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Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe

By John Boswell

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Both highly praised and intensely controversial, this brilliant book produces dramatic evidence that at one time the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches not only sanctioned unions between partners of the same sex, but sanctified them--in ceremonies strikingly similar to heterosexual marriage ceremonies.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The acceptance and sanctification of homosexual relations in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches during Medieval Europe are examined in this scholarly work.

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From Library Journal

Not since Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1981) have Christians of all creeds confronted a work that makes them look so closely at their notions of the relationship between the church and its gay and lesbian believers. Diligently researched and documented, this immensely scholarly work covers everything from the "paired" saints of Perpetua and Felicitas and Serge and Bacchus to lesbian transvestites in Albania. Examining evidence that the early church celebrated a same-sex nuptial liturgy, Boswell compares both Christian same-sex unions to Christian heterosexual unions and non-Christian same-sex unions to non-Christian heterosexual unions. Appendixes contain, among other things, translations and transcriptions of cited documents. Whether or not minds are changed on the matter will probably fall along sectarian lines, according to current attitudes on homosexuality. However, the work will provoke dialog. A groundbreaking book for academic, public, and theological libraries.

--Lee Arnold, *Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, Philadelphia

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From [Booklist](#)

When Boswell published his *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* in 1980, he touched off a firestorm among antigay Christian and gay polemicists that rages to this day. He contended there was great tolerance and even acceptance of the unions of same-sex couples in premodern Europe. Indeed, actual rituals uniting such couples with the Christian church's blessing exist in the documentary record. In this long-gestated companion to his controversial landmark study, Boswell produces those rituals in translation, argues for how he has translated them, summarizes the histories of both heterosexual matrimony and same-sex unions in the Greco-Roman world, presents the views of early Christianity on heterosexual and same-sex couplings, traces the development of nuptial offices in the church, compares heterosexual and same-sex ceremonies of union, and discusses the checkered history of tolerance for same-sex unions during the Middle Ages. Throughout his presentation, three qualities predominate: lucidity in the writing; scrupulous scholarly documentation of factual statements and propositions (on many pages, more space is taken up by footnotes than main text); and great caution in distinguishing the sexual expectations of two-person relationships in ancient times from those presumed today--preoccupation with sex is very much a modern phenomenon. Although a rare book for the public library, it may, like its predecessor, be a vital one. *Ray Olson*

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