

Foreword

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Gay Religion marks a watershed in the study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) religious experience in contemporary American society. Rather than understanding the relationship between LGBT people and religion as a problem to be debated, which so much other literature seems to assume, this volume recognizes the richly diverse religious experiences of gay people as a new and as yet unmapped resource in the history of American religious expression. Gay religion, as discussed in this volume, is a cross section of the cornucopia of modern American spirituality. Like other religious people in the United States, gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people seek solace for their souls in a dazzling array of institutional religions and noninstitutional spiritual practices. For some, erotic experience itself becomes the golden pathway to spiritual awakening and expression, much like the spiritual pilgrimage of some of the saints of early and medieval Christianity.

By emphasizing the diversity and richness of gay religious experience, this volume challenges the current public discourse around religion and LGBT people. Despite popular opinion, gay people are not foreign to religious communities, even quite conservative or fundamentalist religious communities. LGBT people are and have been active members and leaders of widely diverse communities of faith for decades, indeed centuries. Perhaps because the rhetoric of some conservative religious groups has vilified gay people so loudly, many Americans believe that gay people stand outside of religious life entirely or are, perhaps, actively antireligious. While that view might possibly

describe some LGBT people who have rightly identified conservative religious groups as the primary obstacle to civil and social justice for gay people, there are many others, whose voices are heard in this volume, who reject the narrowness and exclusive theology of conservatives yet still embrace the beliefs and practices of those religious traditions. For them, the fight with conservative Christians is not only political and social, it is also theological and biblical. Even when contemporary fundamentalist groups have attempted to shut the door against their openly gay members, those members have insisted on opening windows of communication and continuing identification with their conservative religious homes. As this volume clearly witnesses, gay people can truly be found everywhere in American religion. From Christian fundamentalism to mainline denominations to New Age religious practices, gay people, like many others in American culture today, are experimenting with the great variety of religious forms available to them.

Gay Religion is more than a sophisticated mapping of the presence of LGBT persons in religious organizations; it is also a reminder of the inherent adaptability of religious forms in the American experience. We see that as self-identified gay people come out and insist on full participation in existing religious institutions, many of those institutions show a remarkable ability to adapt and change in the light of the new voices in their midst. In much the same way, the religious marketplace itself changes as new religious communities emerge. In what may be the most provocative and controversial argument in this book, the authors suggest that gay people are also redefining the meaning of being religious in popular culture.

Gay Religion is an important contribution not only to the growing field of LGBT or queer studies but also to the sociological and ethnographic study of religion. As America and other nations become more religiously diverse and new spiritualities emerge within, alongside, and outside established faith communities, understanding the dynamics of religious change becomes critically important. This volume provides new vistas for analyzing those dynamics across a wide spectrum of religious institutions and spiritual practices.

It may be that society will someday look back and wonder why a book like this was needed; that is, why gay religious practices would need to be singled out and lifted up from American religious practices generally. While we hope the day will come when all people achieve the full equality in religious communities that we believe gay people enjoy in the eyes of God, we suspect the unique spiritual experience of the LGBT community is often unacknowledged and perhaps even unknown to many contemporary religious people in the wider world. This volume begins to fill that important political, educational, and spiritual gap. We certainly cannot know the future, but this important book is an excellent guide to the present.