

AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE OF HOMOSEXUALITY AMONG THE AFRICAN PEOPLE

OBASOLA, KEHINDE E. Ph.D

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES
OLABISI ONABANJO UNIVERSITY
AGO-IWOYE.

EMAIL: blessnuel@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

It is sad to note that the culture of homosexuality which is a form of sexual perversity has enveloped the world and it has become a canker worm eating into every fabric of society and leaving in its trail tales of woes as it has negatively impacted the lives of not only those involved in the act, but has brought about a negative image for the Church who is suppose to be a harbinger of hope for the world. Interestingly, the Church is enmeshed in series of contradicting controversies which has dented the image of the Church and as such, she is losing grip over the essential responsibility she has over the spiritual as well as the social lives of the people whom she is to cater for. Consequently, the issue of homosexuality has become a cancer that is eating into the live of the Church with the ordination of gay bishops and the recognition given to the group by various peoples and governments. It is in this light that the paper delved into the response of the African people on the issue claiming that homosexuality is un-African and it is culturally unacceptable. The paper posited that homosexuality is unethical and unnatural. Therefore, it should be condemned in strong terms.

Introduction

The homosexual debate has recently gained more intensity the world over. Even in Nigeria, strident voices are asserting their viewpoints either to affirm or debunk the morality behind the homosexual saga which now pervade the human race to the intent that man is now at the throes of this human epidemic. It is interesting to note that man has lost every sense of dignity and moralism and there is an open declaration by both men and women for homosexual desires. On March 11, 2009, hundreds of gays and lesbians were reported to have stormed the National Assembly apparently under foreign influence to protest against a Bill prohibiting same sex marriage by homosexuals in Nigeria (Umukoro, 2009). They did this under the guise of fundamental human rights.

Interestingly, Archbishop Peter Akinola, the immediate past Primate of the Anglican Communion in Nigeria, was in the news because of his heroic effort against legitimizing homosexuality in Nigeria. The Archbishop was forthright in condemning homosexuality. According to him:

From the very beginning, we see in the word of God the God created the world and when He created the world, He also created man in His own image – male and female He created man... so going by the order of creation, that is, the divine arrangement – man and woman. In our African set up, when you talk of a man cohabiting with another man, it is an abomination, it is unheard of. When you go back to the Bible, you have specific directives, urging people of God to abhor such relationships. In fact, the word of God is so strong on this matter that whole city was destroyed. The Bible says this is an abomination before the Lord, don't do it (Akinola, 2008).

Despite the protest raised against the practice, even in the Western part of the world, homosexuality as a form of sexual orientation has gradually become a reality, acceptably within the legal framework of many countries. It may be surprising to many to learn that the present President of America, Barak Obama, concurs to the view that homosexuals have a legal right to contract marriages (Obama, 2006:222-223). He believes that to prohibit them will be tantamount to a denial of their fundamental human rights. It is no wonder that in Europe and in America today, many marriages are being contracted among homosexuals and they receive legal protection just like heterosexual marriages. Even though this development may be quite shocking to some, the pressure from the gay fraternity to recognize gay Bishops and Priests is equally making negative impacts. It appears all cultural, religious, ideological and social wall of partition against homosexualism are systematically being broken down, especially in the Western world.

In Nigeria, however, one may not say homosexuals have been able to remove all cultural and institutional barriers. Many are still in the closets, perhaps because of the strong cultural aversion towards the practice. But some are gradually coming out of their closet to assert what they perceive to be their constitutional rights. They want people to recognize them and respect their sexual orientation. They do not want to be regarded as weird and abnormal because of their sexual preference. In the Christianized West, the homosexuals have gradually worked their way into public acceptance, at least, legally. But can that be said of Nigeria or Africa where traditional religion still holds sway? How does a typical African view homosexuality? Amidst this debate of the morality of homosexuality, what should be the response of a typical African?

Etymological Connotation of Homosexuality

The word homosexuality may be etymologically traced to the Greek and Latin hybrid with *homos* deriving from the Greek word for “same”; thus connoting sexual acts and affections between members of the same sex, including lesbianism (Wikipedia, 2010). Gay generally refers to male homosexuals, but is sometimes used in broader sense to refer to all homosexuals. In the context of sexuality, lesbianism denotes female homosexuals. Contrary to popular opinion, the word “homosexuality” was coined not by psychiatrists or scientist, but by a person who was fighting for the homosexual rights. It was first seen in public print in 1869 when it appeared in two anonymous pamphlets. Those pamphlets were published as a method of fighting against the criminalization of homosexual sex in the newly formed Federation of the Northern German States. Journalists in the first part of the twentieth century readily adopted the term and made it available for use in everyday while psychiatry circles continued to use the term “sexual perversion” (Wikipedia, 2010).

One needs to point out that while the term “homosexual” was not created until the end of the nineteenth century; same sex love has been practiced since the beginning of civilization. In ancient Greece and Rome, the pairing of same sex partners during the act of love making was not considered out of the ordinary. The disapproving connotations attached to homosexuality began to enter into the thought patterns of Roman society just prior to the emergence of Christianity. But as Christianity flourished, the expression of sexuality for any reason other than procreation was considered very sinful, hence the initial persecution of homosexuals.

During the Middle Ages, the term “sodomy” first came into use to describe homosexual love and according to Marmor (1980:6) it is an ancient phenomenon. It originated from medieval Latin around 1180 as a designation for “crime against nature”. There were three methods by which this crime could be committed: first, by obtaining venereal pleasure with a member of the opposite sex; but “in a wrong manner”; second, by having sex with an individual of the same sex; and third, by having sex with an animal. From Medieval Latin it passed into the languages of Western and Central Europe as the technical expression for a crime which was punishable by death until the second half of the eighteenth century. Thus, the terms “sodomy and “sodomite” embrace more than just homosexual sex, although most of the prosecutors were for either male homosexuality or bestiality. According to Ahmadu (2001:167) “the growth of sodomy has been so phenomenal that in the West today, about ten percent of the population is involved in gay and lesbianism”. Furthermore, he surmised that:

By the 1970s, the gay and lesbian culture had developed in America and Europe to the point that members could no longer hide their identities. So militant was their demand for acknowledgement that certain rights and privileges had to be conceded to them. Their self assertion was so aggressive and clamorous that the larger population came to doubt whether they were not after all the ones in the wrong regarding sexual matters.

Sodomy involves the act of lesbianism which is the erotic drive of female to female. This act has been condemned by various traditions and cultures even though, it is an act which still pervade various societies today.

The Bible and Homosexuality

There is a plethora of passages in the Bible that dwell on issues bothering on homosexuality. Probably, the first reference to homosexual practice is recorded in Genesis 19. Here is recorded what appears to be a homosexual encounter. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah has been described as “legendary” (Geisler, 1991:268). Among their numerous acts of debauchery was homosexual behaviour, clearly demonstrated in the incidence of Lot’s encounter with certain men of the city. They wanted to have carnal knowledge of the two visitors who had lodged in Lot’s house. They inquired from Lot, “where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we may know them, carnally” (Gen. 19:5). It is instructive to note that Sodom became so depraved that the term “sodomy” (apparently derived from the word Sodom) was synonymous with all forms of moral aberrations. Scholars have noted that the sin of Sodom was not simply luxury or inhospitality but that of homosexuality (Geisler, 1991: 268). To try to interpret the passage otherwise is begging the issue and thus would do violence to the plain understanding of the incidence. It is clear from Lot’s vain attempt to appease the sensual appetite of these debased people with his virgin daughters that they were not just after any form of sexual encounter, but the homosexual type. No wonder God’s judgment was unsparing: “Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion...They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7). It is equally pertinent to note that homosexuality is strongly condemned in the Levitical Code. The divine disapproval for the act is expressed in judgmental terms:

I am the lord. Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable. Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it (Lev. 18: 21-23).

Such immoral act is regarded as perversion and is totally abhorrent to God. The content of the passage reveals that it was because of such abominable acts of sodomy and bestiality that God judged the Canaanites Lev. 18: 24-25).

Bearing in mind the strong language and the capital punishment meted out on homosexual offenders, it would be right to conclude that God considered homosexual acts a very serious sin and His wrath was not limited to Jews alone but extended to the Gentiles who practiced this act of perversion.

In another perspective, Paul wrote extensively about love, grace and tolerance in personal and interpersonal relationships was critical in evaluating homosexual lifestyle. He employed the most condemnatory language when referring to homosexual practices among the Romans and the Corinthians. The Romans particularly, had abandoned God and given themselves to lewd practices. Therefore,

God gave them up vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise, also men, leaving the natural use of the women burned in their lust for one another, men committing what is shameful and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due... being filled with all unrighteous sexual immorality...who knowing the righteous judgment of God that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them (Rom 1: 26 – 32)

Paul referred to homosexuality as an act which is “against nature”; that is, it is unnatural and it is on this parameter that it is condemned as unwholesome and unethical.

However, Bailey (1955) maintained an opinion which is somewhat different from that of the Bible. He maintained that there are two types of homosexuality, namely, homosexual condition or inversion and homosexual pervert. According to him, “the genuine homosexual condition or inversion, as it is often termed, is something for which the subject can in no way be held responsible. In itself, it is morally neutral like the normal condition of heterosexuality. However, it may find expression in specific sexual acts and such acts are subject to moral judgment no less than those which may take place between man and woman...the pervert as the term suggests, is not a true homosexual, but a heterosexual who engages in homosexual practices. He may do so casually, from motives of curiosity or in exceptional circumstances; or habitually, as a prostitute or in pursuit of novel sensual experiences.

Kubo (1980:75) however, insightfully pointed out that the distinction between homosexual inversion and homosexual pervert as propounded by Bailey does not appear in scripture nor does the Bible reflect the understanding of it as we have it today. The position of the Bible is that of condemnation whether the form of homosexuality is inversion or perversion. Two other critical texts when evaluating the homosexual phenomenon are I Corinthians 6:9 and I Timothy 1:9-10. Scholars have argued over the true meaning of the Greek terms *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*, translated respectively by some Bible versions as “them that defile themselves with mankind” and “effeminate”. The 1952 Revised Standard Version simply translates *arsenokoitai* as “homosexuals”. Kubo (1980:75) laments that the distinction earlier made of homosexual inverts who do not participate in homosexual practices. Koranteng-Pipim (2001) sees the matter in an altogether different light. He argues that there is no hint in the two Greek terms that suggests that Paul was condemning only a certain kind of homosexual abuse, as in prostitution, rape, or pagan ceremonies. Rather, Paul condemns homosexuality as sin in its entirety. In other words, homosexuality is wrong regardless of the motive behind its practice.

In view of this brief survey of Biblical references to homosexual behaviour, it would be safe to conclude that the Bible is not morally neutral on homosexuality. One may deduce from a prima facie interpretation of Paul’s statement in Romans 1, Corinthians 6 and I Timothy 1 as well as other Bible passages like Leviticus 18 that homosexuality in all of its various forms is a sinful practice.

It is not surprising therefore, that Paul lists homosexual offenders among those that will not inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9). As explained by Geisler (1991: 270-271), “although believers are capable of slipping into any sin, nonetheless, no one who continually practices homosexual life style is incongruent with Bible morality. One may need to look elsewhere to justify its practice.

Contemporary Debates on Homosexuality

There are probably few issues that have evoked more debates and perhaps sentiments as the homosexual imbroglio. It is a volatile issue and people are entrenched in the position they espouse which they consider objective and humane. What are these views? Three views are clearly identifiable: namely, non – acceptance view, qualified – acceptance view and full acceptance view. These views will be briefly discussed and evaluated.

Non –Acceptance view: This position totally rejects the homosexual lifestyle and considers it sinful. Advocates of this view consider the homosexual behaviour as depraved – a form of sexual deviation that is contrary to nature and societal values. The Non – acceptance debaters of Christian extraction hold that homosexuality is a post – fall distortion of human sexuality. They often use the popular argument that “if God intended homosexuality to be a legitimate expression of human sexuality, He would have created Adam and Steve and not Adam and Eve (see Koranteng-Pipin, 2001: 48). Thus, those who hold the non – acceptance view in the homo –sexual debate argues that like all other morally corrupt tendencies, homosexual orientation or disposition does not excuse the sin of homosexuality. The homosexual lifestyle is

unnatural and socially unacceptable. It is even a threat to human lives because it is one of the greatest purveyors of some of the most dreaded sexually transmitted diseases like HIC/AIDS.

Qualified – Acceptance View: This is a form of accommodating view which sees homosexuality as not altogether incompatible with social values. It is considered as a post – fall aberration rather than post – fall distortion of human sexuality. The argument goes like this: Homosexual condition/orientation is a non – ideal condition of human sexuality (just as poor eye sight, asthma or allergies). It is conceded that God did not create homosexuality just as He did not create loneliness or disabilities. Since homosexuality is not God’s ideal plan for people, it should be removed wherever possible (Blake, 1992:11).

The phrase “wherever possible” implies that not all homosexual conditions are amenable to remedy. It further implies that not all homosexuals whose conditions are not amenable to remedy are not ethically culpable. Again, those who argue from the non – acceptance point of view maintain that the homosexual condition is not sin but a condition of sinfulness. What do they mean by this? What these advocates mean is that homosexual condition or orientation is one evidence of the brokenness and fallness of our present world. The condition may therefore, be classified with diseases (such as alcoholism), with handicap (such as congenital blindness) and eccentricity (such as left- handedness). Lake (1992: 7) would conclude that “we should not hold a person responsible for his/her sexual orientation anymore than we hold a person responsible for skin colour”. Therefore, being a homosexual is not a sin, but lustful and inappropriate homosexual activity is sin and therefore, must be avoided. According to Davidson cited in Koranteng – Pipim (2001:54) asserts categorically:

I don't deny the evil of the thing (homosexuality); for evil it certainly is, but I do deny the sinfulness of it. The homosexual condition is to be classified with disease, weakness, death, as an evil; not with gluttony, blasphemy, murder, as a sin.

This position holds that homosexual condition is not as sin and thus, homosexuals should not be condemned. Even though, the homosexual condition is not a sin, homosexuals are not free to express their homosexual drives. But the question is: If homosexuals were created that way by God and their condition is not sinful, why should it be sinful to express their homosexual conditions

Full – Acceptance View: this view asserts that homosexuality is fully compatible with nature and societal norms. Proponents of this argument see homosexuality as part of the pre – fall natural order. They maintain that homosexuality is neither a distortion of human sexuality nor an aberration. Rather, homosexuality is an immutable sexual orientation given or created by God as a gift to some that people just as heterosexuality. These advocates nevertheless concede that it is an eccentricity or a mark of one’s individual identity, just like possessing a particular colour of skin, eye or hair. Pierson (1990:257) proposes that:

Homosexuality and heterosexuality are two aspects of sexuality, neither being the counterfeit or the other, both being right or wrong depending on the context of their expression...

Thus, fulltime apologists of homosexuality contend that homosexual behaviour may be eccentric but definitely not sinful or evil. It is the abuse of homosexuality for example promiscuity, rape or prostitution that is wrong, but not its legitimate expression in the form of loving, consensual, monogamous, homosexual relationship. That means homosexuals should be affirmed in their same – sex relationship be allowed to “marry” or to form “close – couple homosexual unions” (Larson, 1984: 16).again, Larson writes:

Christians therefore, have reason to encourage homosexuals who are honestly convinced that they should neither attempt to perform heterosexually or remain celibate...

To the advocate of full – acceptance view of homosexuality, there is nothing wrong with the homosexual lifestyle; it is all a matter of preference. The debates over these viewpoints may not abate in the near future. Contenders of these differing positions feel that they have legitimate point to make. How would a typical African react to the debate?

The African Response

Despite the moral bankruptcy that has generally characterized leadership in Africa, it is interesting to note that most African leaders have denounced homosexuality as evil, unnatural and incongruent to African culture and psyche. A brief survey of some of their views is revealing: President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe compared homosexuality to bestiality and has ordered the Police to raid the offices of Gays and Lesbians (Boykin, 2001). In fact, Mugabe claimed that homosexuals were “worse than pigs and dogs” (BBC Africa Live, 2002). Namibian President, San Nujoma, was more antagonistic and vitriolic in his attack of the homosexuals. He declared that “the Republic of Namibia does not allow homosexuality or lesbianism here. Police are ordered to arrest you, deport you and imprison you” (Boykin, 2001). Nujoma sees homosexuality as against God’s will and act that shows that the devil is at work. Indeed, Namibia’s Home Affairs Minister, Jerry Ekandjo urged the Police officers to eliminate gays and lesbians from the face of Namibia.

There are others beside those in the leadership cadre who feel that homosexuality is totally un-African and that it negates all the cherished values of a typical African. Thus the reactions of Africans may take the following forms: That homosexuality should not be accepted, it is not the plan of God...it is completely bad and it does not originate from Africa, it is satanic and controlled by the evil spirits. John Ernest is of the view that homosexuals should be disenfranchised in Africa; they have no rights to be respected. Ernest opined that “homosexuality is a curse and that God should punish those who are engaged in the act, just as God reacted to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah” (BBC Africa Live, 2002). James Hallowanger lends credence to the views expressed by Ernest when he asserts that “Africa has no right to respect gays according to African tradition and even the Bible. In fact, the act of gay is immoral and should be condemned by all civilized nations of the world” (BBC Africa Live, 2002). Yet there are those who feel that Africa would be throwing away its culture and ethics to the Western culture and principles and thus playing the fool if it should respect the right of the homosexuals. That is why there has been a strong reaction to the gay activist group’s effort to stall a bill seeking to ban same sex marriages in Nigeria.

Kamor (2009) is obviously far from condoning the practice. He surmised that:

The sensationalist act of these individuals (the so-called human right activists) and their supporters show that the face of Nigerian culture is changing – but only for the worse. The singular impact of the shame was to demonstrate that homosexuality is bold and here, that it is normal sexual orientation that is “neither a defect, a disturbance, a sickness, nor a malfunction of any sort, but the truth is that homosexuality is an illness and can be anything but normal.

As such, he is of the opinion that the lewd debauchery called homosexuality is more dangerous to the moral well being of the nation than a standing army and that this global cancer should not be allowed to infect Nigeria.

Though there has been a few dissenting voices, the general consensus in the African milieu is that homosexuality should not be allowed to take root in Africa. It is foreign to African culture and religion. Thus, its manifestation should be treated as an aberration rather than a socially acceptable behavioural pattern.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the issue of homosexuality has elicited deep and often extreme reactions in Africa. Many see the phenomenon as un-African and against African social and religious heritage. Homosexual lifestyle is perceived to be against nature. Traditionally, Africans place high premium on procreation. Marriages are first and foremost, expected to fulfill the divine mandate to replenish the earth. Homosexuality is a direct negation of this divine imperative; hence, the homosexual preference in considered unnatural and it is against sexual ethics among the African people.

The view that homosexuality is not “normal”, but rather a challenge to the norm may be justified by the fact that our sexual bodies were designed for reproduction. Arguably therefore, homosexuality is an adaptation, not an inborn trait. It is a distortion of the biological and psychological components of the body. Indeed, homosexuality strikes at the very root of creation and threatens the ultimate survival of the human race.

It is proper to respect homosexuals as human beings created in God’s image, their moral shortcomings notwithstanding. But such respect and sympathy should not translate to condoning the pseudo-dichotomy of homosexual orientation and homosexual desires which are unarguably opposed to the creator’s original will. The provocative thought expressed by Umukoro (2009) on the blighting effects of Western culture is worth noting. He surmised that:

The Western world has provided acknowledged leadership in science and technology, but the African marital culture is infinitely superior to theirs, and we must not let them take it away from us. Rather, they should be made to recognize and adopt our cherished family values and the beauty of our extended family system which guarantees corporate and individual well-being. The giddy technological height attained by the so – called developed world has resulted in the disintegration of their traditional society and the breakdown of family life, as well as the collapse of social and religious institutions, which serve as ballasts to communal living.

It may therefore, be observed that in the entire hierarchy of creation, it is only human beings, the supposedly higher creature, who engage in homosexuality and attempt to make a virtue out of it. A cock will never mount another cock; neither will a male dog or goat climb another of its kind. Homosexuality is thus a dehumanizing act, a mockery of the divine image with which humans were originally made.

References

1. Akinola, P. 2008. “We Won’t Succumb to Blackmail”, *TELL Magazine*, Nigeria’s Independent Weekly, No 24, October 27.
2. Ahmadu, I.M. 2001. “Spirituality and the Growth of Sodomy in Nigeria: A Theological Reflection”, in Wotogbe-Weneka, W.O. (ed), *Religion and Spirituality*, Port Harcourt: Emhai Books.
3. Bailey, D.S. 1955. *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, New York: Longman
4. BBC Africa Live, <http://www.mask.org.za/article.php?cat=ajd=74>. Retrieved on the 15th June, 2012.
5. Blake, C. 1992. “Redeeming Our Sad Gay Situation: A Christian Response to the Question of Homosexuality”, *Insight*, December, 5.
6. Boykin, K. 2001. “Homosexuality in Africa” <http://www.keithboykin.com/author/africa.html>. Retrieved on the 11th April, 2010.
7. Davis, J.J. 1993. *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, New Jersey: P & R Publishing.
8. Geiler, N.L. 1991. *Christian Ethics*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House.
9. “Homosexuality”, <http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality>. Retrieved 15th June 2012
10. Kamor, D. 2009. “Homosexuality as Transgression Beyond Limits”, *Daily Trust*, Tuesday April 7.
11. Koranteng-Pipim, S. 2001. *Must we be Silent? Issues Dividing our Church*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: Berean Books.
12. Kubo, S. 1980. *Theology and Ethics of Sex*, Nashville, Tennessee: Review and Herald Publishing Association.
13. Larson, D.R. 1984. “Sexuality and Christian Ethics”, *Spectrum* 15 May.
14. Mamor, J. (ed) 1980. *Homosexual Behaviours: A Modern Reappraisal*, New York: Basic Books.
15. Obama, B. 2006. *The Audacity of Hope*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
16. Pierson, M. 1990. *Millennial Dreams and Moral Dilemmas*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
17. Umukoro, M. 2009. “Much Ado about Homosexuality”, *Guardian Newspapers*, March 10.