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Gay Culture and the Riddle of Andrew Sullivan

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Sullivan came to national and international attention as editor of *The New Republic* from 1991 to 1996. He came to this post after earning degrees at Oxford University (B.A.) and Harvard University (Ph.D.). Under his editorship, *The New Republic* became known as one of the nation's most lively, informative, and controversial journals of opinion. The courage and imagination demonstrated in Sullivan's editorship is the most likely explanation for the controversy that brought his downfall as editor. Nevertheless, Sullivan continues to contribute to the magazine as a senior editor.

In the October 24, 2005 issue of *The New Republic*, Sullivan writes about "The End of Gay Culture." Of course, Sullivan's perspective on homosexuality and gay culture is deeply rooted in his own homosexuality and his ardent embrace of his own homosexual lifestyle. He is anything but a dispassionate observer.

In his new article, Sullivan describes the massive transformation of American culture we are all now observing, at least in terms of the rapid normalization of homosexuality in public culture. Sullivan sees this as a two-edged sword for homosexuals.

On the one hand, the assimilation of homosexuals and homosexuality into the larger culture means that homosexuals are no longer outsiders. On the other hand, Sullivan sees the demise of a gay subculture as a significant loss, at least for the homosexuals who remember the experience of defining themselves by "transgressing" cultural norms.

As evidence of this transformation, Sullivan points to his experience of almost two decades as a summer resident of Provincetown on Cape Cod. Over the last quarter-century, Provincetown has become a mecca for gay men and lesbians, "a place where a separate identity essentially defines a separate place." As Sullivan describes the Provincetown perspective: "No one bats an eye if two men walk down the street holding hands, or if a lesbian couple pecks each other on the cheek, or if a drag queen dressed as Cher careens down the main strip on a motor scooter."

Nevertheless, that vision of Provincetown doesn't exist anymore, Sullivan explains. "As gay America has changed, so, too, has Provincetown. In a microcosm of what is happening across this country, its culture is changing."

The changes indicate that homosexuals in America no longer feel the need for a separate identity, a separate place, and a separate lifestyle. A real-estate boom has turned Provincetown into a resort for wealthy homosexuals where class is now more important than sexuality. Furthermore, the domesticization of homosexual culture has also changed the picture: "The number of children of gay couples has soared, and, some weeks, strollers clog the sidewalks. Bar life is not nearly as central to socializing as it once was." Beyond this, "week after week this summer, couple after couple got married—well over a thousand in the year and a half since gay marriage has been legal in Massachusetts."

As he sees it, America is no longer marked by a “single gay identity.” Instead, a proliferation of niche sexual identities and cultures has replaced the dominant gay ethos that emerged in the 1970s.

“Slowly but unmistakably, gay culture is ending,” Sullivan observes. “In fact, it is beginning to dawn on many that the very concept of gay culture may one day disappear altogether. By that, I do not mean that homosexual men and lesbians will not exist—or that they won’t create a community of sorts and a culture that sets them in some ways apart—I mean simply that what encompasses gay culture itself will expand into such a diverse set of subcultures that ‘gayness’ alone will cease to tell you very much about any individual.”

This is the world homosexuals have long dreamed of, Sullivan admits. Nevertheless, “it is a threat in the way that all loss is a threat. For many of us who grew up fighting a world of now-inconceivable silence and shame, distinctive gayness became an integral part of who we are. It helped define us not only to the world but also to ourselves. Letting that go is as hard as it is liberating, as saddening as it is invigorating.”

Sullivan points to one central factor that explains the rapid transformation of American culture and its assimilation of homosexuals and homosexuality—the HIV epidemic. “The history of gay America as an openly gay culture is not only extremely short—a mere 30 years or so—but also engulfed and defined by a plague that struck almost poignantly at the headiest moment of liberation. The entire structure of emergent gay culture—sexual, radical, subversive—met a virus that killed almost everyone it touched. Virtually the entire generation that pioneered gay culture was wiped out—quickly.

The HIV epidemic established homosexuality as a central cultural concern and, quite unexpectedly, served to normalize homosexuality within the culture. The HIV plague “established homosexuality as a legitimate topic more swiftly than any political manifesto could possibly have done,” Sullivan asserts. “The images of gay male lives were recorded on quilts and in countless obituaries; men whose homosexuality might have been euphemized into nonexistence were immediately identifiable and gone.”

As he reviews the impact of the HIV crisis, Sullivan points to some patterns that emerged in its aftermath—patterns that would likely be missed by those outside the gay subculture. The emergence of lesbians as leaders of the major gay rights organizations was, Sullivan suggests, largely due to the fact that the gay male leaders were largely dead. “Most of the older male generation was dead or exhausted,” Sullivan notes, “and so it was only natural, perhaps, that the next generation of leaders tended to be lesbian—running the major gay political groups and magazines. Lesbians also pioneered a new baby boom, with more lesbian couples adopting or having children.”

What Sullivan hints at, but does not openly suggest, is that the lesbians were also successful in pushing a more domestic picture of homosexuality. The radical sexual promiscuity so common to many homosexual men was replaced, in the public eye, with the more settled picture of lesbian couples, often with children.

Meanwhile, a whole new generation was emerging—younger homosexuals who grew to maturity (or were even born) after the HIV epidemic. “For the first time,” Sullivan observes, “a cohort of gay children and teens grew up in a world where homosexuality was no longer a taboo subject and where gay figures were regularly featured in the press.” The younger generation seems to want homosexuality to be seen as normal—not exceptional. This is verified by the research published by Ritch C. Savin-Williams in his book, *The New Gay Teenager*. Sullivan’s generation, on the other hand, fears the loss of the more radical homosexual culture that emerged after events such as New York’s Stonewall Rebellion and the re-branding of San Francisco’s Castro district as a gay haven.

Sullivan’s point is clear—the transition of homosexual culture represents the substitution of Ellen DeGeneres for the “bull-dykes” and “lipstick lesbians” of the past. Likewise, well-known homosexual male celebrities define homosexuality in the public culture, rather than “hyper-masculine bikers and muscle men.”

Sullivan admits (or celebrates) the fact that “these sub-sub-cultures still exist.” Yet, “the polarities in the larger gay population are far less pronounced than they once were; the edges have softened.”

In this article, Sullivan is returning to ground he has covered before. His 1995 book, *Virtually Normal*, described the struggle between “prohibitionists,” “liberationists,” “conservatives,” and “liberals,” in the homosexual community. During this period, Sullivan emerged as a major (and, at least at first, quite lonely) proponent of same-sex marriage.

“Gay marriage is not a radical step,” Sullivan insisted. “It is a profoundly humanizing, traditionalizing step. It is the first step in any resolution of the homosexual question—more important than any other institution, since it is the most central institution to the nature of the problem, which is to say, the emotional and sexual bond between one human being and another. If nothing else were done at all, and gay marriage were legalized, ninety percent of the political work necessary to achieve gay and lesbian equality would have been achieved. It is ultimately the only reform that truly matters.”

But, even as Sullivan argued for the acceptance and legalization of same-sex marriage, more radical homosexual theorists were dismissing marriage altogether. As Sullivan explained, “Marriage of all institutions is to liberationists a form of imprisonment; it reeks of a discourse that has bought and sold property, that has denigrated and subjected women, that has constructed human relationships into a crude and suffocating form. Why on earth should it be supported for homosexuals?”

Sullivan’s 1995 book, and his most recent article, must be read in light of his 1998 testimonial, *Love Undetectable: Notes on Friendship, Sex, and Survival*. This book was written after Sullivan had been diagnosed as HIV-positive. As he recalled: “I contracted the disease in full knowledge of how it is transmitted, and without any illusions about how debilitating and terrifying a diagnosis it could be. I have witnessed first-hand a man dying of AIDS; I have seen the ravages of its impact and the harrowing humiliation it meant. I had written about it, volunteered to combat it, and tried to understand it. But I still risked getting it, and the memories of that risk and the ramifications of it for myself, my family, and my friends still forced me into questions I would rather not confront, and have expended a great deal of effort avoiding.”

When a high school friend asked Sullivan how he had contracted the virus, Sullivan informed him that he had no idea which sex partner had been the source of the viral transmission. “How many people did you sleep with, for God’s sake?,” his friend asked. Note Sullivan’s answer carefully: “Too many, God knows. Too many for meaning and dignity to be given to every one; too many for love to be present at each; too many for sex to be very often more than a temporary but powerful release from debilitating fear and loneliness.”

In other words, the public Andrew Sullivan emerged as a major proponent of responsibility, stability, and self-control, while the private Andrew Sullivan was deeply involved in homosexual promiscuity.

All this broke into public view in 2001, when a homosexual columnist discovered that Sullivan had been posting advertisements for unprotected homosexual sex at internet web sites. The ensuing controversy within the gay community was vitriolic, even as it was revealing.

“The End of Gay Culture” is an eye-opening essay. As an exercise in cultural analysis, it demonstrates genuine insight and an insider’s perspective. More than anything else, Sullivan’s article should awaken thinking Christians to the fact that homosexuality *is* being normalized in the larger culture. This surely represents a matter of urgent missiological concern, for the normalization of sin represents a progressive hardening of the nation’s heart against the Gospel.

At a more personal level, this article reminds me to pray for Andrew Sullivan. I say this even as I realize that he may be more offended by my prayer than by anything else. In most of his writings, Mr. Sullivan demonstrates a consistent and ardent determination to celebrate homosexuality as central to his own self-discovery and personhood. Yet, he also reveals significant doubts. When he explains that he “never publicly defended promiscuity” nor publicly attacked it because “I felt, and often still feel, unable to live up to the ideals I really hold,” I detect a glimmer of doubt. I have faced Mr. Sullivan in public debate on issues related to homosexuality. I consider him to be among the most gifted, thoughtful, and unpredictable intellectuals on the current scene. More than anything else, I want Mr. Sullivan to find his self-identity and deepest passions in the transforming power of Christ—the power to see all things made new. Without apology, I pray that one day he will see all that he has written in defense of homosexuality, and all that he has known in terms of his homosexual identity, as loss, and to find in Christ the only resolution of our sexuality and the only solution to the problem we *all* share—the problem of sin.

Andrew Sullivan has been a focus of my prayer since I first learned of his HIV-positive status. I do pray that God will give him strengthened health and the gift of time. After all, our Christian concern should be focused not only on the challenge of homosexuality in the culture, but the challenge of reaching homosexuals with the love of Christ and the truth of the Gospel.

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