

Review of Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip and Sarah-Jane Page, *Religious and Sexual Identities: A Multi-Faith Exploration of Young Adults*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2013, xii + 266 pp., ISBN 978-1-4094-2637-0

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Religion and Sexual Identities presents an extensive mixed-methods research project on religious young adults (18–25 years) in the U.K. Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip and Sarah-Jane Page have combined interview and survey methods to further the understanding of the construction of sexual and religious identities of youngsters adults in the U.K. Whereas sexuality is a topic that has often been explored in relation to young adulthood, religion has a marginal place in the study of young adult sexuality. Analysing religion, sexuality and youth together addresses several research gaps and questions popular assumptions about the incompatibility of religion and sexuality, as well as of religion and youth. As such, *Religious and Sexual Identities* is a crucial contribution to the study of religion, gender, sexuality and young adulthood.

What makes *Religion and Sexual Identities* particularly innovatory is its combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Almost seven hundred young adults participated in the project through an online survey, of which over sixty respondents joined for additional in-depth interviews. The authors acknowledge that their sample group is slightly unrepresentative of the broader U.K. context, as a majority were students and belong to a middle/upper class social environment (p. 15). The participants come from different religious backgrounds, including Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh and mixed-faith. This multi-faith approach enables not only a broader understanding of religious youths' ideas and experiences of sexuality, but it also sheds light on differences and similarities among and across religious traditions. The authors describe their methodological choices with great clarity, and an overview of the participants and research questions can be found in the appendices. The first chapter gives an overview of methodology and introduces central concepts. In the following empirical chapters, theories about religion, young adulthood and sexuality are interwoven with the data analysis. Qualitative and quantitative

data are combined to enable insights in how young adults 'construct their personal and social identities by engaging with the broader social processes of individualisation, de-traditionalisation and subjectivisation that many scholars argue are defining characteristics of the contemporary religious landscape and society as a whole' (p. 4). In Chapters 2 to 6, the empirical material is presented by combining the survey data with the outcomes of the qualitative interviews.

Chapter two focuses on the meaning of religion in the lives of the participants. It pays attention to personal experiences of religion, with survey questions as: 'I make decisions in my everyday life with reference to religion.' Religion provides a force of personal strength and support for almost all participants, but is also an important factor of community building and belonging. Chapter 3 shifts the focus to sexuality. The various meanings of sexuality are analysed in relation to religion, religious authority and personal faith. For the participants, sexuality is part of individual experiences (sexual orientation, sexual experiences, personal relationships), as well as part of broader social relations (marriage, expectations of the community). The fourth chapter analyses bodily practices and experiences of sexuality by focusing on virginity, masturbation and pornography. This chapter reveals some of the ambivalences present in the perspectives and experiences of young adults. For example, masturbation is considered by some of the participants as an important way of exploring sexuality, and of taking charge of sexual embodiment. However, the majority of participants across religious traditions consider masturbation a sin and as conflicting with religious ideals. After the individual focus of the first chapters, chapter 5 puts relationships central. It analyses mainly 'counter-normative sexualities' (p. 103), such as non-heterosexual and non-marital sexual relationships. This chapter demonstrates the different perspectives of youngsters about what is considered proper and improper sexual behavior with regards to LGHB (p. 117) identified people. Finally, the last empirical chapter 6, entitled 'Positioning Oneself in the World', looks at how the social environment, such as media and peers, influences young adults' perspectives toward sexuality. It also analyses how media representations influence ideas about sexuality and gender among youngsters.

The concluding chapter brings together the themes of religion and sexuality in the construction of identity among young adults. The concluding analysis does not only give insight in personal perspectives and practices, but it also sheds light on the relation of young adults with religion as a social institution and community and their construction of sexuality as part of their identity and social lives. Even though *Religion and Sexuality* entails a uniquely broad insight in social lives, there are some limits to this approach. The concept of ethnicity does not have a dominant place in the analysis. The authors acknowledge the absence of ethnicity as an analytical category in the introduction, and consider an analytical focus on ethnicity an opportunity for further research on young religious adults and sexuality. A second omission of the book, which the authors do not problematise, is the normativity of male and female identified positions. Instead of the transgender inclusive notion LGBT, Kam-Tuck Yip and Page refer to their participants as either heterosexual or LGHB, meaning lesbian, gay, homosexual and bisexual. The empirical chapters reveal that some trans* people were present among the sample. Unfortunately, this gender diversity is not taken into account. One participant is for example referred to as 'a trans Buddhist who chose not to define her sexuality' (p. 55), but there are no further remarks about the potentially specific experiences of religion and sexuality

among transmen and –women. Even though the inclusion of different non-heterosexual identities is crucial and an important addition to the understanding of religious and sexual subject formations, the lack of (trans)gender analysis presents a blind spot in the research.

Altogether, *Religious and Sexual Identities* is an important addition to current existing scholarship on religion and sexuality through its specific focus on young adults' lived religious experiences and perspectives. The book is very well structured and the arguments are presented in a solid manner. The authors present a creative combination of empirical data and theories from religious studies, gender studies and sociology. In the interweaving of data and theory the stories of the participants are sometimes presented as exemplary of existing theory. At other moments the empirical material counters theoretical arguments, thus demanding theoretical reconsiderations. In conclusion, the aims of Kam-Tuck Yip and Page are well reflected upon and the research is substantively founded. At times the analysis remains limited, most importantly in the lack of critical analysis of the concept of gender, which would add to the relevance of the work in fields as gender- and queer studies. As it stands now, *Religious and Sexual Identities* most significantly contributes to the fields of religious studies, the study of religion and sexuality, and the study of young adulthood. The authors argue that, although certainly terrains of negotiation and contestation, religious and sexual identities are not mutually exclusive for young adults in the U.K. This questions broader academic and dominant public understandings where religion and sexuality continue to be positioned as incompatible. The book is an excellent mixed-method exploration of the multi-layered character of both religion and sexuality in the construction of subjectivity among young adults in contemporary secularised society.