

Stonewall, forty years on

THE RIOTS outside New York's Stonewall Inn in the last days of June 1969 were not the first, nor the last, in which homosexuals would brawl with police in defence of their rights. Homosexual bars and meeting places had been routinely raided by the police, who would drag gay, lesbian, transvestite, and transsexual delinquents and hustlers off for a night in the cells to be followed by court appearances, fines and prison sentences. These violent affrays had gone on for generations before the Stonewall Riots, perhaps most notably at Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco during August 1966. Here, hustlers, transvestites and transsexuals, people excluded from regular gay bars, rebelled against police harassment and persecution by violently resisting arrest and fighting back against large numbers of cops.

So the Stonewall events of June 1969 were not unprecedented or unique. What was remarkable and memorable about them was what *followed* these events: the rapid formation of a number of radical gay and lesbian organisations and newspapers. Of course, homosexual organisations were not, like gay riots and substantial brawls, new or unprecedented in 1969; in fact attempts at the formation of gay organisations had begun in America in the 1920s and been crowned with success during the late forties and early fifties. What was unprecedented about the events that followed the Stonewall riots was the public response of lesbians and gay men in New York and other big cities. A bold and significant minority of homosexuals in America began in public meetings, in street demonstrations, in newspapers, and in interviews given to the press and broadcast media, to identify themselves as homosexuals; they began to articulate for the first time their hostility to prevailing

religious and psychiatric opinion – they publicly rejected their criminal status – and spoke clearly and forcefully of their demands for justice and equality.

Within less than six months this spirit of rebellion had spread to homosexual milieu in large cities throughout the Western world. The fight for gay liberation was on. Within a decade this movement would win substantial support and recognition in trade unions and social democratic parties, and among psychiatrists and wider medical and legal opinion. Within *two* decades, even conservative parties and right wing legislators and churchmen in many of the rich and well-developed countries of the world, would recognise homosexual demands for justice.

In the summer of 2009, forty years after Stonewall and forty-three years after Compton's Cafeteria, much remains to be done. Consistent and nationwide rights have still to be won in the United States, the right wing in churches, synagogues, and mosques still have to be defeated; the influence which reactionary religious opinion continues to exert upon public policy still has to be dissolved. However, the basic argument for justice and equal rights has been won by homosexuals in most of Western Europe and in the biggest and most modern cities throughout many other parts of the world.

These developments have provoked dismay and vicious responses among irredentists determined to recover cultural territory lost in the worldwide movement towards the acceptance of difference and homosexual equality. This week Bishop Nazir-Ali, the Anglican Bishop of Rochester, called upon homosexuals to "repent and change". While saying he welcomed homosexuals into the church, he reiterated his warning that this welcome was conditional on lesbians and gays rejecting their sinning ways and coming to Christ through exclusively heterosexual relations. The lord bishop is engaged in a bidding war with Muslim clerics to see who can be most forthright and determined in the face of the lascivious corruption spreading out from Sodom to all the Cities of the Plain.

Consequently, Nazir-Ali has helped form the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans, which aims to win back the Anglican Communion to the rigours of Biblical 'truth' and the fulsome nastiness of its Bronze Age morality. Failure is not contemplated by these men – their defeat will simply result in them splitting the Anglican church and hauling great portions of it off into alliance with people like Archbishop Akinola of Nigeria who actually doubts the human status of gay men and lesbians.

Homosexual emancipation arouses fear and bewilderment in these men of the cloth. They cannot understand how it is that homosexuals have won such widespread acceptance; they, like Benedict XVI and the cardinals in Rome, cannot contemplate the steady erosion or defeat of their worldview. They cannot understand how it is that an outcast group like homosexuals have won acceptance throughout the cities of the rich world. Consequently, they cleave to their redoubts in poor countries – in the global South and in Eastern Europe – where old time queer bashing and murder, and the old time subordination of women appears to be secure in the embrace of that Old Time Religion that they love so well.

These people do not seem to be capable of connecting up the dots: modern cities, relatively high standards of living, greater educational and economic rights for women, racial and religious freedom, democracy, and the recognition of human rights, have resulted in societies capable of hearing the demands of homosexuals for justice and equality, societies capable of engaging with the struggle for gay rights in a creative and thoughtful manner.

This growth of liberal acceptance among large sections of the population regardless of religious affiliation has stunned traditional churchmen. They have watched with mounting anxiety for thirty or more years as homosexuals have Come Out and have begun to be accorded their proper place in society along with women and black people. Against liberal ideas they pose traditional arguments about nature, of

which they know little, and about God, of which they know a great deal, but somehow nothing has worked. Society has just gone on bumpily through big social struggles and big upheavals, through ups and downs, but getting friendlier to homosexuals, to women's rights and to racial equality. Nothing the religious right has to say seems to have made much difference – which is why they are retreating to alliances with churches in Uganda and Nigeria, places where the 'traditional values' of tribalism, bigotry and gender inequality continue to reign supreme.

This reveals the truly reactionary character of those opposed to gay rights. Gay rights have only come to the fore and won substantial gains in societies in which peasant, caste and tribal relations, have dissolved, and in societies in which the heavy industrialisation associated with the mining, the steel-making, and the mass production of the first sixty or seventy years of the twentieth century has been replaced by a social life founded upon the production of services, mass communication and media, and mass consumption. The disappearance of old industrial communities in which rigid social and functional hierarchies were maintained, in which gender and racial inequality was enshrined, and in which social solidarity and cohesion took precedence over individuality and difference, opened up society to the possibility of change.

It is these deep structural changes, which will, as modern economic development gradually takes hold, consign the good bishops and their bigotry to the past to which they so richly belong. Of course, there will be many bitter struggles along the way, and doubtless there will be many casualties, but assuming that capitalist relations, the rule of law, and democracy, are able to continue to expand into areas which are now poor and ruled by oligarchs, kleptocrats, and tyrants, the days of religious reaction and bigotry are decidedly numbered.