



# Queer Identities and Religion

## Introduction

This week, we turn our attention to queer sexualities and gender identities, considering how religious communities engage with and understand these. We often assume that religions are opposed to any form of queer lifestyle or identity, but is it really that simple? As Dag Ølstein Endsjø reminds us, “The fact that the majority of religions are more negative towards homosexuality than to married heterosexuality does not, however, mean that there is a fundamental clash between religion and homosexuality” (p. 120).

Through this handout and the week’s readings, we will look at the way queer discourses of gender and sexuality are both challenged **and** affirmed within religious traditions. And we’ll ask the usual questions about the religious and cultural functions of religious teachings on queer sexuality and gender identity.

Next week, we will turn our attention to queer spiritualities – how queer people negotiate their membership to religious communities, and some of the challenges they may face.

The main reading for this week is Dag Ølstein Endsjø, *Sex and Religion*, ch.5. There are also some online articles and videos listed under the week 5 module (which I’ll refer to throughout this handout).

## Culture or Religion?

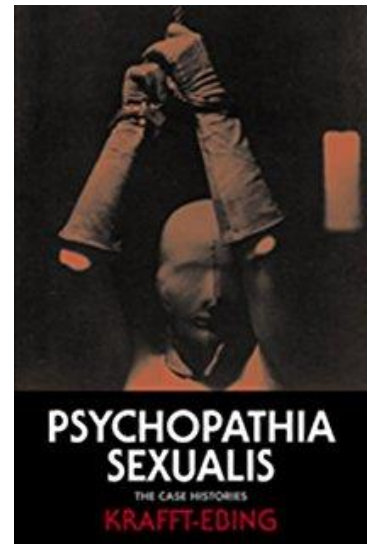
Religious attitudes to queer sexualities and gender identities don’t arise in a vacuum – as we’ve mentioned in previous weeks, religious beliefs are influenced by wider cultural attitudes, and vice versa. So religious communities may give religious reasons for their tolerance/intolerance of queerness, but it is very likely that they are also reflecting the same tolerance/intolerance that is dominant in their surrounding cultures. As James Wilets suggests:

‘The connections between religion and homophobia [and transphobia] ... cannot be analysed without reference to cultural norms ... Religion alone is not always the primary agent of creation of homophobic [and transphobic] attitudes, and sometimes does not contribute to homophobic [or transphobic] attitudes at all. Indeed, in some cases, religion may reinforce or sanction existing positive attitudes towards homosexuality [and the trans community]’ (from “Religion and Homophobia,” in *Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, 2016).



## Gender and sexuality are social constructs

You'll remember from week 1 that understandings of gender and sexuality are not fixed, stable, or transhistorical, but are constantly changing across space and time. The terms 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' were first used in the 1860s by journalist Károly Mária Kertbeny, and adopted as medico-legal terms in 1886 by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his book *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Sexuality began to be understood as part of a person's *identity*, rather than something they simply 'did'. In other words, their sexual desires became a way to categorize and label them as either 'normal' (and moral) or 'abnormal' (immoral). The term 'bisexual' dates to the early 20th century, while 'transgender' was first used in medical discourses around 1965.



Bearing this in mind, it's difficult for us to pinpoint religious teachings and understandings of sexuality, given that this concept is relatively new. E.g. if we wanted to ask 'what does the Bible say about homosexuality?' we would (technically) have to say 'nothing whatsoever', as the modern concept of 'homosexuality' was not recognized at the time the Bible was written. And it is often difficult to discern from ancient sacred texts and teachings exactly *how* sexuality and gender identity were understood.

Making things even more complicated, the terms 'homosexuality', 'heterosexuality' and 'bisexuality' don't have fixed or stable meanings. As Endsjø notes, there are plenty of people in the world who would consider themselves 'heterosexual' but who have had (or would be happy to have) sexual relations with someone of the same gender identity.

So in essence, discussing religion and queer identities is not terribly straightforward, and we have to keep this complexity in mind when we study the topic. But that's what makes it so interesting!

## Religious attitudes to sexual desires change over time and space

Read Endsjø, pp.123-30.

As Endsjø notes, none of the major world religions are overly positive about homosexuality, but throughout history, their tolerance levels have varied, and same-sex desires and relationships have, from time to time, been viewed more favourably (or at least tolerated to a greater degree). Some examples include:

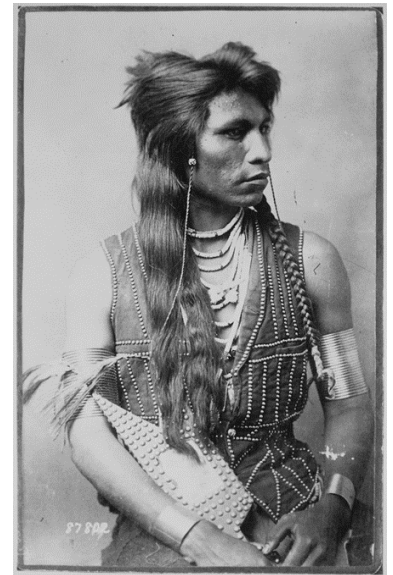
- Buddhism: has a long tradition of tolerating same sex desires between some Japanese Buddhist monks and younger novitiates. Although interestingly, women's same-sex desires were not viewed so favourably.
- Hinduism: Vedic texts (c. 1500 BCE) and Kamasutra both regard male same-sex desires and non-binary genders as acceptable.
- The Jewish Talmud (c. 500 CE) condemns anal sex between men (they believed that this act can lead to solar eclipses and earthquakes!), but is far more lenient about homosexual relationships that don't include penetrative sex. And homosexual relationships seem to have been tolerated and practiced in some Jewish communities during the Medieval period too (see article [here](#)).
- Ancient Greece: Sexual relationships between men were tolerated in some cultural and religious contexts.



## Religious traditions challenging gender binaries

Read Endsjø, pp. 130-34.

Endsjø also notes that religions have been far from totally intolerant of transgender or non-binary gender identities. Indeed, as we saw in week 1, queer theorists challenge the idea that the gender binary (male or female) is fixed, stable, and non-negotiable. It is also challenged by the fact that many cultures and communities throughout history (and around the world) make sense of gender differently – the gender binary is a *western* concept, which other cultures may not conform to. A considerable number of cultures are accepting of gender fluidity, or recognize a ‘third gender’. You can explore these on the wonderful gender diversity map [here](#).



However, while Endsjø does note that there is some tolerance of queer sexualities and gender identities within certain religious communities, can we really say that religions *condone* or *sanction* homosexuality or trans identities? It's one thing to be 'tolerant' of a person's lifestyle, but quite another to celebrate it, welcome it, or even consider it to be 'natural' or 'normal'.



"Religion is a big help whenever I have doubts about my homophobia."

Many religions proscribe homosexuality, viewing it as something inherently sinful, and persecuting those who practice it (see Endsjø, pp. 134-48)

The religious rationales for such intolerance include:

- Contradicts the divinely-mandated heteronormative order of things.
- A source of impurity – matter 'out of place' (see wk 3)
- A marker of 'outsider' sexuality (associated with non-believers)
- A consequence of ungodliness – divine punishment for some other wrongdoing.

Similar arguments are made by some religious groups to condemn trans identities.

If we think about the *cultural* function of religious intolerance, though, we could argue that it grants religious/divine authority to the heteronormative status quo. Religious values and ideologies often reflect, or mirror, wider cultural ideologies, reinforcing them, and being reinforced by them. Religious teachings grant a moral justification for *othering* certain groups and individuals, allowing dominant groups to protect their own power and diminish the power of others. This is very clear in the history of colonialism, with its close ties to Christian mission. Missionaries used biblical and Christian teachings to impose western models of gender and sexuality onto the communities they colonized, thereby granting divine authority to western values and colonial power. Patrick Thomsen has written about this in his article about Christian homophobia in Pacific and NZ contexts (linked to under the week 5 module).

As I've said already, understandings of gender and sexuality change across time and space, so it is not always easy to work out exactly what religious texts and teachings have to say (if anything) about homosexuality and trans/gender fluid identities. And to be honest, any form of same-sex desire does not appear to be a priority in sacred texts. We saw last week that there are far more rules and regulations about heterosexuality than any other non-heterosexual identities. And as Endsjø notes (pp.148-57), religious communities (including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) have a long history of showing some degree of tolerance to same-sex desires.

Yet this has not stopped religious communities and individuals using their sacred scriptures to perpetuate intolerance. While religion doesn't "cause" homophobia or transphobia all by itself, it certainly plays a part. You have probably heard various condemnations of homosexuality from religious groups (including our very own Brian Tamaki of the Destiny church).



Sacred scriptures, such as the Bible, are often cited as 'proof' that homosexuality and trans identities are sinful. But, as Teresa Hornsby and Deryn Guest note, this use (or misuse) of the Bible is highly problematic:

If the power of heteronormativity resides in its unquestioned status of "normal" and its unchallenged place at the foundation of a sexuality that is "good" and "blessed," the buttress of the whole façade is Bible translation and interpretation ... Heteronormativity is not in the [biblical] text, waiting to be discovered; the interpreter or reader brings the assumption of heteronormativity to the text and uses the text to justify heteronormativity.

*Transgender, Intersex and Biblical Interpretation* (2016), p.4.

A number of biblical texts (as well as texts from other sacred scriptures) are regularly used to promote intolerance against queer and trans identities. But are these texts even talking about queer sexuality or gender identity in the way we understand these terms today? Or are they being used as 'proof-texts' to condemn homosexuality and transgender identities – i.e. taken completely out of their original context and made to say something that they really aren't saying?

Over the page, I've got a few examples of biblical texts that are regularly used to justify intolerance of queer and trans lives. If you've taken one of my other classes (Bible and Pop Culture, or Religious Texts of Terror) you'll have heard me talking about these before.

## Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

These two verses are often used as ‘proof positive’ that the Bible condemns ‘homosexuality’. And they are typically translated as follows:

- “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” (Leviticus 18:22 NRSV)
- “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.” (Leviticus 20:13 NRSV)

So, ‘lying [i.e. having sex] with a male as with a woman’ is interpreted to mean that a man cannot have sex with another man. But if we take a closer look at the Hebrew (the original language of the Old Testament), what does it say? Below, I have done a word-for-word translation of the two verses:

- 18:22 - And with a male you will not lie (have sex) beddings/beds/lyings of a woman, it is an abomination.
- 20:13 - And a man who lies with a male beds/beddings/lyings of a woman, abomination they did the two of them they must surely die their blood is on them.

What do they mean?? One possible way of reading these is that both laws forbid two men from having sex with the same woman (i.e. no threesomes, and/or no polyandry). I’m not saying that’s the correct interpretation, but it is a possibility, both in terms of the Hebrew grammar and logically too. In a patrilineal culture, where men wanted to ensure the paternity of their wives’ offspring, then it would not be wise for a man to ‘share’ a wife with another man.

My point here is that, while this biblical law has been interpreted as prohibiting ‘homosexuality’, and has been used to justify religious intolerance of queer people, it may not be referring to homosexuality at all.

Similarly, [Genesis 19](#) is often used as a text that shows God’s condemnation of homosexuality – yet it is a text about the threatened gang rape of two divine messengers by the men of Sodom (hence where the term ‘sodomy’ comes from). After the men of Sodom threaten this act of gang rape, the divine messengers strike them all blind, and God rains down fire and brimstone on the town, utterly destroying it. And while some people have long argued that the ‘crimes’ of Sodom were homosexual lust, the story has nothing to do with same-sex desire at all. The men of Sodom were not ‘homosexuals’ as much as they were potential rapists.

When it comes to transgender identities, the Bible is again used by some Christian communities to condemn trans people, despite it not saying *anything* about trans identities. According to US Baptist pastor [Robert Jeffress](#):

“Jesus’s words here have a great deal to say about the current controversy about transgender identification. People are all confused: ‘Gee, what do we say as Christians about transgender ...?’” Hey, it’s not that confusing. In Matthew 19.4 God’s words are applicable. The Bible says, ‘Have you not heard, “God made them from the beginning male and female. Not male, female and question mark.”

Yet the biblical text Jeffress quotes ([Matthew 19:4](#)) actually refers to divorce – not transgender identities. Jesus is arguing that people should not get divorced – so why is it being used to promote intolerance of trans people?

And if you watch the Robert Jeffress video, what techniques does he use to ‘convince’ his audience that the Bible condemns trans identities? (Hint: what is he holding as he’s talking?)

Byron Rangiwai's article also offers another example of the biblical text being misinterpreted to justify homophobia. He is writing in response to Israel Folau's Instagram posts, where he cited a New Testament text (1 Corinthians 6:9-10) to back up his homophobic views. According to Rangiwai:

"Literal understandings of the Bible, by the untrained, are problematic, and that the conclusions drawn from inexperienced readings of the Bible are, in fact, not only misleading, but dangerous ... literal interpretations of the Bible text have led to, and can lead to further, oppression" (p.252)

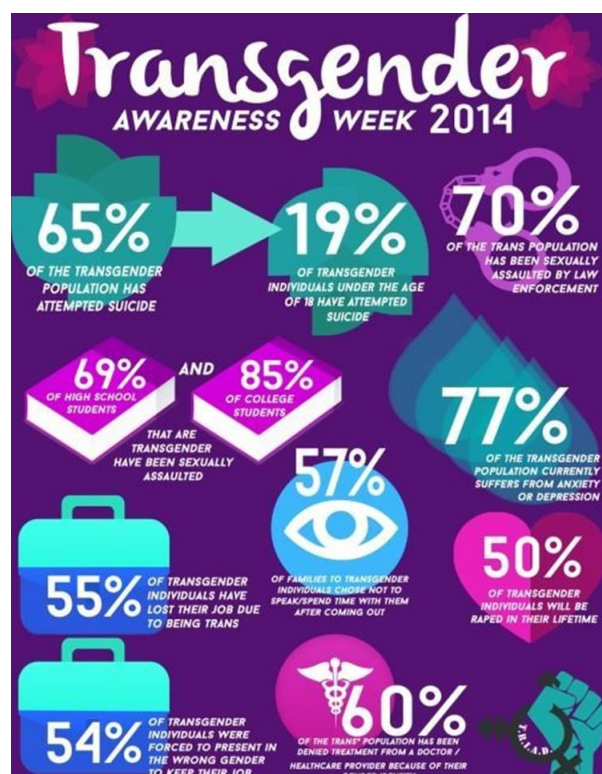
## Why does this matter?

Homophobia and transphobia have devastating impacts on queer lives – they lead to multiple forms of violence:

- The subjective violence of physical and sexual assault, murder
- The symbolic violence of hate speech, discrimination, bullying, intolerance, and othering
- The structural violence of discriminatory laws (including criminalizing homosexuality)

Within heteronormative and homophobic religious discourses, queer lives are marginalized and invalidated until they almost become invisible. Like wider societal intolerance to queer and trans people, religious intolerance serves to dehumanize them, making their lives 'invalid', attaching an immoral label to them, effectively making it far easier to do them harm, and to justify that harm.

Religious homophobia and transphobia will also have a serious impact on queer and trans people who belong to faith communities themselves – we'll discuss that next week.



## Changing times

Read Endsjø, 161-78

The last part of Endsjø's chapter brings home the diversity of views held across and within religious groups when it comes to homosexuality and transgender identities. Some faith communities will be welcoming, while others are utterly intolerant. And members of these communities may well change their views, or rethink religious teachings to come to new understandings.

There is an interesting documentary, created by some biblical scholars and theologians here in New Zealand, where they talk about their own 'journeys' toward questioning Christian condemnation of homosexuality. It's called 'Time for Love' and I've linked to it in the week 5 module, so you can watch it.

But there are also plenty of people who still appeal to religious texts and teachings to justify their homophobia and transphobia. Many of you will have read about Israel Folau's Instagram posts from a couple of years ago – both Patrick Thomsen and Byron Rangiwai have written about this, critiquing Folau and challenging his (mis)interpretation of scripture. Both articles are linked to in the week 5 module, so do take a look. Rangiwai's article in particular details very carefully how biblical texts can be interpreted out of context (as I mentioned above) and how devastating an effect this can have on the lives of queer Christians. There is also a great article by Harriet Winn (a former student of this course!) who critiques both Folau and Brian Tamaki's misuse of the Bible.

Another issue to think about is same-sex marriage (SSM) – when debates were taking place here in NZ and Australia about whether or not to legalize SSM, religious reasons were often used to speak out against this change in the law. We can talk more about this in the tutorial, but do have a read of my article (under the week 5 module) titled 'Religious freedom ... or religious intolerance?' where I discuss religious exemptions to SSM. There are also two videos you can watch –

- Biblical scholar N.T. Wright, who is arguing against SSM on religious (and moral grounds). I find Wright's rhetoric fascinating, as he manages to make SSM sound terribly threatening, as though it poses a great danger to society.
- Maurice Williamson's now-famous speech at the Beehive just before the vote to recognize SSM, where he calls out religious intolerance, and reassures everyone that SSM is no real threat to anyone.