

Henrik Bogdan and James R. Lewis. *Sexuality and New Religious Movements*. New York: Palgrave, 2014. 240 pp. ISBN: 978-1-137-40962-1.

A voluptuous woman, face turned-away from the viewer, lies prone across the back of a many-headed leonine beast. She pulls — in unequivocal phallic visual metaphor — a set of red reins across her upper thighs with her left hand whilst the right supports a cosmic womb, from which dawn breaks (perhaps). This choice of cover image — a reproduction of that created by Frieda Harris under Crowley's instruction for the tarot trump XI 'Lust' ('Strength' in the majority of other decks) — fairly well epitomizes the concerns I have with this volume.

Whether selected by the editors or publishers makes little difference — a representation of a generic, long- and fair-haired naked woman is chosen to illustrate a thematic volume on sexuality in New Religious Movements. Why did the cover image not represent individuals of a range of genders, or a man? Or, indeed, following the volume's focus on dimorphic concepts of gender, a symbol of gender polarity of which many abound? Are we simply meant to read this as a nod to the market-stimulating role in which salacious images of women are so often employed? However, it is the more troubling sexuality=women equation that the conjunction of the volume title and this image creates, unconscious as it may be, but which is unfortunately born out further in some of the discourse within, that I find enduringly troubling. I like conceptual trouble, but not of this kind.

The Introduction, co-authored by the editors, sets out the volume's dual agenda: "First, we wish to challenge many of the misconceptions — propagated by the anticult movement and, by extension, the popular media — about sex, sexuality and gender in NRMs," and also to "give a deeper and more complex understanding of sexuality and religion in late modernity." (3) These aims raise two issues. The first pertains to the proposed audience for the volume, given that the requisite attribute of critical inquiry would make graduate students and academics highly unlikely to take the accounts of "sex, sexuality and gender" disseminated by either anticult organisations or the popular press at face value. Further, one would also assume (I hope not erroneously) that such an audience would have a nuanced if not detailed understanding of such in late modernity. The latter claim also floats adrift from the entire academic field of gender and cultural studies, which receives no reference at all in the Introduction. Thankfully a number of chapters do engage with relevant scholarship from that field. Overall, I was left wondering, who was the intended audience for this volume?

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In addition, Bogdan and Lewis do very little to provide a framework for the selection of chapters, not least why some movements are represented and not others. Of course, it is often not possible to provide cohesive representation in edited volumes and the Introduction is exactly the place where acknowledgement of omissions and logic of selection should be detailed; I did not find that these issues were adequately addressed. Indeed, critiques of the elastic nature of the category of New Religious Movements seem valid considering that the final chapter, by Lewis, takes as its focus Catholic Nuns. I struggle to read this inclusion as anything other than opportune. I also struggle to understand how these issues were not raised during a peer review process.

The overall orientation set by the Introduction is of sex, sexuality and gender being examined via normative categories of dimorphic gender and the normal–deviant binary. There is a substantive lack of acknowledgment of nonbinary gender positions. Indeed, gender seems for the most part to be a synonym for ‘women’ and even within a reductive binary scheme there is no sustained analysis of masculinities chosen for inclusion in the volume, let alone a range of non-binary gender identities. This is evidenced by the four search terms used in Bogdan and Shay’s examination of Osho: “sex, sexuality, gender and women,” (4) no ‘men’, let alone ‘trans’, ‘intersex’ or ‘queer’ identities considered (within the limited bounds they set, Bogdan and Shay do provide salient analysis). Similarly, the terms sex and sexuality are presented *prima facie*, without consideration of their discursive and historical construction, especially vis-à-vis alignment with concepts of individual subjectivity. The editors note that they have “deliberately refrained from imposing a particular theoretical approach” regarding sex and gender, (8) rather leaving such to the contributors. Some contributors do a marvellous job of positioning their analysis within contemporary theoretical debates, others (like the Introduction) leave very complex terms to hang undefined and ambiguous. This allows little room for the work of challenging commonplace assumptions.

Despite these substantial reservations, there are of course matters of worth amongst the nine distinct chapters. As with many edited anthologies the standard of scholarship varies, but important issues are tackled. Among the most successful are Clifton on sexuality in contemporary Wicca; Petsche on Gurdjieff; Faxneld and Petersen on contemporary Satanism. While I do not necessarily agree with Fagen and Wright’s entire argument, their point regarding the cultural valuation of ‘motherwork’ is well made, though the references to what is and is not ‘natural’ for women remain disturbing. Several chapters refer — negatively — to ‘feminism’ or ‘feminist’ theory, set up as a

‘bogey woman’ inhibiting correct analysis or due consideration. However, the term is only ever used generically, and there is no due attention to the wide variety of feminisms or complexity and substantive differences within the field of feminist theory. For many in this volume, feminists/feminism are simply rendered an ill-informed and even priggish ‘other’ against which their ‘unbiased’ analysis is pitched. A form of shadow-boxing that does nothing to bolster the credibility of the arguments being made.

I was initially enthusiastic to receive this volume, and imagined it would be greatly useful for my undergraduate class on ‘Sex, Desire and the Sacred.’ Students may indeed be directed to a few select chapters, but overall the volume fails to deliver on its ambition. Very little analysis moves outside a thoroughly conservative and normative dimorphic understanding of gender, and, despite the diversity of sexual practice reported, the consideration of this content tells a depressing and disturbingly uniform tale that reproduces normative stereotypes and assumptions.

**Conflict of Interest Statement:** Jay Johnston was an Associate Supervisor of Johanna Petsche’s PhD thesis.

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