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Religious Archives Network

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Wanted: LGBT Religious History

Addressing LGBTRAN's second-anniversary dinner, John D'Emilio calls for comprehensive historical research into American LGBT religious movements.

By James Waller

April 16, 2004

Chicago Theological Seminary

Gay historian John D'Emilio knows that history—historical study and research—can really change the world. He has firsthand experience in helping it happen.

In the summer of 2003, D'Emilio was among a group of LGBT scholars, including fellow historian George Chauncey, working together at Indiana University's Kinsey Institute. It was while they were there that the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its landmark *Texas v. Lawrence* decision nullifying state antisodomy statutes. The decision, D'Emilio said, was “of special interest among the group because the lead defense lawyers had gone to George to prepare an amicus brief, and I'd been invited to join in that.”

On the morning of June 26, D'Emilio and his colleagues arrived at the institute to learn that the justices, by a 6 to 3 vote, had ruled against Texas, overturning the court's 1986 antigay decision in *Bowers v. Hardwick*. “We were amazingly happy,” D'Emilio said. The happiness they felt was intensified, a short time later, when they read the majority opinion text, which had been posted on the web. To their astonishment, Justice Anthony M. Kennedy, writing for the court, had used a historical argument to bolster the court's conclusion that antisodomy laws are unconstitutional.

“We really felt we made a contribution,” said D'Emilio, who told this story to the gathering assembled for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Religious Archives Network's second-anniversary dinner, held at Chicago Theological Seminary on April 16. The story served as a preamble to his remarks, in which he focused on the need for comprehensive historical research on LGBT religious movements in the United States from the mid-20th century through today.

Citing the “huge amount” of work that LGBT historians have produced over the past two decades—on topics ranging from medicine and homosexuality, to McCarthy-era antigay hysteria, to gay men and women's roles in World War II—D'Emilio expressed concern that American queer religious history is “not on this list.” On the one hand, D'Emilio said, he finds this paradoxical, in that what he called the single most important work of LGBT history yet published, John Boswell's 1980 book *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, focused on religion, as did the first important modern historical study of homosexuality, Derrick

Sherwin Bailey's *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, published in England in 1955.

But D'Emilio, who directs the program in Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, also understands the reluctance that many LGBT historians feel about working on queer religious history. For many people, he said, "religion is the first place that we experienced pain around our sexuality." He speculated that this may be a reason that he "has never even been able to persuade a student to do a term paper on religion and homosexuality."

Nonetheless, the absence of a "deeply researched historical study" of LGBT movements in American religion over the past five decades bothers D'Emilio. "It troubles me because I believe in a more complete history," he said, "but it also troubles me for a more practical reason." D'Emilio explained that, in the pre-Stonewall era, homosexuality was viewed as a "sickness, a crime, and a sin."

"Well," he said, "in 1973 the American Psychological Association got rid of 'sickness.' In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court got rid of 'crime.' But 'sin' still hasn't been gotten rid of." That is, in the religious sphere, there's been no event comparable to the APA's removal of homosexuality from the list of pathologies in its diagnostic manual nor to the Supreme Court's *Texas v. Lawrence* decision.

According to D'Emilio, the historical research that could help counter the conception of homosexuality as "sin" is especially needed today, when controversies over same-sex marriage are roiling the United States. "Marriage is a moment when we are blessed and declared to be holy," he said, "and we are fighting to be declared holy and without sin. That's the symbolic fight. If we were to begin doing serious history of homosexuality and religion in the U.S.—especially if that history were the story of struggle—we would implicitly be challenging impressive notions of timelessness." It's those notions of timelessness, D'Emilio indicated, that lie at the core of arguments against same-sex marriage.

In introducing D'Emilio to the April 16 gathering, LGBTRAN chair Neil Gerdes called him "one of our most distinguished scholars." D'Emilio, the author of many books and articles, is best known for his groundbreaking 1983 study, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970*. His most recent book is *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, a biography of the gay civil rights leader who planned the 1963 March on Washington.

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James Waller, a Brooklyn, New York-based writer, is a member of the LGBTRAN Advisory Committee.