

Introduction

Edward R. Gray and Scott Thumma

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. Whether these stories discuss the viability of homosexuality as a Christian lifestyle, one church's acceptance of gays and lesbians as clergy or bishops, or the protests of a gay rights group at a major denominational gathering, it seems that the nation's press and the public's attention are captivated by accounts of conflict between religious entities and gay men, lesbians, bisexual, and transgender individuals (LGBT). Yet within this media attention, one is hard pressed to find positive stories of gay religious life or tales of organizations harmoniously merging homosexuality and religion. Yet these stories abound. Supportive religious groups have flourished, though underreported in the media, from the beginning of the gay rights movement in the 1960s.

Likewise, in the academic arena, researchers and scholars have spent considerable effort on the necessary tasks of apologetics and the construction of a gay or queer theology or on the historical examination of the debates and conflicts around religion and homosexuality. Within the fields of sociology of religion and contemporary religious studies very little attention has been paid to identifying and exploring the supportive gay religious organizational alternatives being created. This absence of a significant body of analytical and ethnographic research on gay religious organizations and expressions is not meant as a critique. Gay religion is a relatively new area of spiritual expression. As such it has required considerable effort on the more pressing tasks of theological definition and ideological clarification than charting and accounting for the organizational developments.

Nevertheless, now that the definitional effort is well underway, scholarly attention should be turned not just toward the difficulties of establishing a positive gay religious presence in existing institutional forms but also toward the examination of new and inventive forms of religious expression created in support of the diverse gay spiritual life in America.

The essays chosen for inclusion in this volume are meant to contribute to a broadening of our understanding of gay and lesbian religious practice and expression in North America at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As a whole, they paint a much richer and more nuanced portrait of what gay and lesbian groups and individuals are doing to express their religious and spiritual needs, desires, and sensibilities. These essays by social scientists and scholars of religion are compelling examples of (a) revitalization of traditional religious expressions, (b) emergence of new religious communities, and (c) spiritual originality found in new, popularly available alternative choices. Each essay promotes an appreciation of the enduring patterns and innovative impulses in North American religious life. The emergence of a gay and gay-friendly spiritual sphere is explored in these vivid essays from the perspective of particular denominational traditions, sectarian or subaltern groups, or popular culture.

Gay religion in America has been, to date, overshadowed by controversial theological debate within nearly all traditions. This volume is not part of that debate. Instead, it is an attempt to situate gay religion within an explicit theoretical framework. This framework recognizes continuity and innovation on the part of religious groups and individuals as paradigmatically American—even among a group variously persecuted or silenced by religious institutions. This volume, then, is a report on constructive institutional forms of gay religious life as found in denominational groups, subaltern communities, and

broader cultural expressions. Likewise, this reporting is not presented as wholly unique but rather is placed within the context of the unfolding story of religious innovation in North America.

The collection aims to highlight particular institutionalized examples of gay spiritual practice rather than attempt a comprehensive or all-inclusive examination of LGBT religiosity. At the same time, we have selected essays that place the phenomena deliberately within and across the American religious narrative. The authors of each of these essays take for granted that some gays are religious and some religious people are gay. This is not ideology, but description. There is nothing new in that statement, except that it is now openly acknowledged by nearly everyone. What is importantly new for scholars of religion—and others—is the availability of a wide range of religious choices for lesbians, gays, bisexual, and transgender persons over the last thirty years (as this volume will bear out). That gay and lesbian persons can now experience the freedom of choice of religious expression in a way like never before—in spite of lingering homophobia and hetero-sexist privilege in religion—is noteworthy. Placing this development in a wider understanding of religion in America is an important and necessary task. (See the final chapter by Marie Griffith)

That these supportive gay religious structures have emerged should not be surprising. American religion has always been the expression of groups (Warner, 1994). What is interesting about these religious phenomena is the conflicted place lesbians and gay men have in religious traditions. Many still hold a deep alliance to these traditions and struggle to create a place of their own within these institutions. Other lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgenders follow a more sectarian impulse. This leads to the creation of

what we call subaltern communities of faith. Still others pursue new forms of spiritual practice outside easily recognized religious structures in popular culture.

Each of these options— revitalizing a tradition, creating a new faith, or finding spiritual fulfillment through popular culture—is a work of commitment. Following a spiritual discipline, being “religious,” or even simply being “spiritual” requires making a choice. No longer is faith simply “received,” (although some passive reception is still at work). Gay persons—along with everyone else—must find their own way and work out their own salvation with “fear and trembling.” Whether gay men and lesbians begin the search near or far from a tradition, today they face a variety of choices from which to construct religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. The countless new choices that have emerged, including innovations such as e-religions, further demonstrate the complexity of modernity’s range of spiritual options. Cyber-versions of established religions are now available at our fingertips to be examined, advocated, and embraced. (Brasher, 2001)

The detachment of the realm of spirituality from the realm of organized religion, seen in the acceptability of being “spiritual but not religious,” offers yet another avenue whereby someone can become a person of faith. Faced with this smorgasbord of faith traditions, gay men, lesbians, and other sexual minority persons must intentionally decide how to be religious, what balance of continuity and innovation they want, when, from whom, and for what ends.

Religious choice is complex and multifaceted for all of us, and even more so for those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender seekers or believers. Contributing to the complexity of religious expression by gay persons are the organizational, theological,

and cultural constraints placed upon them as non-heterosexual persons. Forty years into the gay rights movement and only a handful of religious groups are unconditionally accepting of gays and lesbians as both full members and potential clergy. However, as this volume demonstrates, gays and lesbians face no lack of options. The possibilities for gay-supportive worship are plentiful, even beyond the cases we examine (see the appendix for a more extensive listing of supportive groups). And while the choices open to these persons of faith may appear to some as if they are strange or exotic, these religious alternatives—this collection shows—are instances of established, enduring patterns of continuity and innovation in North American religious life.

No one religious expression, form, or media fits all heterosexual persons. No one would challenge that. Too often, however, the choices for gay persons have been understood as very bleak: to sit more or less quietly in a tolerant religious group, quit organized religion altogether, or embrace a faith practice that is exclusively homosexual. Previous scholarship has continued to reinforce this (we believe false) framework. Creating one's own medium of religious expression is an American specialty, regardless of sexual orientation. Moreover, establishing innovative practices—and persuading others to adapt them—has an equally American pedigree (Stark, 1985:359). The explorations of gay religion described within this volume show how gays and lesbian are—unsurprisingly, we think— part of a continuing American religious tradition of innovation and continuity.

The plurality of forms and expressions of religion and spirituality for gays represents an innovative turn of both ideological transformation and organizational revitalization. Over the last few decades, exemplary charismatic individuals, and also groups of ordinary believers, have worked to create distinctive gay/lesbian spaces in the religious landscape of

the United States. Each of these innovations is distinctively gay but also thoroughly religious. The membership of Dignity, Integrity, and other denominational groups have reached thousands and impacted the polity of nearly all the major religious traditions. Likewise, leaders within the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches have worked to establish the organization as a national denomination. Today, congregations of this predominantly gay denomination have become flagship institutions, alongside the gay bar, of a proud gay community in North American cities. Still other persons create new media of spiritual expression drawing on local culture such as The Gospel Hour, Atlanta's popular drag performance of gospel music.

This volume's essays are reports from these new spiritual precincts. The sometimes daring, always fascinating, and never wholly predictable homesteading of new spiritual expressions is not foreign to the American religious landscape, however. One need only look at the internal revitalization efforts within national denominations based on the restructuring as well as mergers and schisms of earlier clusters of congregations to identify the malleable nature of denominational heritage groups. Likewise, an even cursory investigation of the highly successful homegrown religion the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints demonstrates the vitality of sectarian innovation at work. Finally, many recent reports from the field describe a large percentage of Americans as having become deinstitutionalized, eclectic consumers of religious ideas. Whether drawing on New Age practices, nature spirituality, or dozens of other available religious options, there is strong evidence of an increasing trend toward individualistic and generalized cultural expressions of spirituality.

The new gay and lesbian religious expressions described in this volume, like their

earlier predecessors on the religious landscape, can be better understood as duplicative of patterns long established in U.S. religion. They parallel the American commitment to denominational life, but also the innovative sectarian impulse as well as a more detached culturally based spirituality (see Stark and Bainbridge, 1987; Roof, 1993).

This volume brings together various ethnographic and ethnographically-inspired writings on the lived religious expressions of gays and lesbians. Each is a distinct, stand-alone, descriptive exploration of spiritual practices. These accounts are not meant to encompass the whole of LGBT religious life in the United States. Nor are they offered as voyeuristic or exhibitionist renderings of novelty. Rather these accounts demonstrate the depth and breadth of gay religion and spirituality in society today.

The contributors to this volume are as diverse as the phenomena they describe. While all are interested in religious practice, their disciplinary backgrounds encompass sociology, anthropology, history, psychology, and religious studies. They include gay men, lesbians, straight men, and straight women. Their writings are richly descriptive, theoretically informed accounts of both the novel and ordinary religious places gays and lesbians have created. Some of the essays focus more directly on the expressive practices of a group; others delve deeply into stories of individual belief; and a few reflect on ritualized public events or behaviors.

These accounts, taken as a whole, situate gay religion within the larger religious economy of North America. Likewise, the essays demonstrate both enduring patterns and innovative impulses in American religion from the perspective of gay men, lesbians, and other sexual minorities.

These contributions are arranged to reflect the coeditors' typology for understanding

gay religion. This typology is neither a self-identification of the persons, groups, or activities reported, nor a selection made by the authors in each case. The volume's typology is a heuristic device for locating the groups and activities reported. This schema is intended to identify gay religion as part of a larger American economy that defines religious tradition within denominational organizations and subaltern communities, and through explicit and implicit expressions of "the religious" in popular culture. This interpretative framework is embedded in a perception of American religion as a dynamic of both innovation and continuity. Following this typology, the volume's contributions are organized into three sections: denominational heritage groups; subaltern communities; and popular culture.

Members of denominational heritage groups hold an allegiance to a particular religious tradition and give priority to this heritage over identification with their sexual orientation. They create gay space in the tradition or seek revitalization within a specific religious denomination or national organization.

Subaltern groups, like those in denominational traditions, are primarily religious organizations. However, they privilege gay identity over preexisting religious tradition. These groups expressly seek a spirituality and organizational form that flows from the gay experience rather than from traditional belief and practices.

Popular culture is not religion at all—at least not explicitly. These events and performances and other popularly available cultural activities do not privilege religious traditions or organizations. Nonetheless, our researchers demonstrate how certain forms of popular culture provide gay persons with new media of individual (if also shared) spiritual expression.

Some contemporary expressions of gay religion are firmly entrenched in traditional

religious institutions as they attempt to carve their own spiritual niches. Several efforts are entrepreneurial and pioneering impulses toward the creation of new institutional traditions. Others represent more recent inclinations toward cultural modification and individualistic spiritual practices. Taken together these adaptive changes demonstrate the complexity of religious innovation and revitalization within LGBT religious life as well as the plurality of choice of spiritual practice outside “official” religious structures available to gay and lesbian persons in North America.

A short interpretative essay introduces each section. These introductions attempt to say something synthetic about each of the three areas of gay religion and also briefly summarize the essays that follow. This dialogue between innovation and continuity, new and old paradigms, cultural reproduction and cultural creativity, homogeneity and heterogeneity continues in R. Marie Griffith’s concluding essay. As a historian of American religion, Griffith raises challenges to the imposition of categories she sees our typology inadvertently doing. Her chapter, likewise, initiates several productive conversations—about the state of gay studies and its relationship with religious studies, about the use of categories to normalize understandings of sexuality, and other such issues—that that we believe this collection of essays will indeed help shape.