

## Book Review

***Queer Religiosities: An Introduction to Queer and Transgender Studies in Religion.* By Melissa M. Wilcox. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020. xv+239pp. \$100.00 (hardcover); \$36.00 (paperback); \$34.00 (eBook). ISBN: 978-1-4422-7566-9.**



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*Queer Religiosities* is an ambitious text, intending to provide an accessible introduction to queer and transgender studies in religion that is “both thematic and intersectional in its design” (viii). This means the text aims to be attentive to power analysis, which is a hallmark of both queer and transgender studies. The author, Melissa M. Wilcox, readily acknowledges that any abstractions in the text are meant to be provisional, since factors such as race, ability, age, and more impact how gender variance and queer experience are understood, experienced, and interpreted. As stated in the Introduction, a goal of *Queer Religiosities* is to “bring the methods and insights of these three fields together, to discover what we can learn from the places where they align and what new insights can be found” (32). This text is not primarily for specialists. In fact, it is notable that the book is one of the first scholarly projects to introduce a wider audience to the importance of conversations and connections among queer, transgender, and religious studies.

Along with an Introduction and Conclusion, this book is organized into six chapters that focus on different themes: Stories, Conversations, Practices, Identities, Communities, and Politics and Power. Exploring themes, rather than particular theorists or religious traditions, allows Wilcox to flow between topics in a way that does not rely on strict categories and enables discussion between chapters to occur more seamlessly. Each chapter includes a discussion of the central theme, with reference to key moments in each field of study (queer, transgender, and religious studies), as well as a concluding section called “Queering Religion/Religioning Queer.” This last section weaves the threads of the chapter together such that the (potential) synergy between queer, transgender, and religious studies is highlighted. This is an important structural element of the text, since at times the connections between the fields may not be readily obvious. Multiple religious traditions are included in each chapter’s discussion; it should be noted here that Wilcox intentionally departs from a “world religions” approach to evaluating the themes in conversation with different religious traditions and practices (ix, 8–9).

While each chapter has its focal point, at times it can be difficult to follow the thread of each chapter because there is so much being discussed with reference to three academic fields

and multiple religious traditions. A complex topic might be introduced briefly before moving on to another. For example, in the “Identities” chapter, readers are introduced to notions of “calling,” primarily with reference to Christianity, that are used in a theological argument supporting transgender identities; conceptions of transcorporeality in African diasporic communities that might apply to transgender understandings; anthropological studies related to *hijra* identities in Hyderabad, India, that pinpoint complex questions in Hindu and Muslim traditions and communities; approaches to gender transition in Iran; and contextual realities of Two-Spirit people, primarily in North American contexts. While all of these are significant conversations and add immensely to the discussion, introducing multiple topics requires a reader to take in a considerable amount of information, historical and otherwise, in a way that emphasizes breadth over depth. This approach works to make *Queer Religiosities* a text that, as noted above, is ambitious in its effort to be as expansive and inclusive as possible, but may be challenging for some readers.

The benefit of this approach, however, is that readers are introduced to many facets of these fields of study. Perhaps it would best to understand *Queer Religiosities* as a text that invites curiosity, encouraging scholars to engage more in-depth with the topics that resonate most with their areas of interest. The “Politics and Power” chapter is a highlight of the text, wherein Wilcox artfully introduces theoretical approaches to interpreting power from queer and transgender studies. This chapter, in relation to the other chapters but also on its own, is accessible and skillful in briefly distilling key points of Marxist, Psychoanalytic, and Poststructural thought as they each have influenced the formation of queer and transgender studies in religion. The introductions are precise and formidable, as is the way Wilcox connects critical theory to its relevance to, and emergence within, religious studies.

Overall, the benefits of Wilcox’s structure outweigh any drawbacks related to brevity. *Queer Religiosities* shines in its skillful discussion and introduction of various topics, themes, religious traditions, and theoretical approaches. In the Preface, Wilcox notes that *Queer Religiosities* is ideal for classroom use, both undergraduate and graduate, and may also be of use to doctoral students who would benefit from introductions to the ways that different theories have impacted the study of religion (x–xi). The text does include pedagogically inclined elements, such as study questions after each chapter, and a bibliography, filmography, and glossary at the conclusion of the text that would be helpful to students, whether as a review of material or as an introduction to key texts, scholars, and ideas.

This aspiration, for use in multiple contexts, is certainly a challenge, as it can be quite difficult to connect to audiences with different levels of knowledge about queer and transgender theories, much less to students who have varying experience or knowledge of diverse religious traditions and practices. With this in mind, I imagine this text would be best used with upper-level undergraduates and graduate students who have some foundation in critical theory and at least cursory familiarity with religious difference, multiplicity, and diversity. Beyond use in the classroom, this text would be very useful for scholars from various fields (but especially religious or theological studies) who want to expand their knowledge of, and facility with, queer and transgender studies. This text is not only timely as an introduction to the confluence of these areas of study; but it is politically and contextually relevant as well. Gender diversity and variance, as well as LGBTQIA+ lived experiences, continually surface in classroom

environments focused on religious studies, so this text would assist any scholar in becoming increasingly conversant.

This text matters in part because queer and transgender studies represent cutting edge analyses that transverse multiple academic fields and disciplines. In the emerging field of interfaith and interreligious studies, *Queer Religiosities* offers not only representation for the fields it introduces, but also connects LGBTQIA+ experiences to significant critical questions and inquiries, especially when it comes to evaluating how queer approaches might engender both critical and generative questions in relation to theological or religious issues or perceived norms in multiple traditions. This stands as a volume that subsequent critical explorations must acknowledge as a foundational introductory text.

Rachel A. Heath  
Vanderbilt University  
Nashville, TN

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