

Book Review

Marsha Keith Schuchard, *Why Mrs. Blake Cried: William Blake and the Sexual Basis of Spiritual Vision* (London: Random House/Century, 2006). Reviewed by Craig Atwood.

You have probably heard of William Blake. You may have seen his highly imaginative artwork, or sung his great hymn “Jerusalem,” or read his poem “Tyger.” What few people knew about Blake, before the research of Keith Schuchard, was that he had a Moravian background. Blake’s mother joined the Fetter Lane Society in London in the 1750s when Christian Renatus von Zinzendorf was very influential. Blake’s mother loved Moravian hymns that sang of Christ as the Bridegroom of the soul, and she was instructed in the 18th century Moravian view of marriage. The Moravians at that time had a “sex-positive” theology that viewed marital intimacy as sacramental. Moravians also celebrated the Incarnation and the full humanity of Jesus. Schuchard argues that Blake’s unorthodox views on sexuality had been influenced by his mother’s Moravian involvement, but Blake’s contact with the Moravians went even further than that.

Schuchard suggests that there was a direct influence of the Moravian painter Valentine Haidt on the young Blake, and she shows that Blake maintained professional contact with a number of prominent figures in British Moravianism, such as James Montgomery and James Gillray. This opens up significant areas for research into the Moravian influence on modern art and poetry; however, the results of that research may be uncomfortable for modern Moravians who would like to forget the era of Zinzendorf as the “Sifting Time.” Particularly surprising for Moravians today may be Zinzendorf’s appropriation of the Jewish Kabala.

The reason Mrs. Blake cried, though, had little to do with the Moravians. Blake brought his wife to tears with his request that she allow him to have a concubine, like the biblical patriarchs. Schuchard reveals that this request was made in the context of the late 18th century’s sexual experimentation, which was similar to the sex revolution of the 1960s. Christian Kabalists, like Emanuel Swedenborg, saw a close connection between sexual and spiritual potency. Many readers will be surprised to learn there was a connection between Swedenborg and the Moravians in London. Schuchard also writes about physicians who experimented with electricity, magnetism, and mesmerism to enhance the sexual experience. Secret societies met for sacred orgies, and scholars published Tantric texts from India that celebrated sexuality. Enlightenment era scholars argued that sex had originally been a central component of religion. Blake was deeply involved in this underground movement to recover pre-Christian priapic religion, and his creative works take on a new life when viewed through the prism of this sexualized spirituality. Mrs. Blake was not always as enthusiastic about this enterprise as her husband.

Schuchard is to be commended for bringing to light this hidden aspect of the so-called Age of Reason and uncovering the complex history of a great artist. It is unfortunate that reviews in the popular press in England have misrepresented both her work and Zinzendorf’s teachings on the mystical marriage and Incarnation. Schuchard draws some conclusions that I am not sure are warranted, such as that Moravian missionaries brought back Tantric practices from the Tranquebar Islands and that the polemic of Henry Rimius can be accepted as a trustworthy description of Moravian sexual practices. Readers of *The Hinge* should be forewarned about the graphic nature of much of the discussion. This is definitely an “R-rated” history.