

**Review of Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Women and Religious Individualism*,
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In the rapidly expanding academic field which scrutinizes the connectivity between LGBT (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender) sexualities and religion/spirituality, Melissa Wilcox enjoys a swiftly rising reputation. *Queer Women and Religious Individualism* considerably adds to the extant academic literature and this can only enhance her personal repute. In this volume Wilcox explores her findings of a survey of women conducted in the Los Angeles area, investigating female sexual variations in relation to religion and spirituality. While framing the findings by weaving a number of theoretical perspectives, Wilcox largely engages with her primary concern for 'intersectionality'. This entails mapping the religious resources drawn upon by some LGBT women, tracing the ways in which alternative options are utilized to make the decisions they do in the attempt to enhance their spiritual lives especially in the face of adverse experiences. More widely, by developing a community study approach to what amounts to a distinct religious sub-culture, Wilcox excavates the wider context of race, gender, and community. This is alongside exploring economic, physical and emotional variables as the essential threads by which LGBT women endeavour to forge their own distinct religious paths in the current epoch of religious exploration and experimentation.

In this sense, and at a more generalized level, the volume aims not only to integrate women more explicitly into the study of LGBT religiosities, but also to permit a voice to LGBT people in the study of contemporary religion. It adds religion into the study of contemporary LGBT lives and considers how LGBT identities and religious identities affect, and are affected by, postmodern cultural configurations. In these ways *Queer Women and Religious Individualism* confirms the trajectories of the current point on the religious compass. Wilcox argues throughout the volume that contemporary queer women's spiritual journeying are both an integral part of and subtly distinct from twenty-first century patterns of religiosity in the United States as a whole, which involve both the growth both religious individualism and an expanding religious marketplace. Like many other people, queer or otherwise, the women who participated in the project are engaged in an on-going process of self-construction, reflexivity and continued self-maintenance in which religion plays an integral part – in positive, sometimes negative, often ambivalent ways.

Wilcox's justification for choosing the particular demographic catchment area of Los Angeles for the survey (although the sample frame is rather small and sometimes too small to warrant generalizations) is exemplified by the popular American adage that 'all the fruits and nuts are in California.' This refers not only to the state's many bounteous products but also in a derogative sense to gay men (fruits) and the followers of new religious movements (nuts). Certainly, California has a long history of religious and sexual diversity which Wilcox usefully traces at some length. Los Angeles has the first lasting gay right group in the USA. It is also heavily represented by contrasting religious groups which display varied and complex attitudes towards LGBT sexualities and the legitimacy of LGBT spiritual traversing. Wilcox thus examines conservative religious groupings including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) which heavily criticize the LGBT agenda. By contrast, some of the more mainstream Christian churches have been LGBT affirming, including the Hollywood Presbyterian Church. Others are of a mixed religious type typified by the Unitarian Universal Churches but are also LGBT affirming. Particularly conducive to the cause are feminist Wicca groups and those that have been purposefully established as a spiritual site for non-heterosexual people, ranging from the Gay and Lesbian Sierrans, the Metropolitan Community Churches and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Wilcox sketches the spiritual journeying and experiences of LGBT women through all such groups and there are enlightening insights here.

Some of the more intriguing aspects in this respect are the religious histories, family relationships and coming-out experiences of queer women. The first two dimensions are by no means new areas of concern to the sociology of religion but have clearly played an important part towards where the women are on their spiritual paths. At the same time both are complicated by coming-out narratives and how women are responded to by kin and the religious communities to which they belong or formerly belonged. Predictably perhaps, many queer women commence their spiritual journeying at this juncture and for many it constitutes the point of entry into the spiritual marketplace. Significantly, a quarter of the study participants combined seeking and conversion to an alternative religious/spiritual collective to create a bricolage of religious beliefs and practices drawn from a variety of different religions and teachers. Wilcox concludes that the major divergence from the general population in spiritual journeying is the frequency in which the women surveyed draw on this mosaic. By exploring these women's stories as exemplary examples of postmodern patterns of religious identity, beliefs and practice Wilcox presents an impressively nuanced analysis of contemporary Western spirituality and self-hood, marking an important contribution to religious studies, women's studies, LGBT studies and sociology.

The volume has seven chapters. Chapter 1 details the historical, cultural, and regional contexts which have impacted the negotiation of religious and sexual identities, thus setting the theoretical framework for subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 explains why Los Angeles is a particularly fertile site for sociological analysis. The answer lies in the city's unconventional nature which has allowed LGBT communities to be particularly innovating. Chapter 3 utilizes the metaphor of the spiritual marketplace in order to comprehend the interactions between religious individualism and religious communities and why this allows us to understand the search for both religious and sexual identity fulfilment. Chapter 4 brings into more focused detail LGBT sexualities and religious continuity, conversion and innovation through a variety of life stories which display a complexity of beliefs, practices and experiences that underpin spiritual pilgrimages. Chapter 5 shows how the mechanisms of social and cultural restrictions are especially relevant to the spiritual identities of the women under survey in the postmodern environment. Chapter 6 explores aspects of the sacred self and spirituality largely within the framework of a capitalist driven culture that permits the liberty to explore 'queer' identities. The final chapter speculates, among other things, that the searching for forms of religion and spirituality compatible

with LGBT sexualities is far more widespread than initially detected since much of that searching may be outside of formal religious institutions. The volume usefully concludes with biographical summaries and methodological considerations.