



Review of Scott Thumma & Edward R. Gray
(Eds.), *Gay Religion* (Walnut Creek, CA:
AltaMira Press, 2004), xvi + 376 pp.

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In the introduction to *Gay Religion*, Thumma & Gray state that “seldom does a day pass that the news services do not contain a story highlighting debates over the place of gay and lesbian believers in American religious life” (p. xi). Yet, they add, little or no attention is given to the tales of harmonious life between homosexuality and religion. The anthology *Gay Religion* seeks to do just that.

Gay Religion provides a richly diverse collection of 21 essays focusing on the relationship between homosexuality and religion in American society. These 21 essays are grouped into three categories: (1) denominational heritage expressions; (2) subaltern/sectarian expressions; (3) popular expressions. This “three-part heuristic typology,” note Thumma & Gray, “is offered for understanding innovation and tradition in gay spiritual practice” (p. 282).

The group of essays entitled “denominational heritage expressions” focuses on the relationship between homosexuals and the denominations in which they were raised. These essays cover both denominations and a wide variety of religions that one might not consider as denominations, such as Judaism, Buddhism, and Santería.

These denominations and religions are part of the American religious landscape and have definite theological or political views of homosexuality, and it is on this crucial issue that these essays revolve. Specifically, how does a Jew, Buddhist, Seventh Day Adventist, or United Methodist, to name a few, continue to live out his or her faith tradition while also living as a homosexual?

Shokeid’s “Why Join A Gay Synagogue,” Cadge’s “Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Buddhist Practitioners,” and Vidal-Ortiz’s “Sexuality and Gender in Santería: LGBT at the Crossroads of Santería Religion” provide evidence that homosexuality and religion, at least in these religious groups, are compatible.

Other articles, such as, Drumm’s “No Longer an Oxymoron: Integrating Gay and Lesbian Seventh Day Adventists” and Thumma’s “Gay Evangelicals: Negotiating a Religious Identity” document the struggles of some homosexuals in faith groups where homosexuality and religion are not compatible.

Two other essays, Primiano’s “The Gay God of the City: The Emergence of the Gay and Lesbian Ethnic Parish,” Cadge’s “Reconciling Congregations Bridging Gay and Straight Communities,” and Ponticelli’s “Shades of Grey or Back to Nature? The Enduring Qualities of Ex-Gay Ministries” document the unique American trait of creating voluntary organizations to deal with social issues. In this case, the voluntary organizations seek to build bridges between homosexuals and their respective faith groups.

The group of essays entitled “subaltern/sectarian expressions” focuses on LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual) groups creating their own religious groups that are centered on the identity of being LGBT. Building on the entrepreneurial experience that is American religious life, LGBT people create parallel groups and organizations “that nurture and solidify a new gay religious identity” (p. 164). Specifically, LGBT people have taken old cultural forms and expressions, such as liturgical practices and theologies, and innovatively have created new, distinct religious realities.

The first three essays highlight the creation of new, innovative realities from traditional cultural forms. Lukenbill’s “Pluralism and Diversity: Music as Discourse and Information in a Gay and Lesbian Congregation” examines the music of a gay and lesbian congregation in creating a new theological identity for the congregants. Bates’ “Liberation in Truth: African American Lesbians Reflect on Spirituality and Their Church” documents the use of liberation theology and liturgical practices consistent with black church to create a religion acceptable to African American homosexuals in their relationship with the divine. Savastano’s “St. Gerard Teaches Him That Love Cancels That Out: Italian American Catholic Gay Men in Newark, New Jersey” highlights the use of iconography, symbols, and hagiography associated with St. Gerard Maiella to create a unique religious tradition.

Wilcox’s “A Religion of One’s Own: Gender and LGBT Religiosities” builds on the work of Robert Bellah’s “sheilaism” that was first put forth in his *Habits of the Heart* (1985). Hasbrouck’s “Utopian Imaginaries and Faerie Practice: Mapping Routes of Relational Agency” and Neitz’s “Queering the Dragonfest: Changing the Sexualities in a Post-Patriarchal Religion” also focus on the individualism of “sheilaism,” but within the context of alternate religions in the United States.

The final group of essays, entitled “Popular Expressions,” examines the manifestation of gay religion in popular culture. While popular culture is not religion, religion, as documented by scholars of implied religion, can be found in popular culture. And, that is what this collection of essays is devoted to—what are those expressions of LGBT culture, outside of religious institutions and organizations, where LGBT people find religion and spirituality.

Gray & Thumma’s “The Gospel Hour: Liminality, Identity, and Religion in a Gay Bar” portrays The Gospel Hour as both a gay cabaret and a Southern evangelical revival. Gray’s “The Harvey Milk Show: Violence, Desire, and Gay Popular Culture” examines how a dramatic account of the life and death of the first openly gay elected official in the United States evokes spiritual and religious themes.

The remaining three essays, Gorrell’s “Rite to Party: Circuit Parties and Religious Experience,” Peterson’s “Gay Men’s Spiritual Experience in the Leather Community,” and “The Spirit Within: Gay Male Culture as a Spiritual Venue” provide different viewpoints of gay male culture as spirituality, particularly the ritualism of these experiences as providing the religious meaning for the participants.

Gay Religion is a groundbreaking book and with any groundbreaking book some mistakes are bound to be made. For example, a few of the essays in this collection are rather dated. Yet, what makes a groundbreaking book so powerful is that it focuses attention on a much-neglected issue and initiates further discussion and study. *Gay Religion* provides a valuable resource, both as a text and a typology, to continue studying and documenting the relationship between homosexuality and

religion in the United States in the twenty-first century. It will be a valuable resource in the classroom to enable students to see the complexity of the LGBT lifestyle both in American religion and society. Furthermore, *Gay Religion* will spur current students to become scholars of the emerging field of gay religion.

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