

Religion and Gender, vol. 2, no. 2 (2012), pp. 356-359

www.religionandgender.org

URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-101609

ISSN: 1878-5417

Publisher: Igitur Publishing (Utrecht)

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Review of Loraine Hutchins and H. Sharif Williams (eds.), *Sexuality, Religion and the Sacred: Bisexual, Pansexual and Polysexual Perspectives*, Abingdon: Routledge 2012, xi + 226 pages, ISBN 978-0-415-78304-0 (hb).

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This book was originally published as a special issue of the *Journal of Bisexuality* (10.1-2) in 2010. The volume contains most of the articles from the special issue – which included a reproduction of a 1993 talk by Starhawk – plus some newer pieces and two book reviews.

In the Foreword, Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajajé (formerly known as Elias Farajajé-Jones) sums up the aspirations of the collection: ‘How might we imagine and experience the intersections between diverse sexualities, genders, gender expressions, relational configurations, religions and notions of the sacred?’ (p x). Central to the book’s stated aims is to subvert and problematize stereotypical oppositions of sexuality and spirituality. As a result, it also consciously resists other binaries, most notably in the areas of gender and sexuality, refusing to work with dichotomies such as male/female and heterosexual/homosexual. Furthermore, as the editors comment, ‘We also wanted to see if there were spaces within theology and spirituality that had not been excavated, or could not be excavated, by a heterosexist or homosexual-centric framework’ (p 2). They consider that what they term a ‘bi/pan/polysexual framework’ will more effectively give space for exploring liminality and intersection in spiritual perspective. The

editors appeal to concepts such as nuance, complexity and ambiguity as the guiding principles for the collection.

The volume is organized in five parts corresponding to five faith-based 'discourses': Christian and Unitarian; indigenous and 'decolonizing'; feminist spiritual; Buddhist; and neo-Pagan. This immediately makes clear that the areas examined are not limited to one religious faith or one understanding of spirituality. However, the editors acknowledge that it was not possible to explore all the religious traditions they would have liked to include, because of the small number of scholars working in the area from beyond the Abrahamic faith traditions (p 10). There are inevitably some essays which could just as easily have been placed in another category, like Margaret Robinson's contribution 'Reading Althaus-Reid: As a Bi Feminist Theo/Methodological Resource', which appears in the feminist spirituality section. The inclusion of essays by clergy from various Christian denominations, as well as activists and members of other faiths, points to the collection's clear situation in rooted practices of spirituality and religious expression. The editors note that most submissions come from Christian perspectives (p 10). One such piece is that by Stephen Lingwood, a Unitarian minister, who criticizes the Church of England for its account of bisexuality in the 2003 report *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*. The Church of England bishops state in the report that bisexual activity always entails unfaithfulness, and that bisexual people need help to discern their true sexuality. Lingwood counters that to figure bisexuality as an absence of a clear orientation, rather than an orientation in its own right, is dehumanizing. Other essays focus on the development of an adult religious education curriculum which includes reflection on bisexuality (Hutchins); the concept of 'two-spiritedness' in African cultures and its relevance for bisexual people of African descent now living in the USA (Asanti); writing as a tool for overcoming 'false divides' between sexuality and spirituality (Stallings); an analysis of the way bisexuality is used to symbolize spiritual freedom in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (Moore); and performed practices of bisexuality in a women's neo-Pagan community in Texas (Harper).

One strength of the volume as a whole is its engagement with ethnicity and race as dimensions inherent to the construction and analysis of sex, gender and sexuality, not just incidental bolt-ons. Discourses of race, for example, are central to Kenneth Hamilton's exploration of the demonization of King Mwanga, a nineteenth-century Ugandan leader, painted as a paedophile and 'sodomite' by European missionaries and explorers because this was rhetorically useful to their cause (p 84).

Mwanga has come to symbolize predatory homosexuality and anti-Christianity, and exists as part of a symbolic construction of homosexuality as 'un-African', which Hamilton reads as influencing recent events such as the passage of the Ugandan anti-homosexuality bill in 2009 (p 85).

The collection is clearly situated in rooted practices of spirituality and religious expression, but some authors' suggested outworkings tend to appeal to somewhat vague notions of 'fairness' without spelling out what these would entail. However, the two essays on Buddhism, by Lisa Keele, and by Jonathan Alexander and Karen Yescavage, are among the most successful in the volume at persuasively interweaving clearly set-out theoretical material with examples from practitioners of the faith. Both essays touch on the possibility of Buddhist ethics for bisexuals, and Alexander and Yescavage suggest that there might be affinities between bisexuality and the Buddhist concept of the 'middle way' (p 177).

The volume has weaknesses too. Given its stated intention to query accepted norms, the volume contains surprisingly little explication of the distinctions and tensions between, for example, LGBT, bisexuality, transgender, intersex, and queer. Despite the volume's title, pansexuality and polysexuality receive almost no attention in their own right. The editors choose, due to limitations of space, not to give a detailed account of the relationship between bi/poly/pansexuality and spirituality, and nor to give a detailed account of what they mean by these terms. This risks conflating them, so that readers not already conversant with the literature in these areas may remain unaware that, for example, many transgender people resist being written into discourses of bisexuality, and many intersex people similarly understand themselves as distinct from transgender people and queer identity politics. This may leave readers less familiar with the field unsure about the overlaps between and specificities of the terms used, and unclear about why heteronormativity and homonormativity require disruption in the first place. The chapter by Phillip Bernhardt-House is an exception. It explores the way in which even LGBT-queer Christian theologies may exclude bisexuality by privileging exclusive same-sex desire over more truly 'queer' sexualities, since, he argues, such theologies often focus on the category of nature and assume that everyone is 'naturally' either homosexual or heterosexual, thereby leaving bisexuals out in the cold (p 26-8). Another area of weakness is that some contributions make less explicit the connections of their arguments to religion and spirituality. An example is L.H. Stallings' review of H. Sharif Williams' book *Conjuring Black Funk*. Furthermore, I confess I struggled to make out the meaning of some of Stallings' sentences, such as 'Funk that's

what Black Sexual Studies is, or should I say the study of Black sexual cultures is a discipline called Funk Studies' (p 94).

To conclude, the mixture of disciplines represented in the volume – including sociology, English, religious studies, cultural studies, anthropology, philosophy, women's studies and psychology – and variety of theoretical approaches has led to a collection which is commendably wide-ranging but slightly lacking in cohesion. The academic quality of the offerings is rather patchy, and the uncritical appeal to bisexuality as an unproblematic good by many of the contributors is not entirely persuasive, perhaps because most essays give relatively little account of the critical conversations surrounding the utility of the concept.

However, given that bisexuality in its own right is discussed very little even in theological and religious contexts where LGBT interests are ostensibly represented, this is certainly an area ripe for development. This volume succeeds in showing that individuals situated in major world religions, as well as adherents of alternative spiritualities, are seeking to generate discussion of its implications. Building on the editors' own earlier work on bisexuality, notably Hutchins' 1991 anthology *Bi Any Other Name*, the volume seeks to bring a range of voices and perspectives into the conversation. As such, it represents an abundant source of examples of bisexual spiritual experience and practice, even if its critical analysis sometimes feels underdeveloped.