

Women in New Religions

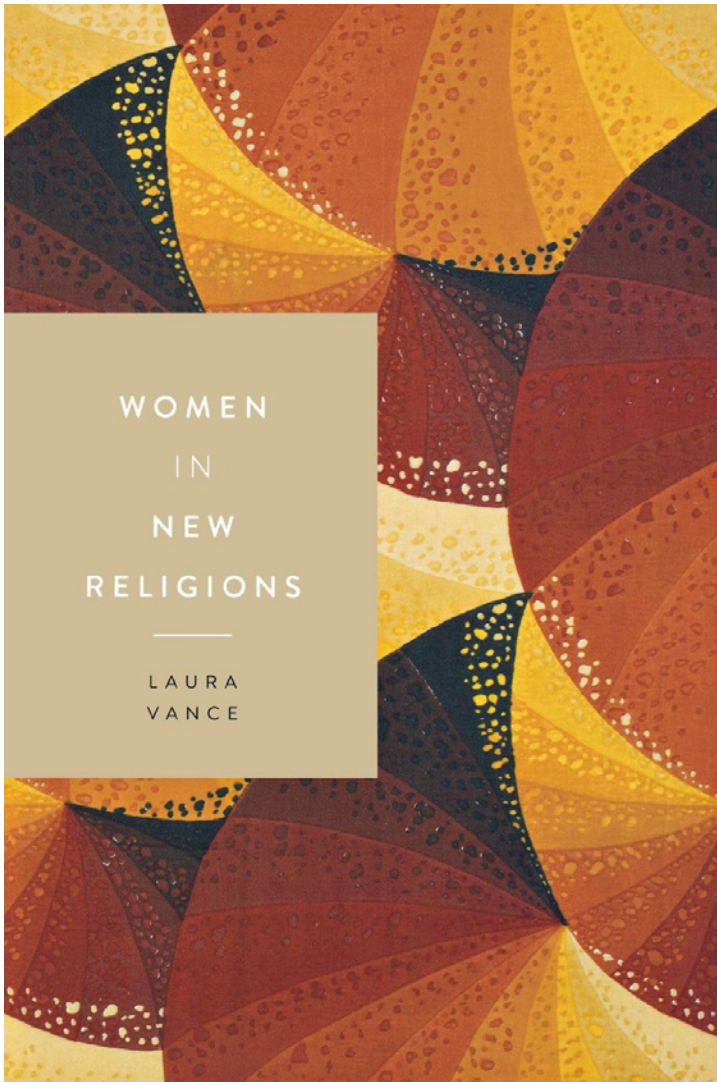
BY LAURA VANCE

Instructor's Guide

Women in New Religions offers an engaging look at women's evolving place in the birth and development of new religious movements. It focuses on four disparate new religions—Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism, The Family International, and Wicca—to illuminate their implications for gender socialization, religious leadership and participation, sexuality, and family ideals.

Religious worldviews and gender roles interact with one another in complicated ways. This is especially true within new religions, which frequently set roles for women in ways that help the movements to define their boundaries in relation to the wider society. As new religious movements emerge, they often position themselves in opposition to dominant society and concomitantly assert alternative roles for women. But these religions are not monolithic: rather than defining gender in rigid and repressive terms, new religions sometimes offer possibilities to women that are not otherwise available. Vance traces expectations for women as the religions emerge, and transformation of possibilities and responsibilities for women as they mature.

Weaving theory with examination of each movement's origins, history, and beliefs and practices, this text contextualizes and situates ideals for women in new religions. The book offers an accessible analysis of the complex factors that influence gender ideology and its evolution in new religious movements, including the movements' origins, charismatic leadership and routinization, theology and doctrine, and socio-historical contexts. It shows how religions shape definitions of women's place in a way that is informed by response to social context, group boundaries, and identity.



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INTRODUCTION

Why Study Women in New Religions?

Notions of gender intersect with virtually every aspect of religion, from images and characteristics of the divine to sacred texts and stories, moral norms, religious history, and so on, and new religions offer a valuable site for examination of gender and religion. New religions, which form around a charismatic leader or leaders, as a schism movement breaking away from an established religion, and/or when a religion is imported that is radically different in its new cultural setting, are important to the study of gender and religion in large part because they often provide women access to possibilities denied them in more established religious traditions and in the wider society. New religions often provide a break from tradition, and define themselves in opposition to established patterns, and so they may allow women positions of authority and other opportunities. A new religion is typically most distinct at its point of origin—when the charismatic leader heads the movement or directly following schism. Distinction is heightened, during this period, and gender, which pervades ideas about dress, language, work, politics, sexuality, family, and other aspects of life, is perhaps the most potent potential symbolic marker of distinct identity for the new religion. Because gender can crosscut every aspect of life, to do gender differently is to potentially do everything differently. The religions examined in this volume—Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism, The Family International, and Wicca—emerged, at least in part, by introducing, and asking adherents to embrace beliefs that were heretical. Over time, if a religion is too different from its sociocultural context it may face difficulty in attracting and retaining recruits. As new religions develop bureaucracy and seek large numbers of converts, they typically become more concerned about social norms and expectations and become less unique and more like the wider society. Women's authority may be increasingly seen as inappropriate, especially if their authority and leadership are seen as improper in society. Later development of the religion into a well-established denomination may provide the freedom to allow women leadership opportunities once again. No longer primarily seeking distinction, and not compelled by the uncertainty of a less mature religious movement, established religions may challenge social restrictions of gender and create conditions that allow women to emerge as visible leaders. Gender, especially definition of women and femininity, is key to sociocultural context and change, and remains a critical site for definition of difference as well as efforts at alignment with the larger society for new religions as they attempt to negotiate boundaries over time.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do most religions begin?
2. Why is it important to study beliefs and practices pertaining to gender in new religions, according to the author?
3. The author claims that gender varies cross-culturally and historically, and that this variation demonstrates that gender is malleable. Does gender vary over history, across cultures, or within a culture? Discuss, using examples to support your position.
4. The author asserts that individuals are socialized within institutions, but may also respond to and shape institutions. Provide examples of both and discuss.
5. Is religion a “site of ultimate meaning,” as the author asserts?



CHAPTER ONE

Mormonism: Gendering the Heavens

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly called Mormonism, emerged as Joseph Smith coalesced followers who believed that he had recovered and translated buried records of an ancient group that migrated from the Middle East to the Americas. A key component of the new religion was restoration of the priesthood—the authority to act for God on Earth to perform religious rituals, including “sealing” ordinances thought to withstand death. By 1841 Smith introduced plural marriage to a few trusted associates, and they also began to secretly marry multiple wives. Though a closely guarded practice, rumors of polygamy spread and drew criticism. One of the most ardent detractors of plural marriage was Joseph’s first and only legal wife, Emma. In 1842, amid speculation about the practice, Joseph created the Relief Society, a women’s organization that Emma led, and Mormon women began to perform religious rituals previously restricted to male priesthood holders, such as anointing the sick, healing by the laying on of hands, and conferring blessings. After Joseph’s assassination, Latter-day Saints fled to the Utah territory, where polygamy was openly practiced, but by 1890, facing federal pressure, leaders renounced it. Over time, temple marriage rituals originally designed for plural marriages were revised to emphasize heterosexual monogamy. By the twentieth century, as the religion grew and became less distinct, male leaders instructed women not to perform most religious rituals—which became the exclusive domain of male priesthood holders—and increasing and singularly emphasized women’s roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers. With the rise of second-wave feminism, Mormon leaders worked to defeat the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, and enacted the Priesthood Correlation initiative, bringing formerly financially autonomous women’s organizations under centralized male control. In the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, LDS leaders spoke in opposition to feminism and LGBT rights, and excommunicated several feminist members, including the September Six. At the core of modern Mormon gender ideology—articulated in the “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” and by church leaders—is cisgender heterosexual monogamous marriage, wherein men are fathers and providers, and women are mothers and nurturers. Gender is eternally fixed, and heterosexual marriage is necessary to achieve the highest degree of eternal reward. Nonetheless, gender and sexuality remain among the most contentious questions the religion faces. Mormon feminists advocate for women’s ordination and other changes in blogs and on numerous and increasingly popular sites, such as Feminist Mormon Housewives, Young Mormon Feminists, I’m a Mormon Feminist, and Ordain Women.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What role did polygamy play in influencing the place of women in Mormonism during Joseph Smith's lifetime? How did women's roles expand after his death, as Latter-day Saints settled Utah?
2. What is your perception of Mormon women? Has it changed after reading this chapter? If so, how?
3. How did Mormon construction of women's roles compare to that of the larger society in the nineteenth century? How did it compare by the mid-twentieth century? How does it compare today?
4. What is the Mormon priesthood? What authority does it convey?
5. Contemporary Latter-day Saint scholars disagree about whether Mormon women ever held the priesthood, but generally agree that there is historical evidence that women in the church performed some rituals that are today reserved for male priesthood holders. How could Mormon women's religious participation be limited during the same decades in which opportunities for women in the wider society were expanded?
6. How does Mormon theology construct gender and gender roles in this life and in the afterlife?



CHAPTER TWO

Seventh-day Adventism: Women's Changing Role in An Endtime Religion

Like Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism coalesced around a charismatic leader in nineteenth-century America. Ellen Harmon (White) joined the Millerite millennial movement shortly before the 1844 Great Disappointment, and in December of 1844, she had her first vision. She saw that Millerites who remained committed to the message of the soon-coming advent were the 144,000 of the Book of Revelation. By 1846, Ellen married James White, who would become her promoter and publicist. Ellen White and other early leaders advocated women's active participation in preaching, prophesying, and public ministry, and following formal organization in 1863, Adventist women and men were formally trained and licensed as ministers. Historical data from the *SDA Yearbook* also indicate that Adventist women held leadership positions in the movement's early decades in the education and Sabbath School departments, as conference secretaries, and as conference treasurers. Women's participation in these activities and positions declined following White's death in 1915, and Adventism shifted noticeably toward emphasis on separate and gendered spheres of influence. By the 1950s Adventist gender norms were aligned with those then prominent in the United States, and Adventist women's religious authority had waned dramatically. In 1950 General Conference leaders quietly considered whether women should be ordained and, as more Adventists called for women's ordination, the question was formally and repeatedly studied—in 1968, 1970, and in 1973, when a group of scholars at Camp Mohaven recommended women's full ordination. By 1973 some Adventist women began to serve in pastoral positions, and more than four decades of study, debate, and controversy followed. The Associates in Pastoral Care program, in place from 1977 to 2000, allowed women to perform some pastoral duties, excluding marriage and baptism. Despite that, some conferences, including the Potomac Conference, allowed women to baptize without denominational approval, and some regions ordained women and elected women to leadership positions. Women's ordination remains the most contentious issue in Seventh-day Adventism. The General Conference currently rejects women's ordination, and some conferences and divisions continue to ordain women and elect them to leadership positions that require ordination.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Compare and contrast the origins of Seventh-day Adventism and Mormonism. How are they similar and how do they differ? Did the gender of the charismatic leader of each influence the response to that leader? How?
2. Seventh-day Adventism emerged from the failed expectations of the Millerite millennial movement. What was Ellen (Harmon) White's role in the emergence of Seventh-day Adventism? Did she display characteristics of charismatic leadership as sociologists define those?
3. What responsibilities did Ellen White advocate for women in Seventh-day Adventism? What responsibilities did she advocate for men? How did those compare to prominent gendered expectations in the wider culture at the time?
4. In the 1880s, Seventh-day Adventism was more encouraging of women's public participation and leadership than most then-contemporary American religions. More than a century later, Adventism's position on ordination is more conservative than that of many religions. Why? How does the author explain this shift?
5. What are the major arguments and events of the women's ordination debate in Seventh-day Adventism?



CHAPTER THREE

The Family International: Sexualizing Gender

One of the most controversial new religions to emerge from the Jesus Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, The Family International (also called the Children of God, The Family of Love, and others), asked those who joined to give up their worldly possessions, live communally, devote themselves to evangelism, and to follow the teachings of David Berg, an Endtime prophet. In 1961 Berg received a revelation that he was appointed by God to destroy the “false System” of religion, and he initially attracted young people from the counterculture movement. In 1969 Berg received his “Old Church, New Church” prophecy, in which God told him that his was the New Church, and that Jane, his wife of more than thirty years, should be supplanted. Berg began a sexual relationship with a young convert, Karen Zerby (later Maria) and a series of sexual liaisons. Shortly after, he withdrew from his public role, instead leading by writing Mo Letters that were distributed to followers. The leadership structure of The Family International (TFI) changed often and significantly, but tended to emphasize heterosexually paired leaders, allowing women to serve alongside men in communal homes. Berg’s sexual antics were hidden from most followers until, in the 1970s, he published Mo Letters that included explicit sexual references and illustrations. His teaching began to suggest that sexual limitations were imposed by “the System” and he decried most sexual prohibitions. Berg also forbade use of contraceptives and instructed followers to engage in “sexual sharing”—having sex with people in addition to one’s spouse—and “Flirty Fishing,” whereby women used sex to attract converts. Two books, the *Story of Davidito* and *Techi’s Life Story* were distributed to followers and depicted children in explicit sexual situations. Charges of child sexual abuse, spread of sexually transmitted infections, the highly publicized murder/suicide in 2005 involving Maria’s son Ricky Rodriguez, and a declining membership eventually forced revisions, but the movement never recovered. With declining revenues and diminished distinction from other Christian evangelicals, the future of TFI is uncertain. Today TFI is led by Maria and her longtime partner, Peter Amsterdam, who live in hiding, and the religion exists primarily as an online community that claims 1,700 members.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The Children of God/The Family International (TFI) is an especially controversial new religion. Why has the movement sparked so much publicity and controversy?
2. Why has this movement garnered so much media attention, especially given that it is much smaller than other religions discussed in the book?
3. Who was David Berg? Did he display characteristics of charismatic leadership as defined by sociologists?
4. The Family International has undergone more institutional restructuring than most new religions. What are the major changes that we see in TFI, both in terms of belief and in terms of organizational structure?
5. What roles have women played over the history of the movement?



CHAPTER FOUR

Wicca: Valuing the Divine Feminine

Some Wiccans claim that their religion has ancient roots, but scholars trace its origin to Gerald B. Gardner, an Englishman who claimed he was initiated into a coven of witches in Hampshire, England. Gardner published *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959) in which he promoted the idea of an ancient fertility religion suppressed by patriarchal witch-hunts. Raymond and Rosemary Buckland are credited with bringing Wicca to the United States, and Wicca, which was originally shared via word of mouth in the US, grew as a result of the WITCH manifesto, and the work of Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, Marija Gimbutas, Zsuzsanna (Z.) Budapest, Miriam Simos, and others. Though conservative Christians have sometimes leveled charges of Satanism against Wiccans, popular depictions of Wicca, such as in the *Harry Potter* series, have attracted unprecedented attention to “the Craft.” Some Wiccans are trained in a coven, but solitary, self-trained practitioners are increasingly the norm, and Wicca is incredibly diverse. Its anti-authoritarian ethos encourages each to find and follow a personal spiritual path. Wicca emphasizes connectedness, nature, magic, synchrony, innovation, and celebration of Sabbats, esbats, rites of passage, festivals, and personal rituals. Wicca is a nature-based religion that celebrates the web of life, seasonal change, and fertility, and sees mortality as part of the cycle of life. Different sects of Wicca understand Goddess(es) and God(s) differently, and Wicca privileges the feminine, as represented in Goddess(es). Wicca draws heavily from the second-wave feminist movement to challenge traditional gender constructs, but often does so by reinforcing the idea that there are basic differences between female and male, which sometimes reinforces gender essentialism. Wicca posits a cosmology that affirms women and challenges male dominance, while encouraging celebration of the feminine and feminist spirituality for both women and men. Wicca honors the divine feminine, affords women leadership, and supports social changes in the direction of gender and LGBT equality.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. There are many misconceptions and stereotypes about Wicca. What are some of these? What comes to mind when you think of a witch? What perpetuates these stereotypes?
2. To what degree has the proliferation of media depictions of Wicca affected perceptions of Wicca?
3. Did Gerald Gardner display characteristics of charismatic leadership as defined by sociologists?
4. How does the origin of Wicca compare to the origins of other religions discussed in the book? In what ways does the origin of Wicca differ?
5. All religions are diverse, but Wiccan beliefs and practices are especially varied. Why? Given this variation, are there common patterns of belief and practice pertaining to gender in Wicca? If so, what are they?
6. In what ways is Wicca different from other religions discussed in the book? Are there ways it is similar?



CONCLUSION

New religions generally assert that they have unique access to the truth, and so emerge in tension with their socio-cultural context. The religions examined here are diverse, but to the extent that these religions emerged in a social context that limited opportunities for women, each provided some greater access to leadership than was common in dominant institutions at the time. Each has also undergone some process of institutionalization—though in Wicca this is significantly limited—and restriction of opportunities afforded women followed (excepting in Wicca). For each, the socio-cultural context changed over the life of the movement, complicating the movement's relationship to that context in a way that continues to affect definitions of gender and opportunities for women in the movement. Jackson W. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove, and Adair T. Lummis suggest that as religious movements mature, they pass through three stages. First, the religion provides opportunities to those not privileged in the wider society—such as women—to amplify distinction. The movement may consent to women serving as pastors, healing by the laying on of hands, serving as prophets, and so on, because *if the social context restricts women*, each of these sets the movement apart. As a religion matures it seeks some alignment with the larger socio-cultural context. When this occurs, *if the social context restricts women's access to authority*, the religion is likely to do so as well. Women's earlier religious participation may come to be embarrassing, and it may be downplayed for a time. In the third stage, a religion, now far more integrated into its social context, becomes more comfortable and tolerant of diverse views, sometimes even going so far as to tolerate "mildly prophetic" expressions of conscience in the direction of gender equality. Although Mormonism and Seventh-day Adventism do not currently retain a collective (institutional) memory of women's access to authority in their early decades, Carroll, Hargrove, and Lummis's description of the first two stages of religious development fit Mormonism and Seventh-day Adventism especially well. The Family International and Wicca emerged in the same decades as the modern feminist movement. The Family rejected elements of second-wave feminism—Berg was critical of feminists—but had a leadership structure that tended to emphasize heterosexual couples in leadership, effectively placing women in even the highest positions in the movement. Wicca lacks any movement-wide leader, but women play at least as important roles as men as leaders within the movement. Each movement responded to its historical context in ways that allowed it to create and emphasize its difference from the world most especially in its emergence, and each continued to be influenced by its socio-historical context in restricting opportunities for women, if and when it did. Gender was constructed in each movement in a way that helped the movement to define its boundaries and to define itself.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The author asserts that “to the extent that gender is connected to ideas about the sacred, gender markers can become emblematic of personal and group religious identity. As such, debate about gender takes on added significance: To challenge gender roles can call into question a group’s sense of its collective self. This is why debate about gender in new religions is often so contentious.” Is the sacred gendered in each of these new religions? How? Does this lead to “added significance” in debates about gender?
2. Does gender intersect with “virtually every aspect of religion,” as the author argues? What are examples, from the religions discussed in the book or other religions with which you are familiar?
3. Are new religions especially well suited to examination of religious ideas and rules about gender?
4. Do you think differently about women in any of the religions discussed in the book? In what ways?



Additional Resources

The following sources can be paired with each chapter. Sources marked with an asterisk are more suitable for seminars and other upper-level courses than introductory surveys.

INTRODUCTION & CONCLUSION

Why Study Women in New Religions?

- *Bromley, David G., and J. Gordon Melton. "Reconceptualizing Types of Religious Organization: Dominant, Sectarian, Alternative, and Emergent Tradition Groups." *Nova Religio* 15, no. 3 (2012): 4–28. *(Introduction and Conclusion)*
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CHAPTER ONE

Mormonism: Gendering the Heavens

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