

## ***Aelred of Rievaulx Spiritual Friendship***

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Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*. Trans. Mary Eugenia Laker. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977.

### 1. Aelred's life and historical context.

From line of married priests in north of England in late 11th century. Thus affected by Gregorian reform and by the Norman Conquest (William traded support for reform for papal blessing). Adolescence in court of Scottish king. Accepted monastic calling at 26. Cistercian order expansion; cf. Bernard of Clairvaux. Series of offices, culminating in abbot.

### 2. "Particular friendship" in the monastic tradition.

Benedict and others cautioned against particular friendships in monasteries, fearing factionalism, disputes, and homosexuality. Sleeping arrangements in Benedict's *Rule* can be read in this regard. Their ideal was a perfect harmony directed to God, which could only be disrupted by special friendships between monks. Aelred's defense of particular friendship will thus have to deal with these objections.

### 3. The question of the history of sexuality.

Michel Foucault's 3-volume *History of Sexuality* (Intro 1976, vols 2 and 3 1984) sparked intense interest. Two of the Intro's theses in particular attracted a lot of follow up work. 1) In general, that the focus on sexuality as the primary moral or psychological category is a modern phenomenon, slowly being disengaged from a general concern with all bodily functions. This focus intensifies in the Counter-Reformation and really come to the fore in the 19th century, due to sexuality's position at the nexus of government interest in individual bodies (discipline and health) and in the national population (size, reproduction rates, etc). 2) In particular, that "homosexuality" is a 19th century category and (hence, by implication) that the reactions of prior ages to same-sex behaviors need to be stated in historically-specific terms.

From this historical perspective, sexuality is a nexus of relations through which societies organize themselves, and moral and legal codes are the reflection of such organizing forces, the way they represent themselves. Thus, like any history, but with more care, the history of sexuality must be amoral: it must treat moral codes as objects to be studied, not as lenses through which to judge.

Consider the history of warfare as an analogy: we have to study the various moral and legal codes in which warfare is represented (for example the Crusades as Christian adventure as represented in Urban II's sermon at Clermont calling for the 1st Crusade, or in Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons about the 2nd Crusade) as part of the object of study (that is, as amplifying or focusing the social forces that "really" produce wars: in this case, one of them being overpopulation of landless Norman knights due to conflict of Roman primogeniture [giving land to first son] and Viking equality ["you think you're better than me?" says the second son to the first]) rather than judging which forms of warfare we prefer (the Crusades as "justified" or not).

Now such amoral objectivity is especially difficult for the history of sexuality, since according to thesis #1, sexuality is the point of highest intensity for our age's concerns; but precisely because of this intensity, amoral objectivity is all the more necessary if we are to have a history of sexuality, rather than a forum for moralizing.

Some of the most noteworthy books contributing to a history of sexuality for our course's interests are: John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe From the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 1980); Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 1988); and Allen Frantzen, *Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from Beowulf to Angels in America* (University of Chicago Press, 1999). The major online resource is maintained by Paul Halsall at Fordham University: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/gayhistbib.html>

The issues involved are complex and controversial. Boswell's thesis is that the attitudes prevalent in the 12th century renaissance (he specifically mentions Anselm and Aelred) toward male same-sex behaviors were more open and tolerant than later medieval attitudes. Others such as Frantzen disagree. Some of the questions: is the history of Church practices and attitudes toward same-sex behavior one of continuous official condemnation or one in which there were periods of more or less tolerance? Was that tolerance simply a lapse, was it a matter of practicality (some officials in some times had more important issues to deal with) or did it reflect pressure for a new doctrine?

I'm not going to go into these details regarding Aelred, as to do so would require more preparation than we have time for. In particular, taking Foucault's lead, we'd have to ask three questions we couldn't possibly answer without a lot of work: 1) whether we had the right categories for the analysis ("gay" vs "homosexual" vs "same-sex behavior"); 2) how much of our interest was a reflection of our age's concerns (what about other monastic moral concerns such as gluttony or drunkenness: are we focusing on sexuality to the exclusion of issues the monks themselves thought equally important? Or at least very important? Shouldn't we ask about sexuality in the context of a general theory of body practices?); 3) whether we had a good theory of sublimation (the move from carnal to spiritual) and hence a theory of the difference between homoeroticism and homosexuality? To do that we'd need a general theory of love (charity, agape, eros, philia, etc.) and in particular, group love, especially in all-male groups: fighting bands, armies, aristocratic courts, monasteries, boarding schools, ships at sea, fraternities, (medieval) universities, military academies, and so forth. Does one need to go through a period of physical same-sex behavior (Aelred at the Scottish court) in order to ascend to spiritual friendship? Should we then tolerate youthful same-sex behavior and only punish it in adults? SF 3.87 might lead us to think so, if we accept Boswell's criticism of the translation of *inhonestas* by "dishonorable" instead of "dishonesty": thus the question is not sex, but truth: "And yet this [carnal] friendship, except for trifles and deceptions, if nothing *inhonestas* enters into it, is to be tolerated in the hope of more abundant grace, as the beginnings, so to say, of a holier friendship." Certain readings of the *Symposium* would also assert that to ascend the sublimation ladder from physical to spiritual mean you have to physically love before you can ascend.

#### 4) Aelred's theory of the desire

Rather than this, let's tackle the question of models of desire. Aelred has a natural sufficiency, intensity, and community model rather than a lack, (illusory) fulfillment, and hierarchy model. In other words, for Aelred – at least on the reading I propose, for the "singers of the song of lack, the crooners of castration" would have their own reading – desire is the desire for increased intensity in a community of equals based on an already sufficient nature rather than the desire to make up a lack in oneself, a desire doomed to fail which chases images of fulfillment and thereby creates a social hierarchy of those with better, more alluring, images. Aelred's intensity vs Augustine's lack then: "our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

Consider his treatment of the genesis of carnal friendship in I.39: "To enjoy these [images of beautiful bodies] as he pleases the carnal man thinks is blessedness, but to enjoy them without an associate he considers less delightful." Here the issue is more or less intensity of enjoyment. The sole man is not incomplete, but less intense. His images give him real pleasure, not an illusory

compensation for lack. Friendship is thus a means of increasing intensity, not making up for a lack: “Then by gesture, nod, words, compliance, spirit is captivated by spirit, and one is inflamed by the other ...” Similar quotes abound: “Friendship therefore heightens the joys of prosperity” (II.13). Most telling is the following from II.15, put into the mouth of Walter: “I believe that I am not even alive as long as I am deprived of the manifold benefits of this great good.” Death is here zero intensity, not incompleteness; life is increased intensity, not chasing after an always incomplete and illusory fulfillment.