

Looking from the Outside In: Social Science and Sexual Identity in Today's Churches

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Books Discussed

God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies. By Dawne Moon. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches. By Horace L. Griffin. Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2006.

Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity, and Community. By Melissa Wilcox. Bloomington, Ind., and Indianapolis, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2003.

Gay Religion. Edited by Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray. Walnut Creek, Calif.: Alta Mira Press, 2005.

The tenor of many mainstream media reports notwithstanding, the potentially church-dividing debate over homosexuality did not suddenly appear in the early years of the twenty-first century. In the United States more than several Christian denominations have been struggling with this issue in some fashion since the 1960s. Many Episcopalians likewise know that openly lesbian and gay people were ordained as priests and deacons and have also served in positions of lay leadership long before Gene Robinson was elected Bishop of New Hampshire in 2003. Despite that history, and perhaps also in some ways because of it, in §135 of the Windsor Report the Lambeth Commission on Communion asked the Episcopal Church in the U.S. to explain, both biblically and theologically, how a non-celibate

homosexual person can be eligible for the episcopate.¹ To casual observers, this request may suggest that no such “explanation” had to date been articulated. Those well familiar with the decades of struggle over this issue within the Episcopal Church know this is not the case, as many publications, curricular materials, and task force reports illustrate.² For some of the “insiders” to that history, the Windsor Report’s request provokes a pointed question: What precisely constitutes suitable “explanation” for ordaining openly gay and lesbian people? Others will want to ask the flip-side of that same question: What will it take to persuade the church that such ordinations are simply wrong—biblically, theologically, and ethically?

Elizabeth Stuart has described well the kind of theological stalemate so many churches have reached over human sexuality in response to such questions. Comparing these ecclesial deliberations to a wrestling match, neither side, she writes, “is prepared to admit defeat, too much is at stake, so they continue to maintain a token grasp upon one another. Unable to let go and unable to resolve the situation, they are trapped by the rules of the game.” Today, she notes, both sides in this struggle have simply collapsed from exhaustion.³

As with any protracted institutional debate, this one that has been preoccupying American and European churches and increasingly non-North Atlantic communities as well stands in need of fresh insights from outside the debate itself; or to borrow from Stuart’s image, our churches would benefit from expanding the field on which this “game” is played. Each of the four books considered in this article offers in some fashion a view of sexual identities in today’s churches from the “outside,” that is, from the perspective of sociologists and ethnographers. (Horace Griffin is partly an exception to this “outsider” characterization, but in ways, as I suggest below, that scramble what inside and outside actually mean when dealing with these topics.)

¹ Lambeth Commission on Communion, *The Windsor Report* (London: The Anglican Communion Office, 2004).

² The Episcopal Church’s response to the request in the Windsor Report, made through the Office of the Presiding Bishop, includes an appendix that provides a partial list of such materials dating back to 1967 (*To Set Our Hope on Christ: A Response to the Invitation of Windsor Report §135* [New York: Office of Communication, Episcopal Church Center, 2005]).

³ Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Hampshire, England and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2003), 105.

Historically, Anglicans have not shied away from strictly non-theological sources such as these for doing theological work and in many cases have drawn eagerly from them. Nearly without exception the “giants” in nineteenth-century Anglican traditions—whether Evangelical, Anglo-Catholic, or Christian socialist—all consulted assiduously both the physical and social sciences for insights into the theological, spiritual, and liturgical quandaries of the day.⁴ Likewise today’s theological quandaries over human sexuality would benefit from renewed attention to the research modalities and data employed by those “outside” the narrower parameters of the theological disciplines.

Sociological, ethnographic, and cultural studies will certainly not resolve the sexuality debates in our churches or provide adequate explanation of the type requested by the Lambeth Commission. These sources may, however, offer a fresh voice to the conversation, clarifying various aspects of the debate and perhaps expanding the theological and spiritual vision of all the parties involved. Among the many contributions offered by the four books considered in this article, I will outline only two. First, both Dawne Moon and Horace Griffin highlight the often ambiguous status of Scripture at the congregational level when dealing with homosexuality. This will no doubt come as a surprise to some, especially those who believe this debate is entirely about the Bible. Second, the analysis offered by Melissa Wilcox and the collection of essays edited by Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray go a long way toward dispelling the common perception of lesbian and gay people as standing outside religious traditions waiting to be let in. Reorienting that perception in significant ways is the fact that openly gay and lesbian people already actively engage in thriving ministries, ordained or not, as well as in a diversity of newly emerging spiritual and religious practices. Moreover, as lesbian and gay people of faith (not to mention bisexual and transgender people) negotiate multiple identities with some regularity (which are never reducible only to gender or sexuality or race or whatever other category we may happen to choose), they exhibit a remarkable religious resilience one might not expect to find among people who have been regularly and

⁴ Among several good sources for these interdisciplinary conversations in Anglican traditions, see William Sachs, *The Transformation of Anglicanism: From State Church to Global Communion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially chapter 4, “The Struggle to Define the Church and its Belief.”

systematically excluded from faith communities. That resilience invites further exploration of the cultural dynamics shaping congregational life in the twenty-first century, and well beyond our current debates over ordination.

In the end, these four books suggest to me, and rather strongly, that the emphasis on sexual ethics in so many churches, while clearly important, can obscure broader questions of religious vitality and spiritual flourishing, which lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people of faith can prompt in new ways for our congregations today.

The Ambiguous Role of Scripture in “Everyday” Theologies

In *God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies*, Dawne Moon sets about the task of assembling the component parts of today’s sexuality debate by looking closely at two congregations of the United Methodist Church, one of which identifies as generally liberal or progressive, and the other as more conservative or Evangelical. Her goal was to analyze how these congregations “construct, in everyday thought and interaction, their beliefs about God and humanity” and the ways they negotiate conflict around those beliefs (p. 1). As a sociologist of religion, she is particularly keen to explore the social component of religious beliefs and to discern, as she describes it, how that social component functions to “naturalize” the various beliefs adopted by members of these congregations. By “naturalize” she means the process by which these congregations take their beliefs for granted as “timeless,” “unquestionable,” and otherwise “just natural.”

These are “everyday” theologies Moon analyzes as these congregations draw from a wide range of sources encountered in everyday life to articulate their theological position in the process of naturalizing their beliefs, shoring them up against the possibility of their being “merely” culturally contingent. She was surprised to discover that both congregations exhibited a nearly universal disdain for “politics.” While members of both congregations disagreed on how to define “politics,” they all agreed that to “be political” stood contrary to the ideals of church life. This led Moon to suppose that their suspicion of the political dimensions of everyday life stemmed from the perceived threat politics poses to “denaturalize” religious faith; it threatens, in other words, to expose the contested and negotiated character of belief itself (p. 5).

This is not to deny that beliefs sometimes change or evolve; members of both congregations readily acknowledged as much. At issue, rather, is *how* beliefs change and the process by which those changes are incorporated into the shared life of the community. In that regard she takes issue with any sociological approach that assumes people derive their religious faith either from official institutional teaching or the mandates of a sacred text or a combination of both. This view, as Moon's study shows, fails to account for the frequency of "mismatches" between a person's beliefs and "official" doctrine (p. 13). Neither the "liberal" nor the "conservative" congregation she studied, for example, simply took at face value the Pauline exhortation to women to cover their heads in worship; likewise both congregations rejected outright the apparent biblical support for the institution of slavery. Biblical texts and church teaching are, then, only two of the many sources people consult for their everyday theologies, and the process of religious meaning-making entails far greater complexity than simply conforming to institutional norms.

All of this led Moon to the central and rather provocative thesis of this book: homosexuality is so highly charged in today's churches not primarily because of the Bible, church teaching, or theological traditions, but because religious debates over human sexuality expose the inherently political character of church life, or the many negotiations of power and privilege that otherwise remain tacit or camouflaged in everyday theologies. In that sense, homosexuality remains explosive and potentially divisive to the extent congregations perceive the church as "above" politics, or at least seek from the church a haven from social hierarchies and the cultural dynamics of power (p. 5).

The stakes in this debate are clearly high, but for reasons rarely discussed in ecclesial councils. Both the wide range of sources for constructing belief and the everyday character of the theologies Moon examined highlight the significant investment church members make in grappling with controversial topics like homosexuality. Religious meaning-making, as Moon suggests, draws into its orbit all the various relationships, activities, and modes of communication by which people "order their worlds" and make sense of their place in them (p. 14). Again, while changes do occur in the beliefs held by a community, Moon's study suggests they occur only when the risk posed to the ordering of one's world by *not* changing one's beliefs is greater than the risk involved in making the change; for "everyday" theologies, this tends to be a rather high standard to meet.

Moon's study implies, at the very least, that the historical-critical tools of biblical exegesis alone will not suffice to break the stalemate in so many churches over homosexuality. The everyday theologies by which people order their worlds resist change derived from a single source, even from a source as apparently central as the Bible. Putting this in a slightly different way, Moon's research inverts the commonly perceived relationship between religion and culture that has shaped the religious debates over human sexuality for decades. While many members of the congregations Moon studied understood their beliefs about homosexuality to derive from their theologies, just as often their own experiences as well as the cultural representations of gay and lesbian people shaped their understanding of who God is and what God intends (p. 56). The Bible, in other words, is not necessarily the source of religious and cultural attitudes toward homosexuality; those already established attitudes instead shape how the Bible is read and interpreted.⁵

Expanding on the role played by extra-biblical sources, Moon devotes an entire chapter to how emotions function in everyday theologies and how the appeal to feelings and intuition shapes those theologies just as much as and at times more than Scripture. Highly contested issues, Moon notes, are especially ripe for such an appeal as many people regard feelings as rhetorically indisputable. Rather than abstract rational argument (which, after all, can be refuted by a better one), how people "feel" about an issue lends nearly unassailable weight to their position. As Moon describes it, "expressing something in a language of emotion forecloses debate, and therein lies its rhetorical power" (p. 183).

Scripture in these everyday theologies thus functions to confirm what people already take as "natural" in their ordered world, which they then articulate with the kind of emotionally-laden language that

⁵ Two recent publications by clergy who have changed their minds about homosexuality further illustrate this point. Even though both Jack Rogers (a former moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.]) and Gray Temple (an Episcopal priest in the charismatic tradition) devote a significant portion of their books to biblical exegesis, both of them cite extra-biblical sources as just as significant in their process of embracing gay and lesbian people. See Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), especially chapter 3, "A Breakthrough in Understanding the Word of God"; and Gray Temple, *Gay Unions: In the Light of Scripture, Reason, and Tradition* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004).

often ends conversation before it begins. In that high-stakes environment, conflicts over how to interpret Scripture do more than call “biblical authority” into question; they threaten to “denaturalize” the sense people make of the world and their place in it (p. 90). This sheds further light on the perception of homosexuality as an irredeemably “political” issue insofar as it generates contested interpretations of Scripture. The contestation itself, Moon seems to suggest, may be the primary source of congregational discomfort around this issue. As Moon notes, “politics” in both types of congregations she studied was synonymous with “self-interest, cynicism, and worldliness” (p. 15).

In short, drawing on Scripture, feelings, and social experiences in the construction of everyday theologies, Moon argues, reflects a deep desire among church members to create a safe haven from politics, especially when the “political” is understood as unavoidably divisive. If this is the case, then moving beyond the stalemate on homosexuality in so many churches today will likely turn not on biblical or theological arguments concerning human sexuality, but on a renewed biblical theology faithfully engaged with the political dimensions of everyday life, as Moon proposes (pp. 240–241).

Horace Griffin’s *Their Own Receive Them Not*—in many ways a milestone study of sexuality in African American churches—illustrates well the significance of Moon’s sociological analysis for constructive theological work. While not a sociological study per se, Griffin’s pastoral and theological analysis is deeply rooted in the social history of African Americans and the “black church,” which adds an important layer of complexity to Moon’s exploration of everyday theologies as well as to the often ambiguous role of Scripture in those theologies. Indeed, Griffin’s book consistently blurs the otherwise tidy boundaries so often drawn between academic disciplines; in so doing he calls into question what constitutes an “outsider’s” perspective. As an Episcopal priest with a doctorate in religion, Griffin certainly qualifies as an “insider” to ecclesial deliberations over sexuality. But as an African American he must also contend with how infrequently race and ethnicity are included in contestations over lesbian and gay relationships. Historically, most mainline church bodies have treated race as an issue separate and distinct from sexuality or, which is in some ways worse, those churches have simply assumed that modes of theological deliberation and community strategies developed in predominantly white communities can work as well in communities of color. While there is much more to glean from this book, Griffin’s scrambling

of the definitions of “insider” and “outsider” presents at least a cautionary tale to those on both sides of the sexuality debate concerning the terms of the debate itself and the extent to which the issues are abstracted from the concrete lived realities of their cultural contexts.

Griffin has undertaken the daunting task in this book of developing a black liberation theology for and among lesbian and gay people. To do so he must cover some already familiar biblical and theological territory, but always against the backdrop of both historical and contemporary institutional racism. The result is a book that makes especially clear the extent to which one cannot deal with theology in black churches in isolation from politics and the social dynamics of white supremacy. The fact that African American theologians like Griffin find such distinctions between theology and politics not only untenable but impossible to sustain resonates with Moon’s analysis of everyday theologies, the breadth of sources for which are made even more explicit in Griffin’s description of the development of black church traditions.

Here the constellation of sources for religion’s “world ordering” process highlights the contrivance of treating race and sexuality as distinct issues. The history of African Americans (as of nearly every other non-white population in the U.S.) exhibits tightly woven bonds among family, community, and religion as a key strategy for survival and resistance in a racist society (p. 20). Further, the legacy of institutional slavery and its commodification of black bodies have contributed to the “sexualization” of race itself as black men are often perceived as sexual predators and black women as inherently promiscuous (p. 56). These and other factors rooted in racialized discourse make gay and lesbian issues only more challenging in African American communities.

The inseparability of race and sexuality (not to mention gender), which white theologians and religious leaders have virtually ignored, now appears unavoidable, both in American civic discourse concerning marriage and in the continuing apparent division in the Anglican Communion between the North Atlantic and the global South. In the U.S., Griffin notes, support for gay and lesbian civil rights among African American Protestants has dropped in recent years, from 65 percent just a decade ago to 40 percent (p. 17). Not coincidentally perhaps, this decline has occurred along with a sharp increase in media coverage of African American clergy publicly opposing same-sex marriage.

Divisions in the Anglican Communion do not of course cut neatly between Euro-American and, say, African provinces. Yet the rhetoric

from some quarters perpetuates the perception of clear cultural distinctions that are often mapped onto race. For example, the idea that homosexuality is a “European sexual practice, unknown to Africans until Europeans imposed it on them”—a claim Griffin has heard often (p. 98)—not only contributes to anti-gay violence in parts of Africa but to similar postures among African Americans, perhaps as a strategy to distinguish those of African descent from their white oppressors (p. 99).

Given these various social factors in the everyday theologies of traditional black churches, Griffin notices the same dynamics around Scripture that Moon described in the congregations she studied. Rather than isolating the Bible as the source of “black church homophobia,” Griffin argues, the social context in which the Bible is read and how it is used shape how black churches approach sexual ethics. Noting that relatively few members of traditional black churches have been encouraged to read and study the Bible for themselves, Griffin suggests these churches follow the lead of their pastor and the choices made from the pulpit concerning which passages to read, for what reasons, and how to interpret them (p. 65). As Moon likewise tried to argue, while these congregations make explicit claims for the Bible’s “authority,” an implicit authority resides elsewhere—with the pastor, who inevitably brings to the work of constructing everyday theologies many more sources than the Bible alone.

For that reason, at least in part, Griffin devotes a good deal of this book to historical-critical interpretation of the most frequently cited biblical passages on questions of homosexuality. This is not new material and many readers will find this exegetical path all too familiar. What is new and significant is that this kind of biblical work is being offered by an ordained African American religious leader, one of the first such offerings. Moreover, he deals with this familiar terrain against the unfamiliar (to some) backdrop of racism in American society and quite helpfully draws both parallels and contrasts between the role of biblical exegesis in the context of slavery and its role in the oppression of lesbian and gay people.

Beyond the biblical material, Griffin also offers a “pastoral sociology,” as it were, in which he gently but firmly brings African American lesbian and gay Christians more fully into view and dispels the typical portrayals in the news media that make black churches and black pastors uniformly “homophobic” or even entirely heterosexual. He does this in two ways.

First, he provides short but powerful profiles of significant African American figures and religious leaders who either were or are lesbian and gay, both historical (such as George Washington Carver and James Cleveland [pp. 113–118]) and contemporary (Yvette Flunder and Irene Monroe [pp. 134–139]). As with the biblical material, Griffin grounds these profiles in the complex social history of black religious traditions in American society in a way that, often subtly, urges today's black churches to reclaim their own from a deeply troubled and painful past.

Second, Griffin describes the ongoing dilemma faced by many lesbian and gay African Americans whose church membership is bought with their sexual silence and invisibility. Here Griffin recalls the psychic pain of light-skinned African Americans who could pass for white in 1950s and 1960s America. While such passing yielded some benefits of white privilege, the cost for many was far too high—unresolved guilt and shame over disowning one's own community (pp. 142–143). In the fifth chapter Griffin analyzes a similar dynamic in patterns of passing, silence, and denial around homosexuality in many black churches. The dilemma resides, as it rarely does for white people of faith, in the centrality of the black church and extended black family in resisting structural and institutional racism. In this case, the unresolved guilt and shame stem not from race but from sexuality. Those willing to pay that price are simply unwilling to risk having “their own receive them not.”

Negotiating Multiple Identities with Religious Resilience

Both Melissa Wilcox's congregational study, *Coming Out in Christianity*, and the collection of essays edited by Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray, *Gay Religion*, expand the terrain mapped by Moon and Griffin by including bisexual and transgender sensibilities. These topics have only just begun to appear on the horizons of many of today's churches and will likely generate a new level of biblical and theological controversy.⁶ Granted that it has now become

⁶ Moon points out in her study that the Book of Discipline in the United Methodist Church treats human sexuality with only two clearly defined types: heterosexual and homosexual. For this reason, she believes, many of the church members she interviewed avoided talking about transgender and bisexual people, even those committed to creating “welcoming” congregations. Transgender issues were seen as too controversial for “conservative” groups and bisexuality was perceived as a state of sexual “confusion” (p. 246, n. 3).

commonplace in some circles (though often not in official ecclesial deliberations over human sexuality) to find the acronym LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) to describe this range of sexual and gender identities, this shorthand notation nevertheless betrays the remarkable diversity of the people and communities grouped beneath that label. As these two books amply demonstrate, the theological task before us has less to do with “homosexuality” than with revisiting assumptions and claims in theological anthropology. Sociologists and ethnographers can provide important tools for that theological work as religion, culture, sexuality, and gender all play complex roles in the process of discerning what it means to be human even as we continue to turn to Scripture and our traditions for insights.

In the preface Wilcox sets the tone for her book and, I would suggest, for the theological work at hand as well: “This book is not about homosexuality. It is not about religion or spirituality or churches. It is a book about people” (p. ix). While theological debates so often turn on the “issue” of homosexuality, Wilcox reminds us throughout this book that our debates are actually about human beings—how they live, what they believe, where they turn to for community and why. If the Anglican Communion seeks to engage more deliberately in a “listening process” around human sexuality, this book would certainly offer an important resource. As Wilcox notes, there is surprisingly little published research on how LGBT people negotiate the complexities of their lives and relationships in the context of a faith community. What Wilcox provides is only the third book-length congregational study on LGBT religious issues. (She also offers a helpful summary of previous ethnographic studies on this topic, dating back to 1975 [pp. 12–16].)

Seeking to understand better how LGBT people of faith negotiate their gender and sexual identities in relation to religion, Wilcox chose to study two congregations in the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC), a denomination founded in 1968 especially for gay and lesbian people by Troy Perry, an openly gay Pentecostal minister.⁷ In addition to the data collected from extensive interviews and survey instruments—which help to keep this study grounded in the lived realities of these congregations—she

⁷ In 2003, when Wilcox published this book, MCC was international in scope with roughly 40,000 members in 300 congregations and in over eighteen countries (p. 18).

provides helpful historical summaries of various external social factors in American society as the backdrop to the congregational dynamics she considers, including the civil rights movement, second wave feminism, and the explosive growth of American Evangelicalism along with its more fundamentalist counterpart in the so-called religious right. (The sections on MCC theology and evangelism should help to dismantle the common caricature of LGBT people as religiously “liberal” or even dismissive of Scripture.⁸)

One of the many strengths of this book lies in its organizational structure, which follows a pattern typical of sociological and ethnographic research. She organizes her chapters into three parts: identity, community, and identity in community. This pattern resonates with traditional approaches to liturgical and catechetical formation, but can enhance parish-level spiritual formation programs well beyond questions of LGBT inclusion.

Wilcox considers, for example, the familiar formative power of American individualism and cites Robert Bellah’s now classic *Habits of the Heart*. Rather than bemoaning individualism as self-absorption or evidence of an eroding sense of community in American society, Wilcox agrees with a growing number of both historians and sociologists who suppose instead that the trends identified by Bellah and his colleagues mark a cultural shift from a “spirituality of dwelling” to a “spirituality of seeking” (p. 54). In that sense, institutional religion has been more or less displaced by “lived religion,” which may or may not conform to the norms of any given institutional affiliation. While the decline in denominational loyalty in the U.S. has been observed for some time now, Wilcox goes further by suggesting that the very notion of “religious identity” has shifted. Rather than identity being attained or granted from outside one’s self, it is rather actively created by negotiating among a wide range of sources and material, only one of which is “religion.” One MCC member she interviewed illustrated that process by explaining that he takes from the Bible what he can “use” and simply disregards what he cannot. Wilcox refers to this as the “biblical buffet” strategy, which applies as well to nearly every other aspect of religious institutional life (p. 56).

⁸ MCC’s 1998 by-laws contains an outline of the denomination’s doctrinal positions, which include belief in the Trinity, the divine inspiration of the Bible, the dual human and divine nature in Jesus, and justification by grace through Christian faith (Wilcox, p. 19).

Identity as complex process rather than given fact resides at the heart of this study, just as it does in the Episcopal Church in relation to American culture and more broadly with respect to the worldwide Anglican Communion. Controversies over sexual and gender identities have of course given that broader process of religious identification a sense of urgency if not crisis. Frequently overlooked in managing that sense of crisis, as Wilcox reminds us, is the fact that same-sex erotic activity has been recognized cross-culturally, nearly throughout human history. Yet in western cultures “the practice of defining a central aspect of one’s identity by such acts arose only in the nineteenth century” (p. 39). Horace Griffin makes a similar point with his brief historical survey of same-sex behavior in various parts of the African continent prior to the appearance of European colonizers (pp. 98–107). If the North Atlantic has imposed anything on non-western cultures, it is not same-sex intimacy, but the condensation of personal identity around such intimacy, to the detriment of both North Atlantic and global South societies alike.

The early twentieth-century advent of a homosexual identity, as Wilcox describes it, presented religious institutions and churches with a whole new set of moral, psychological, and legal challenges they were simply unequipped to handle theologically or ecclesially (pp. 39–46); hence the decades-long struggle over homosexuality with which we are still living. For LGBT-identified people of faith, these developments only begged a question they would not otherwise have chosen to ask and that many found (and still do) impossible to answer: Do I locate my identity religiously or sexually? In MCC congregations, like the ones Wilcox studied, members simply refuse to choose between the two. Rather than resolving the question of identity, however, this refusal to choose merely exacerbates the problem, with unfortunate ramifications even for self-proclaimed “welcoming” congregations in mainline churches.

In her interviews and surveys Wilcox noted that open and affirming or otherwise “welcoming” congregations often provided insufficient assistance to LGBT people in their process of “coming out,” or integrating their faith and sexual/gender identities. The importance of affiliating with explicitly LGBT-oriented congregations (like those in the MCC) extended beyond the coming out process, a significant finding for whether predominantly heterosexual “welcoming” congregations provide places for LGBT people of faith to thrive (pp. 60–61).

Wilcox remains true to her intent to write a book about people rather than issues, and in the end the congregational dynamics and

cultural factors she analyzes make this book useful for more than LGBT people and communities. LGBT people of faith offer an opportunity, Wilcox explains, to “explore what happens when the dominant culture defines two aspects of one’s identity as irreconcilable” (p. 171). The religious resilience of those she interviewed in overcoming that sense of social and cognitive “dissonance” marks some significant terrain on our religious landscape that has only partially to do with sexual ethics. After all, LGBT people are not the only ones navigating today’s spiritual marketplace and carving out custom-made identities from a dizzying array of sources.

The time and energy spent by mainline church congregations on what to do with homosexuals could just as easily be spent—and perhaps more fruitfully, as Wilcox’s study implies—on what to do with the rest of their non-LGBT members, who are also but for different reasons “spiritual seekers” rather than “spiritual dwellers.” Wilcox suspects, for example, that the increased visibility of LGBT people of faith in recent decades stems only in part from the emergence of a “gay liberation movement” in the 1960s (p. 78). Just as important are the broader religious and spiritual trends in the U.S., which LGBT people may illustrate but which have shaped American congregational life much more broadly and which many clergy have yet to address in the patterns of their faith communities.

Those broader trends are made even more explicit in *Gay Religion*, the collection of essays edited by Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray. This collection extends the reach of the material addressed by Moon, Griffin, and Wilcox well beyond Christian churches. While slightly more than a third of the twenty-one essays in this collection deal with Christianity in some fashion, the others explore LGBT participation in a wide range of traditions (from Buddhism and Judaism to Santería and Native American sensibilities) as well as new and emerging spiritual practices and communities outside of what is ordinarily referred to as “institutional religion.” This volume nonetheless belongs with the other three considered in this article for at least three reasons.

First, the religious resilience among LGBT people observed specifically in Christian contexts by Moon, Griffin, and Wilcox only deepens in the essays collected by Thumma and Gray. Throughout this collection it is clearly not a matter of *if* LGBT people, by virtue of their various sexual and gender identities, will adopt and participate in religious and spiritual traditions but only of how and where they will.

As Gray and Thumma note in their introduction, in mainstream media sources “one is hard pressed to find positive stories of gay religious life or tales of organizations harmoniously merging homosexuality and religion. Yet these stories abound” (p. xi). While this volume cannot provide a comprehensive correction to that gap, the essays do offer a provocative representation of the religious diversity and spiritual vitality among LGBT people, both historically and presently. LGBT people are not, in other words, by definition irreligious, nor are they bereft of opportunities to engage in religious and spiritual practices.

In short, and contrary to the common portrayals of religion in America in popular culture, whether film, television, or the news media, much more is happening religiously and spiritually in the U.S. than what transpires on a Sunday morning in American churches. Clearly, many LGBT Christians care deeply about the sexuality debates in our various congregations, yet the essays in this collection offer an important reminder of the wider cultural context in which those debates are conducted. For a good number of LGBT people, the institutional policy decisions of a given church do not determine whether they will engage fully in religious and spiritual practices. Wilcox makes a similar point by observing that one’s identity (whether civic or religious) is no longer reliant “on the statuses that institutions confer” (p. 54).

Second, and expanding on the first, these essays mark a shift in how religious debates over human sexuality are generally portrayed and perceived in public discourse and deliberation. High-profile instances of those debates (such as the election of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire) appear to turn on whether “homosexuals” will be allowed in a given church and under what conditions. That very question certainly defined the focus of Moon’s study, but also by implication the MCC congregations Wilcox analyzed, as well as the dilemma faced by silenced and invisible LGBT Christians in the black churches Griffin describes. The essays assembled by Thumma and Gray, however, carry the potential to recast these assumptions. The terms and conditions of how LGBT people “may” be religious and spiritual are not always or even necessarily set by religious institutions. In the vast American marketplace of religious and spiritual traditions, LGBT people—like every American—can choose where, when, and how to practice their faith and spirituality without waiting for permission to do so. René Drumm’s contribution to this collection, for example, examines Seventh-Day Adventism and how LGBT people carved

out their own space within that tradition, which officially condemns their behavior. They did so, in part, because of their love of the Bible and the particular approach to Scripture encouraged by that tradition. The work of integrating their identities with Seventh-Day Adventism, in other words, proceeded on their own terms (pp. 62–63). Likewise, Peter Savastano traces the efforts of Italian Roman Catholic gay men in New Jersey to create their own religious space around their devotion to St. Gerard Maiella, including the development of theological insights particular to their experiences (p. 184).

Third, these essays show the extent to which openly LGBT people actively engaged in religious traditions can contribute, sometimes dramatically so, to the ongoing evolution of those traditions. Moreover, as some contributors to this volume argue, those LGBT engagements can prompt reassessment of what it means to be “religious” at all. As Donald Boisvert argues, some elements of popular gay male culture (whether in dance clubs or at pride parade festivals), which more than a few would consider “merely” cultural or secular, can become occasions for “apprehending the sacred, the transcendent, or the religious” (p. 353).

These and many other moments of evolution and reassessment may well be one of the key though often unspoken sources of discomfort in many Christian churches as their members ponder what might change in their congregational life if LGBT people are openly welcomed and incorporated into their community. Moon suggests as much in the nearly ubiquitous disdain for “politics” she encountered in both the “liberal” and the “conservative” congregations she studied: just the presence of visibly LGBT people in those congregations could well propel those communities into reassessing the “political” in the life of faith. Similarly, the expressed preference Wilcox found among some MCC members to worship only with other LGBT people—even when they had the option to worship in a “welcoming” congregation of a denomination more consonant with their theological or liturgical sensibilities—at least implies the need for reassessing what “welcome” actually entails, and not just for LGBT people. Likewise Griffin’s proposal for a black liberation theology appropriated for and among LGBT African Americans would likely compel black church congregations to address in new ways their own perceptions of racialized sexualities as well as how authority is understood and exercised in relation to Scripture and pastoral care. This carries further implications outside traditionally black churches as predominantly

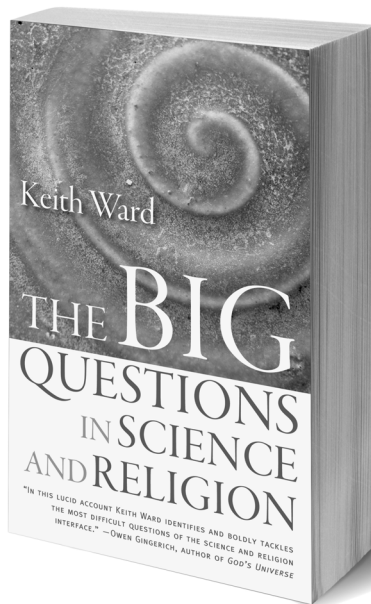
white congregations would likely recognize in new ways how the cultural constructions of race and ethnicity shape their own everyday theologies and spiritual practices.

Taken as a whole, Thumma and Gray's rich if controversial collection again reorients the typical usage of religious "insiders" and "outsiders." When traversing parts of the religious landscape mapped by these essays, most Christians will find themselves outsiders looking in, and some of these essays would no doubt push many Christians beyond their religious comfort zones, whether to the ancestor rituals of Santería (pp. 115–138) or the Wiccan festivals of "neo-pagan" practices (pp. 267–271). If taken as a theological opportunity, however, addressing that discomfort can present occasions for assessing the spiritual health of one's own faith community and tradition. While a few of these essays take note of the ongoing pain and disappointments among some LGBT people in relation to religion, most of the work in this collection bears witness to thriving spiritual practices and religious vitality among remarkably diverse LGBT communities. By taking a closer look at such spiritual flourishing, surely more than a few Christian communities would find the tenor of their deliberations shift. Rather than, or perhaps in addition to, trying to discern the ethics of "homosexuality," they might ponder what lessons can be learned and insights gleaned from LGBT people of faith for the revitalization of their own congregational life.

As Christian churches, including the Anglican Communion, continue to address important biblical and theological questions in sexual ethics, the sociological and ethnographic research presented in all four of these books invites those Christian communities into a broader realm of theological exploration, a realm that our current debates can so often obscure. That broader realm may not (and probably will not) resolve our contested ecclesial relationships. But the "insiders" in these debates, and perhaps especially the ones Elizabeth Stuart so well described as simply "exhausted," can find resources to renew their energy, spur further reflection, and envision new possibilities for our common life of faith in these varied views from "outside."

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