an arguably historical person who became associated with internally complex and variable combinations of doctrine, prayer, and action,—combinations which also originated in a historical period; (2) most if not all of these combinations of doctrine, prayer and action specify that these complex patterns of adherence to original (apostolic) teaching, fellowship (koinonia), the breaking of bread, and prayers link the Christian community to Jesus who had come as Savior and would come again as Judge; (3) therefore, Christian faithfulness now is at minimum no less than adherence to complex patterns of doctrines and practices which can be shown to have originated in a specified period. In Momigliano’s words, “in the Church conformity with origins is evidence of truth” (Momigliano 1990:136).

There are certain problems with all this. First, the historical period of origins needs to be specified. Was it Jesus’ own preaching? thirty years after Jesus’ death? a century? five hundred years? The apostolic message itself gives little or no criteria for specifying such a period. Second, the contents of the complex patterns of teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers must be specified in far greater detail, and the patterns taken together give no firm criteria for adjudicating major and minor divergences. Finally, if obvious historical changes originating outside the community of faith are granted to play any role in the community’s growing narrative, that role must be specified. For example, how are the churches to incorporate a change such as the Roman destruction of Jerusalem (70 C.E.) into the community’s narrative—does this change mean anything to the community, or does the community and its narrative continue on as though unaffected?

The power of the discourse of Christian trust expressed through some kind of formal or informal Christian communal narrative allows the Christian community to do several things. Such discourse allows the community to recognize external changes, to specify particular complex patterns of faithfulness, and to specify more closely which portion of the distant Christian past has more authoritative weight than other portions of the communal narrative. Theologians which rely on a strong sense of narrative, whether St. Augustine, Luther, Schleiermacher, or Stanley Hauerwas have developed theological criteria for making all these decisions, but their criteria are always to some extent vulnerable to fresh insights about particular historical eras. For example, Luther badly misunderstood some aspects of medieval Scholastic theology; Schleiermacher badly misunderstood the Eastern Orthodox tradition and Churches. When newer and fuller historical inquiry yields pertinent insights which correct or overturn such interpretations altogether, then the discourse of historical inquiry directly impinges upon Christian theological narratives. To echo Hauerwas’ question, where in history is Christian trust to be found? Ecclesiastical history studied under the metaphor of trust has particular trouble answering Hauerwas’ question, and if the answer is clear but narrow, the theologian risks the charge of informal sectarianism—a charge which Hauerwas has had to refute.

Ecclesiastical history, unlike sectarian or confessionalist history, both represents and refashions complex traditions which are both historical sources and historical processes. Ecclesiastical traditions both constrain and aid historical discourse, quite like the “levels of expectations” which constrain and aid Gombrich’s artists. Ecclesiastical history is predicated on Christian variability and internal disagreement. The Vincentian canon
Koinonia

(“what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all”), regardless whether it be a theological ideal, has never been a reality. Historians (together with other scholars) are involved in this vast specifying and sorting out.

Boswell objected both to the kind of history which seeks crisp orthodox usability as well as the kind of history which saddles the organic development of thought and doctrine with the weight of theological trust. “Until the middle of this century premodern European history consisted principally of the doctrines of the Christian church and of the political and military activities of kings and aristocrats. That this added up to a severely restricted, if not grossly distorted, view of European society had become apparent by the 1940s, when this narrow text was vigorously emended by the annalists, the French group of social historians who strove to retrieve from the margins of history the scribbled lives of the poor, the ordinary, the unaristocratic, the nonstrategic, the apolitical” (Boswell 1992:94). Boswell situated himself in the post-annaliste attempt to study the “ideas, lives, and feelings of those not merely unimportant or overlooked in their own day but actively oppressed, silenced, or hidden from view” (1992:94). In Ernst Gombrich’s language, the difference between the schemata or model and perceived reality had become too pronounced for some historians to ignore.

This kind of ecclesiastical history directs its attentions not so much towards the identification and preservation of the intellectual, prayerful deposit of apostolic faith, as towards the interaction of Christians with each other in evolving patterns of faithfulness, unfaithfulness, vision, blindness, hospitality, and intolerance. Whether this Christian past is “usable” or “trustworthy” is much harder to demonstrate according to the traditional doctrinal and intellectual criteria. It includes orthodox and heretical Christian doctrines, prayers, and teachings, as well as the social interactions which both formed them and were formed by them as glimpsed in a variety of media (e.g., poetry, art, personal accounts, church wardens’ books, in addition to doctrinal and political texts). It lends itself to a variety of interpretations, and not infrequently casts revered Christian leaders in somewhat less than saintly light.

Boswell was more ambiguous about what kind of trust Christians might place in the discourse of historical inquiry regarding matters of faith. He recognized that post-annaliste historical study is not necessarily “debunking” inquiry, but can easily tend to treat Christianity as a doddering old aunt: “humor her and let her say whatever she wants to but doh’t take her seriously” (Boswell 1982:10). Boswell refused to do this: he could see the inconsistency that at Nicea or Chalcedon “it is funny that truth is decided by majority vote, but that doesn’t mean that it’s not true” (1982:10). He is enfeebled here to a rather traditional Catholic understanding of the cooperation of nature and grace. By nature, Boswell comprehended a Christian past was not just the preserve of bishops, kings, preachers, saints, and councils, but included homosexuals, Jews, Muslims, women, foundlings, and some sort of ceremonies to celebrate some sort of partnership among people of the same sex. By grace, it was a Christian past nonetheless, capable of cooperation with God’s grace for the completion and fulfillment of nature.

So do Boswell’s books provide historical knowledge which Christians can trust? Do Boswell’s books name, language, and story a world which contemporary Christians might find intelligibly similar and helpful to their contemporary perplexities? COTH and SSU certainly serve to undermine the traditionalist notion (abroad in many ecclesiastical traditions) that the ecumenical Church’s practical teaching on homosexuality has always been unambiguous. If anyone supposes that Christian practice has always been unambiguously to anathematize homosexual persons (however much as the descriptor “homosexual person” may be valid), COTH would suggest otherwise; intolerance has grown perceptibly to supplant earlier tolerance.

Boswell’s other book (KOS) suggests a middle term, that acceptable moral practice in the church has changed over time; exposition (child abandonment), foundlings, hospitals, and modern child welfare organizations all have served a broadly shifting moral consensus.

Yet anyone who recommends to contemporary churches that they ought to practice greater tolerance or acceptance of homosexuals, or ought to bless same-sex unions on the basis of Boswell’s historical writings may be pressing Boswell’s studies into positions of antepenultimate or penultimate Christian trust, positions better left to preaching, liturgy, and formal ecclesiastical discussion. The “moral argument” of all his books is much more indirect, and works through suggesting complexity, historical change, and the intrinsic temporal dimension of abstract terms in moral theology. This writer believes that there are indeed excellent arguments to tolerate, accept, and ordain gay and lesbian persons, and to bless their unions, but on bases which are only indirectly derived from Boswell’s complex and subtle historical texts.
In Boswell's spirit, I wish to suggest another metaphor for the study of the ecclesiastical, cultural, social past. This metaphor is entirely different from ecclesiastical history as the metaphoric guardian of the fortress of orthodoxy, preserving intact an inviolable deposit of faith. This metaphor is also entirely different from ecclesiastical history as the story of the unfolding, growth, or development of Christian doctrine and practice through history as a source of trust, equating the sense of history with understanding of Christian faith as self-awareness (Pelikan 1989:231). With Boswell, as a Christian historian I do believe that the content of Christian history matters, that it is not just a nominalist-like cultural production of hegemony and memory.

I suggest the metaphor of ecclesiastical history as the archaeology of flesh and blood, as Shakespeare tells us, the stuff that dreams are made on. This "flesh and blood" is the soft tissues of the past, the entrails of motivation, imagination, memory, despair, and hope in every human being, in Jesus, the Christ, and through him in the eucharistic community of memory. I intend by "archaeology" a much more modest metaphor than Michel Foucault's memorable images of archaeology, genealogy, and ethics (Davidson 1986). Archaeology is a procedure and discourse which alters its own basis of information even as it discovers it. No archaeological dig can happen twice; the original data-base is destroyed in order to be interpreted. Metaphorically, the study of ecclesiastical history (the study of the assembly of all those who have perceived themselves as called by God) employs scholarly interpretations and discourse which both constrain and aid the assembly's remembering. Simultaneously the assembly's discourse and levels of expectation both constrain and aid the scholar's discourse.

In the community of flesh and blood, bread and wine, this exchange of discourse, and discourse of exchange, point to a faith and a Word which is graciously beyond hegemonic social control and hazardous individual interpretation. The Christian archaeologist is a living partner in a conversation with the dead, their bones and parchments and guts and brains. Such history hews close to its sources, whether written or material. It is a process of learning to ask the sources the right questions and learning to listen to whatever answers they might give. David Tracy has called this theological process "mutually critical correlations" (Tracy 1975:49-52, 79-81; 1981:371-376). The ecclesiastical historian's conversation between the living and the dead requires a disciplined imagination which is intrinsically

The concept of heresy can provide a quick, sketchy example. Heresy studied in the kind ecclesiastical history which seeks to identify and preserve the intellectual content of the deposit of apostolic faith is formal heresy. It is the willful and persistent adherence to an error in matters of defined doctrine of the Catholic faith on the part of a baptized person. Heresy studied in the kind of ecclesiastical history which seeks to understand the organic development of Christian faith is essentially an arrested development (Pelikan 1989:78-79, 269-272). This view is far more charitable, and suggests a sort of material heresy, the holding of heretical doctrines through no fault of one's own, as is the case with most people brought up in "heretical" surroundings; such a person never consciously accepted certain formally Catholic doctrines, and so cannot reject or doubt them. Of course, this definition is circular, and heresy as a case of arrested development tends to suppose the existence of a body of apostolic, authorized doctrines somewhere else.

By contrast, I suggest that the heresy suggested by the ecclesiastical history as a sort of archaeology of flesh and blood is essentially a transgression against the Christian community. Such heresy is a "choosing" (haeresis) because it privileges certain authorized voices to such an extent that it materially silences or exiles discordant voices and subversive perceptions. The insistence that only authorized perceptions and defined doctrines provide a true standard of orthodoxy ignores the social transmission of countless practices which enliven or impede evolving understandings of the holy Presence in, with, and under the church.

The individual ecclesiastical historian is always an archaeologist in a trench, with limited time and point of view close to the ground. The fragmentary narrative discourse which such Christian historians can provide frankly admit their own lacuna. I suggest that such fragmentary history can provide knowledge which Christians can trust for historical knowledge, one grain of sand at a time. Whether the discourse of ecclesiastical historians can even begin to chart the course of the subterranean streams of apostolic, faithful witness is a judgement which I believe can only be rendered from the standpoint of the Kingdom of God at the conclusion of all histories.

Let Boswell's texts continue to be challenged, re-thought, reformulated, and revised by responsible, insightful, and fair-minded readers. That is the
process of history, not understood as organic development or guarding
the fortress of apostolic orthodoxy, but a history of the stuff that dreams
are made on, the archaeology of flesh and blood.

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