

Homophobia: A History (New York: Metropolitan/Henry Holt, 2000)

By Byrne Fone

This is an extensive overview of the history of the different and changing attitudes to homosexuality in Western culture since the ancient Greeks. Just as, during almost all the time covered by this history, there was no equivalent to our modern term "homosexuality" so even less was there an equivalent of the yet more modern term "homophobia". What we get is basically a compendium of information about the varied fortunes experienced by homosexuals, much of which has to do precisely with the hatred, misunderstanding and persecution of people with a same-sex orientation.

While every reader will find something interesting and new in this book there is perhaps not much shock-horror mileage left in accounts of the medieval burnings and early modern executions of "sodomites". Unfortunately there were many who ended up on pyres and the majority were Christian heretics and witches; not to mention that in 19th England you could be hung for stealing a sheep.

The struggle to gain acceptance or tolerance in Western society and the gradual growth of a better understanding about same-sex orientation is told against a background of opposition from those who were determined for one reason or another to make life as difficult as possible for those who practised a life-style in accordance with their nature. The conclusion of the author is not very optimistic in spite of what some would see as considerable gains over the prejudices and ignorance of the past. This book was published nearly ten years ago. Would his conclusions still be the same today?

He claims that homophobia "seems to have the force of a command of nature, to speak from the deep structures of the inner self....and emerges as a condition, even as a disease, of the psyche as well as a disorder of the imagination, the spirit, and the soul." Perhaps it is no coincidence that this kind of language might well be applied by homophobes to homosexuals! We must beware of the kind of over-reaction that disables communication and inflames passions.

On the other hand Fone's use of religious terms like "spirit" and "soul" suggests that, in spite of the inevitably negative role played by institutional religion in his history, he may not be as far from the Kingdom of God as all that. It is indeed the spirit or soul of every person and their relationship to their Creator that will in the end decide how we relate to one another here on Earth with all our complexities and ambiguities.

The focus of this history is limited to Western civilization; its North-American provenance is obvious. Perhaps one day we may be able to compare homophobias and attitudes to same-sex relations from African, Indian, Chinese and other non-European cultures. Meanwhile this book offers us a good summary of the tortuous path taken in the West from Greek philosophy, passing through Roman tolerance and Christian intolerance, and then waiting for a long-delayed enlightenment from the Enlightenment in order to arrive finally at our present-day belief in the "rights" of homosexuals to equal treatment.