



Lawton, S. (2021) Bisexuality, Religion and Spirituality: Critical Perspectives. *Psychology of Sexualities Review*, 12(2), [Book Review].

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Deposited on: 26 August 2021

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***Book review***

**Bisexuality, Religion and Spirituality: Critical Perspectives**

**Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip and Alex Toft (Editors)**

**Routledge, 2020**

**Hardback: £120.00 / eBook: £33.29**

**210 Pages 2 B/W Illustrations**

**ISBN: 9780367030209**

The editors of this volume bring together interdisciplinary voices to construct a vivid dialogue about bisexuality and religious identities and spaces. Not only are there wide-ranging disciplinary contributions from sociologists, psychologists, theologians, scholars of religion and literature, this volume brings together international work from UK, Canada, Lebanon, Turkey, Australia and the USA. Furthermore, as much previous research on the topic of bisexuality and religion has focussed solely on the sexuality's intersection with Christian identities, there is an expansion of work in this book which encompasses Sufism, Buddhism, Islam, Paganism, Judaism and non-religion into the conversation, broadening the scope of the field vastly. The multiple contributions to this book highlight the tensions between Abrahamic faiths with bisexuality, the alternative affirmations offered by other spiritual traditions such as Sufism, Buddhism and Paganism/New Age religions, whilst at the same time not oversimplifying the differences between the two into a false dichotomy of affirmation and rejection. Also contained within is a vital documentation of intersectionality, exploring often overlooked intersections of unique identities. In this review, I will review each contribution chapter by chapter, devoting a section to each of the eleven chapters in this edited volume.

The first chapter summarises each contribution fairly and gives an excellent overview of the state of the literature on bisexuality and religion, as well as key issues that bisexual people face in contemporary society. The editors do well here to show how contemporary attitudes to bisexual people broadly shape religious understandings of the sexuality as well.

The second chapter looks at (non)religion, gender and sexuality amongst Canadian youth, comparing young bisexuals with similar participants their age. Shipley and Young give a good problematisation of straight passing in relation to bisexuality in their literature review. The quantitative elements of this chapter do elucidate quite a bit about the cohort that they are looking at,

but I feel the qualitative elements could have been foregrounded instead, as many extraneous or otherwise unimportant data are reported alongside more meaningful findings. For example, the researchers provide a wealth of descriptive statistics about their sample (religious identities, sexual identities, sexual practices), but not many comparative inferential statistics beyond survey responses which show that religion and (bi)sexuality do interact but fail to tell us why. There is some interesting material on a bisexual trans and genderqueer Muslim person (Michelle) here who states that Islam is a very open religion but that the institution of mosques are patriarchal and homophobic. This is a rare insight into queer Muslim experience. Michelle's practices of religion online are also noteworthy and show how faith practices are changing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Crucially, identifying as trans, queer and Muslim is not experienced as conflictual for her. This chimes with the overall finding that many people in the cohort saw their own personal faith as separate from the textual or institutional religion they were a part of. There is a good conclusion to the interview section which highlights interconnected social pressures of identifying as bisexual, some of which are due to religious organisations and others coming from different social institutions (such as school) or general misunderstandings. The fear of being misunderstood is a clear issue for many of the bisexual respondents in this study. This was a good chapter, but I would have liked to have seen more material related to the intersections of religion and spirituality discussed in the interviews as this would have elucidated more about the findings from the survey. Additionally, only one person drawn from the interviews was actually religious, the rest were all non-religious. Even among the non-religious participants, there is no discussion of their absence of faith and its intersection with their sexuality.

In Chapter 3, Toft and Franklin discuss the intersecting identities of a young, disabled bisexual Christian (Abigail) within the Evangelical faith. The initial section and literature review provides a good, intersectional overview of the issues, and is not a mere facsimile of previous similar literature reviews in other chapters, which is commendable given the lack of literature in this area. The chapter highlights the challenges of living as an LGBT disabled person, but also the individual ways that Abigail responds to those challenges by using her own creative agency. This chapter introduces one of the key themes present throughout this volume, which is an individualisation of the

person's faith as a response to being challenged by their faith community, but also the simultaneous longing to be part of a faith community. Overall, this is an excellent chapter which teases out the complexities of all these identity categories thoroughly and sensitively while focusing on their intersections.

In the next chapter, Yip and Page discuss young adults' experiences of bisexual erasure and religious spaces in the UK. There are some interesting interview excerpts which detail how bisexual people can choose to reinforce the monogamous ideal in order to solidify their own sexual identity in the context of prejudice, while other quotes illustrate the pressures to categorise oneself in the face of an overwhelmingly hegemonic heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy. There was a reluctance among participants to adopt the label 'bisexual' because of the stigma associated with it. The study nicely weaves qualitative and quantitative results together by finding appropriate thematic links. In this chapter, you get a real sense of how people's understanding of their faith and its doctrines impacts their sexual lives. However, the authors rightly caution that not all people's experiences of Abrahamic faiths are that of narrow, conservative dogmatism that rejects alternative sexualities.

The subsequent chapter, *Ritual and liminality: bisexuality within Christianity and Paganism*, contains excellent and compelling material which acknowledges the gendered experience of bisexuality, especially what being a bisexual woman with faith is like, and how often mainstream Christianity is patriarchal and off-putting to many bi women. The unique experiences of bisexual Wiccans that are captured here are very important as such experiences are often overlooked by academic perspectives. There is some rare and elucidating material here which offers a radical redefinition of a religious community that accepts bisexuality. The chapter bolsters the overall volume because of its addition of an anthropological focus, which is deeply grounded in theory and previous research without becoming abstract or overly theoretical.

The sixth chapter, which draws upon Toft's doctoral research, focusses on how sexuality and spirituality are negotiated by bisexual people. It attempts to understand how bisexual Christian identities are performed and highlights the flexibility that participants often display in regard to their multiple identities. Using a Goffmanian framework, Toft explains how bi Christians both refocus and

individualise their Christian selves. Here, Toft provides a very useful framework for understanding how religion and sexuality are reconciled on the individual level. The chapter overall provides interesting insights into how these occasionally conflicting identities can reshape each other to form a holistic sense of self.

Chapter 7 details a queer theological account of one bisexual Christian's life story (Sam). There is a rigorous discussion of both the experiential and theoretical aspects of bisexual visibility contained within this chapter. Greenough gives a compelling overview of queer theological accounts of bisexuality, despite the lack of literature, but I feel the author's arguments would be further bolstered to taking a more interdisciplinary approach by incorporating the sociology of sexuality (such as Plummer's telling sexual stories) and feminist works (such as Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality*), which seem to be alluded to but not openly referenced. The extended theological dialogue between the theoretical and Sam's experiential testimony is really excellent material. Theology is not a discipline often included within social science research, and the book as a whole is more beneficial for including it.

Chapter 8 focusses on author Elif Shafak's book *The Forty Rules of Love* in a reparative reading as well as giving the author's own background as a bisexual Turkish woman. Stobie's analysis brings out the deconstructive work that Sufi mysticism can bring to breaking down binaries, and also highlights *The Forty Rules of Love* as a queer text that eschews and critiques binaries to do with gender, sex and love. At the same time, Stobie contrasts the 'rich archive' of same sex desires and expressions written by medieval Islamic scholars with contemporary Turkish politics and religious institutions. The material Stobie brings to the volume is rich, both in terms of its depth of analysis but also its scholarship, which gives a wide-ranging overview of both historical and contemporary Turkish understandings of sexuality, as well as a close queer textual reading of a bisexual author's work with a unique combination of intersectional identities.

Chapter 9 begins a turn towards the health and psychology related literature on bisexuality and religion with Maatouk and Jaspal's account of religion, male bisexuality and sexual risk in Lebanon. The authors' initial literature review relies somewhat on controversial research, and one

wonders why they have privileged sexological/medical work, some of which is clearly outdated, rather than research that looks at bisexuality without scepticism. The chapter does a good job in outlining both Islamic and Christian theological arguments against the acceptance of homosexuality. Likewise, the historical information about the cultural existence of forms of homosexuality in the Islamic world is interesting and provides important context. The authors take an unusual approach using secondary qualitative data to formulate hypotheses about bisexual men's experiences in Lebanon by using psychological theory and cultural context. Ultimately, this chapter is held back by not including any empirical research. It lays the foundation for a grounded empirical study, and while it teases out some of the nuances of Lebanese society's view of bisexual men, it ultimately is merely generating hypotheses without testing them.

Chapter 10 details Shepherd's qualitative study of depression and suicidality among bisexual Christians. This study is unique in that it includes both church practitioners and bisexual congregants in the USA and UK, seeking to investigate how supportive a variety of Christian denominations were towards LGBT individuals. Shepherd's interpretation of their own findings is unusual as despite finding that sexuality-related conflict was the most cited reason for anxiety/depression among participants, they were unable to conclude that religiosity had an impact on bisexual people's mental health in their study. There was also a missed opportunity to discuss positive experiences of bisexual Christians with affirming churches; there's only material on the side of church practitioners which show a mix of affirmation or neglect of bi people's issues within the church.

The final chapter focusses on the impacts of religion and childhood experiences on bisexual wellbeing. It details a quantitative study of 405 Canadians by Robinson and Asadi. The researchers had a unique methodology which included a queer and two-spirit research team, and a community advisory team of bisexuality people, giving the research enhanced credibility to deal with unique issues arising around this topic, and I hope this methodological innovation would be considered by any project investigating marginalised communities. The researchers give a very thorough account of the literature on bisexual mental health, all framed within Minority Stress Theory. Their literature review is detailed and nuanced, acknowledging the flaws of many previous approaches that have been

taken to bisexual mental health studies (e.g. treating LGB as a single group). The findings of their study found no relationship between depression, anxiety or social support and participants' perception of past religiosity or current religiosity. Interestingly, religiosity was not found to be a risk factor or a protective factor. The researchers highlight that complex topics such as bisexuality, mental health and religion should be further investigated using qualitative research methods.

Overall, Yip and Toft aimed to bring together various voices to instigate a dialogue about bisexuality and religion. The editors have succeeded in their aim, highlighting a diverse array of interdisciplinary voices to discuss bisexuality as an identity within many varied religious spaces and practices. This volume goes a great way in filling a lacuna of knowledge about bisexuality and religion, and is highly commendable in its pluralistic outlook and skilful use of intersectionality to approach a complex and under-researched topic.