

**Judaism** and then for **Pauline Christianity**. The designation of homosexual relations as an "abomination" or "abominable crime" in medieval and modern sacral and legal texts echoes the wording of the Old Testament.

The complex web of prohibitions recorded in the Book of Leviticus has defied full explanation from the standpoint of comparative religion. Recently influential among social scientists (though not among Biblical scholars) has been the interpretation of the anthropologist Mary Douglas (*Purity and Danger*, London, 1967), who views the abominations as part of a concern with the boundaries of classification categories, strict adherence to which attests one's purity in relation to divinity.

### ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS

According to the French Catholic Orientalist Louis Massignon (1883–1962), the Abrahamic religions are the three major faiths—**Judaism, Christianity, Islam**—that look to the patriarch Abraham as their spiritual father. In their belief systems, Abraham ranks as the first monotheist who rejected the pagan divinities and their idols and worshipped the true God who revealed himself to him. (Modern scholars have concluded that the book of Genesis is a historical novel written only after the return of the exiles from the Babylonian captivity, and that monotheism in fact began with Akhenaten, the heretical pharaoh of Egypt in the fourteenth century B.C. But completely eradicated in Egypt itself after his death, Akhenaten's innovations left no resonance except for their possible survival in the neighboring Israelite monarchy, which began its rule under Egyptian cultural hegemony.)

All the Abrahamic religions proscribe homosexual behavior, a taboo that derives from the Holiness Code of the book of Leviticus and the legend of **Sodom** as these were received in Palestinian and then Hellenistic Judaism between the fifth

century B.C. and the first century, when the writings of such Jewish apologists as **Philo Judaeus** and **Flavius Josephus** show it in a fully developed form. Thus the negative attitude of all three faiths has a single **Old Testament** source; its reception in Christianity is secondary and in Islam tertiary, the Islamic tradition having mainly been shaped by Nestorian Christianity of the early seventh century. All three contrast in the most striking manner with the role that homosexual behavior and the art and literature inspired by homoerotic feeling played in Greco-Roman paganism—a legacy that the medieval and modern world has never been able fully to suppress or disavow, but which has driven scholars and translators to acts of censorship and artful silence when confronted with texts and artifacts bequeathed by the ancient civilizations.

The claim of homophobic propagandists that the prohibition of homosexuality is universal rests essentially upon its proscription in the Abrahamic religions, which have primarily condemned male homosexuality. Lesbianism is nowhere mentioned in the **Old Testament**, the **New Testament**, or the **Koran**. The passage in Romans 1:26 that has often been interpreted as referring to lesbian sexuality actually concerns another Old Testament myth, the sexual union of the "sons of God" and the "daughters of men" in Genesis 6:1–4. The association of Sodom's twin city of Gomorrah with lesbianism is an accretion of the later Middle Ages and confined to Latin Christianity.

As for the texts in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, modern critical scholarship has identified them as part of a legal novella from the Persian period, and the entire Mosaic Law as a document compiled by Ezra and the "men of the Great Assembly" in the years 458–444 B.C., hence long after the return of the exiles from the Babylonian Captivity. The account of the destruction of Sodom is a geographical legend inspired by the salinization and aridity of the shores of the Dead Sea, a result of the

lowering of the prehistoric water level that exposed the barren vicinity to full view. The book of Genesis and its later elaboration in Christian and Islamic legend have in their totality been dismissed from history, as modern scholars with access to Egyptian and Mesopotamian sources now conclude that the authors of the Old Testament had no knowledge of any historic event earlier than 1500 B.C. and that there was no urban culture in Palestine in the so-called patriarchal age.

While Jewish communal life in Palestine laid the foundations, the prohibition on homosexual behavior could not be enlarged into a Kantian imperative for all humanity without a Hellenic supplement. Some Greek thinkers had independently formulated a condemnation of homosexuality on philosophical and ethical grounds, the chief of which was that sexuality was intended by nature solely for the purpose of procreation. But this view remained a philosopher's dictum with no support in religion or mythology. It was Judaism that brought to the question the uncompromising prohibitions of Leviticus and the accompanying death penalty, a sanction exemplified by the myth of the destruction of Sodom. The four lines of attack—philosophical, ethical, legal-religious, and mythical—converged in Philo Judaeus (ca. 20 B.C.—ca.A.D. 45), who formulated in flawless Attic prose the arguments that Christianity was to adopt as the basis for the intolerance of homosexuality in its own civilization.

The enforcement of the taboo in the three Abrahamic religions is quite another matter. For most of its history Judaism lacked the state power with which to impose the Levitical death penalty, but could resort to ostracism and exclusion from the Jewish community. Christianity, and above all Latin Christianity, succeeded in creating not just a fearsome legal prohibition, but also an intolerant public opinion that mercilessly ostracized not just those guilty of "unnatural vice," but even those accused or merely suspected of it,

and so burdened even exclusive homosexuals with the mask of a heterosexual identity. Islam, even after adopting this part of the Abrahamic tradition, never effectively superimposed it upon the more tolerant folkways of the Mediterranean societies which it conquered and won to its faith, but even allowed homoerotic literature to flourish in the languages cultivated by its adherents, though plastic art celebrating male beauty was restricted by dogmatic opposition to image-making.

Louis Massignon composed a work entitled *Les trois prières d'Abraham, II, La prière sur Sodome* (1930), inspired by Abraham's intercession for the Sodomites in Genesis 18, in which he professed to have discovered the "spiritual causes of inversion." It is the most sophisticated piece of theological homophobia the twentieth century has produced. A summary of his ideas appears in "Les trois prières d'Abraham, père de tous les croyants," *Dieu Vivant*, 13 (1949), 20-23.

However deep-seated and tradition-hallowed the prohibition of homosexuality in the Abrahamic religions may be, it stems in the last analysis from pre-scientific ignorance and superstition and not from beliefs accredited by modern science and philosophy. The contemporary gay liberation movement may be regarded as a rejection of the Abrahamic tradition in regard to homosexuality and a return to the more tolerant and accepting attitude of Greco-Roman paganism, even though some gay activists seek to sanction their beliefs in the guise of pseudo-Christian or pseudo-Jewish communities. On the other hand, the unanimity of the three religions authorizes their adherents to collaborate in good faith against gay liberation and other goals of sexual reform, however much they have hated, shunned, and even persecuted one another over the centuries because of their mutually exclusive claims to be the sole revealed religion.

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### ABU NUWAS (CA. 757–CA. 814)

Arab poet. One of the greatest of all Arab writers, Abu Nuwas was the outstanding poet of the Abbasid era (750–1258). Abu Nuwas al-Hasan ibn Hani al-Hakami was born in Al-Ahwaz; his father was from southern Arabia and his mother was Persian. His first teacher was the poet Waliba ibn al-Hubab (died 786), a master who initiated him into the joys of pederasty as well as poetry.

Abu Nuwas continued his education in theology and grammar, after which he decided to try his luck as an author in the capital city of Baghdad. Here he soon acquired great fame as a poet who excelled in lyrical love poetry (*ghazal*), in lampoons and satire, and in *mujun*—frivolous and humorous descriptions of indecent or obscene matters. He became the boon companion of the Caliph Al-Amin (ruled 809–813), son and successor of the illustrious Harun ar-Rashid (ruled 786–809). His irresistible humor and irony made him a favorite figure in popular stories of the Arab world, where he played the role of court jester. (He makes several appearances in *The Thousand and One Nights*.)

Abu Nuwas's favorite themes were wine and boys. He was one of the first Arab poets to write lyrical love poetry about boys, and his genius brought the genre to great heights. His preferred type of youth was the pale gazelle, whose face shone like the moon, with roses on his cheeks and ambergris in his long curly hair, with musk in his kisses and pearls between his lips, with firm boyish buttocks, a slender and supple body, and a clear voice. Beardless boys held the greatest attraction—the growth of hair on the cheek was likened to that of apes—but

here also Abu Nuwas flouted social norms by describing down on the cheek as erotically appealing, since it preserved beauty from indiscreet glances and gave a different flavor to kisses.

The only woman who played an important part in his life was Janan, a slave girl, but, because of his libertine conduct, she never trusted the sincerity of his love. When she asked him to renounce his love of boys, he refused, saying that he was one of the "people of Lot," with reference to the Arab view that the Biblical Lot was the founder of homosexual love. Abu Nuwas was sexually interested in women or girls only when they looked like boys, but even then he considered their vagina too dangerous a gulf to cross. As he said (symbolically): "I have a pencil which stumbles if I use it on the front of the paper, but which takes great strides on the back." Lesbianism he derided as pointless: "It is fat rubbed up by fat, and nothing more. And rub as one may, when down to bare skin, there is nothing to rise in response. There is no wicked shaft that is smooth at the tip to drive itself home and sink into place."

Abu Nuwas was notorious for his mockery and satire, in which the sexual intemperance of women and the sexual passivity of men were favorite themes. A lot of people, even those in high places, were verbally "buggered" by him: "Your penis would not be soft if you did not widen your anus!" Such verbal abuse landed him in prison twice; he was also jailed once for drinking wine.

He liked to shock society by writing openly about things which transgressed the norms and values of Islam. For example, he was probably the first Arab poet to write about the taboo subject of masturbation, which he declared to be inferior to the love of boys, but preferable to marriage. He did not hide his "sinful" behavior behind a cloak of silence, as was expected in Islam; instead he openly boasted of his love of boys and wine: "Away with hypocrisy . . . discreet debauchery means little to me. I want to enjoy everything in broad