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### Review of Morris' "When Brothers Dwell in Unity: Byzantine Christianity and Homosexuality"

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Stephen Morris.** *When Brothers Dwell in Unity: Byzantine Christianity and Homosexuality* Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2016. 227 pp. ISBN (print) 978-0-786-9517-7; ISBN (ebook) 978-1-4766-2214-9.

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Stephen Morris's book offers a specific viewpoint in an intensely debated field of research. The author's specific approach has its advantages over other publications, which only describe some of the responses of the Byzantine Christian society to "suspicious sexual relationships;" the author relates these advantages of his work to its holistic characteristic: it is "all together in one study" (10).

The author's reflective assessment of his book is largely confirmed by its discussion on the various historical social and cultural layers in which these "responses" were given, including Byzantine monastic attitudes, liturgical practices, canon law, biblical commentary, imperial politics, and the impact of all of these upon same-sex relationships, second marriages, and other unconventional forms (at least for the period under study) of marital relations between the sexes. As for his consideration of these problems, Morris displays a differentiated approach to the various spheres of Byzantine society, specifically to Byzantine Christianity; this has enabled him to discover, behind the facade of the often unequivocally perceived "Holy Tradition," a variety of beliefs, evaluations, and solutions. His study devotes special attention to the changing behavior of the Church, showing a tendency to adapt to social realities with respect to divorce and second and third marriages, the varying severity of penalties for same-sex relationships, etc.

Behind what might seem to outside observers as a conservative ecclesiastic life, the author traces the historical trends of flexibility, cultural evolution, and changing ideas regarding “sinful” or “suspicious” marital practices and sexual relationships.

The author presents a comparative analysis of the approaches taken by civil law and the Church to various kinds of criminal behavior in this sphere, and discusses these in the context of canon. Moreover, he focuses on one more dividing line relevant to these issues: that which separates civil and canon law, which severely condemned such conduct, from the actual punitive practice, which not rarely showed lenience and selectivity in its judgments. The author not simply registers the fact of this contrast, but explains it as due to various social and cultural considerations, including the position, within the social hierarchy, of the specific individual subject to punishment, and the role of that individual in the male-male sexual relationship, the application of punishments not in view of social morality, but in the interest of the ruler, etc. These adaptive strategies are viewed in the book across several centuries of history, and are seen as specific results of the changing cultural contexts and standards.

In this respect, in addition to its informative value, the book has a specific cognitive impact inasmuch as it breaks with certain prejudicial clichés, cultural enigma images, and traditional everyday representations. In the last part of the book, “Conclusions and Reflections”, Morris offers what seems to be an excessively severe and generalizing critique of previous historical research, but the author’s ambition has been to stand apart from the ghettoizing ways of thinking in relevant studies: “Queer studies and medieval studies both operate with ghetto mentalities” (169). On this basis, the author is able to fulfill the larger-scaled program of his work, suggested in the introductory part of the book, to achieve a retrospective historical and theoretical integration of the marginalized other, though in the guise of a specific cultural figure and role.

My personal belief is that the author has achieved this goal in some aspects, but not quite in others.

The great religious traditions are a global phenomenon, but they function in culturally different local contexts. In many places within the book, the author has indicated this correlation in theoretical and historical terms, a correlation that in our times is becoming increasingly one-directional, going from changes in the secular “context” to those in the sacral. At the same time, the main task the author sets himself to in his study is quite different from this theoretical and historical “lesson.” His task rather concerns expected present-day changes in the institutional, internal, ecclesiastic sphere of Orthodox Christianity, changes that would be motivated by the past historical practices of adaptation described in his study: “How has this gradual adaptation and modification of teaching and practice functioned in the past? Can it function again now as society is currently coming to terms with those who are ‘homosexual’ . . . ?” (1).

The author even supports this pragmatic goal of the analysis by relating it to a specific historical tradition and practice that existed in Byzantine Christianity: “. . . the church can see the male-brotherhood relationship as a distinct form, though the functional equivalent of marriage” (13). With regard to this applied functionalist aspect of the study, I myself would refrain from using the designations under which the author himself anticipates he might be criticized: “advocacy scholarship” or “special pleading” (15). But the task of the study, as the author, himself, has narrowly defined it, seems to permit an instrumental use of an historical topic, thereby making research less freely open to the cognitive challenges of creative imagination.

This preset task has some unproductive consequences for the course of Morris’s analysis, which may be pointed out as follows:

- 1) He presents some rather general conclusions, which do not follow convincingly from the sources and the discussion but *do* support the author's admission that he is "arguing from silence" (93) due to the lack of sufficient documentary evidence and proof. These include the claim that "*adelphopoia* service was . . . considered to be and functioned as a 'gay marriage'" (93) in the later history of Byzantine Christianity; the assertion that Justinian's law against male-male sexual relations was applied chiefly as a political tool against his opponents (56-58); the conclusion that "Sex, in all its forms, was a primary interest of the first monks" (38).
- 2) Although the author fits the basic concepts he uses within their historical meaning and designations in specific periods, in some of the titles of the separate parts of the book (at times given in quotation marks) and in the title of the whole book, the modern designations of the same concepts are used, e.g., "homosexuality", "gay male", "gay marriage". This creates the false impression that the phenomena and concepts of the historical past are identical with those of today, so that the historical may be applied to the present.
- 3) In the author's multifaceted analysis of the critique of male-male sexual relations made by John Chrysostom (99-136), in places, Morris's cultural-historical approach cedes place to a psychological interpretation, and theoretical analysis, to emotions: the author belittles Chrysostom's critique, in *Against the Opponents of Monasticism*, of the sexual instrumentalization of the other, of the hierarchically dependent and subjected individual, and ascribes it to personal biographical facts in the theologian's life rather than to a value stance in support of equality and mutuality in human relations.

Even so, researchers and the broader reading public have before them an interesting book that holds a definite place and presents a definite stance in the debate relevant to the theme in question.