

BOOK REVIEW OF *MOON SISTERS, KRISHNA MOTHERS AND RAJNEESH
LOVERS – WOMEN'S ROLES IN NEW RELIGIONS*

Nineteenth and Twentieth Century New Religious Movements (88000)
Dr. George Martin
Mark David Harris
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Palmer, Susan Jean, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers and Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions*. Women and Gender in North American Religions. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1994.

I have preached in evangelical churches across the United States, in Europe, and elsewhere, and often take a moment to survey the congregation before I begin. In most services, more women than men fill the pews. According to friends and acquaintances, Catholic churches, Muslim mosques and other religious organizations are no different. Women seem to participate in religious life more than men, although men hold most of the leadership roles, regardless of religion. Men also study religion more frequently; according to US statistics 61% of religious studies students are male and 39% are female.¹ Despite the increasing number of women in leadership in business, politics, and other organizations, the mainstream religious sphere seems to be an exception.

Biographical and Historical Information

In her seminal work *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers and Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions*, sociologist Susan Jean Palmer examines the roles of women in New Religious Movements. With a PhD in Religion from Concordia University and serving as a Professor of Religion at Dawson College, Palmer has the education to speak with authority. She also has the experience, having spent years investigating NRMs.

¹ "Religious Studies Graduate Degree Program," accessed November 17, 2015, https://www.graddiv.ucsb.edu/documents/stats/RELST_Grad_Profile_Final.pdf.

Summary of the Book

Palmer begins by discussing changes in the American family since World War 2. In the past nuclear families were intact with the husband as breadwinner, wife as mother, and children in the home.² In the present, many families don't have a husband, others don't have children, most expect all adult members to work outside the home, and divorce is common. Children are no longer the focus of many families, but the gratification of adults is. These changes may have removed the pressure to conform to certain roles, but also removed the security of the family. More than anything else, the frailty of the marriage bond has threatened women's roles as wives and mothers, the most important roles of yesteryear.³

After identifying the main feminine roles in American society as "mother", "sister", "breadwinner", "housekeeper", "wife" and "lover", Palmer characterizes women's roles in NRMs as "clear" or "simple".⁴ NRMs simplify women's roles by emphasizing one or two roles and deemphasizing the others. Therein lies a strong appeal of NRMs.

There are three religious views of sex identity. Sex Polarity teaches that men and women are different and that one sex, usually men, is better than the other. Sex Unity holds that men and women are not fundamentally different and that they are equal. NRMs that hold sex unity typically devalue the body, because physical differences are undeniable. Sex Complementarity teaches that men and women are fundamentally different but still equal because such complementarity is required in life.⁵ Palmer uses these categories, albeit slightly modified, in this work.

² Palmer, 5.

³ Palmer, 6.

⁴ Palmer, 1.

⁵ Palmer, 9.

Palmer discusses sex polarity groups. The International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) promotes the female role of mother. According to the founder, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977), men advance spiritually through celibacy and nonattachment while women advance through motherhood and devotion to their husbands.⁶ Because men have semen, the vehicle of the spirit soul, they are more spiritually advanced than women. The sexes are often separated, and Palmer speculates that women are attracted to the movement because of the strong sisterhood in this highly structured society.⁷

The Rajneesh movement, on the other hand, placed women over men. It attracted middle aged, educated, upper middle class, unmarried, and childless women. Initiates engaged in short term, heterosexual, pluralistic relationships, pairing men in their 20s and 30s with women in their 30s and 40s. Procreation was discouraged, and women were trained to be the aggressors, the “lovers”. Originally disciples (sannyasins) lived on communes, but after 1986 most moved into society, more men became leaders, women were allowed to have babies, and “free love” diminished.⁸

The Unification Church of Rev. Sun Myung Moon is a sex complementarity group which consider God to be bisexual. Men and women are equal in their spirituality, and need each other for their spiritual completion. The True Parents, Rev. and Mrs. Moon, have True Children, couples in their church, who then further procreate into a race of true believers. Palmer notes that the role of “sister” is dominant, and women seem drawn to the movement both for the political/missionary activities and for the structured system of dating and mating.⁹

⁶ Palmer, 17.

⁷ Palmer, 33.

⁸ Palmer, 48.

⁹ Palmer, 101.

In the now-defunct Institute of Applied Metaphysics, marriages were complementary. They were idealized as ying-yang unions, with younger men and older, sometimes postmenopausal, women. Such mating of yin and yang was required for spiritual wholeness. IAM members had to live communally, separating entirely from the outside world and their former lives.¹⁰ Over time, however, men gained dominance in the philosophy of the group, even to the point of wife beating.

The Messianic Community was also a sex complementarity group, with women's role as "helpmeet" wife emphasized.¹¹ Families lived in group houses but bedrooms and bathrooms were separated. Adultery and divorce were forbidden and children were valued. The group met with controversy in 1984 in the Island Pond Incident. Local authorities took away their children due to suspected child abuse, but no abuse was ever found. Women were subordinate in the family but men helped equally with child rearing. Men worked for the group in traditionally male occupations such as carpentry and women in traditionally female ones such as cooking and sewing.

In the next section, Palmer covers the sex unity groups. The Raelians, a NRM founded by the French racer Claude Vorilhon, later known as Rael, in 1973. Raelians teach that men and women are essentially the same, and gender is an artificial construct.¹² Consequently any kind of sex or no sex is permissible; the most respected role is "playmate". Marriage and childbearing are discouraged, especially if they interfere with an individual's fulfillment. Despite the encouragement of women in leadership, most Raelian leaders are men.

¹⁰ Palmer, 107.

¹¹ Palmer, 133.

¹² Palmer, 169.

The Institute for the Development of the Harmonious Human Being (IDHHB) was founded by Eugene Jeffrey Gold in California in the 1960s. Heavily influenced by the teachings of George Gurdjieff and L Ron Hubbard, IDHHB courses are designed to reveal the powerful being within each person. As such the appropriate strategy when misfortune occurs is to maintain an inner detachment.¹³ This Buddhist-like vision applies to personal relationships and sex as well.

In the final section, Palmer develops identified commonalities between the groups. First she notes that the NRMs profiled provide spiritual solutions to problems besetting modern families. Each group skips courting in favor of instant intimacy or arranged marriages. Each group emphasizes one or two of women's roles and rejects others. Finally, each group rejects the child centered family.¹⁴ Divorce is either impossible or no big deal, and Palmer suggests that women in NRMs are seeking ways to avoid responsibility for their love life. Communal living helps to avoid the isolation of the modern family and provides help with children. One of her main observations is that the leaders of the NRMs are firm in their teachings, unlike the "wishy washy" positions of modern religious leaders.¹⁵ Finally, since most members only spend 2-3 years in any movement and then transition back to the larger society, the NRMs highlighted provided environments for individual and collective sexual experimentation,.

Critical Analysis

Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers and Rajneesh Lovers – Women's Roles in New Religions is not something that I would ever have picked up from a library or bookstore shelf, but it was a worthwhile read. As noted above, Susan Palmer is the right person to write this book.

¹³ Palmer, 192.

¹⁴ Palmer, 209-10.

¹⁵ Palmer, 234.

There is no doubt that the American family has had a rough go during the past 50 years. Challenges from adultery to divorce to same-sex marriage have made families in 2015 nearly unrecognizable to those of 1965. Men and women need each other, they always have, and that fact will never change. Perhaps the hyperfeminists Irina Dunn and Gloria Steinem, who said “a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle,” didn’t realize that if they had parents who actually believed that, and lived it, they would never have been born. Palmer is right in stating that women in NRMs are trying to solve problems with marriage, relationships, and even their own identities, in modern American society.

Her use of sex polarity, sex complementarity and sex unity as the analytic paradigm for the book is useful, but it would have been better had she noted, or realized, that sex complementarity is the paradigm in the Bible. Instead she implied that “traditional roles” fit into the sex polarity category, with men as superior to women and the husband leaving everything in hearth and home to his wife. That may have been the paradigm of some homes in the 1950s, but it has never been the Biblical one. From Genesis to Revelation, God is crystal clear that men and women are equal before God; different from, yet complementary to, each other.

Palmer’s discussion of the various groups was enlightening. Her consistent organization between groups can roughly be stated as: history, gender roles/theory, courtship/marriage and procreation, women in work/ritual/leadership, sexual identity, appeal to women, and conclusion. This structure made comparison between groups easier.

The book would have been better had she compared the highlighted NRMs to more widely known religious movements. I have already mentioned that traditional Christianity falls squarely in the sex complementarity group and that the Raelian system smacks of Buddhism. Adding groups in which sex played a major role such as “The Family” would have been helpful.

The biggest problem with the book is that it is over 20 years old, a lifetime in the realm of NRMs. There is no mention of Santeria, La Santa Muerte, or the many other cults that appeal to non-whites. As the minority population grows in America, beliefs of these groups, whether NRMs or not, become more important.

As a man, I don't think much about what it means to be a man. I also don't worry much about the state of the family, gender roles, or relationships. I follow Christ the best I can and figure that it will all work out. My wife is far more intentional about all of these issues. This book helped me to understand her perspective better.

Christians can learn from these NRMs. Traditional churches are often reluctant to discuss sex at all, thereby denying believers guidance on this important issue. We sometimes have unbiblical ideas about gender roles, believing that one sex is inherently better than the other or that "women's work" is qualitatively less important than "man's work". Modern American Christianity can be "wishy washy" about moral standards such as adultery, fornication, and same sex conduct when we should teach and live a Biblical worldview. We allow our families to be isolated, putting too much pressure on individuals and not enough on the group in rearing children and keeping marriages together. Finally, the Western church often does not give singles much support in finding a mate and dealing with relationships. The Body of Christ is a body, mutually interdependent, and we must socialize ourselves to think this way from the earliest moments of life. Individuals matter but no one stands alone. This is probably the area in which we can learn the most from NRMs.

Conclusion

Susan J. Palmer has done a good job writing a worthwhile book in *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers and Rajneesh Lovers – Women's Roles in New Religions*. This book is useful to students

of religion as well as students of women's studies. Men especially will benefit not only from the new perspectives but from realizing the need to consider questions about sex roles, families, and relationships.