Book Review


This attractively produced small volume contains ten chapters about issues of gender and sexuality in a range of new religious movements, from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism) which was founded in the early nineteenth century, through a range of twentieth-century groups up to the 1970s such as Adidam and the Raelians. However, the scholarly emphasis is mostly on the contemporary, early twenty-first-century practices of each group, with a few exceptions. The editors’ short ‘Introduction’ emphasises the necessity of placing unusual ideas about sexuality, and practices that result from these teachings, in their ‘proper context’ so that any evaluation of these movements is ‘a valid critique’ (p. 2). Chapter 2, ‘Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Empowerment in Mormon Fundamentalist Communities’ by Jennifer Lara Fagen and Stuart A. Wright certainly argues against the grain of secular liberal versions of women’s choice and freedom, arguing that plural marriage in fundamentalist Mormonism (FLDS) is different to the oppressive domesticity of the Western nuclear family, and rather liberates through the support of ‘othermothers’. Invocation of the right of women to choose their own way of marrying and raising children is, to this reader, naive and possibly disingenuous, as the FLDS women were born and socialised into that lifestyle and did not freely choose it.

Martha Sonntag Bradley’s ‘Gender Among the Branch Davidians’ investigates the tradition of female leadership in Seventh Day Adventism and its offshoots. David Koresh (b. Vernon Howell, 1959–1993) inherited the leadership of Mount Carmel from Lois Roden (1916–1986). Bradley explains how during his years in power he re-shaped the sexual practices of the community via the exercise of charisma, such that he advocated ‘an alternative route to salvation’ (p. 45) in his sermons on Revelation, and his interpretation of the seven seals. The community endorsed Koresh’s multiple marriages and sexual relationships (even with minors). The next chapter, Roshani Cari Shay and Henrik Bogdan’s ‘Sex and Gender in the Words and Communes of Osho (nee Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh)’, sketches Osho’s career as a spiritual teacher and his liberal approach to sex, ‘because only love, meditation, and death bring one into the present moment completely’ (p. 65). He also emphasised that celibacy followed naturally on from a sexually active life. The combination of conservative (by Western standards) and radical ideas that Osho expressed (about sex, AIDS, women, and so on) is acknowledged, and the empirical interviews from members of the Osho communes are genuinely fresh and interesting.

Michael (Anthony) Costabile’s ‘Sexual Practice, Spiritual Awakening, and Divine Self-Realization in the Reality-Way of Adidam’ is an insider’s account of sexuality in the teachings and community of Adi Da Samraj (b. Franklin Jones, 1939–2008). Costabile notes that Adi Da’s teaching is partly about ‘absence of conventional taboos in all that he did with devotees’ (p. 91). The chapter discusses ‘true yogic intimacy’ and ‘intimate yogic
friendship’ amongst Adi Da’s followers (p. 107). Chapter 6, Johanna J.M. Petsche’s ‘Gurdjieff on Sex: Subtle Bodies, Si 12, and the Sex Life of a Sage’ is an area in which little academic research has been done, and is well-grounded in the sources. Chas Clifton’s ‘Sex Magic or Sacred Marriage? Sexuality in Contemporary Wicca’ is focused on the Wiccan ‘Great Rite’, which can be enacted symbolically (using an athame and cup) or may involve the High Priestess and Priest in ritual sexual intercourse. The sober, academic, and non-sensationalist tone of Petsche’s and Clifton’s contributions is especially commendable, and is also present in Per Faxneld and Jesper Aagaard Petersen’s ‘Cult of Carnality: Sexuality, Eroticism, and Gender in Contemporary Satanism’, which notes that ‘sexual emancipation, when coupled with a Satanic approach, actively engages sexual morality on a variety of levels’ (p. 169). Nevertheless, the negotiation of ‘morality’ is complex and the interplay between biological essentialism and cultural transgression results in a lack of uniformity in the Satanic milieu regarding sex and gender.

Chapter 9, Susan J. Palmer’s ‘Raël’s Angels: The First Five Years of a Secret Order’, is an intriguing account of the female order founded in 1998 by Raël (b. Claude Vorilhon, 1946). These women were selected as consorts of the extraterrestrials that are expected in Raëllism, and are defined as a ‘religious and contemplative community’ (p. 191). There is a focus on ‘inner beauty’, though plastic surgery to improve the appearance is approved, as is transgenderism (if a man wishes to become an Angel). Palmer posits the Angels as protectors of Raël’s charisma. The final chapter, James R. Lewis’ ‘Fantasies of Abuse and Captivity in Nineteenth-Century Convent Tales’ is rather different to earlier contributions, but functions to explain how a religion (in this case Catholicism) might be construed as sexually deviant by an unsympathetic press and public. This book is well-written and interesting to read, and is recommended to readers interested in marital, familial and sexual relationships in new religions.

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