

Shiple, H. (2014 ed.)

Globalized Religion and Sexual Identity. Contexts, Contestations, Voices.

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In many societies, the intersection of religion and sexuality is a minefield. Traditional constructions of religious and sexual identity are imposed, challenged, and deconstructed; and more recent views of diversity are equally contested. As socio-cultural constructions, religion and sexuality — as well as their intersections — should be studied in their specific contextual configurations. That precise challenge is taken up in this volume. Fourteen chapters describe such intersections in different contexts (Canada, USA, UK, Brazil, and Hong Kong/China). Most deal with Christian cases and debates — with one significant excursion to Buddhism, and some examples including Muslims.

As is typical for an edited volume, the theoretical and methodological approaches are highly divergent. The underlying perspective is made clear in the introduction: a social constructionist and Foucaultian identity critique coupled with a lived-religion approach, and the interpretation of the secular as a specific stance vis-à-vis religion. This is expressed in the three sections of the book: contexts, contestations, and voices. The chapters present theoretical and/or empirical studies, framed by a variety of disciplines and using many different methods.

Under the rubric of ‘contexts’, Barrett-Fox offers a sociological interpretation of the rise of the anti-gay activism of the religious right in the USA. Man-Chung critically discusses a 2013 Hong Kong law regarding transsexual marriage rights in terms of Žižekian and Buddhist philosophies. Power presents a lived-religion approach to study rural Canadian religious discourse about same-sex marriage. Finally, Barras and Dabby critique discursive constructions of ‘religious’ versus ‘secular’ in the context of debates about male circumcision.

In the section on ‘contestations’, Jakobsen and Pellegrini examine policy changes in the Obama presidency relating to same-sex rights, stressing the link between religious and sexual freedom. Leal et al. present ethnographic research about discrimination in the secular Brazilian school curriculum, and the escapes that sexual ‘others’ find from this system. Lieflander discusses the Anglican controversy on (homo)sexuality, from the perspectives of Weber and Troeltsch. Chan and Huang study the anti-gay stances of Chinese Christians in social media. Hunt describes the positions of different Christian denominations in the UK towards sexual diversity.

The section on ‘voices’ opens with Rosas and De Castro’s analysis of the construction of femininity and restrictive views of sexuality in an evangelical Pentecostal community in Brazil. Strhan looks at how media and public

discourse frame and regulate conservative Christian voices regarding sexuality. Chinwuba presents a small-scale investigation of gay African men in Canada against the background of homophobia in Africa (especially Uganda). Shipley and Dickey-Young present first results of an empirical study on the understanding by Canadian youth of religion and sexual diversity. The volume concludes with Taylor and Snowdon's analysis of the identity narratives of religious LGBT youth.

As this overview suggests, this book has a lot to offer with respect to current debates on religion and sexual diversity. However, its overall composition is less satisfying. The title speaks of globalised religion and sexual identity, but neither is properly elaborated. The only chapters that can be read as addressing globalised religion are those of Lieflander and Chinwuba; all other chapters are limited to a specific religious (and usually Christian) context. The notion of globalisation plays no significant role. Similarly, sexual identity — in a strict sense — appears only in the chapters by Leal et al., Chinwuba, Shipley and Dickey-Young, and Taylor and Snowdon. The selection of contexts, topics, and perspectives seems rather haphazard, which does not contribute to the stated goal: “to explore religion and sexual identity from a range of countries across the globe, focusing on the theme of religious/ideological voices in state policies, such as same-sex marriage, identification and education” — which, in fact, sounds more like a summary than a goal.

The juxtaposition of unrelated case studies is not uncommon in volumes such as this. Neither is the lack of coherence. I was therefore eager to read the editor's conclusion, which would have been an opportunity to bring together insights from the various chapters to the aggregated level of theory-building. What do we learn from these cases that will help us to understand the intersections of globalised religion and sexual identity? Unfortunately, the conclusion only repeats some of the interesting insights already presented, without making the effort to take us further.

Although I would have appreciated this theoretical next step, as well as more rigorous structure, better selection of topics and cases, and more critical interaction between the chapters, I still enjoyed fourteen quite interesting case studies.

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