

INTERVIEW

Mark Jordan is the author of *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*. As the title suggests, Jordan tackles a controversial and weighty task: He seeks to discount the use of the term "sodomy" as a category used to condemn gay and lesbian people by unmasking it as a late-in-coming invention.

As Jordan and I sat on the patio of a small coffee shop and discussed lesbian and gay Chris-

Religion

tian theology, we managed to raise the eyebrows of at least one worker, who may have been surprised to hear two gay men discussing Christianity while he was taking out the trash.

Is it possible to be lesbian or gay and Christian?

If by Christian you mean a real Christian, that is, someone who responds to the revelation God made in Jesus, then the answer is emphatically yes. There are dozens of definitions of "lesbian" or "gay," and 10 times that many definitions of "Christian." So the question will quickly come down—as often in theology—to a discussion of who gets to set the definitions.

I think there is difference between asking, "Can I be a Christian and gay?" and asking "Can I be a Catholic and gay?" or "Can I be a Methodist and gay?"

Do you think we should reject the teachings of the denominations in which we grew up?

At their best, denominations show us different versions of Christian truth. But their emphases may be important reminders of things we would rather forget. Lesbian and gay Christians have been tempted to live as if we didn't need any of those old patterns for our lives, because we judged that our denominations were wrong on the issue of homosexuality. Now, though, we have to ask ourselves, "How do we live outside the closet as homosexual Christians? How is being a gay Christian different from being gay secular or gay Buddhist?" The traditional wisdom of our denominations can be very helpful in taking up those questions.

What do you think about groups like Metropolitan Community Church, the mostly lesbian and gay denomination founded by Troy Perry in 1968?

Part of the genius of MCC is the genius of peacekeeping—of not fighting over details of the incarnation or what exactly happens to the bread in the commemoration of the Lord's Supper. I don't know how long that delicate peace can continue.

Certain questions are hard for Christians to avoid. For example, does the authority go to the individual, to the majority of the community, to certain officials in the community, to some doctrinal statement? Similar questions have divided Christians for 2,000 years, and no group has succeeded in postponing them for long. Of course, I would prefer that we did keep peace in the Christian household—not just for lesbian and gay reasons, but for ecumenical reasons. Christian quarreling is always ugly.

Are we doing Christianity more good by staying in Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian and other mainline churches, or do we do more good by leaving them in favor of MCC and gay denominational groups like Dignity in the Catholic Church and the Methodist group Affirmation?

That is the most urgent question. And it's one that a gay or lesbian Christian can only answer individually, in prayer. Great spiritual discernment is required in this prayer. You need to ask

Reclaiming the word

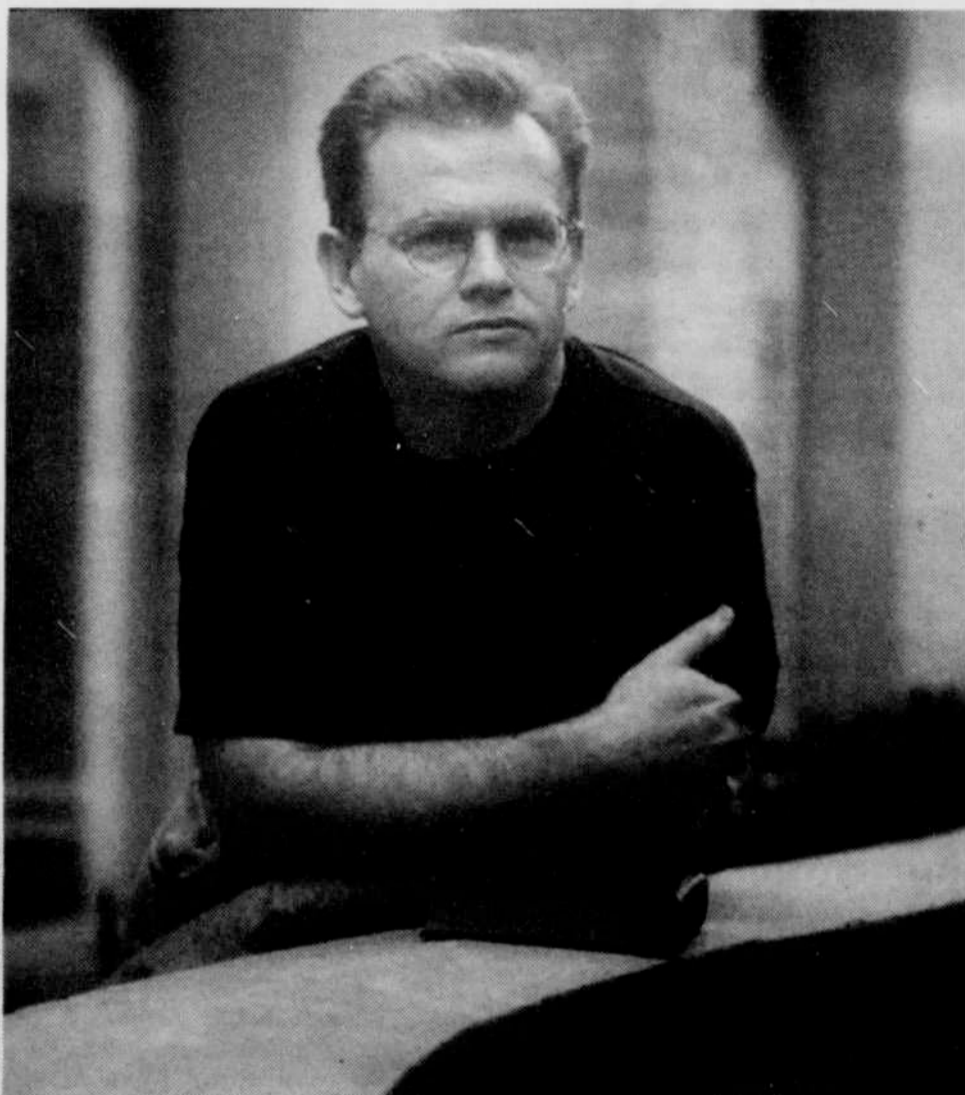
The idea of sodomy has been used to bar gays from Christianity, but one theologian says that's the church talking, not God

by Gip Plaster

yourself, for example, how angry you are and how much you are suffering. There is no point walking out Sunday after Sunday from your congregation either crying or raging. You can't worship. And it may be, moreover, that certain denominations cannot be reformed. God may mean for them to disappear.

In general, Christians seem to have sort of strange—and inaccurate—ideas about what the Bible says. Why is that?

The Bible has been preached that way, for one thing. A lot of effort has gone into producing bad Biblical interpretations that reinforce prevailing social prejudices about homosexuality. A hundred and fifty years ago, similar efforts were made to use the Bible to reinforce the interests of slaveholders.



Mark Jordan

But the larger issue here has to do with our assumptions about what the Bible means and what kind of answers it gives to moral questions. One man asked me at a book signing whether I had ever read Leviticus 18, where it says, roughly speaking, that it is an abomination for a man to "lie with a man as with a woman." He assumed that if I had ever read it, I would instantly know better than to live as a homosexual. I answered that I had not only read it, but had used my faltering Hebrew to try to read it in the original. I then added that it's very hard to know how any verse in Leviticus 18 applies to a modern Christian. The chapter is part of the holiness code that imposed standards of purity or "cleanness" on adult male Israelites. But by that point I had begun to push against my questioner's fundamental assumptions, or fears.

Americans sometimes seem to act as if the Bible were originally written in English.

If God had wanted the original Bible in English, God would have caused it to be written in English. But God caused the Bible to be written in Hebrew and a common street version of Greek. We ought to remember and respect that divine choice.

Let's talk a little about your new book, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*. Tell me about it.

In the process of writing the book I made a historical discovery, which is that the category "sodomy" appears very late in moral theology. I think that I can pinpoint when and where it was coined as a theological term—around the year 1050 by the religious reformer Peter Damian.

And what application does your finding have for our lives?

One conclusion is that "sodomy" is worthless as a category for serious theology. It was glued together out of paradoxes, misreadings and equivocations. That makes it even more peculiar that this particular theological category got written into English and American law as the main category

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under which we homosexuals were persecuted. I want to show how illegitimate the category always has been.

Who will want to read your book?

Despite the fact that it has footnotes, I didn't intend the book mainly for an academic audience—though of course I wanted my scholarship to be sound. I intended the book primarily for those who are still being wounded by condemnations of homosexuality as sodomy. I wanted to say to them, "Look, there's no reason to bleed. The supposed arguments that are being wielded against you are, in fact, theologically incoherent."

Did writing the book change you spiritually?

It did and it does, in ways I don't yet understand. In the course of writing the book I've become more and more radical in my consideration of future alternatives. At the start, I positioned myself very deliberately as a dissenting Catholic. Now I think that my position may be something else, somewhere else. God may want more prophetic and radical responses to the churchly persecution of homosexuals. And my

future as a teacher or writer may be in specifically gay and lesbian churches.

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Do you think the book will have an effect on your readers spiritually, too?

My hope has always been that the primary effect would be to release some anger and bring about some consolation: anger that the church has distorted the tradition, consolation that this distortion isn't from God.

We've talked a little about overcoming what some people think the Bible says about homosexuality. Do you believe the Bible says things that are supportive of gay and lesbian people?

There are no homosexuals in the Christian Bible. But then there aren't any heterosexuals, either. "Homosexual" and "heterosexual" are categories invented barely 100 years ago. They don't figure in the Bible any more than the categories "American" or "Republican." There are passages in the Bible that speak about erotic relations between some members of the same sex, but these passages cannot be made into generalizations about homosexuality. The hard issue is how you get from these very old texts, written in and for dead cultures, to your own life circumstances.

Then what?

Once you settle that question, you will discover many passages that speak to homosexuals. Some of these are passages about same-sex love—like David and Jonathan or Ruth and Naomi. Others will be passages about less likely figures—say, about eunuchs, a marginalized and badly understood sexual minority. We should also remember that earlier versions of the Gospels may have contained more explicitly homoerotic material—for example, the story in the "secret Gospel of Mark" about the young man who became Jesus' special companion, of whom there remains only the tantalizing mention in Mark 14:51-52.

Which parts of the Bible seem most supportive to you?

The most supportive passages for me are those about the sufferings required of God's chosen ones—of the Israelites in Egypt, of the prophets in Israel, of Jesus and his followers. And doesn't Jesus talk directly to lesbian and gay Christians when he says things like, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account" (Matthew 5:11)? That is the Bible saying something very supportive to homosexuals—very supportive, but not very easy. You have to weigh these words from the Lord against the disgust at same-sex desire that Paul expresses in Romans 1 and elsewhere.

So how do we justify being gay and Christian? Do we simply ignore the parts of the Bible that trouble us?

I don't think we can ignore anything that's in the Bible, but I think the Bible is not one book. It's a whole library of books, spoken in a lot of different voices with varying relevance to us in the present. It's crucial to remember—and now I'm really talking like a Catholic—that the Bible is for the sake of the Christian community, not the other way around. The Bible is a privileged instrument for God's teaching humankind, but it is only an instrument. The heart of Christianity is not a text; it's being in love for a living God. The Bible has authority only so far as it ministers to that love.

The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology by Mark Jordan. University of Chicago, 1997; \$24.95 cloth.