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Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Women and Religious Individualism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 276 pp., $24.95 (paper), $65 (cloth).

Studies of religious adherence among lesbians and gay men in the United States have often focused on institutions like the Metropolitan Community Churches, which cater to congregants who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender (LGBT). Over several decades, these studies have encountered an overwhelming majority of men in these congregations, leaving lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LBT) women's experiences underexplored. Not only has this led to gaps in the literature, but it also raises significant questions as to the reasons for the often large gender disparities in these congregations—all the more surprising since they reverse general trends whereby women tend to be more religiously involved than men. In *Queer Women and Religious Individualism*, Melissa Wilcox asks the pointed question: "Where are all the women?" (5), and in answer offers an exposition of the patterns of LBT women's religious and spiritual affiliations through examining the experiences and beliefs of a select group of women in Los Angeles, California.

Recruiting participants through LGBT events and media as well as religious organizations, this study paints a picture of an eclectic group of women dispersed across a broad array of religious institutions and practices, including mainstream churches, liberal synagogues, LGBT-focused congregations, and alternative religious movements. Their spiritual views are also diverse, from conservative Christians to those who find spiritual nourishment in the Sierra Club conservation organization, or among the ironically political Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Wilcox's participants have made religious choices for a range of intersecting reasons. In addition to LGBT rights, issues of feminism, and (for many) ethnicity, featured prominently in their choices, alongside practical considerations such as travel times to their religious institutions in sprawling L.A. Negotiating these competing factors in tandem with their spiritual beliefs and values has taken many of these women on complex spiritual journeys.

Corinne Garcia, for example, comes from a working-class Native American background. A woman who lives as a man and moves

between genders, Corrine found assurance in her childhood religion of Catholicism when she realized that the priests wore dresses, giving her comfort that it was okay that she, feeling like a boy, was also forced to wear dresses (100). And while she sometimes felt at home growing up in her Latino community of East L.A., she also felt partly out of place, since no one around her shared her Native American ethnicity. Turning to Santería allowed her to negotiate these complexities, affirming her Latino and African-American heritage, but resonating too with her Native American history, since Afro-Caribbean religion also developed under colonization (179). One of the deities with whom she had a close relationship also spoke to her of gender fluidity.

Santería offered a way for Corinne to draw together the complex threads of her experience within a single religion. For others, the negotiation of conflicting considerations left them moving across a variety of religious institutions and organizations. Among her sample, Wilcox identifies a significant group of religious "seekers": people who are looking for but have not yet found their spiritual home(s). Another group (almost a quarter of her study) follow what she calls forms of religious bricolage, piecing together religious identities from an array of religious institutions and spiritual spaces (120–29).

Such patterns of religious exploration are likely to be familiar to researchers of contemporary Paganism. Many of us know well this tendency for people to move across multiple milieus: attending Pagan rituals, temples, yoga, New Age stores, and meditation centers, while all the while drawing their sense of spirituality or religion from myriad experiences across different settings. Not surprisingly, Wilcox encounters several women involved with contemporary Pagan traditions, and her survey includes discussions of traditions important to the LGBT communities she studies: Dianic Wicca, Reclaiming, and the Radical Faeries. And while these discussions are insightful, the greater value of this work for Pagan Studies lies not so much here as in situating contemporary Paganism within a spectrum of religious diversity, seeking, and bricolage—part of a much bigger picture of religious and spiritual negotiation among lesbian, bisexual and transgender women.

Contemporary patterns of religious seeking in a spiritual marketplace have of course been widely identified by sociologists of religion, echoing as they do broader themes of "individualism" and the construction of the "post-modern self" in post-industrial societies.

Wilcox brings an innovative take to these discussions, emphasizing the importance of community in the lives of her participants, and the centrality of institutions in processes of constructing the "reflexive self." While she uses the words "religious individualism" to describe these patterns, the individuals she finds are not isolated, but draw on resources, community and inspiration from organizations, as "tiles in the mosaic" of their religious or spiritual lives (chapter 5). In a lovely metaphor for this process, she suggests that it is through such resources that the self "can be cobbled together in a kind of existential 'found art'" (3).

But also striking about Wilcox's account is the extent to which these experiences of seeking and bricolage typify the women in her study, and she offers an array of suggestions as to why this might be. For example, where having children is often a catalyst for women to return to religious institutions as adults, among LBT women it can be a barrier. As one participant asks about her attempts to take her daughter to a Baptist church when living in Kentucky: "I would hear the minister start saying terrible things about homosexuals... And—how could I take her to church and have the minister—saying terrible things about who I am?" (108). Another intriguing lead is given in Wilcox's discussion of the different patterns of men's and women's coming-out processes. Coupled with a tendency for young people to drop out of religious attendance in their late teenage years, these could mean that perhaps young lesbians are much more likely than young gay men to negotiate their sexuality outside of religious institutions, possibly never to return (156–58). It seems telling that of the twenty-nine women in this study, only two continued in the religions of their childhood (106).

Ultimately, this is not just another discussion of postmodern selves in the religious marketplace, but offers a view of the negotiation of the self under complex pressures. The very importance of institutions to the construction of each person's religious "mosaic" becomes a catalyst for patterns of seeking and bricolage when these institutions fall short or when spiritual identities begin to clash with other aspects of identity. These clashes can be most pronounced when encountering discrimination, and as Wilcox points out, "it stands to reason that groups experiencing religious discrimination would engage more in religious seeking and bricolage than those at the center of (positive) attention in their religious organizations" (204). Thus she sees herself in part telling a story of "the collision between religious discrimination and postmodern selves" (204).

And while she distinguishes between these dynamics, it raises the question of the extent to which general patterns of religious individualism are likewise negotiated under conditions of constraint and the pressures of complex identities.

This work is rich with striking facts and fascinating insights. Tracing L.A.'s distinctive cultural geography, Wilcox highlights its most notable, overlooked contribution to LGBT movements in the United States: as the point of origin of the vast majority of LGBT religious movements (28). Her care in attending to the stories of transgender participants is also to be commended as an opening for much needed further research in this area. *Queer Women* both begins and ends with a very considered analysis of the value of what she calls the "exemplary case study" in the context of wider sociological literature. As an ethnographer, I found these discussions, along with methodological considerations addressed in Appendix B, very valuable. As the author points out, the very de-institutionalized context of her subjects would make them difficult to locate in population-level survey studies. At the same time it would be near-impossible with larger surveys to identify the kinds of complex relationships between religious, sexual, ethnic and gender histories that she uncovers. But she suggests her findings can also be used to inform broader survey-based studies, allowing generalization to wider geographical areas.

Overall, *Queer Women and Religious Individualism* offers a fascinating window into religious life with relevance for many of us studying the religious landscape of contemporary post-industrialized societies, particularly in the United States. It opens up new lines of research on lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women's religiosity, and it takes familiar questions of religious individualism, the religious marketplace, and social individualism in fruitful new directions.

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