



Review of Donald Boisvert, *Sanctity and Male Desire: A Gay Reading of Saints* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004), 224 pp.

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In the past decades, openly gay scholars in religious studies have recovered the history and experiences of gay lives within and outside religious communities, investigated discourses on sex and gender, defended differences of sexual orientation against public hostility and biblical Scripturalism, critiqued heteronormativity, and generally broadened the vision of scholarly inquiry within the academic study of religion. A subgenre of writing within this field has focused on the experience of gay men in view of their religious upbringing in a particular tradition as well as their current devotional practices. In these texts, autobiographical insertions and confessional revelations are often blended with historical, phenomenological and ethical musings. These texts come across as a rich tapestry of images, reminiscences and thoughts that are often more suggestive in nature rather than systematically argued. Though informed by academic discourse, their devotional, confessional and hagiographic style makes them at times resemble a breviary—a gay breviary, that is.

Donald Boisvert's *Sanctity and Male Desire* falls into this genre of gay devotional writing. He argues that Catholic male saints inspire not only devotion but also desire, and that their stories and images contain an eroticism that can be recovered from beneath a more repressive Catholic culture. Boisvert, who teaches religion at Concordia University in Canada, approaches this topic as an openly gay man who was raised in the Catholic tradition (the reader learns this on the first page of the Introduction). Situating himself within a larger argument—advanced by scholars like Mark Jordan and Robert Goss—that Roman Catholicism is simultaneously homophobic and also “homoerotic and campy” (p. 8), he wants to explore the possibilities of desire with which the iconic images of male saints are invested. In a certain sense, such an approach falls into a loosely understood Foucaultian framework with its interest in an archaeology of knowledge, except that the knowledge to be unearthed, in Boisvert's case, is less related to discursive formation and more to an embodied knowing of desire.

In the introduction, Boisvert argues convincingly that as objects of veneration, saints exude a sensual quality. Since they serve both as model and mediation, the sensual quality is claimed by the believer in two ways: first, wanting to imitate them as exemplary models (if only in one's fantasy) and, second, investing one's wishes and hopes in them as intercessory forces (mediation). In either case, desire is at the center of veneration. The passionate and sensuous devotion to saints—often in tension with orthodoxy and scholasticism—speaks to the strong dynamics between devotee and the object of admiration. “In intensely Catholic cultures,” Boisvert writes, “[saints] are clothed and bathed, covered with flowers or

dripping in bright red droplets of blood, gaudy and almost comical in their painted features, and lit by the reflective glow of a thousand votive candles” (p. 19).

Boisvert is not interested in pursuing the whole spectrum of desire that saints might elicit and evoke from their devotees; instead, he focuses on the possibilities of investing male saints with gay erotic desire. It happens in two ways: exploring the queerness of the saints themselves and, second, affirming the gay embrace of male saints as eroticized objects. “I have been engaged in a process of ‘queering’ hagiography,” he writes, and “I have examined the lives and imagery of a limited number of male saints . . . recast[ing] them as gay icons” (p. 207). Devoting each chapter to one (sometimes two) saints, he introduces and reflects on, for example, the archangel Michael, Saint Sebastian, Paul and Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Damien and Peter Julian Eymard. One chapter is devoted to the “erotic Christ,” and in the two concluding chapters he reflects more broadly on how to understand saints in a secularized, modern world (can we meet men today who are saints?) and how to affirm gay male sanctity today.

I would call *Sanctity and Male Desire* an example of gay devotional writing since it unapologetically presents a partisan view of sainthood. It wants to speak to the gay community, and it does so powerfully. It encourages gay men, who would like to remain within the affective and religious universe of (Catholic) Christianity, to embrace proudly and courageously those dimensions of the tradition that give them spiritual sustenance without having to deny their erotic embodiedness. Not coincidentally, each chapter ends with a short devotional prayer and hymn, casting the respective saint into a supporter and protector of Christian gay men. Autobiographical insertions, in which Boisvert reveals openly his own desires for saintly male bodies, indicate an agenda of gay male sanctity that knows no shaming. In this sense, *Sanctity and Male Desire* is a gutsy, brave and daring book.

Boisvert does not strive to “prove” a claim historically or textually (or intertextually) but wants to persuade through the rhetoric of experience. Within a community of like-minded people, this works well. How persuasive it is, however, for a reader who does not inhabit the same erotic investment in devotional imagery and this particular religious imaginary remains questionable. A non-gay reader may find the book intriguing, enlightening and, at times, amusing and provocative; but not sharing the same experiential universe, the argumentation itself often seems rather weak. A gay, non-Catholic reader may find the erotic(ized) language of the book appealing (the description of beautiful male bodies and erotic practices), but the passionate veneration of saints may remain utterly foreign to them.

To his credit, Boisvert does not make the reductionist claim that all male saints were gay, though some might have been: “No doubt some canonized saints were homosexual, as were other holy men from the Judeo-Christian tradition” (p. 193). It might be easier to say that many saints were “queer,” if by queer we understand generally a life deviating from normative behavior and expectations.

Yet, Boisvert can be flawed for another kind of reductionist move: he constructs an image of a perfectly shaped, highly eroticized male body ascribed to each of the saints. This imagined saintly body is repeatedly described as “beautiful,” “erotic,” “titillating,” “handsome,” “bare-chested,” “naked” or “semi-naked,” “muscular,” “glorious,” “ragged” and endowed with “perfection,” “virile masculinity,” “masculine strength,” etc. More often than not, the saints of old

appear in a body conforming to the modern norm for gay beauty. Hints of age and deformity (say, through illness) are mentioned only in passing and do not elicit an eroticized response. “Mine is decidedly a fetishistic gaze,” Boisvert admits and, revealingly, adds: “If [Sebastian] were a contemporary model strutting Calvin Klein underwear in some ad, the image would be equally arousing” (p. 48).

An exception of sorts is the body of Christ. Though Boisvert imagines Jesus to be a “handsome man,” “caring and attentive, sensitive yet principled” and working “bare-chested in the burning sun” (p. 180), he is attracted also to the “broken body” of Christ. The crucified Jesus (a “handsomely glorious body of Jesus [hanging] from the cross” (p. 171)) “elicits strong feelings of comfort and passive submission, the male docile and compliant body.” Yet, this submissiveness is immediately complemented by the symbol of the “lion” with its “brute aggressive force, the male as dominant energy and the definite top” (p. 170). Not surprisingly, the “fully male, genitally endowed” sculpture of Michelangelo’s *Risen Christ*, with its “muscular arms, thighs and buttocks” (p. 177), commands Boisvert’s admiration.

The fantasized ideal of a perfected, virile male body reflects a homo-normative body, a constructed body that appeals to a particular gay male gaze. Indeed, this uncritical embrace of one dominant body image speaks more to a hagiographic fantasy than a queer discourse. Boisvert’s project of “queering hagiography” seems, at times, more an exercise in “gay hagiolatry”; it is an excessive adoration of a construct that affirms a particular gay identity rather than a broadening of queer bodily possibilities.

In fairness to Boisvert, he does introduce a range of men’s lives and stories (the reflections on Paul, Augustine and Francis of Assisi, for example, do not follow the above mold), but these do not carry the weight of the book. At times, this reviewer wished for a more persuasive historical and theoretical grounding; instead, *Sanctity and Male Desire* remains grounded almost exclusively in experience, memory and re-envisioning—and that is both its strength and its weakness.

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