



Sexual Orientation: The History and Significance of an Idea

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I. TOWARD A NOTION OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION

GENITAL SEXUAL ACTIVITY WITH ANOTHER PERSON OF THE SAME SEX HAS BEEN recorded since antiquity. Fertility cults surrounding Israel were condemned by priests and prophets for utilizing both opposite and same-sex cult prostitutes in worship. Pederasty, the practice of men using young boys for sexual intercourse, was widely accepted practice in ancient Greece. The focus of the ancients was on human sexual behavior. The direction of a person's inner sexual object-orientation is neither described nor contended.

During the middle ages, sexual intercourse with those of the same sex was considered sin. Those participating in same-sex genital activity were not thought to be differently oriented than those engaging in sexual activity with the opposite sex. Persons continuing in such same-sex activity were considered morally depraved.

In the seventeenth century genital sexual activity with those of the same sex was considered a crime. Such activity could result in imprisonment or hanging, yet the participants were not considered a different category of human beings.

Major changes occurred in the nineteenth century, shifting the consideration of same-sex genital activity to the nature, not simply the behavior, of the participant. In 1869 a pamphlet printed in Leipzig employed the term *homosexualität* in argumentation that would soon thereafter define homosexuality as mental illness — as a condition. It was not until 1892 that Charles Chaddock, an early transla-

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tor of Krafft-Ebing's classical medical handbook of sexual deviance, introduced the term homosexuality into the English language.¹ Sexual inversion, the term most commonly used during the 1800s, referred to a broad range of deviant gender behavior. Deviant object-choice was but one of the many pathological symptoms exhibited by those whose sexual expression was at variance with that conventionally understood to be appropriate to one's anatomical sex.

Early in the twentieth century medical doctors, particularly psychiatrists, viewed homosexuality as a pathological condition. Persons exhibiting homosexual behavior were considered immature, lacking in ego strength, arrested in childhood or early adolescent stages of development, or possessing paranoid and schizoid personality disorders. Understanding homosexuality as a pathological condition as well as "deviant" sexual behavior constituted a major shift in the understanding of the relationship of sex and sexuality to gender identity, gender roles, and a person's essential being and place in society.

II. SEX BECOMES SEXUALITY

This reconceptualization of sexual inversion as homosexuality was predicated on another nineteenth-century shift in the western societal understanding of sex. In this shift, sex becomes sexuality, i.e., a psychological and physiological reality constituting something essential to the self. This sexual dimension of the self was identified as a drive or basic unconscious instinct shaping conscious human life and governing genital functions. Sex (a primarily anatomical and behavioral reality) became sexuality (a central organizing principle of the self). David Halperin writes of this reconceptualization:

Sexuality, in this latter interpretation, turns out to be something more than an endogenous principle of motivation outwardly expressed by the performance of sexual acts; it is a mute power subtly and deviously at work throughout a wide range of human behaviors, attitudes, tastes, choices, gestures, styles, pursuits, judgements, and utterances. Sexuality is thus the inner most part of an individual's human nature. It is the feature of a person that takes longest to get to know well, and knowing it renders transparent and intelligible to the knower the person to whom it belongs. Sexuality holds the key to unlocking the deepest mysteries of the human personality; it lives at the center of the hermeneutics of the self.²

With sex having become sexuality, and sexuality having become homosexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality, a person's sexual identification has come to be viewed by sexologists as complex and multi-dimensional.

One's "sex" is determined by one's anatomy, by one's genitalia. On this basis persons are declared male or female at birth.

One's "gender identity" refers to one's inner sense of one's sexuality, to one's experience of oneself as male or female. John Money asserts:

¹David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 15.

²Ibid.

Because sex differences are not only genitally sexual, although they may be secondarily derived from the procreative organs, I found a need some thirty years ago for a word under which to classify them. That word, which has now become accepted into language, is gender. Everyone has a gender identity/role, one part of which is one's genital or genitosexual gender identity/role....the masculinity and/or femininity of your gender role is like the outside of a revolving globe that everyone can observe and read the meaning of. Inside the globe are the private workings of your gender identity.³

It is possible to be an "anatomical" male and have a female gender identity or vice versa, as is the case for transsexuals.

One's "gender role" is determined by the complex interaction between one's sex and the culture's determination of what is expected of or appropriate for women or men to be and do. On this basis men and women are said to be masculine or feminine. For example, it is acceptable for an anatomical female who understands herself to be a woman to wear traditional men's clothes, i.e., trousers. In the United States such is regularly the case. It is not usually acceptable for an anatomical male who understands himself to be a man to wear traditional women's clothes, i.e., skirts. In the United States such a person is a cross-dresser; in Scotland he may be in traditional garb—a kilt.

III. THE COMPLEXITIES OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION

While one's "sexual orientation" is primarily determined by the object(s) of one's sexual fantasies and desires, by the focus of one's inner sexual fantasies and affection, Eli Coleman understands sexual orientation to be even more complex. Coleman asserts one must consider nine dimensions of human sexuality when discerning sexual orientation: current relationship status, self-identification identity, ideal self-identification identity, global acceptance of one's current sexual orientation identity, physical sexual identity, gender identity, sex-role identity and sexual orientation identity as measured by behavior, fantasies, and emotional attachments, and lastly the individual's past and present perception of their sexual identity compared to their idealized future. Even though on this basis men and women are said to be hetero-, bi-, or homosexual, Coleman asserts this to be an oversimplification.⁴ It is possible to be an anatomical male, have male gender identification, live in societally expected modes of masculine being and behavior, and be exclusively focused on another male as the object of one's sexual desire and fantasies.

The unfolding discoveries and conceptualizations of the last 150 years in western societies "establish" sexual identification to at least include the complex dimensions of sex, gender identity, sex roles, and sexual orientation.

This broad operating consensus is by no means everywhere accepted, commonly understood, or static. New research, alternative proposals, and intense

³John R. Money, *Gay, Straight and In-Between* (New York: Oxford University, 1988) 77.

⁴Eli Coleman, "Assessment of Sexual Orientation," in *Psychotherapy with Homosexual Men and Women*, ed. Eli Coleman (New York: Haworth, 1988) 9.

political machinations regularly reshape it. While great efforts are being extended in redefining gender and sex roles, those studies, debates, and political movements concerning sexual orientation are the most divergent and contentious.

IV. THE SEARCH FOR CAUSES

One such contentious effort has been the search for the “origin” or “cause” of homosexuality in social relationships and culture. Once homosexuality came to be understood as a pathological condition, psychiatrists and psychologists set out to study and treat it. Numerous psychoanalytical theories were advanced. Incestuous attachments to the parent of the opposite sex, too close attachment to the parent of the same sex, failure to identify with the same-sex parent, castration anxiety among males, and the narcissistic quest for a symbol of one’s own self are but a few of the theories put forth that were eventually discovered to be unfounded, inconsistent, or unprovable.

“Therapies” grounded in these assertions were found by most researchers to be ineffective in “treating” homosexuals. Richard Isay writes:

Kinsey and his co-workers for many years attempted to find patients who had been converted from homosexuality to heterosexuality during therapy, and were surprised that they could not find one whose sexual orientation had been changed. When they interviewed persons who claimed they had been homosexuals but were now functioning heterosexually, they found these men were simply suppressing homosexual behavior...and that they used homosexual fantasies when they attempted intercourse.⁵

Other therapists developed approaches which they claimed made significant strides toward treating the “dissatisfied homosexual.” Joseph Nicolosi’s reparative therapy effects significant change in male homosexuals who want to change by exploring the source of their problems, developing nonerotic same-sex relationships that diminish their sexual attraction toward men, making them more secure in their gender identity, and bringing them to enjoy heterosexual relationships.⁶

In 1956, Evelyn Hooker’s study, in which three eminent psychologists failed to distinguish thirty homosexual from thirty heterosexual males on the bases of the best psychometric instruments, challenged the notion that gay men were pathological. Her study became the first in a series that demonstrated that homosexuality could not be viewed as mental illness. In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association deleted homosexuality from its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* signifying it no longer considered homosexuality a disease.

Even as psychiatry found little evidence regarding the origin of sexual orientation and developed contested assertions about the “treatment” of homosexuality, the biological sciences began their own inquiries into its etiology. Research emerges in three major arenas: anatomy, physiology, and genetics.

⁵Richard Isay, *Being Homosexual* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 111-112.

⁶See Joseph Nicolosi, *Reparative Therapy of Male Homosexuality* (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1991).

Anatomical research into sexual orientation grows out of neurological studies of both the fetal development and adult structure of the brain. The most well known of these studies is that of Simon LeVay, a neurobiologist at the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California. LeVay studied the nucleus of certain cells in the hypothalamus of forty-one persons who had died at hospitals in California and New York. Nineteen of these persons were homosexuals who had died of AIDS; six were women presumed to be heterosexual; and sixteen were presumed to be heterosexual men, six of whom died of AIDS. In his study, LeVay discovered the volume of the nucleus was more than twice as large in heterosexual men as it was in homosexual men and the heterosexual women.⁷

Although his study was not tightly controlled for variables and has not yet been duplicated, LeVay argues that his work indicates at the very least that sexual orientation in humans can be studied biologically.

Richard Pillard at Boston University School of Medicine asserts on the basis of his study of the effects of hormones on fetal development that a key hormone present in embryos may, depending on its presence or absence, prevent the male brain from defeminizing, thereby creating "psychosexual androgyny." Thus gay men are understood as men with physiologically induced feminine components, and vice versa for women.⁸

At best Pillard's research, linked with that of others such as psychiatrist Richard Green at the University of California at Los Angeles, circumstantially implicate physiology in sexual orientation.

Perhaps the most influential genetic study has been the one on twins conducted by Michael Bailey, a Northwestern University psychologist, in cooperation with Pillard. In their work they discovered that the gay-gay concordance rate for identical twins raised separately was 52 percent, compared to 22 percent for fraternal twins and 11 percent for adoptive brothers. They argue that if homosexuality is genetic, then the more closely related persons are, the more likely the sexual orientation of one can be predicted by the sexual orientation of the other.⁹

Even though biological research into the origins and nature of sexual orientation is by no means conclusive and is difficult to understand and interpret, it points toward the conclusion that such factors play a significant role in determining human sexual orientation.

V. A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION?

So what if anatomical, physiological, and genetic factors do play a role? What will this mean to the persons and groups receiving, interpreting, and acting on such conclusions? How will their visions, meanings, and values shape and be shaped by these findings?

⁷Simon LeVay, "A Difference in Hypothalamic Structure Between Heterosexual and Homosexual Men," *Science* (August 1991) 47-52.

⁸Chandler Burr, "Homosexuality and Biology," *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 1993) 47-65.

⁹*Ibid.*

Historian David Greenberg argues that the critical issues in the sexual orientation debate are neither psychological nor biological but social and cultural. According to Greenberg, homosexuality is a way of being and behaving interpreted differently by particular societies at different times in their histories. His “social constructivist” view asserts that homosexuality is not an essence or condition that some people have and others do not. In Greenberg’s view the idea of a stable, life-long homosexual identity is a product of modern western societies.

Greenberg believes, like most Freudians, that human sexuality is extremely flexible and innately non-specific in regard to object. Sexual feelings, he believes, can be labeled and organized into identities and patterns of behavior in greatly diverse personal, social, and cultural systems. Greenberg supports his assertion with over 600 pages of examples of greatly diverse interpretations and structurings of homosexual behavior in ancient and modern societies. He proposes that urbanization, science, technology, and bureaucracy are the major forces which have shaped the emerging self-understandings of gays and lesbians in western societies.¹⁰

Whether or not Greenberg’s thesis is accurate (the emerging work in biological issues indicate that at least in part it is not), his assertion that human societies participate in the construction of their own sexual identities, meanings, and systems is profoundly argued in his book and corroborated by the brief history narrated throughout this essay.

VI. CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

So what do Christians make of these emerging learnings, the continuing debate, and their own participation in shaping present and future understandings of sexual identity, especially orientation? Three perspectives emerge as Christians participate in the spiritual discernment, moral deliberation and social construction of present and future sexual realities.

1. Some Christians argue that the unfolding discoveries of the various disciplined understandings of sexual identification, if honestly and diligently followed, could lead people (western societies? humankind?) to greater knowledge (truth?) and quality of life (wholeness?). This search for truth and wholeness could lead (has already led many?) humans to a fuller understanding of sexuality which includes variations in sexual orientation. Such a reading of the data would see a movement in the emerging discoveries toward a future of full acceptance for gay and lesbian people.

Some Christians in the physical and behavioral sciences are suggesting that this is a kind of “Copernican moment” in regard to the Bible and Christian views of sexuality. Now, as then, systems of emerging “truth” demonstrate a different understanding of physical and psychological reality than that perceived in the overall schema and specific texts of scripture.

¹⁰David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988).

2. Many Christians take a significantly different view. Whatever else sexual identification might be, it is finally to be essentially understood in the light of God's revelation and God's will as revealed in scripture. In the scriptures these Christians find "God's vision" to include celibacy for singles, whether homosexual or heterosexual, and one-man/one-woman marriage as the enduring patterns of sexual expression.

These same Christians argue that fidelity to one's identity and vocation as a single or married person is as applicable to more complex understandings of sexual identification as to less complex ones. Knowledge may result in deeper understanding, but the essential mission and values guiding sexuality remain the same. The scriptures and the Christian church's vision and values are clear, tested, and understood.

3. Other Christians operate from yet a different perspective. If God's creative work continues around and through humankind; if disciplined human inquiry and understanding both discover and participate in God's creative and sustaining word; if the shared history of God's confessing people conveys the church's past discernment of the enduring voice of God; if the scriptures are the cradle that bears Christ, God's normative grace and truth; if the Holy Spirit calls Christians into communion with God and one another in proclaiming the gospel while continuing to discern and confess the presence and activity of God in this new time; then this moment becomes a time for engagement in Spirit-led public discourse among Christians in which the voice of God is discerned in the troubled waters of conflicting discoveries and understandings of God's truth.

These same Christians argue that there have been such times in the past where Spirit-led discourse has significantly impacted the uses of data and thought from the physical and behavioral sciences (e.g., the role of spirituality in personhood); in other cases this Spirit-led discourse has led the church to rethink its thought and practice (e.g., the role of women in ministry). Critical to such discourse is understanding God's truth as integrated or "of a piece" and a willingness to join others of the church in public conversation, taking seriously all the sharp edges of conflicting information and differing viewpoints as God's voice is discerned. Scripture will be the norming norm, yet God's creative and sustaining presence in experience, science, and culture will also be honored.