Christine Hoff Kraemer, *Eros and Touch from a Pagan Perspective: Divided for Love’s Sake* (New York: Routledge, 2014) 224 pp., $145 (cloth)

In this clearly written and persuasive book, Christine Hoff Kraemer advances interdisciplinary scholarship in Pagan studies and sexuality studies. She sets her work in context by identifying the two strains of scholarship to which she belongs and by providing sufficient personal information for the reader to grasp where she is coming from. To this end she self-identifies as a Pagan of long standing who engages in bodywork as a profession, specifically as a massage therapist. She affirms the struggle of earlier feminists, men as well as women, to overcome the Western moral tradition of shame about the human body, a struggle that allowed her to grow up without that shame, and yet acknowledges that it still took her years to develop a fully healthy affirmation of her body and appreciate the sacred healing quality of touch. Throughout the book details of her personal and academic life illuminate her argument.

In her *Introduction to Pagan Studies* (2007) Barbara Davy documents how for early Pagan studies “interdisciplinary work” meant employing tools from psychology, sociology and history to establish legitimate scholarship around contemporary Paganism. Only later did authors undertake constructive work that made Pagan studies an equal partner with another field to contribute to scholarship on both sides. Kraemer wants to advance theory in both sexuality studies and Pagan studies, but before she can begin this task she must face a stubborn fact: Neither the reading public nor most scholars in other fields understand contemporary Paganism; some do not even accept it as a legitimate religion. Kraemer meets this challenge well.

In order for her readers from the sexuality-studies side of this conversation to understand contemporary Paganism and to take it seriously, Kraemer devotes six pages to the beliefs and practices of today’s Pagans. Because I wanted to know if Pagan practitioners who are not necessarily familiar with a scholarly approach would recognize their religion in her presentation, I read most of the six pages to a discussion group in my local Pagan community. They agreed with her that Paganism has no one perspective and cannot
be explained in universal terms. Moreover, once they understood the decidedly academic terms she uses (all of which she defines clearly), they also agreed that she manages to capture many important commonalities of belief and practice across this diverse religion. They felt adequately represented to an audience who does understand or accept Paganism. From a scholarly perspective, I also find that Kraemer more than adequately introduces Pagan Studies with multiple references to relevant works by major scholars in the field. To involve those of us on other side of this interdisciplinary conversation, Kraemer likewise presents Sexuality Studies scholarship that supports her argument with multiple references to works in that field. In fact, her weaving of numerous relevant sources into her explanations stands out as one of the strengths of Kraemer’s work.

Not content to balance two scholarly perspectives, Kraemer introduces theology into the conversation, again from two sides: Pagan theologies and Erotic theologies. As with her coverage of Paganism, she draws on multiple resources to overcome potential objections that formal statements of beliefs must necessarily be dogmatic or monotheistic. Documenting themes from American black liberation theology, post-Christian feminist theological work, and Pagan theology (specifically Carol Christ, Starhawk, Constance Wise and Michael York), Kraemer focuses on the depth of understanding of social justice these perspectives provide as well as their support for her own “implicit polytheism.”

To advance her argument that “the erotic is a divinely transformative force,” Kraemer introduces her reader to a number of progressive theologians, including Riane Eisler, Patrick Califia, Deane Juhan, Janet Hardy and Dossie Easton, and Carter Heyward (13). She employs a critical approach, acknowledging, for example, that later scholars have rejected Eisler’s narrative of a matriarchal pre-history. Kraemer likewise rejects Eisler’s categorical dismissal of dominance and submission as normative parts of human sexual interactions (69). Without belaboring the details, Kraemer allows her reader a view into how scholars approach sexuality as a generally positive aspect of human experience and evaluate various forms of sexuality in diverse social/historical contexts. Combining Pagan and Erotic theologies brings Kramer to these theological points: social justice, gender analysis, and the positive moral significance of human touch.

Kraemer advances a five-part thesis about erotic touch:
1. That one’s “body is the vehicle of all our experience” (164), including mental experience because it comes through the brain.
2. That the human body can be viewed as sacred—“the fleshly matrix of God Herself” (165).
3. That loving consensual touch, both sexual and nonsexual, is a human right, the current repression of which harms both individuals and society.
4. That humans need a “new set of values,” the one Kraemer promotes in her book, to inform our “decision-making on both personal and social levels” (166).

She discusses and advocates for many forms of nonsexual human touch—between parent and child, between friends, from care-givers for the elderly, etc. She argues persuasively that many forms of touch that we fear are actually necessary for health. For example, misguided paranoia about child abuse has led to laws against elementary school teachers touching their students in any way, an unhealthy outcome given small children’s need for consistent appropriate loving adult touch.

However, Kraemer bases a larger part of her argument on analysis of sexual touch. She highlights diverse forms of sexuality as examples of how we can free our minds of prejudices against certain types of touch. She discusses expanding legal and social acceptance of homosexuality as normative to demonstrate that public attitudes can change in positive ways. Throughout the book her primary example of human sexuality that needs to be brought into this circle of acceptance is BDSM, an acronym for “bondage and discipline/dominance and submission/sadomasochism” (26). From a few tentative questions I raised among my community of friends and colleges, I must conclude that Kraemer is certainly correct in her assertion that the majority of people today, including those who consider themselves to be liberal/progressive thinkers, reject BDSM as prima facie immoral. Kraemer asserts to the contrary that when practiced as intended within the BDSM community, this form of sexual interaction is perfectly normal and healthy. Moreover, she employs the concept from liberation theology of listening carefully to the voices of the oppressed to assert that voices from this rejected margin of human sexual practice offer poignant insights.

To persuade her readers to give this form of sexuality a fair hearing, Kraemer describes the practices and rules of engagement required by the BDSM community. The foremost rule is that BDSM
must always be consensual at a level beyond that normally required when one engages in “vanilla” heterosexuality. The latter is a semi-joking but never fully examined term Kraemer uses for mainstream sexual interactions between two persons of opposite sexes. By extension it applies as well to most one-on-one homosexual interactions. What most gays and straights do not do, despite propaganda such as the “No means no” campaign on many college campuses, is gain explicit detailed verbal assent prior to beginning any sexual act. The BDSM community always requires this level of mutual consent. Moreover, BDSM practice always includes prior agreement on a “safe-word” to abruptly end any sexual encounter when utter by either party (or any party in the case of sex among three or more individuals). Kraemer sees the failure to include these rules of practice as one way the vanilla-sex mainstream needs to learn from the BDSM community. Kraemer provides a number of examples of BDSM such as “light application of a soft flogger” up through “more extreme forms of BDSM—often called ‘edge play.’” If engaged in accordance with these rules, such acts, she contends, constitute “consensual pleasure between adults [that] needs no justification” (26).

Justification of safe, consensual BDSM, however, dominates this book. Perhaps because she is well aware that it is a particularly hard case to make, Kraemer includes BDSM in nearly every phase of her argument. Despite her difficult-to-accept BDSM examples, she argues convincingly that our society needs a much heathier attitude toward sex. Her plea for more and healthier sex is only part of her argument. We need, she asserts, more touch—both sexual and non-sexual. Cutting our bodies off from loving, caring touch we demean our humanity and deny our sacrality. Insisting that “loving touch is necessary for human flourishing” Kraemer asserts that “touch is potentially part of our daily lives, and the neglect of loving non-sexual touch is causing tremendous harm to our society physically, emotionally, and socially” (166). She believes the Pagan community can offer the best locus for this change because of its already established openness of alternative forms of both spirituality and sexuality. To enable us to move in this new direction, Kraemer proposes the Pagan Erotic Theology outlined in her book, a mode of thinking with high potential to contribute to a more individually caring and socially healthy attitude toward our bodies.

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