

Book Review

A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society

by Bruce Bawer, Poseiden Press, 1993

This is a most intriguing book by a gay conservative. It makes the argument that there is a large, silent, hidden gay community which is nearly indistinguishable from the straight community--one that it is high-functioning and stable. In fact, Bawer insists, his life and that of most other homosexuals in America bears little resemblance to the "narrow, sex-obsessed image of gay life" presented in most gay periodicals.

The book is interesting for the perspective it provides against the book *Gay Soul* (described previously), which portrays a gay America which is exactly the opposite of Bawer's gay America--one which is hedonistic, anti-religious, and even celebratory of practices such as incest and sadomasochism.

What is most significant about *A Place at the Table* is that it identifies the split between more conservative, mainstream gays (who tend to be less visible), and the more radical gay culture; Bawer believes most gays actually belong to the former category. Significantly, Bawer was harshly criticized by the gay press for making such a distinction, and for his criticism of the more radical elements of the gay community.

The author points out that religious objectors tend to focus single-mindedly on the biblical condemnation against homosexuality, while ignoring historic prohibitions against divorce, the accumulation of wealth, and similar issues which might "hit closer to home." Clearly, this point is well-taken.

"Most conservatives fight to preserve a system that forces most homosexuals to treat their private lives like a dirty little secret, and drives many others toward a subculture that encourages them to view themselves as extremists, subversives, outsiders," according to Bawer.

Bawer says he finds nothing "objectively wrong" about the tastes and interests of the gay subculture. But he is distressed that what he calls a "small but highly visible minority of the gay population" is speaking for the whole. More conservative men, living relatively conventional lives, tend to keep their homosexuality to themselves, he says, so young gays are unaware that there are other role models--and that they need not emulate "the gay subculture."

Bawer feels a strong need to communicate the following to young gays: "be true to yourself, your good and decent self, and understand that there's no inherent conflict between homosexuality and decency. Don't let anyone, straight or gay, tell you any different."

"In an of itself, homosexuality is morally neutral and with-

out interest...The truth is, homosexuality is not a problem and should not be seen as one." He decries the difficulty of convincing straights that "nothing about homosexuality is intrinsically contrary to their values."

Gays who are promiscuous are *not* manifesting a trait intrinsic to the homosexual condition, he insists; their behavior is an indication that they are *victims*--having fallen prey to self-hatred induced by society's homophobia.

Bawer's theme--that homosexuality is healthy, and the gay community would fit comfortably into straight society if only fully accepted--is argued in a conciliatory, reasonable, and very persuasive manner.

"No One Can Change"

On closer examination, though, we see that Bawer's thesis rests on a series of assertions which range from highly questionable, to quite patently false. Contrary to reliable recent research, he believes the 10% figure is "about right" for the proportion of homosexuals in the population. He insists that gays are no more likely than straights to sexually abuse children. He asserts they can never convert to heterosexuality; those who believe they have changed are living in a state of denial as "emotional cripples...who are lying to everyone, and most of all themselves." He further insists, "Parents need to be helped to understand that they *cannot* reduce this risk of their children becoming homosexual."

And Bawer proceeds to assert--buying into "sound bite" science, against the serious evidence--that one is "born homosexual." He says, "it is meaningless to speak of approving or disapproving of someone's innate characteristics." On whether there is any room for argument as to whether homosexuality is innate: "Well, yes, there's 'argument' because bigots who know nothing about the subject refuse to accept the testimony of gays about their own lives and feelings." Yet he bases this argument on a clearly indefensible assertion-- that when a person has felt a certain way from childhood, this is an indication of a genetic (not developmentally based) condition.

"Happy Families Are an Illusion"

Then he moves on to repeat another very characteristic gay assertion: that the hope of happy, traditional family life is only an illusion. He is deeply cynical about heterosexual marriage, saying he "wouldn't want to live in what was the 'moral equivalent' of most of the marriages with which I'm familiar. Half the husbands I know cheat on their wives. Some beat their wives. Some couples argue constantly, some hardly speak to each other. Some of the husbands are dominated completely by their wives, some of the wives are slaves to their husbands...Not in a million years would I want a relationship that was 'morally equivalent' to such marriages..."

There is no description here of the author's relationship with his own parents, about which the reader can only speculate; however, he does acknowledge he shares the almost universal gay experience of memories of boyhood

inadequacy with male peers.

"A World Of Repressed Homosexuals"

He describes a scenario which--many readers would believe--reflects a rather shockingly obvious distortion of his own:

"Any reasonably attractive gay man knows what it is like to be stared at with anxious longing by a dubious young daddy pushing a pram, or drop into a gay bar after work and find himself the object of lewd, desperate overtures by a weepy, bibulous middle-aged husband."

He says he and his lover pass so-called "ex-gay" men on the street "all the time....At first, seeing a young man walking toward us, arm in arm with his wife, one of them pushing a baby carriage or stroller or carrying an infant, we'll think we're looking at a nice, ordinary, happy little family. But then, just as this family is about to pass us, the young husband's eyes will suddenly meet mine or Chris's in a fleeting, painful, haunted stare, and all at once we'll both realize that the picture is a lie, a forgery, and that this family's home is built on quicksand."

Bawer makes the leap of assumption that a man's curious stare at himself and his lover reflects envy, romantic longing and repressed sexual attraction.

For Bawer, it is simply hypocrisy to separate homosexual behavior from the orientation. "Those who condemn homosexuality while maintaining 'friendships' with individuals gays are simply hypocrites who refuse to face the inconsistency--and the brutality--of their attitudes."

He sees no conflict in the Bible between his own religion--Christianity--and his homosexuality, calling that condition "God-given." Then he goes on to deliver a smooth-sounding but philosophically shallow argument for biblical approval of homosexuality:

"The first thing that such a reader must understand is that society was structured very differently in biblical times than it is today. One cannot easily draw parallels between relationships then and now. The ancients' sexual roles and sexual conventions were radically different from ours, as was their understanding of sexual emotions and sexual identity...What all these passages underscore is not that God is cruel and unreasonable, but that the Bible was written by men who lived in a particular time and place with values that differed dramatically from our own...the scriptures, as they have come down to us, could therefore not help bearing the marks of human frailty, ignorance and prejudice..."

His equally pleasant-sounding but simplistic solution: The "thing to do is to accept rather than condemn, to love rather than hate."

--But What New Standards?

"[T]he fringe elements of the gay population have failed in large part to set moral standards for themselves," he admits. But he is predictably vague (after having just deconstructed his own Bible) about just what those standards *should* be, or on what rational basis he could now defend *any* such new, revised standards.

But perhaps the reader can gain an inkling of those revised standards might be from Andrew Sullivan's bestselling book, *Virtually Normal*. Sullivan is perhaps the most prominent gay conservative, and he argues that gays "have a better understanding of the need for extramarital outlets."

Bawer's case is smoothly said and quite persuasive-sounding, but his book makes its case on many false assumptions, and offers no new revelations.

---Reviewed by Linda Nicolosi