

Blossom of Bone: Reclaiming the Connections Between Homoeroticism and the Sacred. By Randy P. Conner. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993, xiv + 352 pp.

Reading *Blossom of Bone* makes clear that Fundamentalist Christian attacks on gay people are nothing new but have been going on for thousands of years. In fact, Randy P. Conner concludes, such attacks are central to the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Drawing on recent feminist studies of ancient Goddess-worshipping religions, from UCLA archaeologist Marija Gimbutas and others, Conner focuses on the gender-variant male priests of these religions, who dressed and acted femininely to bring themselves closer to the Great Mother Goddess (known in various Mediterranean cultures as Inanna, Ishtar, Athirat, Isis, Astarte, Diana, Hecate, Cubele, and others). Many of these priests served as temple prostitutes for non-feminine men to achieve spiritual union with the Goddess through sex with these feminine males. When Hebrew men used the patriarchal sky father god Jehovah to challenge the gender-egalitarian Goddess worshippers, they also attacked the androgynous male priests that were so commonly associated with such religions.

Because many Hebrews began worshipping the Canaanite goddess Athirat and her male consort Baal (the Golden Calf of the Hebrew Bible), Jehovah's zealots attached great importance to prohibitions against men dressing as women and having sex with men. Unlike the other religions of the region, the patriarchal Hebrews emphasized the deity as father and ordered their priests to become heterosexually married. They conducted a murderous campaign to destroy androgynous homosexuals. Conner sees the biblical story of Jehovah's destruction of Sodom as being a symbol of this attack, a part of the effort to wipe out Goddess worship.

Likewise, as Christianity established itself as one of a myriad of religions in the Roman Empire, Christian zealots began massacres and persecutions of gender-variant priests of competing sects. Such persecutions continued, off and on, from when Christianity became the state religion in Rome until the Inquisition, when surviving European Goddess-worshipping folk religions that respected gender variance and same-sex eroticism were finally terrorized into repression.

Not restricting his book to the Western heritage, Conner draws on recent anthropological research to show that many cultures have accepted a close relationship between gender variance, homoeroticism, and spiritual insight. Citing the evidence from ancient cave paintings and archaeological findings, he makes the case that such aspects were often associated with shamanism in many primal religions of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Numerous ancient sects of Yoruba, Hausa, Lango, Zulu, and other religions show a widespread African understanding that androgynous and homoerotically inclined persons were spiritually gifted. Such associations were also common in religions of ancient Europe.

Drawing on anthropological evidence of the ancient Russian *enaress*, Near East *galli*, South Asian *hijras*, East Asian *flower boys*, Southeast Asian *basir*, Polynesian *mahu*, Siberian transformed shaman *soft men*, and Native American Indian *berdaches*, Conner suggests an ancient and widespread gender-variant tradition associated with shamanistic transformation that existed probably as long ago as the original diffusion of humans across Eurasia to America and the Pacific islands.

Conner offers an excellent discussion of associations of male gender-variant shamans in ancient East Asian goddess religions and also in Taoism. Regrettably, he does not include analysis of the acceptance of gender diversity and homosexuality in Buddhism. He does, however, include an interesting discussion of spiritual aspects of Chinese eunuchs. In chapters on the Caribbean and Brazil, he offers similar evidence of acceptance of spiritually gifted gender-variant homosexuals in the African-based Santeria/Candomble religions.

Such cross-cultural examples offer a wider context for us to understand the history of gender variance and same-sex eroticism in Europe. With spiritual associations destroyed by Christian persecutions, such androgynous homoerotically inclined persons retreated into the marginalized lower-class world of carnival troubadours and also into the world of new-Classical Renaissance artists. Conner concludes that together the carnival and arts traditions represent gender nonconformist remnants of resistance to Christian dominance.

After a brief hop, skip, and jump over several poets and philosophers of the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century, Conner examines in more detail writers like Thoreau, Whitman, and Wilde, arguing that their thinking was inspired by the pre-Christian respect for gender and sexual diversity, and that their impact helped lead to a twentieth-century disillusionment with the Judeo-Christian tradition and a reaction against religious and political totalitarianism. This rising sense of democracy and wider humanism helped lead to the anti-colonial movements of Third World peoples in reclaiming their pre-Christian traditions, and to a greater respect for other cultures among Westerners. This relativistic view encouraged self-empowerment and anti-discrimination movements among minorities.

What has not occurred among twentieth-century liberal humanists, Conner argues, is a recognition of the ancient connections between homoeroticism and the sacred. Reacting against Judeo-Christian bigotry, many gay and lesbian academics have rejected religions as a means of advancing equal rights. Conner is especially critical of queer theory social constructionists, who have denied any connection between modern gays and lesbians and older forms of sexual variance. In their emphasis on the new creation of "the modern homosexual," Conner sees an attempt to deny and even censor a spiritual aspect of gender-variant homoeroticism as recognized by many cultures through human history.

Drawing on his own participation in the Radical Faeries movement, Con-

ner considers same-sex erotic attractions to be part of a larger difference of a group that is essentially different from the heterosexual mainstream in more than just sexuality. By androgynously bridging the gap between men and women, between the world of heterosexual procreation and the world of artistic creativity, and between the mundanely rational and the extra-rational exploration of the mysteries of the universe, Conner suggests that non-reproductive variants on the margins of gender and sexuality have a special insight to provide original contributions to human thought.

Yet despite his essentializing acceptance of cross-cultural archetypes, Conner also appreciates a paradoxical fluidity relating to sexuality and gender. He makes the analogy to Quantum Physics, which sees matter as being both solid particle and wavelike undulation. Rather than either/or opposites, the universe is best understood as both essence and process. He draws on holographic theory, which sees everything as interrelated, with distinctions of time and place being largely illusionary; and chaos theory, which explains the universe as unpatterned and random. In such a reality, Conner sees special benefits accruing to humanity's future due to nonconformists and those who can free themselves from the norm. In other words, culture in the future can reclaim the gifts of special insights and creativity, building on the recognition of such specialness (believed in terms of spirituality) by ancient cultures of the past.

While Conner bases much of his thesis on feminist interpretations of ancient Goddess religions and also cites examples of gender-variant warrior women, his main focus is on male androgyny. The study of female gender variance cross-culturally, which remains to be written, is a crucial part of the story of human sexual diversity that we are only now beginning to uncover.

For bringing together a wealth of anthropological, classical, and historical scholarship relating to the association of homoeroticism, and androgyny, and spirituality in many world cultures, Conner's book deserves thoughtful attention by scholars and others. With such attention, he hopes, a new post-Christian era of gay creativity and spirituality will blossom, reborn out of the fertilizer of the dead bones of the past.

Such a viewpoint has important political implications. It can give the gay and lesbian movement a wider perspective than merely striving for sexual liberation and protection from discrimination. Part of our problem as a political movement is that we have been more reactive than proactive. Cross-cultural examples can help numerous persons develop constructive roles for themselves outside of the heterosexual norm, inspired by special roles for gender nonconformists in other cultures. Such cross-cultural models should not, of course, become straight-jackets requiring particular imitation, but in their very diversity can invigorate creativity in future world cultural adaptation. Anthropologists have a particular responsibility to gather and interpret this evidence.

WALTER L. WILLIAMS

*University of Southern California
Los Angeles, California*