

Preface

Almost all religions have an issue with same-sex relationships. While this is a well-known fact in the history of religions, it has not yet become an object of systematic research. In particular the question as to why religions decline homosexuality. The general male dominance of religion makes it a priori likely that gay activities arouse indignation against their challenging of the religious order of nature attributed to them. Concern for the basic principles of life, especially vis-à-vis the beginning and end of human existence, is probably even more important as to why all forms of sexuality, outside of the religiously sanctioned family and for other reasons than procreation, are met with disapproval. Having sex "just for fun" appears from a strict religious point of view not only as an evil sin that leads people away from their obedience to god's law but to a contradiction of life itself.

It is, therefore, of little wonder that the dismissal of homosexuality lessens when religions become secularized. Christian westernised denominations have started to allow female clerics to move up to the highest ranks and do not hesitate to approve gay marriages these days. But their orientation towards the world is dearly bought by a decreasing religious impact on the majority of their followers and on society as such. Secularism comes along with the disintegration of traditional family structures and leads to a much greater degree of autonomy and individuality even among religious devotees. In its wake, sexual self-determination has become a matter of course and a positive value proposition shared by many believers as well. On the other hand, fundamentalists and the representatives of an orthodox understanding of religion usually call sexual liberty an expression of decadence and identify it as hotbed of vice. Aren't they right, from their point of view, to uphold tradition and to brace themselves against the on-going demise of faith and moral? Isn't it understandable that they reject extramarital sex as an assault against what has been appreciated as good and right on religious

grounds for such a long time? For them, the whole spectrum of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) conduct emerges as a sign that the end of the world is, indeed, nigh.

Whereas homosexuality causes trouble upon most religions, some even threatening with schism, a scientific occupation with religion and sexuality takes advantage of evading these kinds of internal conflicts. Since the academic study of religion is based on the principle of religious non-involvement, its research objects are transferred from theological discourses and the insider's view to the overarching framework of society, history and culture. Apart from a religious reasoning, it concentrates on historical contexts, on aspects of comparison and on the question of how the behaviour and rationale of religions change under the adjustment pressure they are exposed to. All so-called world religions originate from ancient times and revere Holy Scriptures written in fundamentally different circumstances. It is normal that these texts contain values and customs up to a certain point incompatible with a modern understanding of life. Especially religions without a particular class of theological exegetes like the Bahá'í find it difficult to differentiate in the thicket of a given situation holding clear-cut demarcation lines, which are necessary, even vital, to distinguish between indispensable and non-negotiable doctrines on one side and teachings to be valued non-essential and therefore feasible to modification on the other. To which of these does homosexuality belong to?

The great strength of Hannah A. Langer's study is to liberate this question from its religious constraints and to address it on firm scientific grounds. It starts with the observation that even the cosmopolitan and open-minded Bahá'í religion is trapped in an almost insoluble dilemma of tradition and modernity when it comes to sexuality. Traditionalist and contemporary views on "normal" sexual behaviour differ from each other on a large scale, sometimes to the extent of an insurmountable antagonism. Without ignoring the right of sexual self-determination, as stated, for instance, by the United Nations Human Rights Council, Langer

avoids projecting a modern understanding of human sexuality in a backwards manner. She focuses instead on a proper contextualization of same-sex relations by way of close reading the authoritative Bahā'ī writings over the course of time. Her profound knowledge both in historical and religious respect enables her to put the problem of "sodomy" into perspective, permitting new insights into the fundamental difference between the perception of anal intercourse in Persian 19th century and the conclusions of today's gender or queer studies. The Islamic notion *liwāṭ* describes gay relations usually occurring between higher-ranking and young men, often beardless juveniles, which originate from the hegemonic structures of that time. They depended on disparity and dominance and had nothing to do with the idea of an individual human right belonging to all people irrespective of their social and other status. Any literal application of an ancient perception of "sodomy" to the sexual manners of our time must inevitably lead to problems in its wake. Have religions, when political systems and prevailing opinions change, to follow suit? The answer is Yes and No.

At the end of the last century North American Bahā'ī members brought the issue of LGBT rights to the fore. In response, the Universal House of Justice in Haifa published an official communiqué in November 1995 to clarify its position. Though adopting a moderate language, the statement left no doubt about its disapproval of homosexuality. It condemned it as blatant act of immorality, a distortion of human nature and something to be dealt with like a handicap or cured like an illness. The rationale of this declaration was a religious one, being also applied to the argument that a rejection of homosexuality would not imply a rejection of homosexuals. However, what the Bahā'ī leadership might have intended as a compromise, fails to gratify those Bahā'īs, who want to be gay and regular members at the same time without impairment of their established rights. In the second part of her study Langer gives an illustrating description of the problems and harm caused by the ex cathedra pronouncement of

the Universal House of Justice. Since an honest religious commitment always affects social relations and is closely linked with cultural, political, economic and many other matters, the suggested splitting of religion and sexuality would, if embraced, unavoidably damage a person's life and integrity. Leaving a community that has proven to be important in numerous regards, surely causes pain, distress and cognitive dissonance. The same holds true for gay Bahá'ís remaining under these circumstances.

The book of Langer stands out not only due to the capability of its author for a reflected empathy scarcely to be found in academic theses but also due to its notable scientific findings. They shed new light on the intimate relationship of religion and sexuality and underline how closely religions are attached to their non-religious environment. The fact that religions usually refer to god's word and divine law does not release their representatives, leaders as well as followers, from the duty to interpret propagations from the beyond and to adequately adapt them to mundane circumstances. The problem, though, lies in the word "adequate".

Time will tell in which direction the discussion about same sex relations develops among Bahá'ís in the future. Homosexuality as a damnable sin and homosexuality as a human right seem to be mutual exclusive at the moment. A closer look into the history of religions and the number of dilemmas of this sort, provides evidence for the assumption that a way out is always possible. Thoroughly examining the adaptive responsiveness of a religion, as this excellent study does, raises in any case our awareness for the great complexity of religious behaviour patterns.

Prof Horst Junginger