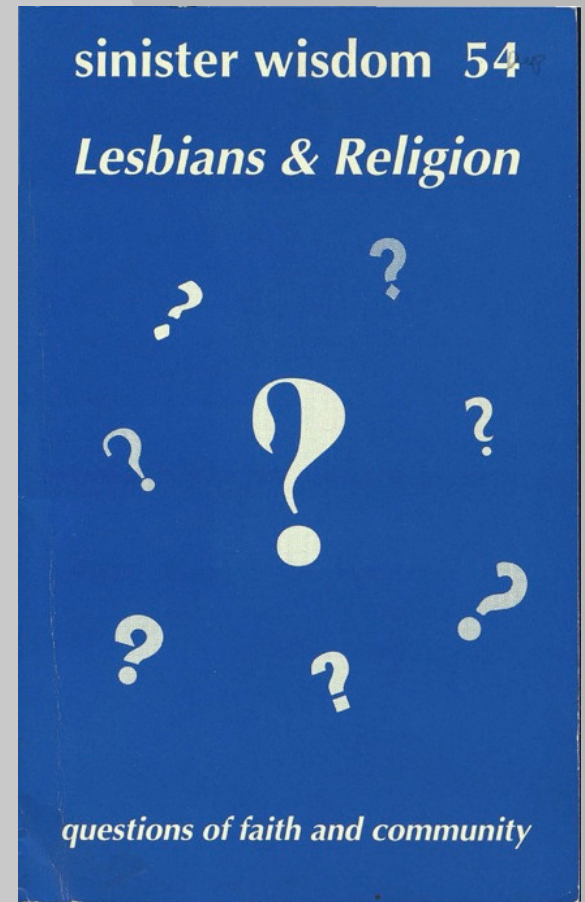


SINISTER WISDOM TEACHING GUIDE:

Sinister Wisdom 54: Lesbians and Religion

SUMMARY

Sinister Wisdom 54: Lesbians and Religion (Winter 1994/1995) features work by lesbians of various religious practices and backgrounds who examine the relationship between religion and lesbian communities. From pieces that critique patriarchal Christian bias within lesbian communities to pieces that celebrate mixed religious identities, *Sinister Wisdom 54* broadens the definitions of faith and intersectional religious practices within and without womyn-identified spaces. As Elana Dykewomon's call for submissions in issue 51 states, "This [issue 54] is the place to bring anger, alienation, careful analysis of hierarchical archetypes, righteous indignation, creative re-visioning and dyke takes on the quest for life's meaning" (7). Through these writings, *Sinister Wisdom 54* illustrates the varieties of the often-complicated yet inextricably intertwined relationships between lesbian identity, religion, and politics.



HISTORY OF SINISTER WISDOM

Sinister Wisdom is a multicultural lesbian literary and art journal that began in 1976 and publishes three to four issues per year. The journal started in Charlotte, North Carolina with Harriett Desmoines (Ellenberger) and Catherine Nicholson as its editors. *Sinister Wisdom* is still published today, and its contents have evolved alongside lesbian identities, politics, theory, and aesthetics. Some issues are organized by a theme, like *Sinister Wisdom 54*, while others are open issues that feature writing and art across themes.



THEMES AND CORRESPONDING READINGS

Religion and Sex:

- Myke Johnson “Of Cowboys, Mystics & Lesbians” p. 59-63.
- Caffyn Kelley “Magic” p. 91-93.
- Marita Avila “Connection Between Womyn” p. 94-96.
- M.K. Stewart “Worshipping at the Body Altar” p. 98-100.

Religion and Lesbian Identity:

- Winn Gilmore “The Funeral” p. 43-50.
- Herlinda E. Arellano “My First Holy Communion” p. 52-54.
- S. Naomi Finkelstein “McRunes and Mazdas” p. 72-79.
- M.K. Stewart “Worshipping at the Body Altar” p. 98-102.
- Gloria Anzaldúa “The Basque Brujas – c. 1492” p. 115-121.

Critique of Religion:

- Herlinda E. Arellano “My First Holy Communion” p. 52-54.
- Lisa Gray “In the Bathtub” p. 64-66.
- Lisa Williams “let us banish god” p. 67-68.
- zana “spare me the solstice tree” p. 69-7.
- Tallen “Dialoguing About Dialogue: A Jewish Lesbian Perspective” p. 81-86.
- Debby Earthdaughter “Non-christian: By Birth, versus the Privilege of Choice” p. 87-90.
- Mara Math “Shalom to All That: A Jewish Dyke Critiques The New Age” p. 101-104.

Balancing Intersecting Religious Identities:

- Juliana Pegues “White Christmas” p. 15-21.
- Judith Berns “The Making of a Jewish, Lesbian Buddhist” p. 22-29.
- Avoteja “Halleluyah Y’al” p. 51.
- Diane Anderson “Diana the Reincarnate” p. 55-58.

Religion and Politics:

- Barbara Ruth “If Kathy Power Surrenders, Can the Millennium Be Far Behind?” p. 30-36.
- Sarah Jacobus excerpt from *An Oral History of Lil Moed* p. 106-112.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

Theme: The subtitle of this issue is “Questions of Faith and Community.” What are some of the key questions regarding faith and community in this issue? What specific challenges, critiques, observations, or emotions do some of the writers express? Why do you think religion can be both an important yet also difficult topic in a multicultural lesbian arts journal?

2

(Re)Creation Poems: Compare Letta Simone-Nefertari Neely’s “gawd and alluh huh sistahs” (13-14) and Lisa Williams’s “let us banish god” (67-68). How does each poet imagine changes to traditional religious stories or figures? How does each poet linguistically call attention to the patriarchal (and sometimes racist) traditions of religion, and how does each poet re-write that narrative? Compare the tones in each poem. Why do you think each poet uses the tone that she does, and how does it reflect their speakers’ attitudes toward religion?

3

Sex/Sexuality and Religious Experience: Diane Anderson’s “Diana the Reincarnate” (55-57) discusses the entanglement of her sexuality and religious practices while other writers express a sense of estrangement from religion because of their sexuality, such as Winn Gilmore’s “The Funeral” (43-50). How do these two works portray religion or religious experience? What are the obstacles each author describes in the relationship between sex and faith? Choose two pieces from *Sinister Wisdom 54* that similarly express the complex relationship between sex/sexuality and religion. How do they compare with Anderson or Gilmore?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

4

Politics and Religion: Read Barbara Ruth's poem, "If Kathy Power Surrenders, Can the Millennium Be Far Behind?" (30-36) and then research Kathy Power and David Koresh/Waco, Texas. With this context in mind, how does Ruth craft a poem that weaves political turmoil, lesbian identity, and religious practice? What are the relationships between these themes and how does Ruth use the poem to attempt to understand and critique each? How does this poem situate lesbian identity and expression within a tumultuous historical and cultural context? How does Ruth imagine (if at all) a reconciliation?

5

Nature and Religion: Many contributors include nature as part of or integral to religious practice or experience. How does nature or the natural world operate in Alex Dalsheimer's "Nature/nurture" (123)? How does it operate in Gloria Anzaldúa's "The Basque Brujas – c. 1492" (115-121)? What natural images are present in each work, and how do these images connect with spiritual or ritual experience(s)?

6

Critique of Christianity: According to her "Notes for a Magazine," why did Elana Dykewomon originally give the issue the alternative title, "Fuck Xmas"? What is her logic behind this statement and how does the problem of white Christian lesbian privilege appear in other pieces featured in this issue? What is Christian bias, and how does it manifest itself in lesbian culture? What are some solutions to white Christian lesbian privilege posed by contributors to *Sinister Wisdom 54*?

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

WRITE

Write about your own religious background and your intersecting identities. How has religion made integrating your identities difficult or easy?

ANALYZE

Select a piece of visual art from this issue and describe its content and style. How does this work connect to the theme of “Lesbians and Religion”? Does the piece seem to challenge, praise, or examine a facet of the theme? How so?

DEBATE

Pick a piece in *Sinister Wisdom 54* that you don't agree with. Write a professional response to the author detailing your thoughts, questions, and challenges to their work. Maintain a critical yet respectful voice in your response and use the text to support your claims.

DISCUSS

With a partner, discuss a theme that you both found interesting and compelling. What contributions to the journal speak to this theme the best? Why did you choose the theme? Together, find passages that support this theme and compare how the examples are similar and different.



ABOUT A CONTRIBUTOR:**Gloria Anzaldúa**

Photo by Kevin Andre Elliott

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color. co-edited with Cherríe Moraga. Kitchen Table, 1983.

Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. Aunt Lute Books, 1987

Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color, 1990 (edited collection)

this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation. co-edited with AnaLouise Keating, 2002

In *Sinister Wisdom 54 Lesbians and Religion*, Gloria Anzaldúa described herself as a “Chicana *patlache* dyke writer from south Texas” (128). Anzaldúa earned her B.A. from Pan American University (1969) and her M.A. from the University of Texas at Austin (1973). She taught creative writing, Chicano studies, and feminist studies in several major universities including the University of Texas, San Francisco State University, and the University of California at Santa Cruz. Her writings and editorial work contributed revolutionary changes in queer and feminist theory as well as Chicano studies, including developing theories about mixed or overlapping cultures that exist on both literal geographical and sociopolitical borders. This “new mestiza” that Anzaldúa advocates for in her work is an awareness of the meshing and comingling of multicultural or intersecting identities in a way that challenges Western conceptions of binary (either/or) thinking.

Her writing and teaching has earned her several awards including The Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award (1986), The Lambda Lesbian Small Book Press Award (1991), The Lesbian Rights Award (1991), and The American Studies Association Lifetime Achievement Award (2001). She served *Sinister Wisdom* as a contributing editor and member of the board of directors from 1984-2004. Anzaldúa died May 15, 2004 in Santa Cruz, California.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about *Sinister Wisdom*, go to: sinisterwisdom.org

To see other *Sinister Wisdom* Teaching Guides, go to: sinisterwisdom.org/teachingguides

To request a free classroom set of *Sinister Wisdom 54*, email Julie at sinisterwisdom@gmail.com with the class title, number of students, and mailing address.



Sinister Wisdom is happy to provide, free of charge, classroom sets and reading group sets of journal issues. For people who are able to make a contribution to cover the cost of postage, we will provide an invoice; postage reimbursement is voluntary though greatly appreciated.

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