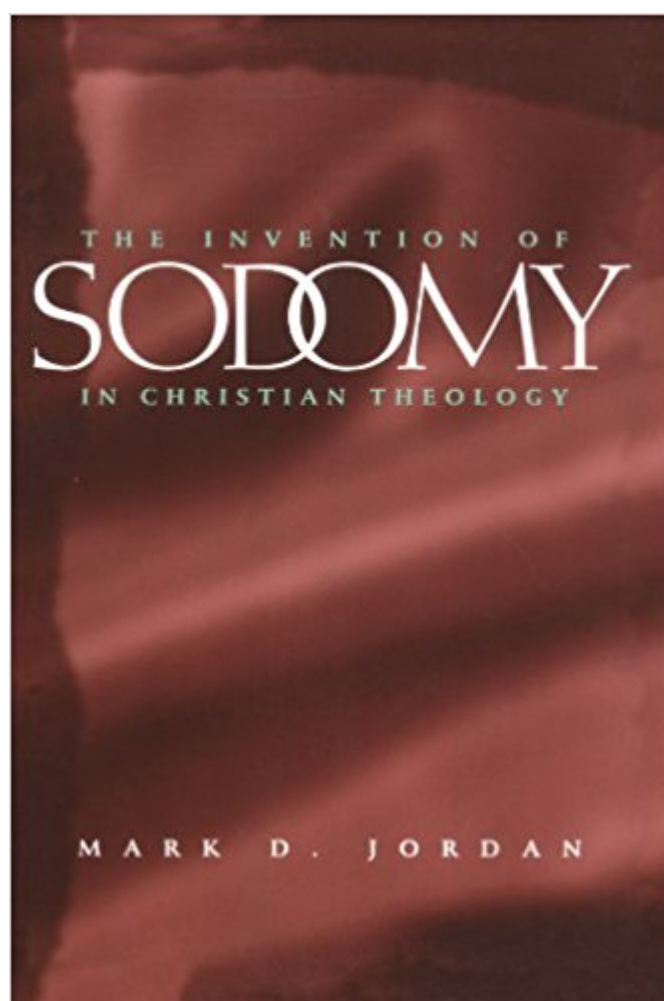


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# The Invention Of Sodomy In Christian Theology (The Chicago Series On Sexuality, History, And Society)



## Synopsis

In this startling original work of historical detection, Mark D. Jordan explores the invention of Sodomy by medieval Christendom, examining its conceptual foundations in theology and gauging its impact on Christian sexual ethics both then and now. This book is for everyone involved in the ongoing debate within organized religions and society in general over moral judgments of same-sex eroticism. "A crucial contribution to our understanding of the tortured and tortuous relationship between men who love men, and the Christian religion" — indeed, between our kind and Western society as a whole. . . . The true power of Jordan's study is that it gives back to gay and lesbian people our place in history and that it places before modern theologians and church leaders a detailed history of fear, inconsistency, hatred and oppression that must be faced both intellectually and pastorally. "Michael B. Kelly, *Screaming Hyena*" "[A] detailed and disturbing tour through the back roads of medieval Christian thought." — Dennis O'Brien, *Commonweal* "Being gay and being Catholic are not necessarily incompatible modes of life, Jordan argues. . . . Compelling and deeply learned." — Virginia Quarterly Review

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Jordan (Medieval Inst., Univ. of Notre Dame) traces the medieval invention of the concept of sodomy and its place in modern American context. He examines paradoxes in the moral teaching on sexuality, especially the theological context for same-sex genital acts, by exploring the history of Christian writings. Eleventh-century theologian Peter Damian coined the term sodomy in relation to

the word blasphemy in an abstracted analogy to the sin of denying God through homoerotic desires. Jordan exposes the fallacies in this abstraction in the varied writing styles of Damian, Albert the Great, Alan of Lille, and Thomas Aquinas, tracing words taken out of context and rifts that have resulted. A scholarly but compelling study; for academic libraries. ?L. Kriz, West Des Moines Lib. la. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

A scholarly critique of how the term "sodomy" arose in the Middle Ages and came to influence Roman Catholic moral discourse. Although the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is at least as old as the book of Genesis, the view of sodomy as a form of sexual sin seems to have been invented in the 11th century by the Italian ascetic St. Peter Damian. Jordan (Medieval Institute/Notre Dame Univ.) restates the now generally accepted view that the sin leading to Sodom's destruction was transgression of the laws of hospitality rather than same-sex intercourse per se, and he gives some very relevant philosophical warnings about using centuries-old texts to find answers to modern questions. For example, there is no clear medieval equivalent for our concepts of "homosexuality" (a 19th-century neologism of forensic medicine) or, indeed, of "sexuality." Jordan's study begins with the Canoness Hrotswitha of Saxony's account of the martyrdom of St. Pelagius, who died rather than serve a caliph's sexual desires, and Peter Damian's Book of Gomorrah. Our author guides us adeptly through the writings of Alan of Lille, St. Albert the Great, and St. Thomas Aquinas, as well as several confessors' handbooks, as he explores how the terms "sodomite" and "sodomy" were used and notes inconsistencies in emphasis and argumentation. For example, Albert the Great, contrary to his normal method, omitted medical data from his Arabic sources that would have suggested a natural (and therefore morally positive) basis for sodomy. Jordan succeeds in showing that Thomas Aquinas's analyses of luxuria and unnatural vice are inadequate for contemporary Catholicism's evaluation of gay and lesbian relationships, but the methodological problems he highlights would seem to emphasize the tradition's stance that sexual intimacy belongs to heterosexual marriage. A stimulating, if not quite convincing, contribution to Thomistic and gay studies. -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

This book addresses some of the same terrain as John Boswell's 1980 book CHRISTIANITY, SOCIAL TOLERANCE, AND HOMOSEXUALITY, but with important points of contrast, one of which is it's half the earlier book's length in pages. Jordan takes a Christianized, quasi-Foucauldian approach to the subject, whereas Boswell's approach was essentialist, stressing historical

continuities which Jordan opposes. Boswell equated the modern concept of homosexuality with the medieval concept of sodomy, whereas Jordan does not. Instead, Jordan argues that the term "sodomy," as used by early church fathers and pre-Renaissance theologians, was a usefully vague invective, employed not altogether differently from the ways "philistinism" was used later or, for that matter, the way "homophobia" is used in some circles today. But parallel to what Jordan says about the term "homophobia," "sodomy," too, has been used politically not as a precise explanation for human behavior, but as "a placeholder for an explanation yet to be provided" (167-68). [Arguably, as philosopher Judith Butler does argue elsewhere (cogently), the same could be said for the current uses of "gay," "homosexual," "queer," etc., or for that matter, "sex."] Jordan's book is an important one for people who identify themselves as either Christian or gay (--or both) because it addresses issues underlying the clash of values and "culture wars" being played out in society now. If indeed, as Jordan suggests, "sodomy" was invented to fill a gap left by Christendom's refusal of the "erotic"--even between two sexes, perhaps progress lies in our seeking a place for the erotic INSIDE the moral, instead of persisting in (often hypocritically) dichotomizing the two--something, in response to a previous reader's comments, Plato did NOT do (though the later Platonists did).

at the start of the second millennium of Christianity. Looking at the preceding "review" that ignores the subject of the book (what Christian theologians of roughly a millennium ago wrote about "sodomy") and seems to have been written by someone who did not read the book but substituted his own condemnations of homosexuality, I was astounded to read that Romans 1 is clear. The "reviewer" also must not have read that, because the syntax (in the original, which the reviewer probably does not know was not English) is VERY convoluted. There are no condemnations of "sodomy" (by any name) in the Gospels that allegedly report the words of the Christ, and Mark Jordan's book does not deal with the Hebrew background or the first millennium of Christianity. (An earlier reviewer must not have seen the blurb FROM Michel Foucault for John Boswell's book, one that is considerably less sound than Jordan's.)

Jordan does show convincingly that "sodomy," in the Bible defined as the sins of the men of Sodom, applies to a range of sinful activities rather than specifically homosexual ones. He does not, however, show that homosexual activity is excluded within that range of activities. But even if Jordan were to show that homosexual activity is not one of the sins of Sodom, the implication for us is merely that "sodomy"--if we would like to be etymologically correct--ought not be used as a term for homosexual activity. If he were to establish that, he would not be establishing that homosexual

activity is not a sin. The only implication would be that we should use a different term to describe homosexual sin (as for instance was often done by using the more inclusive term "luxuria," it appears). Since Jordan shows a hermeneutical friendliness to the Bible (which is what motivates his etymological interest in "sodomy" in the first place), he would be hard pressed to do away with passages of similar brevity in which homosexual activity is specifically labeled as a sin. (In fact he ignores these passages entirely, as the authors he reads do not, which decimates the value of his arguments around pp. 166 ff.) Regarding the Middle Ages, even if "sodomy" had been constructed incorrectly as a term for homosexual activity and similar sexual sins, the idea of those sins was not constructed. His interest turns out to be merely etymological through page 40. For most of the remainder of the book, Jordan moves to "invention" in the rhetorical sense, finding all the different ways that sodomy was discussed--seldom engaging the arguments, as though he is having enough fun repeating all the unsayable words. On 42 and towards the end, he unfairly objects to the use of places and place-names as symbols, calling this an "essentialism" that is "antihistorical." This hermeneutical prejudice is untenable, and not just in the case of Sodom. One might say that "homophobia" is also one of those words that is used as "an attack upon a [supposedly] malignant essence" (43, cf. 167-68). If Jordan really is attacking the whole system of applying abstract words to sets of activities, he loses the ability to make many of his own points as well. For those interested in the relationship of nature and ethics, the most relevant and good parts are: 54-56, which are especially good for showing the connection between nature, reason, and ethics in Peter Damian; at 87 (and the whole section as well), esp. where Jordan summarizes how Alan of Lille demonstrates the naturalistic fallacy; after a lot of digressing, some material on Albert the Great at 126 ff.; and a good summary of Aristotle's NE at 132. By the Albert the Great section, it becomes apparent that the relation of pleasure to the natural and the moral is what is really at issue. One should also pick up some Plato on this, e.g. from the Laws, 732e, 836c-e, 838b-839c, passages which seem very pertinent. Jordan and Plato seem to diverge regarding this relation. My vote is with Plato.

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