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Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip

## Editorial

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**Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip** is Professor of Sociology at the University of Nottingham, UK. His has published in journals such as *British Journal of Sociology*, *Sociology of Religion*, *Theology & Sexuality*, *Sociology*, *Sexualities*, *Sociological Research Online*, and *Contemporary Islam*. He is also the author of *Gay Male Christian Couples: Life Stories* (Praeger, 1997); and co-author/co-editor of *Lesbian and Gay Lives over 50* (York House Publishing, 2003), *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and Sacred Places* (2010), *Religion, Youth and Sexuality: A Multi-Faith Exploration* (Ashgate, 2011), *Religion, Gender and Sexuality in Everyday Life* (Ashgate, 2012), and *The Ashgate Research Companion to Contemporary Religion and Sexuality* (Ashgate, 2012).

School of Sociology & Social Policy  
University of Nottingham  
University Park  
Nottingham  
NG7 2RD

[andrew.yip@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.yip@nottingham.ac.uk)

One of the most exciting recent developments in the social-scientific study of religion/spirituality and sexuality is the increasing intersection of these two fields. This special issue – a collection of six empirically, methodologically and geographically diverse articles – represents a collective effort to contribute to this ongoing dialogue.

Wilcox kicks off the exploration by discussing lesbian, bisexual and transgendered women's patterns of engagement with mainstream and LGBT<sup>1</sup>-focused religious organizations in the greater Los Angeles area, within the broader context of their under-representation in such spaces, compared to men. She demonstrates that such patterns are structured by not only individual choices, but also socio-cultural and political factors such as race/ethnicity, commitment to feminism,

1. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered.

concern for LGBT rights, and intersection of sexuality and religion in the life-course.

Using a quantitative methodology, Henrickson and Staniforth undertake a large-scale survey of religious and non-religious LGBT New Zealanders, exploring the tension between sexuality and religion, which has led to many participants' disaffiliation from institutional Christianity. They find that this dissonance management strategy is more common among men. On the other hand, among religious LGBT people, more women than men consider spirituality significant in their lives. Compared to their non-religious counterparts, religious participants are also more likely to experience dissonance in terms of their sexual identity. These religious participants – particularly women – also draw upon traditional Christian values of monogamy in relationship formation. By comparing the religious and the non-religious, and women and men – and significantly based on a sizeable sample – Henrickson and Staniforth have offered us an illuminating picture of the intersection between gender, religious and sexual identities.

Though methodologically different, these two articles have done an important job in incorporating gender into the analysis of the complex intersection of gender, sexual and religious identities. This is a much-welcome endeavour to further expand the exploration of the multiplicity and intersectionality of contemporary identity.

Turning our attention away from LGBT individuals, the next two articles turn the spotlight on heterosexuals in different religious traditions. Sharma examines Protestant women in the UK and shows how they negotiate the dominant norm of “Christian femininity” – a personal, religious and social commitment to the norm of “sex within marriage only.” Sharma uncovers multiple meanings and management strategies, ranging from compartmentalization to embracement, reflecting a combination of conformity and resistance to this norm. Her findings show conclusively that the Church's injunction of “sex within marriage only” does not capture the multiple realities of contemporary women's lives.

Continuing with the theme of “sex within marriage only,” Avishai takes a close look at how marriage educators and counsellors assist orthodox Jewish women in Israel to negotiate sexual anxieties and ambiguities surrounding the eve of their wedding, in anticipation of their crossing the significant boundary of the forbidden/repulsive to the permissible/sanctified. The multiple strategies Avishai uncovers – the traditionalist, the pragmatic, and the reformist – testify to a culturally embedded analysis of a community searching for a response to “the problem of the flesh.” She shows that, rather than being rigid and closed to innovation, this seemingly conservative community has demonstrated their collective agency to construct diverse approaches to reconcile piety and carnality. Her contribution

reminds us of the importance of not essentializing and dichotomizing religious (assumed conservative) and secular (assumed progressive) cultures. As Avishai has shown, the boundary between them is often porous, and empirical research ought to capture the crossing – back and forth – of such boundary.

The final two articles address various epistemological, methodological and empirical aspects of researching sexuality and religion/spirituality. Browne and Dinnie give us a unique presentation – in the form of a dialogue between them – of their respective and collective reflections on the interesting issues that arise in their “going back” to the research fields and “giving back” to the participants. Their insightful dialogue demonstrates how sexualities are implicated in these processes and how spiritualities are sometimes enacted on their return to the field as a “non-researcher,” or “participant” in some contexts. They argue that “going back” to the research fields generate a host of complex issues on the professional and personal levels, where pleasure and spirituality could be found both in the experiences of the space itself and from having undertaken research in these spaces.

Last but not least, Smith gives an insightful account of her research on LGBTQI<sup>2</sup> Buddhists in London. She observes that the participants construct their sexual and gender identifications as provisional and contingent, rather than essential and fixed. This seems to contrast sharply with the narratives documented in research on theistic traditions where LGBTQI members often argue for a divinely created identity which often underpins their quest for acceptance within religious structures. In reflecting on this contrast, Smith encourages us to apply “queer theorizing” to Buddhist anti-essentialist perspectives on sexuality and gender, but at the same time being sensitive to oppressive and minoritizing forces based on, for instance, gender and class, in such communities.

2. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, questioning and intersex.