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 confessed 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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