Anton Nyström's Defense of Homosexuality

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Abstract:

In 1919 Anton Nyström became the first person in Sweden to publish a comprehensive defense of homosexuality. He believed that its classification as a mental illness was erroneous and that Sweden's law against homosexual sex was both irrational and cruel.

Nyström was a physician whose work in the medical area dealt primarily with dermatology, psychiatry and human sexuality; however he was also a prolific historian, who took a staunchly anti-Christian view in his analysis of how Christianity affected European culture, especially in the area of sexual morality. In fact, much of Nyström's medical texts dealing with human sexuality consisted of anti-Christian cultural and historical commentary.

The object of this "C-uppsats" is to analyze Nyström's pamphlet, *Om Homosexualitet och Hermafroditi: Belysning af Missförstådda Existenser* and illustrate how its defensive structure was consistent with the pattern used by the author in his other books and articles on human sexuality. Specifically, that irrational and neurotic Christian beliefs caused both mental and physical suffering and were the source of deleterious forms of morality.

Additionally, this paper will also show that the solution Nyström had for the problem of negative and erroneous attitudes towards homosexuality was to replace the sodomitic view of homosexuality with one based upon a more rational and naturalistic belief system, the basis of which could be found in the pre-Christian cultures of Europe, most especially in Greece. This new conception was to be constructed primarily out of historical example and cultural analyses.

For Nyström, history writing was used both as a weapon to fight the source of negative attitudes towards homosexuality, as well as a tool that could be used to build a positive cultural model which would be beneficial for homosexuals.

Key Words: Nystrom, Anton; homosexuality; historiography; 19th-century; atheism; cultural history
1. Introduction

Anton Nyström was a physician with a wide-ranging and prolific career both in and out of the medical profession. Between the decade of the 1860s up until his death in 1931 he wrote an impressive number of books and articles which spanned several subjects: medicine, sex research, history (especially cultural history), education and politics.

There are probably four main achievements for which Nyström should be most noted. The first was his founding of Stockholm's "arbetareinstitut" in 1880. The second was his position as one of Sweden's first dermatologists. The third and fourth are what this dissertation will deal with: Nyström's role as a prolific historian and his prominence as one of Sweden's most significant researchers on human sexuality, specifically his groundbreaking pamphlet in defense of homosexuality.

In 1919 Nyström published *Om Homosexualitet och Hermafroditit: Belysning Af Missförstådda Existenser*. This work was divided into two chapters: the first dealt with homosexuality and was entitled "Homosexualiteten: Inför Vetenskapen och Lagen". The second chapter was called, "Hermafrodititien: Dess Uppkomst och Olika Slag Samt Dess Förhållande Till Homosexualitet." Like Nyström's other works on human sexuality much of this pamphlet consisted of historical commentary.

When the pamphlet was published homosexuality was viewed by the medical community in Sweden as a mental illness and by the government as a crime. Nyström believed that both of these situations were absurd. He attempted to show that homosexuality was not a mental illness by presenting empirical evidence obtained during his own time as a physician, as well as from other researchers, including the German physician and sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld.

However, medical evidence was not the only tool that was used. Nyström believed that negative attitudes towards homosexuality were also the result of the neurotic and irrational Christian morality which had first begun to spread in Europe via the Roman Empire during the first century AD. Much of Nyström's writings in regard to sexuality were attempts to depict the Christian view of sex as being detrimental to health.

*Om Homosexualitet* was the first comprehensive defense of homosexuality ever published in Sweden. While the clinical component of the paper was certainly instrumental, the main weapons used

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1. I am assuming a knowledge of Swedish on the part of the reader and will not provide any translations.
by Nyström were not statistics or empirical data, but rather history writing and cultural commentary. Historical and cultural analyses became tools in which to attack Christianity, as well as to reconstruct models of homosexuality which were contrary to the biblical ones. These models provided a positive alternative that would be beneficial to homosexuals.

1.1 Goals

The goals of this paper are to first show the anti-Christian philosophy which guided Nyström's writings on history and human sexuality. This will illustrate how and why he believed that Christianity was a detrimental influence on European civilization. Secondly, I will specifically detail how Nyström used history writing as a method to attack Christianity by showing how he used historical examples in order to provide evidence that Christian dogmas created neurotic, irrational attitudes and practices regarding sex, and were the direct cause of mental illness in many believers. The third is to present Nyström's 1919 article on homosexuality as one which conforms to this previously-established pattern. The fourth is to explain how using positive examples of homosexuality from history – especially ancient Greece – was a way of presenting an alternative model to the one which categorized homosexuality as immoral and sinful.

The purpose of choosing these four goals is to create a focused frame of reference in which to adequately study Nyström's methodology for depicting Christianity as the source of the sorrowful situation for homosexuals during his own time and highlight the cultural tools he used both to attack the root of the problem (Christianity), and to provide remedies for it.

1.2 Source Material

Since historiography and an analysis of Nyström's writings on human sexuality are paramount to the research in this paper, the primary source material will consist almost entirely of Nyström's published articles and books on sex, religion and history. Additionally, there is also an autobiography which has proven to be very useful, both for biographical information and for clarifying the intent behind some of Nyström's articles.

1.3 Previous Research
Since the publication of Kenneth Dover's *Greek Homosexuality* in 1978 there has been a growth of research into the history of homosexuality not only amongst Classical scholars, but in other areas of the humanities, as well. In regard to Sweden, the most comprehensive work dealing with the history of homosexuality is *Sympatiens Hemlighetsfulla Makt: Stockholms Homosexuella 1860-1960*, published in 1999 and edited by Göran Söderström. Its 720 pages deal mainly with gay life in Stockholm, but it is also an excellent general source on the historical background of homosexuality in Sweden during the one-hundred year period in question. Jens Rydström's *Sinners and Citizens: Bestiality and Homosexuality in Sweden, 1880-1950* is an English-language work which examines the history of both homosexuality and bestiality. *Undantagsmänniskor: en svensk HBT-historia* by Svante Norrhem, Jens Rydström and Hanna Winkvist, as well as *Homo i Folkhemmet: Homo- och bisexuella i Sverige 1950-2000* by Martin Andreasson are some other general reference books. Additionally, there is *Lambda Nordica*, which was founded in 1989 as a scholarly journal devoted to the scientific study of homosexuality within the humanities. It deals with all of the Nordic countries, and there are a good number of articles to be found there dealing with a range of topics.

Concerning Anton Nyström, *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon* lists a number of secondary sources pertaining to him; however, there are really no comprehensive biographies or detailed analyses of his pamphlet on homosexuality. The most notable work is Sigfried Leander's *Folkbildningens Födelse: Anton Nyström och Stockholms Arbetarinstitut 1880-1980*. Leander writes about Nyström within the framework of his role as the founder of the institute, but her book is far from being an adequate biography. There also exists a relatively small number of articles dealing with Nyström's work as a physician and his political and educational contributions.

Also, while Nyström is mentioned at some length in both *Sympatiens hemlighetsfulla makt* and *Sinners and Citizens*, neither one contains a detailed discussion of his 1919 publication.

### 1.4 Method

Constructionism and essentialism are the two most important schools of thought among researchers who study homosexuality within the humanities.

Constructionism most likely came into existence with the arrival of Michel Foucault's *Historie de la sexualité*, which was published between 1974 and 1983. This school maintains that sexual identities
such as heterosexual and homosexual are social constructs. Historians and other scholars within the humanities who follow this school believe that homosexuality is an identification that did not come into existence until the 1870s, when activists and researchers began using the term. According to constructionists, before this decade it was impossible for anyone to consider themselves to have had a "homosexual" identity.\(^2\)

On the other side are the essentialists who believe that homosexuality has a biological basis and that it is a quality and identity that has existed throughout human history. While they acknowledge that the word "homosexual" is a relatively modern invention, they believe that there have been people since at least the time of the ancient Greeks who have identified themselves (or were identified by others) as having a preference for erotic same-sex relations.

According to Kenneth Dover, homosexuality is "the disposition to seek sensory pleasure through bodily contact with persons of one's own sex in preference to contact with the other sex."\(^3\) This definition is a very good and precise starting point for the essentialist.

There is a great deal of disagreement between the essentialists and constructionists. Rictor Norton in *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual: Queer History and the Search for Cultural Identity* has written an excellent defense of essentialism and critique of constructionism:

> The social constructionists argue that where no words exist, no concepts exist, and that indigenous societies revealed by anthropology have no word for 'the homosexual' and therefore no option for choosing such a state...But the fact of the matter is that a great many indigenous societies did have words for "the homosexual".\(^4\)

Norton continues his argument with several examples of terms used to describe homosexuals: "Janet" from Flemish, "adelaida" from Portuguese, and "nellies" from English. All of these labels existed in Europe prior to the late nineteenth century.

I consider the constructive viewpoint to be contrary to the large body of historic evidence, and I will, therefore, be writing this thesis from the point of view of an essentialist.

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2. Queer theory -- which has recently become popular within the study of homosexuality -- is a branch of constructionism. The theory seeks to identify that which is considered normal or accepted sexuality and compare it to that which is considered outside this frame of reference.
3. Dover 1978, p. 1
However, I should also point out that I find the term "essentialist" to be rather pseudo-technical and somewhat limiting. My basic belief regarding homosexuality is that there have always been those who prefer to have sex with others of the same gender, but that homosexual sex also occurs among those who do not necessarily have this orientation. Differences in culture have played a strong roll in the frequency and acceptability of homosexual activity.

My paper will also be written from a cultural historical point of view. It is somewhat frustrating (at least for me) to clearly mark the borders of the various branches of history (intellectual history, social history, cultural history, etc.) One of the reasons, I believe, is that these borders are often contrived and detrimental to a good analysis of written texts. Yet, I consider this thesis to lie more within the realm of what is considered to be cultural history than that which is considered to be intellectual history, partly because of Nyström's roll as a cultural historian. Also, a large part of the dissertation deals with the differences in Ancient Greek and Christian concepts of homosexuality, as well as nineteenth century cultural attitudes. This gives further weight to the placement of this thesis within the sphere of the cultural rather than the intellectual (if, indeed, such separations are necessary.)

1.5 Limitations

This paper is not a biography of Anton Nyström. Such a work would contain far more information on his writings regarding dermatology, his war correspondence, letters, political activities, and even the topic of his possible antisemitism. I am dealing specifically with Nyström's published works on history, Christianity and human sexuality. The biographical section will, therefore, try to deal mostly with the aspects of his life which are most relevant to these topics.

Also, since a general history on the topic of homosexuality in Europe is far too vast a topic for a student dissertation, it is probably best to limit the historical background section to the areas most relevant to Nyström's article on homosexuality: Christianity and homosexuality; psychiatry and homosexuality during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; Hellenism and homosexuality in Germany during the nineteenth century; as well as homosexuality in Sweden. And even these topics will be severely abridged in order to give a brief, yet functional background to the main topic of the thesis.

It is also important here to note that when writing about the ancient Greeks, I will be writing about them from the nineteenth century point of view. Modern research has shed a great deal of light on
homosexuality in Ancient Greece, but this is not really pertinent to my paper. Therefore, any claims about ancient homosexuality (aside from those of Kenneth Dover) should not be taken to be those of my own (which have been shaped by more recent scholarship), but rather those that were generally understood by Nyström and others who lived during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Nyström's writings on cultural history and human sexuality are vast, and they can not be adequately dealt with in paper of this size. It is, therefore, important to again state that I will be limiting my research to what I consider to be the most relevant to the topic at hand.

2. Historical Background

2.1 Christianity and Homosexuality

The Christian view towards homosexual sex has, for the most part, been a negative one. There are a number of passages in both the Old and New Testaments which condemn homosexuality; however, the ones which are probably the most important are those which tell the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is from here that the word sodomy was derived.

But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to us tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof."

Eventually, God destroys the two sinful cities, and the consequences of homosexuality are made

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5 Genesis 19:4-9, Revised Standard Version
There are differing opinions about how the early Christians viewed homosexuality, with John Boswell being one of the most adamant proponents of a more tolerant attitude. However, it is hard to argue that by the late Middle Ages and up until the late twentieth century, most of the religious officials in Europe had a condemnatory attitude towards homosexual sex.

2.2 Psychiatry and Homosexuality During the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Homosexuality had begun to be explored as a scientific subject during the late nineteenth century by a variety of researchers, but it was the German-born, Austrian psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebbing who became the authority on what was then termed "sexual perversions", including homosexuality. While Krafft-Ebbing did at first consider homosexuality to be a type of mental illness, he was far from anti-homosexual. He corresponded frequently with Hans Ulrich (see 2.3) from 1866 onwards regarding the subject of homosexuality and he was an advocate for repealing sodomy laws in both the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Germany.

It was Krafft-Ebbing's book *Psychopathia sexualis* (1886) that was credited as the most authoritative work on homosexuality. It classified homosexual attraction as a mental illness and thereby solidified the belief that same-sex desire was a mental illness. Yet, ironically, it was Krafft-Ebbing himself who, by the end of his career, came to see homosexuality not as a disease, but rather as a natural variation within the spectrum of human sexual behavior. Therefore, the man who may have been the most responsible for propagating the misconception of homosexuality as a sickness eventually refuted his own mislabeling. But this did not seem to have an effect on a large enough number of researchers to combat the earlier misdiagnoses.

The most important work contradicting the pathological view of homosexuality was Magnus Hirschfeld's *Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes* (1914). Hirschfeld was also the founder of the first two journals devoted to sexual research, *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* and *Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft*. According to his works, homosexuality resulted from "developmental anomalies" in "secondary sexual" and "psychological characteristics." Hirschfeld's work heavily influenced
2.3 Hellenism and Homosexuality in Germany During the Nineteenth Century

The scientific study of homosexuality, as well as the modern gay-rights movement, began in Germany. While there had originally been some liberalization regarding the treatment of homosexuals in some of the German-speaking states during the nineteenth century, the unification of the region and subsequent dominance by the Prussian state saw the establishment of a universal penal code which criminalize sodomy in 1871.\textsuperscript{10}

Ancient Greece, with its homoerotic artwork and positive depictions of male couples in literature and mythology, presented Europeans of the nineteenth century with an alternative model for homosexuality than that of the negative one portrayed by Christianity and by the law. This affinity for the ancient Hellenes was especially strong in Germany. The reason for this is at least in part due to the extreme importance of inculcating knowledge of Classical civilization and languages in the schools of the German states. Hellenophilia amongst the Germans most likely began with the educational reforms of Wilhelm von Humbolt, who was a key figure in the reorganization and centralization of the Prussian school system during the first decade of the 19th century, most especially in regard to the creation of the gymnasium. It was he who insisted upon rigorous training in both Greek and Latin as an instrumental part of receiving the "Arbitur". The subsequent generations of educated Germans, therefore, were not only familiar with, but also thoroughly expert in Greek culture.

It is no surprise then that educated homosexuals in Germany would have both an affinity with and understanding of Greek homoeroticism\textsuperscript{11} and that this would form a common basis and model for their sexual identity.

\textit{Ancient Greece provided models for shared ethics and aesthetics of the emerging gay community. In terms of ethics, ancient Greek literature provided concepts of companionship, such as military-patriotic Spartan comradeship, which gained popularity as models for how male-male relationships should be pursued.}\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} Matzner 2010, p.61-62
\textsuperscript{11} Matzner 2010, p.63
\textsuperscript{12} Matzner 2010, 68
Hans Ulrich, who perhaps more than any other man can be given the credit as the founder of the gay rights movement - both in Germany and the rest of Europe - used ancient Greece as a source for his theories on homosexuality. He did not coin the term "homosexual" (that was something which must be credited to Karl Maria Kertbeny), but he did come up with the word "Urning", which is derived from Uranus, as a definition for those who were sexually attracted to others of their own sex.\(^1\)

### 2.4 Homosexuality in Sweden

#### 2.4.1 The Law

Medieval Sweden\(^1\) was late to Christianize, and the lack of sodomy laws in what was still a partly-pagan Scandinavia raised the disapproval of Pope Honorius II:

> **In 1227 Pope Honorius III wrote a letter to the Archbishop of Lund appealing to him to deal severely with people guilty of bestiality and 'those sins that should not be named nor committed, for which the Lord condemned Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction.'**\(^5\)

Neither Denmark nor Sweden did anything about the situation. In fact, for the entire course of Swedish history up until the early seventeenth century, the country lacked any law specifically aimed at punishing homosexuality.

The first law against sodomy to be promulgated in Sweden came into effect in 1608, during the reign of Charles IX. It was now legal to condemn people for the biblical crime of having a sexual relationship with another person of the same sex. However, this law only lasted until 1734 when the kingdom underwent a new legal reform.\(^16\)

Homosexuality once again became illegal in 1864 with the passage of Chapter 18 section 10 of the new "strafflagen":

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13 Kennedy 1988, p.50
14 The topic of pre-Christian attitudes towards homosexuality in Sweden is one which is dependent on an in depth analysis of anthropology, archeology and literature. Although this is an interesting and relevant topic, it is far beyond the scope of this paper.
15 Gade 1986, p.126
16 Silverstolpe 1999, p.36-37 "Praxis och teori 1726-1864" in *Sympatiens*
Prosecution and persecution of homosexuals once again became an official function of the state. An unusual characteristic of this law was that it applied to women as well as men. This was a rarity in Europe and made Sweden one of the few countries to prosecute lesbians under its sodomy law.\textsuperscript{18}

There were objections to the law. One of Nyström's predecessors, the psychiatrist Frey Svenson, advocated for its repeal; however, Svenson did not approve of homosexuality itself. He believed that it was a mental defect and was critical of Magnus Hirschfeld's research and opinions.\textsuperscript{19}

Chapter 18 section 10 was redacted in 1944.

\textbf{2.4.2 Homosexuality and Nineteenth Century Swedish Culture}

The first physician in Sweden to make a clear reference to homosexuality was Eric Gadelius in his 1804 work \textit{Handbok i Medicinal-Lagfarenheten}.\textsuperscript{20} However, the word "homosexuell" itself did not appear in a Swedish publication until 1894 when it was mentioned in the medical journal \textit{Hygieia}.\textsuperscript{21}

By the 1880's there was more of a public willingness to discuss sex and this atmosphere led to the voicing of opinions contrary to the newly-established sodomy law. However, like Svenson, these views were not necessarily pro-homosexual voices, but rather voices of sympathy towards people who were being prosecuted because of their "sickness". Yet opinions of this nature were still a significant turning point, not only because they advocated the decriminalization of homosexuality, but also because they brought the issue of homosexuality into the realm of public discussion.\textsuperscript{22}

August Strindberg can also be credited for introducing homosexual themes into some of his literary works, thereby bringing attention to the issue.\textsuperscript{23}

There were efforts during the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century (prior to Nyström's article) to portray homosexuality positively, but these efforts existed mainly in the cultural sphere. For instance, in his book, \textit{Den siste Athenaren} (1859), Viktor Rydberg portrayed

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\textsuperscript{17} Rydström 2003, p.340 \\
\textsuperscript{18} Rydström 2003, p.32 \\
\textsuperscript{19} Rydström 2003, p.48 \\
\textsuperscript{20} Silverstolpe 1999, p.69 "Paragraf 18:10" in \textit{Sympatiens} \\
\textsuperscript{21} Eman 1999, p.153 "Det Homosexuella Genombrott" in \textit{Sympatiens} \\
\textsuperscript{22} Silverstolpe 1999, p.43 "Vänskap och Kärlek Åro Ett" in \textit{Sympatiens} \\
\textsuperscript{23} Söderström 1999, p.22
homosexuality sympathetically against a negative portrayal of Christianity.\textsuperscript{24} Another cultural figure was Pontus Wikner. Although he may not have lived his life as what would today be considered an openly gay man, he did give a speech in 1880 in Uppsala in which he advocated tolerance for what would then have been considered immoral sexual practices.\textsuperscript{25}

Eugene Jansson was a gay artist who lived between 1862 and 1915. His paintings often had a strong and obvious homoerotic element to them, and it was perhaps he who best represented nineteenth century homoeroticism in Swedish visual culture. His depictions of male bathhouses and soldiers were significant since both were important elements of male homosexual culture during this period.\textsuperscript{26}

\section*{2.5 Biography}

\subsection*{2.5.1 Early Years}

Anton Christen Nyström was born in Göteborg on the 15th of October, 1842. His father was a wholesaler named Frederic, and his mother, Carolina Christina, whose family name was Silverstolpe, was descended from a Scottish immigrant who had settled in Sweden during the reign of Erik XIV. She died in 1848 at the age of thirty-nine.\textsuperscript{27}

The marriage between Frederic and his wife was a happy one, but the untimely death of his wife apparently caused a great deal of sorrow both for Frederic and for his children. Nyström recalls in his autobiography the mood that was present amongst his family at this time:

\begin{quote}
Min far greps av den djupaste sorg vid denna förlust, som vi barn ock kände djupt. Min mor dyrkades formligen av min far, som i henne såg en ängel och alltid kallade henne så.  
\end{quote}

Anton and his two brothers attended Göteborg's realgymnasium, and he wrote that the education he received there was beneficial. It was during these years that an interest in both zoology and entomology burgeoned in the future scientist.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{24} Silverstolpe 1999, p.53 "Vänskap och Kärlek Äro Ett" in \textit{Sympatiens}
\bibitem{25} Rydström 2003 p.43-45
\bibitem{26} Eman 1999, p. 208-236 "Bröderna Jansson" in \textit{Sympatiens}
\bibitem{27} Nyström 1929, p.11-12
\bibitem{28} Nyström 1929, p.13
\end{thebibliography}
With the exception of the death of Carolina, Nyström's childhood was generally a happy one, but a severe crisis in his health occurred when he contracted rheumatic fever at the age of fifteen. Although a serious illness, it was successfully treated under the supervision of Dr. Forsenius. This physician became an important person in Nyström's life by nurturing a budding interest in medicine. It was Forsenius who was, most likely, the man responsible for making a future career in medicine possible for Nyström. Since a good grasp of Latin was essential for admission into medical studies, Forsenius stressed the necessity of mastering the language. This was a problem since Anton had not previously studied Latin in depth. Also, Frederic did not approve of his teenage son's wish to study medicine. He was hoping that Anton would become a business man instead. The young Nyström asked for help from his new mentor, who eventually convinced Frederic that medicine was a worthwhile pursuit. Nyström took one-hundred and forty private lessons in Latin before traveling to Uppsala in order to take his student exam. He passed and received a grade of cum laude in several subjects.

2.5.2 Arrival in Uppsala and Medical Education

Anton's arrival in Uppsala was a liberating experience. He enjoyed his days as a student, and it was here that he met Pontus Wikner. Both student and professor wrote fondly of one another. It seems that their friendship was not a sexual one, but Nyström was well aware of Wikner's homosexuality.

In 1866 Anton took his kandidatexamen in medicine and finished his doctoral studies at Lund in 1868 with a dissertation entitled *Cretinism och Idioti*. He then traveled to various clinics in Copenhagen, Berlin, Vienna, Paris and London in order to gain more practical experience. During his time abroad Nyström developed an interest in dermatology which would set him on a course to becoming one of Sweden's first practitioners and researchers in this branch of medicine.

2.5.3 Religious Conversion

In his biography Nyström talked about his antagonism towards Christianity, as well as the various

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29 Nyström identifies this physician's name only as "C.Forsenius".
30 Nyström 1929, p..14-17
31 Rydström 2003,p.50-51
32 Nyström 1929, p.59-63

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stages of his development away from religion and towards a position of atheism. He began his story with an historical observation that the decade of the 1850s was the last in which Christian beliefs stood largely unchallenged in Sweden, and then moves on to the religious life of his own family:

*I vårt hem upprätthöll min far den traditionella ordningen i kyrkligt avseende, och familjen hade ett par bänkplatser i domkyrkan.*

As a boy and teenager, Anton had a relatively usual religious upbringing, but he was not in any sense a pious young man:

*Jag blev genom undervisningen ej egentligen “troende” och kan ej minnas, att jag någonsin trott, att Jesus föddes av en jungfru, nedsteg till helvetet, uppstod efter döden och for till himmelen. Någon tid hade jag emellertid en dunkel föreställning om Kristus såsom en sorts gudamänniska. Jag levde några år som en oskrymtad medlem av den luterska kyrkan, gick till nattvarden ett par gånger och bevisade gudtjänsten i kyrkan. Min religiösa ståndpunkt hade redan vid slutet av skoltiden påverkats av mina naturvetenskapliga studier...*  

Nyström never truly believed in the dogmas of the Lutheran faith. The doubts he expressed in his childhood were strengthened by a growing knowledge of science. It was via the biblical criticism of NW Ljungberg that Nyström began to see Christianity from the point of view of an historian and cultural researcher. He attended an 1861 lecture held at Göteberg's Vetenskap- och Vitterhetssamhälle, and noted that this lecture was condemned by the local religious community. 

Sometime during the beginning of 1862 Nyström read Rydström's *Bibels lära om Kristus*, which further inspired his scientific examination of the Bible. It was in this year that Nyström wholeheartedly left the Christian religion.

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33 Nyström 1929, p.20
34 Nyström 1929, p.21
35 Nyström 1929, p. 45
Då jag var på besök i Göteborg i början av januari 1862, fick jag där kännedom om Ljungbergs åsikter, blev fritänkare och övergav den kristna tron och gick vidare i mitt tvivel. Snart kunde jag såsom jag skrev i min dagbok, "ej längre tro, att Gud vore den föregivna mystiska personligheten och följaktligen ej heller tro på Kristi gudom, lika litet som på försoningsläran." 36

However, Anton had not yet become an atheist. He instead went through a short-lived stage as a pantheist before reaching his final decision to abandon belief in the supernatural altogether.

Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* played a large roll in Nyström's intellectual and philosophical development. Yet at first he had some doubts about Darwin's thesis. It was difficult for him to accept the idea that man had evolved from animals. However, after he read Aldous Huxley, Nyström became convinced by Darwin's evidence and arguments. He also maintained that the publication of *Origin of Species* was a breaking point in society's march away from religion. He believed that the book and the science that it espoused could be used as a tool that would free people from the intellectual confines of theology and religion. 37

Nyström spent his entire adult life writing anti-Christian articles and books, including *Kristendomen och den fria tanken* (1908). The book would help to instigate the so-called "Djävulsdebatt" which began in the newspapers of Sweden in May of 1909 and lasted throughout the summer of that same year. While Nyström's book was entirely anti-Christian, the debate was more specifically about the existence of the devil and consisted of three sides: liberal Christians, traditionally-minded Christians and freethinkers. 38

### 2.5.4 Psychiatry

Nyström wrote that it was "studier av filisofisk och sociologisk natur" 39 which led him to psychiatry. It is an important statement which indicates that his previous studies of these two areas set him off on a course to research not only the human mind, but more specifically human sexuality.

36 Nyström 1929, p. 46
37 Nyström 1929, p.42
38 Claesson 2004, p.179-181
39 Nyström 1929, p. 72
Another philosophy which had an important influence on Nyström's historical and psychiatric works was positivism. While he had not yet read August Comte at Uppsala, by 1873 he had managed to obtain a copy of GH Lewes' *History of Philosophy from Thales to Comte*. Positivism became a useful system of thought for Nyström and helped him formulate his scientific theories on history, psychiatry and human sexuality.

Positivism är ej blott en filosofi, utan ock en samhällsamt religionslära, vilken utgår från bevisade vetenskapliga teorier och som i alla företeelser inom materiens och andens värld söker och följer de verkliga lagarna för företeelserna för att ernå en enhetlig och harmonisk lära såsom grund för ett värdigt harmoniskt leverne.  

This philosophy was so attractive and influential that Nyström even founded a positivist society in 1879, which lasted until 1902.

3. Research

3.1. Hellenism versus Christianity

Nyström was not only an atheist, but also adamantly anti-Christian in his writings. This is an important clarification since Nyström held relatively high opinions of religions which were based in nature, even though he did not believe their mythologies to be true.

His first book on Christianity was *Jesus och Kristendomen ur Naturvetenskaplig och Historisk Synpunkt*. It was published anonymously by Adolf Bonniers in 1873 with the author being listed only as, "En Vetenskapsman." It was here that one can see the beginning of the view that there existed a strong dichotomy between the Greek and the Christian views of morality, with the first one being humanistic and the latter misanthropic. The overshadowing of the ancient Hellenic view of sex and philosophy with the Christian had been detrimental to European culture.

Despite Nyström's atheism he had a sympathetic view towards Greek religious beliefs, which

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40 Nyström 1929, p.102
was part of a larger admiration of Greek culture in general. The affinity which Nyström had for Hellenic beliefs was primarily due to the connection which the Greeks drew between their spiritual life and the natural world:

De stridiga känslorna och passionerna, som hindra hälsans bevarande, skulle enligt forntidens greker ej regleras genom dogmer och befallande bud, utan genom kärlekens eller Eros' kraft, och i människornas inre skulle skönhetens milda tyglar, Chariterna och Muserna, leda och förena de stridande krafterna. Det var kärlekens fläkt, som skulle bringa den inte människans slutna frön till blomning.41

Not only was Greek culture superior in its love of beauty and rationality, but it was even conducive to health. The absolutely antithetical relationship which existed between the Greek and the Christian can be seen here:

Hvilken skillnad mellan den grekiska livsåskådningen och den kristna! Livsglädje, förnuft, skönhet och harmoni i den förra, dysterhet, okunnighet, fruktan och hemska fantasier i den senare.
I den grekiska antiken rationella vetenskaper, i den kristna magi och mysticism. I den förra dådlystna och modiga sinnen, i den senare själfpinande asketer och gråtmilda suckande och om sin salighet bekymrade, enfaligt troende själar.
Religionen liksom konsten höjde hos grekerna inre poesi och yttre skönhet, och glädje var dess medelpunkt.42

3.1.1. Reconciling Historical Objectivity and Anti-Christian Philosophy

Yet Nyström is careful not to be too subjective a critic of Christianity in his historical works. He criticized, for example, Voltaire and Hume for their propagandistic history writing:

Den förres kvicka, men falska och i grund ohistoriska kritik af kristendomen har

41 Nyström 1904, p.62
42 Nyström 1908, p43-44
förvillat otagliga sinnen, som ej förstått att de storheten eller finna det lagbundna
i den kristna kyrkans tidiga framträdande, då de med den djärfve kritiken blott
sett bristerna i dogmsystemet samt urartningen under kristendomen
förfallsperiod.43

However one can still criticize Christianity within this framework. It is important here to
note that Nyström had a system of objective reasoning which he believed led him to the
conclusion that Christianity is detrimental to human morality, philosophy and civilization. It is a
common thread in his works. He does not simply make accusations, but rather observations
based upon rational arguments and the clear presentation of events.

3.1.2. Christianity, Health and Sexuality

Nyström's belief that Christianity had a detrimental effect on health and was a harmful system
of morality can be clearly seen in his most important work within the field of sex research,
*Könslivet och dess lagar* (1904). The book deals for the most part with the history of human
sexuality. The basis for the currently-existing ignorance and irrationality regarding human sexual
morality is made clear in the introduction:

*Den okunnighet om de sexuella förhållandena, som finnes hos flertalet
människor, både gifta och ogifta, föranleder ständigt talrika lidanden, sjukdomer
och olyckor. Länge har man bemödat sig att sprida kännedom om människans
allmänna hälsöförhållanden, men föga har gjorts för undervisningen om
könslivet, som dock är lika så viktigt att känna som matsmältningen och
födoämnena, andningen och luften m.m., ja än viktigare. Åtskilliga arbeten
därom ha visserligen utgivits; men på detta område har ingalunda samma
vetenskapliga objektivitet öfverallt gjort sig gällande som på lifslärans andra
områden. Då könsfunktion står i ett visst förhållande till moralen, och
teologismen med dess öfvernaturliga föreställningar hos flera författare varit
bestämmande i fråga härom, har detta ledt till en skef och ensidig uppfattning af
begreppet sedlighet samt den mänskliga viljans förmåga att behärksa*

43 Nyström 1894, Vol.I p.33
Here one can see Nyström's antipathy towards the theological (or Christian) influence over morality and how it has led to ignorance and suffering. It also shows how dissemination of knowledge on sex is linked and therefore tainted by religious considerations. Later on in the book, he gives examples of Christian tyranny over the law. The criminalization of fornication was one notable situation.

But specifically, how has Christian morality been harmful to human health and happiness? This was an issue that was first taken up in *Jesus och Kristendom* when a comparison between the lifespans of those who abstained from sex (ascetics) is compared to those who were married:

> Af statistiken veta vi, att den ogifte mannen har betydligt kortare lifslängd än den gifte; den förra har ej utsigt på att bli mer än 45 år, då den gifte blir 60! Detta kan endast tillskrifvas det mer moraliska, lidelse - och sorgfriare lifvet inom äktenskapet.45

He continued his observation about Christianity being the source of ill health in *Om läseri och sinnesrubbnin* (1880), where he more specifically targets Christian asceticism, devotion and dogmas as being the cause of mental illness. However, Nyström does not credit himself with being the first to make this discovery. Rather he writes that it was the French physician Henri Dagonet and his *Maladies Mentales* which noted the connection. He reiterates the author's comments that there was a rise in the number of cases of mental illness in Sweden between 1833 and 1842, during the spread of Methodism.46

The connection between Christian – especially Protestant – religious fervor and mental illness was something which Nyström was able to observe first hand in his practice as a physician; however, he also cited historical examples as strong evidence of this theory. For instance, the cases of self-castration by some of the early church fathers, such as Origenes.47

The history of self-castration was also taken up in *Könslivet*. Specifically, the disturbing case of mass self-castration by large numbers of Christian ascetics in Nicea in 325 AD.48

44 Nyström 1904, p. 3
45 Nyström 1873, p. 164
46 Nyström 1880, p. 12
47 Nyström 1880, p.10
48 Nyström 1910, p 23
3.1.3 Christian Revelations as Hallucinations

Christianity not only caused mental illness but was itself caused by mental illness. The idea that the major religious revelations contained in the New Testaments are, in fact, the result of hallucinations forms a key part of Nyström's delegitimization of Christianity.

In *Kristendomen och Den Fria Tanken* (1908), this view is expounded upon:

*De kristna asketerna ha ofta haft hallucinationer, beroende på deras ständiga uppgående i gudliga betraktelser, beskådande af den korsfäste "frälsaren", frestelser till kötets synder, som tillskrevos Satan, o.s.v i förening med sömnlöshet och fasta, som utmärglade kroppen.*

Nyström began his argument by not only attributing Christian revelations to hallucinations, but also by giving a cause for those hallucinations.

Later, a number of important Christian figures from both the New and Old Testaments (as well as saints and other religious figures from later centuries) are given. Martin Luther, Savonarola, Saint Bridget were some of those mentioned, but, of course, Jesus was the most important. One example of a notable story about Jesus which Nyström attributed to hallucination is the vision of the devil which occurred during Jesus' 40 days and nights wandering in the desert.  

3.2. *Om Homosexualitet och Hermaphrodit*: Belysning af Missförstådda Existenser

When Nyström first broached the topic of homosexuality in *Könslivet*, his views could be described as those of a physician who had sympathy for those suffering from an illness.

*En sexuell abnormitet, som på senar tid blifvit bättre känd än förr, är dragningen till eget kön, homosexualiteten. Denna är ibland medfödd, och i så fall bör den bedömas med försiktighet och moderation. Icke så få äro behäftade därmed,*

49 Nyström 1908, p.14-15
50 Nyström 1908, p.16-18

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somliga lida mycket däraf och söka ibland bot mot sitt olyckliga tillstånd. Ofta beror dock homosexualiteten tvifvelsutan på dåliga exempel och lockelser samt är en last. Ej sällan har den utvecklats genom svårigheten att finna tillfälle till sexuellt umgänge med det andra könet, och ofta har den anledning i fruktan att genom umgänge med offentliga kvinnor få venerisk smitta.  

However, this initial attempt to write about homosexuality was short and markedly different from *Om Homosexualitet*. In fact, there is no mention of his first attempt at describing homosexuality in his autobiography. However, this excerpt from that book, which mentions the 1919 article, may provide some insight into why he changed his mind:


It seems that between 1904 and 1919, Nyström had come into contact with more homosexuals and the empirical evidence he gathered led him to reach a more objective conclusion based upon a larger number of observations.

### 3.2.1 Medical Defense

*Om Homosexualitet* was published by Svanbäck & Company in Stockholm and contains a number of illustrations. Nyström began his argument with the definition of the terms

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51 Nyström 1904, p. 52-53  
52 Nyström 1929, p. 88
homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual.\textsuperscript{53} He then divided up homosexuality into two groups. The first consisted of "medfödda" homosexuals, which Nyström believed was made up of the group whose orientation manifested itself in childhood or adolescence. The second type was the "förvärvfådd" or those who developed homosexual behaviors later in life. He called these types pseudo-homosexuals and gave a variety of possible causes for their behavior: "slumrande anlag, särskilda lockelser, brist på någon andra könet."\textsuperscript{54}

The scientific study of homosexuality was something which grew out of the burgeoning field of sexual research (or sexology) and those who studied this topic often cited Krafft-Ebing as the empirical basis of their research. Initially, Krafft-Ebing believed that homosexuality was a mental illness. However, as Nyström mentions, it was Krafft-Ebing himself who changed his view on the pathological nature of homosexuality and came to think of it as a normal variant of human behavior. However, Krafft-Ebing was not the only researcher which Nyström cited for empirical data. Magnus Hirschfeld and Irwan Block are also credited as the most modern and accurate researchers on homosexuality.

Nyare studier af framstående sexologer M. Hirschfeld, Iwan Bloch m.fl., liksom ock af mig själf, ha visat, att själssväthet långt ifrån är allmän hos homosexuella, utan att värklig homosexualitet är en anomoli, som finns hos många till kropp och själ fullkomligt friska personer, som ofta utmärkas af hög intelligens och ej visa några psykiska defekter.\textsuperscript{55}

Also, like many cases of heterosexual mental and physical illness, it is abstinence which caused problems for homosexuals:

Genom den ofta tvungna sexella abstinensen blir många homosexuell – som ej kan eller på grund af viljestycka ej söker få sin könsdrift tillfredsställd – neurastenisk.\textsuperscript{56}

Regarding the biological nature of homosexuality, Nyström believed that is was an "yttring af

\textsuperscript{53} Nyström 1929, p.88
\textsuperscript{54} Nyström 1919, p.3
\textsuperscript{55} Nyström 1919, p.8
\textsuperscript{56} Nyström 1919, p. 8
hermafroditi" and was "af organisk natur" rather than being a "förvillelse" or a "psychopatisk tillstånd". The specific etiology for male homosexuality was the existence of elements of the ovary in the testicles and in the case of lesbians, of testicular elements in the ovaries. However, he continued by mentioning the possibility that the brain may also play a role in determining sexual orientation:

Men därjämte torde homosexualiteten, i synnerhet hos pseudo-homosexuella, också kunna ha en psykologisk anledning eller utgång från det cerebrala könscentrum.\textsuperscript{57}

Nyström's depiction of male homosexuality consists of a general characterization that would today be considered a negative stereotype. A homosexual man, for example, is not as brave as a heterosexual. A homosexual seeks jobs of a more mental nature rather than those that require physical labor. Many homosexuals are attracted to such occupations as teachers, artists and musicians.

While these observations may seem unsettling to modern eyes it is important to point out that this characterization was written from a positive point of view in order to demonstrate that homosexuals are useful, worthy people who can contribute to society.

The next stage in the medical defense is to point out the fact that psychiatric research into homosexuality had been conducted mostly on patients in hospitals rather than on homosexuals in everyday life. This had led to a sampling bias which contributed to the false belief that homosexuality was a sickness.

\subsection*{3.2.2 Cultural Defense}

Nyström believed that homosexuality existed in all classes of people in all historical epochs and that is was especially common among primitive peoples. This observation was not simply a rhetorical device. He gave Ferdinand Karsh-Haaks Uranusmus bei den Naturfolken in Hirschfeld's 1901 Jahrbuch as a source for empirical data.

The belief in the naturalism and universality of homosexuality was a starting point and basis for the rest of Nyström's argument.

\textsuperscript{57} Nyström 1919, p.10
"Homosexualiteten förekommer hos alla folk och har förekommit på alla tider aldeles oberoende af kulturen...

Den förekommer mycket allmänt bland naturfolken, och detta utvisar åtminstone, att leda vid det normala eller kultur degenerering ej är en orska därtill.

Allt utvisar, att den är en universell naturföreteelse, beroende på anlag i vissa människors organisation, en könsdrift, tillhörande vissa personers natur, hvilken sålunda ej är »onaturligt«, fast den är anomali eller en från den normala könsdriften, de heterosexuellas, afvikande företeelse".  

Homosexuality is a natural and neutral characteristic which had the potential of developing into the highest form of love, but just as for heterosexuals, the nature of the sexual relationship (whether it be base or sublime) depended on the individuals' personalities and characters. It was the universal and natural elements of homosexuality which were essential qualities in Nyström's argument, since he held the natural world – and belief systems based in nature – in such high regard.

3.2.3 The Greeks

Ancient Greece was a model for Nyström's natural, rational and humanist model for homosexuality and was presented as an alternative to the Christian belief of sodomy. Homosexual relations, for instance, were even featured positively in Greek religious life, with the gods of Olympus reflecting the homosexual relations of their earthly subjects. This was a stark contrast to the asexual (or even anti-sexual) god of the bible and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Among the ancient Greeks there were expressions of homoerotic desire which ranged from the most highly ideal to those that were simply lustful. However, it was the idealized version of homosexuality which was the most relevant contribution of Greek culture to Nyström's model of homosexuality:

"Det estetiska behaget ock skönhet hos den harmoniskt utbildade ynglingens kropp var början till den grekiska kärleken. Men ynglingens andliga egenskaper värderades ock, och detta ledde till förädling av denna ynglingakärlek. Den högstående greken ville se en skön själ i en skön kropp, hvorför den andliga

58 Nyström 1919, p.4
59 Nyström 1919, p. 12-13
Homosexuality was not simply an impulsive sexual desire, but could be the source of a relationship possibly on par with or even superior to heterosexual marriages. Socrates and Plato represented two of the most well-known examples of writers who exemplified the higher type of homosexual love. An important part of this idealism is the separation of the erotic type of homosexual love from the more spiritual type. In fact Nyström defines this as "Platonic love."

In the second chapter of Nyström's article, hermafordinism is dealt with. The first three pages deals with a cultural analysis on the nature of the god Hermaphrodites (whose appellation is a compound created by joining the names of his father, the messenger god Hermes, and his mother, the goddess of love, Aphrodite.)

Accordingly, the dual nature (or ambiguous nature) of the god has been a curiosity both to physicians and to the general public since ancient times. Yet the concept of androgyne is not unique to the Greeks. It has a more universal nature and has been reflected in older "nature religions", as well. Nyström continues on with other examples of gods and goddesses who had some sort of androgynous nature (even if it was not as prominent as Hermaphrodites.)

Most importantly it was the attention that the Greeks gave to Hermaphrodites, both in their literature and their art, that is indicative of the Greek celebration of androgyne (something which, again, is seen by Nyström to be the biological cause of homosexuality.) The appreciation of harmony is, perhaps, one of the reasons why the dual nature of Hermaphrodites (equal part man and woman) was so significant.

3.2.4 Biographies and Additional Statements

Perhaps one of the most important tools Nyström uses to defend homosexuality is biography. In the introduction to the biographical section of the article, he prefaced his more detailed biographies with a list of several important personages whom he believes to have been gay: Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Heinrich Hössli, Oscar Wilde, and Kirkegaard are several examples.

The more detailed biographies begin with Gustaf III. It is stated as a given that Gustaf's
homosexuality is well-known. While he married, he did so only as a duty rather than as someone who
would enjoy married life. Nyström notes that the king had an aversion to sexual relations with his
wife.\textsuperscript{64}

It is true that Nyström describes Gustav with feminine characteristics, mentioning, among other
things, his preference for playing the female role in a play when he was young. But this is not a
negative characteristic in Nyström's view, simply one that reinforces his belief that homosexuality is
caused by the presence of a female element in one's body.

It is interesting that the majority of people whom Nyström chose to write about at length were
women, specifically women with strong and notable characters. Not surprisingly Sappho was the first
person mentioned, almost certainly since her colony on Lesbos was the origin of the word for female
homosexuality. He stressed her ability to write erotic poetry. Another strong woman whom he believed
to have been a lesbian was Queen Christina of Sweden. However, probably the most notable example
of a strong woman given by Nyström was Louise Michel, the female soldier who served in Napoleon
III's army in 1871. He described her with positive adjectives such as "energisk" and as a fighter against
tyranny.\textsuperscript{65} It seems that Nyström believed that women with a masculine characteristic could be an asset
to society.

If, after the biographical section, there is any doubt as to Nyström's attitude towards homosexuals,
he clarifies it with a number of reaffirming statements:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Det konstitutiva i kärlekslivet är hos homosexuella detsamma som hos heterosexuella...Erotiken är hos homosexuella alldelles som hos de heterosexuella, växlande mellan en hög idealisk kärlek till den grofsta sinnlighet...De homosexuella måste förstå, att de ha samma skyldigheter mot samhällsordningen som de heterosexuella...}\textsuperscript{66}
\end{quote}

Nyström's advocacy and sympathy are clear. He offers therapeutic advice to homosexuals who may
be reading his article or physicians who may be treating them.

Finally, in the last paragraph the humanist element in his defense is made absolutely clear:

\textsuperscript{64} Nyström 1919, p.11
\textsuperscript{65} Nyström 1919, p.13-14
\textsuperscript{66} Nyström 1919, p.15
I humanitetens och vetenskapens namn hoppas jag, att dumma och rigorösa lagparaver, som kunna tillämpas på enhvar homosexuell, måtte snarast afskaffas och att man noga precisar hvad som skall anses som straffbar förbrytelse och samhällsvådlighet till skillnad från eroticla yttringar, som visserligen ej äro normala, men därför ej behöfva brutal eller vådliga för andra.67

Nyström's article is one written by a physician and scientist, but as he himself states, it is also one written by a humanist and humanitarian seeking to eliminate suffering based upon Christian beliefs.

4. Conclusion

While certainly not the first person in Sweden to describe homosexuality in a positive light, Anton Nyström should be considered a pivotal figure in the gay liberation movement in Sweden since he was the first person in that country to publish a comprehensive defense of homosexuality, one which encompassed both its medical and cultural aspects.

The view of the medical community that homosexuality was a mental illness was fairly common, and was even one that Nyström himself initially accepted. It was only after conducting his own research, as well as becoming more familiar with Magnus Hirschfeld's work, that Nyström realized his previous beliefs were erroneous.

But the cultural aspect of Nyström's article was the most significant, and one which fell into the same pattern as the rest of his writings about human sexuality. The negative attitudes towards homosexuality were seen as being part of a larger problem which was caused by having sexual morality be shaped by Christianity. Christianity was seen by Nyström as both causing mental illness and being caused by mental illness. It had been detrimental to human sexual morality and had caused unnecessary suffering and cruelty for centuries. This was not a simple, blind dislike for Christianity, but rather a point of view which was furnished with ample historical evidence illustrating how Christianity had

67 Nyström 1919, p. 19
caused neurotic and irrational behavior.

While anti-Christian philosophy is a theme which permeated all of Nyström's published writings about sexuality, it is curious that he did not at first see the connection between the Christian concept of sodomy and the negative attitudes towards homosexuality.

It is an irony and perhaps even an embarrassment since Nyström did not mention his initial view on homosexuality in his autobiography. However, his 1919 pamphlet most definitely fit the rest of his writings in that the persecution and misery suffered by homosexuals was seen in large part as being caused by Christian dogmas and morals. While homosexuality was a natural condition that was accepted and even celebrated by societies which had a more naturalistic attitude towards sexual morality, the conversion of the Western world from Greco-Roman paganism to Christianity had been a major, negative turning point for homosexuality.

The solutions to the problems faced by homosexuals were to be found in history writing. By attacking the source of most negative attitudes towards homosexuality (Christianity) and then depicting positive examples of homosexuals from history, most particularly from Ancient Greece, Nyström was able to show that homosexuality had been a normal, natural part of human life and that the existing moral structure based on the bible was injurious, cruel and unnatural.

For Nyström, it seems that history writing was the remedy to the cultural injuries inflicted by Christianity.
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