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The Order of Christ Sophia [hereafter OCS] is a small and relatively young new religious movement that sprang from the ashes of the Holy Order of MANS. Children of Jesus and Mary, co-authored by James Lewis and Nicholas Levine, is actually an edited volume with contributions from sociologists Scott Thurman and Christine Johnson (a former member of OCS) and two active priests in the Order, Mary Francis Drake and Lucille Michaels. The work is a coherent, clearly presented, and exhaustive study that skillfully employs a full range of approaches to the study of new religious communities.

Nicholas Levine offers a general overview of the history of the OCS by exploring its roots in predecessor movements the Holy Order of MANS and the Holy Order of Sophia and the biographies of the two founding master teachers, Father Peter Bowes and Mother Clair Watts. Levine then examines the theology and practice of the Order, which is a fusion of Roman Catholic spirituality, new thought, and eastern meditation wedded together with a psychotherapeutic program that involves members in a program of group therapy. James Lewis and Christine Johnson then examine demographic questionnaires administered to many members of the OCS in 2005 and 2008. This chapter deals with such issues as age and affiliation, education and income, sex ratio, religious background, and motivations for joining the movement. Lewis and Johnson note substantial variance with previous studies of other NRMs, particularly in the areas of age and education. Further, Lewis and Johnson give ample support to the role of religious experience in the decision to affiliate and he takes to task those who dismiss religious experience as “epiphenomena.”

In the chapter on Controversy, Lewis and Levine explore the ongoing experience of the OCS with negative media, disenchanted ex-members and assaults from the anti-cult movement. It is here the persona of Lewis comes through most clearly as he engages then dismantles the claims to “mind control” and the destructive nature of involvement in alternative religions. They make skillful use of survey data from ex-members to demonstrate that the overwhelming majority of former members reject the negative stereotypes of alternative religions and do not interpret their time spent in the OCS as a “cult experience.”
Lewis next explores the role of religious experience in the OCS, which he defines as “experiences that seem to be perceptions of—including apparent communication from—non-ordinary spiritual dimensions and/or spiritual beings.” Members understand themselves to be “Christian mystics” and Lewis explores the range and the significance of these experiences in the life of the Order.

Lucille Michaels examines the role and status of women in the OCS, which can be generally categorized as empowering women and appreciative of the feminine. The Order honors the feminine nature of the divine and models the positive role of women in the leadership of Mother Clair. Michaels and Mary Francis Drake present a psychological profile of the OCS. They administered the Shipley Institute of Living Scale, the Personality Research Form, and the NEO Personality Inventory Revised to approximately 90 priests, deacons and congregants who attended the 2006 summer retreat. In general, they found that those most heavily involved in OCS with the longest tenure demonstrated the lowest levels of neuroticism, which they interpreted to be in direct conflict with theories that NRMs cause degeneration of mental health.

Christine Johnson employs the General Social Survey to compare the attitudes of OCS members with the GSS database of the general population and with the responses that William Bainbridge gathered from a similar survey of The Family International. Members were asked some 200 questions pertaining to a variety of issues including their self image, understandings of the nature of God, their religious mission, and views toward society. While the OCS and The Family come out fairly square on issues of religiosity, the OCS members had considerably lower “missionary vision” and considerably higher valuation of the general society, government, and social institutions. Scott Thumma then compares the OCS to traditional conservative and mainline congregations. While it is clear that the OCS requires a more intense level of commitment and has substantive theological variants, Thumma finds considerable similarities in organizational patterns and group dynamics with “mainstream” American religion, which itself is in flux as it adapts to social changes. Thumma concludes that it may be more useful to view movements like the OCS as “niche congregations” as opposed to a “cult” or alternative religion.

In the concluding chapter, Lewis assesses the future prospects of the OCS in terms of Rodney Stark’s model of the factors that lead to survival and success of emergent religions. Lewis addresses a number of factors in the Stark model such as cultural continuity, non-empirical truth claims, tension level with the surrounding culture, leadership, religious workforce, and personal networks. Though Lewis takes issue with several aspects of the Stark model, in general he finds the OCS meets the criteria for continued growth and is
laying the groundwork for life after the passing of the founding masters.

*Children of Jesus and Mary* has succeeded admirably at the two principle
tasks of such a work. The literary, historical, and social scientific research is
well done and gives the reader a very clear answer to the primary question:
What is this movement? Though we might have heard more voices from
OCS members, there is nonetheless sufficient participant observation and
personal testimony to answer the more fundamental question: Who are these
people? This is an admirable work that will be of great value to scholars and
students interested in alternative religions.

However, one is compelled to ask why a relatively obscure group of 100
–160 members would merit such an effort. Lewis and Levine have more in
mind. They seek to offer critique of both the ACM and some rather highly
valued theorists and to put forth a more fully developed and compelling
model for the study of NRMs. Here again they succeed, with the slight
caveat that we are presented with more charts and graphs than the actual life
experience of OCS members.

The other agenda is somewhat more subtle and perhaps more problematic.
Lewis takes the bold step of including a former member and two active priests as
scholarly contributors to the work. OCS is blessed with a high level of education
among its members and those chosen have graduate degrees in related fields.
Lewisjustifies this decision by observing that “the objectivity of Christian schol-
ars writing about Christianity, of Buddhist scholars writing about Buddhism,…
and so forth is rarely challenged, but the objectivity of scholarship by new
religion insiders is regularly dismissed as inherently flawed.” Lewis is convinced
that inclusion of an insider perspective makes the volume more legitimate. While
it is certainly true that Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims do quality research
on their own traditions, I am hard pressed to recall the study of a new, intense,
high tension, “alternative” movement within any of those traditions that was
significantly informed by scholar/members. This is not in any way to question
the quality of the work done by Drake, Johnson, or Michaels. But I sense that
their inclusion had less to do with their qualifications as scholars, and far more
to do with hope that this work will lead toward a broader acceptance of the OCS
and similar movements as a more “normative” aspect of the American religious
landscape. This is made more explicit with Thumma’s characterization of the
OCS as a “niche congregation” and by Lewis when he argues that religious life in
America has been so reconfigured that “metaphysical,” “new age” or the “occult
milieu” ought rightly to be considered a legitimate subculture of the Christian
West. I suspect this perspective has considerably more traction in Madison, Bos-
ton, New York, and Los Angeles than in Americus, Georgia.

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