

Homosexuality and Faith:
Comments at the *Scared Spaces, Safe Places*, Panel Discussion
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People who notice details might have observed that the description of this panel that appears on the *Ten Percent Society* literature is different than the one included on the Philosophy and Religion Colloquium announcements. This is intentional; I rewrote it. The original description included the phrases “community of faith” and “people of faith,” terms I’m uncomfortable with as general descriptions of all religions. While faith is central to Christianity, it doesn’t necessarily hold the same weight in other religions. It certainly doesn’t in Judaism. There are plenty of observant Jews who either doubt the existence of God or who don’t believe in God at all.

To be a “good Jew” one must obey the law regardless of what one believes, and there are plenty of reasons to do this other than faith: tradition, family responsibility, community, and love of ritual are but a few. The word *Israel* itself means one who wrestles with God, and there is no reason to think that this doesn’t include wrestling with belief as well as the law.

I am a Jew in part because of an accident of birth and in part because of the theory of justice that lies at Judaism’s core. I appreciate its traditions and rituals, I like its approach to learning, and I value its unabashed embrace of intellectual life. I also really like the food. I suppose that I have faith in some of its assertions, but I am not a Jew irrationally. I am one because I consciously choose to be one based on evidence, argument, and my understanding of the world.

As far as I am concerned, the core story of the Jewish people is one in which Abraham argues with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. He clearly wins the argument. God leaves the conversation before Abraham is finished because God knows that Abraham is right in his assertion that one should not destroy the righteous alongside the wicked. Christianity sees faith as central because of the place of Jesus in the religion. As many contemporary Christians articulate it, one must accept Christ as a personal savior and in doing so, one is redeemed. In short, while Christianity is a religion of faith, Judaism is a religion of duty and calling Jews a people of faith is a misrepresentation of the tradition.

I would like to take this point further to suggest that the terms communities of faith and people of faith are inapplicable in the Christian or any other religious context as well. One does not have faith in a religion; one has faith in the truth of propositions. One may have faith in God’s existence or in the propriety of a law, but one does not have faith in systems of thought. Religions are complex philosophies with ethical, political, and metaphysical components. They have embedded philosophies of history and rules of exegesis, descriptions and prescriptions about life, motivation, and justice. They are sociologies. In short, religions have rational structures that give its adherents a spectrum of possibilities regarding personal choice, textual interpretation, and duty. They are not, as one colleague snidely suggested to me recently, aggregates of “people who happen to believe in the supernatural.”

It is the rational component of religious observance that I wish to emphasize in my comments, and it is this rationality that becomes eclipsed by the terms “community of faith” and “people of faith.” Faith tends to preclude change. One believes or one does not, and, under this model, cognitive change occurs only through fundamental personal alteration, and that’s a lot to ask of any argument. Reason, on the other hand, allows for modification, growth, and personal evolution – a piecemeal examination of oneself and the world around us. It is also worth noting that faith and reason are much more intimately related than we tend to admit. In short, there are rational reasons for believing some religious assertions and for rejecting others. Faith and reason are not mutually exclusive.

Now one might argue that no sophisticated understanding of religion is necessary to understand scriptures. If one takes a “literal” interpretation of the text, if one does precisely what the text suggests without imposing one’s own views, then faith is all one needs to will appropriate action. My response is that no one, despite assertions to the contrary, ever reads the Bible literally – no one.

Obviously, some scriptural passages can be understood exactly as written; I don’t dispute that. However, many of our beliefs and rituals require, at minimum, approximations to practice them in any

commonsensical manner. Consider, for example, the laying on of Tefillin. Orthodox Jews, when they first wake up in the morning take two boxes attached by a leather strap and tie them around their heads and their arms when they pray. The boxes contain scrolls with numerous biblical passages including the passage: “Therefore shall ye lay up these My words in your heart and in your soul; and ye shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes” (Deut. 11:18).

This practice is obviously a narrow interpretation of the law – the Orthodox tie the boxes on the arms and heads so that the scriptures are close to the eyes and the heart, and attached to the hand – but a literal interpretation of this passage is impossible. They cannot *actually* write the words in their heart, and although they temporarily tie the passages to their hand, they are not bound irreversibly. When the rabbis developed this practice, they did so in a manner that would ensure that the ritual would not violate common sense. Literalism is always necessarily limited.

Biblical exegesis is a complicated matter and all interpretations require judgments. Let us ignore for the time being that almost no one in this room reads the text in its original language. Let us also ignore that every stitch of evidence suggests that the Bible has been edited, re-ordered, and supplemented over the years based on the cultural and political attitudes of the times. And let us forget that the sanctioned scriptures represent only a fragment of what might be included.¹ Instead, let us deal with the text itself, in English, in familiar forms, and given the nature of this panel, let us do so by focusing on the issue of homosexuality.

According to my copy of the *Tenakh* (The Hebrew Bible), Leviticus 18:22 reads “thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind; it is an abomination.”ⁱⁱⁱ The key term is lie, which is also used in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* and the King James translation. It is generally assumed that “lie” here means have sex with, but this is not a literal interpretation of the text. “Lie” here is either a euphemism or a colloquialism. If we were understand it literally, as best as I can figure it, what it would preclude is same sex naps.

Actually, to take the point further, what the text actually precludes is taking naps with all of the men in the world at one time, or at least not taking a nap with all of the men in the world in the same way as one does with all of the women in the world. And, given that many of the readers of the text are women, it doesn’t preclude lesbian naps, only gay-male naps, since its prohibition applies to mankind but not womankind. Now, one might respond by asserting that the bible assumes its audience to be

male and that we have to adjust the relevant nouns when we change the readership, therefore lesbian naps are also prohibited. Fair enough, but this itself is an assumption, or, perhaps, if you would prefer, an educated judgment. It is something we bring to the text. No matter how you look at it, what it isn’t is a literal interpretation.ⁱⁱⁱ

My point here is not to engage in detailed Biblical interpretation. If it were, this discussion would be a failure. My method is shockingly unsophisticated. It is, I admit, downright silly. But it is not nearly as silly as the position I oppose. My point is that textual interpretation requires judgments, assumptions, and contextual knowledge. There is no such thing as a literal interpretation at all; people who claim to do it either don’t know any better or are lying.

The purpose of all of these comments is to prepare all of you for our task. *The Ten Percent Society* asks us how we can make space for traditionally marginalized people in organized religion and my response is that the first step is to start thinking about religions like a bunch of adults. Children hold their breath, cover their ears, and sing when they don’t want to hear what someone has to say; grown-ups shouldn’t do this. Children think that things happen without reason, without histories, without baggage. Adults shouldn’t think this. Children seek contextless magic, but adults understand that smoke and mirrors are components of every trick. To seek literal scriptural interpretation or religion based solely on faith is to seek compartmentalized explanations that are in opposition to everything else we know about the world. This does science, human judgments, and religion itself a terrible disservice. It infantilizes the human race.

Instead, we need to treat religions as what they are – sophisticated articulations of cultural truths that have evolved over time in order to provide spectra of answers to life’s difficult questions; theological and philosophical systems that give guidance to human action while trying to articulate humanity’s place in the universe. Religions ought to be treated with respect not with unsophisticated obstinance.

As our knowledge increases, and as our awareness of what justice increases, our religious systems must be modified to incorporate new information. Otherwise, our religions give up all claims to the truth and become reduced to narcissistic fairy tales designed to make us feel better about our bigoted decisions. The ever-expanding sphere of justice is telling us that gays, lesbians, bisexuals, the transgendered, and the queer are all entitled to equal justice in our society. It is

time for our religions to reflect this fact if they do not do so already.

There is no point in me telling you what Judaism has to say about homosexuality. Since most of you do not subscribe to its tenets, its conclusions will be largely irrelevant to your lives. Instead, I will simply summarize: Judaism says what most other religions say about the topic: it tells us what people who came before us have thought and it gives us a structure to assist in our own deliberations. It incorporates a multiplicity of attitudes about homosexuality into an often inconsistent theory of the good life that remains open to interpretation and change. Jewish denominations disagree about how liberal or conservative this understanding should be, but in the end, they are all subordinate to one religious reality: regarding homosexuality, Judaism, like all other religions, anticipates whatever it is we bring with us to the table.

Footnotes

ⁱ The four canonical gospels are not the sole existing ones. The Gospel of Thomas, for example, portrays a very different picture of Jesus than the Matthew, Mark, John, and Luke, and the consequences of the newly discovered Gospel of Judas are yet to be known.

ⁱⁱ Published by the Jewish Publication Society of America.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leviticus 20:13 also uses the term *lie* to refer to what may be homosexual sex, although this time the indirect object is singular and refers to a man not mankind. Deuteronomy prohibits men being sodomites and women whores – we’ll get to that in a minute – and Romans 1 26-27 is a bit more complicated. The *New Oxford Annotated Bible* reads:

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, [27] and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

In contrast, the King James reads:

For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: [27] And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet.

These are pretty different translations. I’m not sure I can even adequately parse the latter one, but the more important question is simply “How does one choose between the two?” Clearly, one cannot follow one *literally*

without rejecting the other one. Instead, we have to adjust the texts to their approximate meanings.

The key terms in each of these passages are “shameful” and “natural,” vague terms that do not themselves suggest any particular type of sex.

For example, consider the term ‘natural.’ In the Western tradition, it has had three separate meanings: occurring in nature, that which is common, and that which is morally forbidden. History of its use is a history of equivocation, of people changing the meaning without letting the audience in on the shift. Thus, we often make the jump from one meaning to another without rational defense. In this context, natural cannot mean occurring in nature – humans are natural creatures and thus homosexuality, by definition, occurs. It can’t mean uncommon either, because many uncommon things are perfectly appropriate – studying philosophy is quite uncommon but I am not an abomination. If, then, it means morally forbidden, then all the assertion seems to say is one should not engage in morally forbidden sex acts. Fair enough, but the passage never indicates what those sex acts are. It only tells us that morally forbidden sex acts are those sex acts that are morally forbidden.ⁱⁱⁱ Tautologies are rarely helpful.

This leaves only the term “sodomite” to deal with, but this too is problematic since the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was not homosexuality but lack of hospitality. God punishes their citizens for threatening his angels but the nature of the threatening act is vague. Even if we are to assume that the mob goes through with their intent to “know” the angels, there is no way to distinguish between the scriptural condemnation of homosexual rape, rape in general, or just abuse. Given the norms of the time, poor treatment of visitors is likely the most disgraceful act attributed to the people in the story. It is also worth mentioning that the King James Version of the story explicitly includes both men and women in the angry mob. If women assault men, it is not homosexual rape.