

WOMEN TO THE FRONT:
POWER, AGENCY, AND DEVOTION IN NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

by
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ABSTRACT

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Under the Supervision of Professor Joe Austin

Women's roles in new religious movements have long been minimized in scholarship and popular media, with few exceptions. The dissertation looks at the new religions of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas; Peoples Temple in Jonestown, Guyana; and the Rajneesh movement in Rajneeshpuram, Oregon. In these three communities, women dedicated themselves to the movement itself, the charismatic male leader, or, as most often was the case, somewhere on a spectrum between the two extremes. The dissertation also addresses the power of women in these movements as leaders and influential figures. Agency, the study of freewill and autonomy of the women in these new religions, is explored, including who joined and why they chose to stay. Finally, this dissertation analyzes the ways in which women specifically demonstrated their devotion to these new religious movements and charismatic leaders.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my brilliant mother, Foyne Mahaffey,

for reading every draft,

every chapter,

every paragraph,

every sentence,

every word,

over and over...

Thank you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the dissertation

In late 2018, an enthusiastic friend purchased a copy of *People* magazine titled *True Crime Stories: Cults* from a grocery store check-out aisle for me. This friend knew that I would take great interest in this special edition of the popular magazine because since 2008, I have studied cults, a term often synonymous with new religious movements. While the publication itself is an interesting cultural artifact, I found the articles inside to be an incredibly sensationalized and distorted presentation of the material. This realization should not have been terribly surprising, given past and present narratives of these featured groups in various fields of scholarship, many of which are echoed in the sentiments that I found in the magazine.

Pictures of the faces of charismatic male leaders of these cults adorn the front cover: Reverend Jim Jones, founder of Peoples Temple; Charles Manson of the Manson Family; and Marshall Applewhite, co-founder of the UFO cult called Heaven's Gate.¹ The women featured in this magazine, for the most part, are sexualized and victimized. Women followers of these new religious movements (NRMs) are portrayed as manipulated and abused, although I concede that some were indeed exploited for sex and labor. Most of the featured stories are about women who were subject to mind control and sex slavery "inside the sinister world of criminal cults"²; those who needed to be rescued, and not as people with any power or autonomy. Women members of the Manson Family are referred to as girls,³ not women. This term infantilizes the women and in

¹ *People*, special edition, *True Crime Stories: Cults* (9 November 2018), front cover. The co-founder of Heaven's Gate was a woman, Bonnie Lu Nettles, who died from cancer in 1985, well before the ascensions of Applewhite and other members by suicide in 1997.

² *Ibid*, back cover.

³ *Ibid*, 96.

some ways nearly absolves them from their participation in the La Bianca-Tate murders of 1969,⁴ as they were simply “seduced by a monster” [Charles Manson].⁵ Due to this magazine and other dramatized accounts of cults, I was inspired to write this dissertation, in which I would explore the roles of the women in some of these groups in the magazine, those who were members of the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and the Rajneesh/Osho movement (hereafter known as the Rajneesh movement, as it was called during the years under study in this dissertation).

1.2 Problem statement

This dissertation will address the exaggerations of some popular media, such as the aforementioned *People* magazine, and misleading scholarship about women in new religious movements that leave out the stories of women altogether or that only mention women tangentially as either villains⁶ or victims.⁷ My interpretation will add to the existing scholarship, which often encourages black and white thinking about gender roles in these new religions.⁸ Instead, I will explore the nuances of women’s participation in positions of power, their agency, and their devotion to their respective movement through the stories of individuals, both leaders and rank and file members, their families, and their frequent dedication to the movement over what media and other popular narratives have determined to be the charismatic male leader.

⁴ However, several of the “Manson girls” were tried and convicted for their participation in the murders.

⁵ Diane Lake, *People*, 14.

⁶ Neo-sannyasin Ma Anand Sheela of the Rajneesh movement, for example.

⁷ The many wives and children of David Koresh of the Branch Davidians, for example.

⁸ Gender is a social construct used to categorize individuals. I will be using “man” and “woman” to refer to those who identify as male or female, respectively. For nonbinary individuals, I will use “they/them”; however, in my studies, I have not encountered transgendered males or females. It is possible that transgendered and/or nonbinary members took part in these movements but choose not to disclose this information.

In this dissertation, I have studied the women in three new religions who remained on the edges of society or those who were almost completely isolated from the outside world: the Branch Davidians of the Mount Carmel complex, located outside of Waco, Texas; Peoples Temple of Indianapolis, Indiana, various parts of California, and ultimately, Jonestown, Guyana; and the Rajneesh movement, whose members formed an ashram in Poona (Pune), India, and Bombay (Mumbai), India, then migrated to their newly-constructed city of Rajneeshpuram, Oregon, in the early 1980s, and eventually disbursed worldwide.

These three groups are considered new religious movements, which establishes them in the same category and provides for comparative study. I chose these three religions not because of their similarities in theology; on the contrary, these groups had numerous ideological differences, including different interpretations of the Bible. Rather, I chose the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and the Rajneesh movement for this study because of their place in society: on the outskirts, where they were often perceived as threats to the mainstream and were placed under government surveillance. These three communities also share the progression from mundane new religions to media sensations due to crimes committed by leaders and members and the groups' disastrous ends, either through violent ends (the Branch Davidians; Peoples Temple) or arrests and consequent deportations and exiles (members of the Rajneesh movement in Rajneeshpuram, Oregon, including leaders Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and Ma Anand Sheela). I have emphasized a social history perspective, rather than one only of religious studies, to examine the position of these three groups in American society primarily during the post-1945 era. Although these groups were⁹ most often religious in nature, I have explored them principally

⁹ Even after Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's (Osho's) death in 1990, the Rajneesh movement still exists in many areas of the world. For this dissertation, I will be writing primarily about the commune in Oregon, which disbanded in 1985; therefore, I will be using the past tense in reference to the movement.

as intentional communities, regardless of their respective and sometimes even opposing religious beliefs.

I bring a multi-perspectival framework based in a variety of disciplines. Although analyses about women in mainstream religions, as well as about gender roles in nineteenth-century new religions and intentional communities have been conducted, the exploration of women in new religious movements post-1945 have largely been left out of the conversation. Research about new religious movements has primarily come from works by sociologists, journalists, and religious studies scholars, all of which is essential for understanding the groups. My dissertation adds to the scholarship by creating an interdisciplinary approach to new religious movements with an emphasis not only rooted in religious studies, but in cultural history of the United States, as I measure participation within these groups against the outside world.

1.3 Why is this study important?

Throughout history, women have been creators, leaders, and devoted members of religions both traditional and alternative. I argue that within the groups under study in this dissertation, women of new religious movements were not simply indoctrinated followers or subject to the whims of charismatic, and most often, male leaders. I argue that gender roles were complicated and varied within different power structures and hierarchies in these movements, which holds true for women members of mainstream religions as well. In *Women in Christian Traditions* (2015), religious studies scholar Rebecca Moore writes that women need to be included in the prevailing narrative as important participants and essential parts of the whole in

mainstream religions. Moore is especially interested in religion within the context of feminism.¹⁰ Religious studies scholar Catherine Wessinger argues that “recent scholarship has amply demonstrated that in mainstream religious traditions most women are marginalized.”¹¹ Wessinger partially attributes this marginalization to patriarchal structures, as only the most charismatic or exceptional women are recognized in popular narratives as important members of the religion.¹² In accordance with Wessinger’s and Moore’s theses, I will argue that women always have played an important and necessary role in religion, whether mainstream or outside the mainstream; however, these women, particularly ordinary participants, have often been overlooked in media accounts and academic scholarship alike.

Perhaps because of the ordinariness and size of most of the groups early in their existence, many new religions have been frequently neglected in scholarly writing and in media. New religious movements begin as sects of established religions or as alternatives to mainstream religions. New religions may be regarded with suspicion or even hostility from the outside world, but most are left in peace if they are perceived as non-threatening to society. However, when something sensational or newsworthy happens to or because of a new religious movement, particularly violence or criminal activity, the viewpoint may shift. Once a dramatic event has occurred, often only then do these communities draw attention from scholars, journalists, and their readers as being different, strange, and even dangerous to the status quo. In his book *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (1998), Lorne L. Dawson refers to the beliefs of other scholars, including Eileen Barker, that “we must realize that

¹⁰ Rebecca Moore, *Women in Christian Traditions* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 2-11.

¹¹ Catherine Wessinger, ed., *Women’s Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 1-2.

¹² Wessinger, ed., *Women’s Leadership*, 2.

journalists face considerable constraints of time, space, and competition in fashioning their stories about new religions. They are necessarily guided by the commercial demand to attract readers, and they often lack expertise in the field.”¹³ While this assessment may be true, journalism can be helpful, for these accounts show what are presented to the public and can tell us something about the way in which this information is consumed: what is put into journalistic interpretations of the subject, what is left out, who is important enough to interview or feature, who is not, and so forth.

Women of these movements are often left out of narratives, despite their valuable and necessary contributions as leaders and loyal members. Instead, the religion’s successes and failures are most often attributed to the male charismatic leader, rightly or wrongly, rather than the women behind-the-scenes as historical actors. This dissertation examines the roles and influence of the women of the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and the Rajneesh movement, all of whom guided the direction and outcome of the movement as much as their male counterparts. Finally, I argue that the loyalty women displayed to the movement itself at times surpassed the dedication to the charismatic male leader; however, this dedication falls along a continuum, with most women existing somewhere in the middle of the two poles.

1.4 Definitions of key terms

Religion

Before proceeding, certain words that are used in this dissertation need to be defined and articulated so that the author and reader will have the same understanding of the terms. Religion

¹³ Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5.

itself is a term that requires explanation, as it can be a nebulous, loose, contested, and sometimes overwhelmingly large concept. Historian Jonathan Z. Smith writes in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (1982),

...*There is no data for religion* [emphasis Smith's]. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study.¹⁴

Other scholars are more definitive about what religion means. Catherine Wessinger posits that religion is “a comprehensive worldview that makes sense of the universe and human existence—explains where we came from and where we are going—teaches what is right and what is wrong—an expression of the ultimate concern, which is the most important thing in the world for an individual or group.”¹⁵ Wessinger's definition of religion is more precise than Smith's, and pertains to religions on an organizational level within their respective communities. For this dissertation, I will rely mostly on Wessinger's definition of religion, but I will also acknowledge that the individual or group must self-identify as a religion to be considered as such—this label cannot be put on the group or individual or be taken away by outsiders.

Mainstream, traditional, or dominant religions also require some explanation. New religious movements can be splinter groups of established religions, including of Christianity, but this is not always the case—these new religions can be complete alternatives to existing religions. A mainstream religion, for the purposes of this dissertation, describes groups which have been legitimized and recognized in society as acceptable, for they have been long-standing

¹⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

¹⁵ Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000), 5.

and have attracted numbers far exceeding those of new religious movements. These established religions include Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, to name the most populous world religions.

New religious movements (NRMs)

New religious movements can also deviate from the societies from which they originated. These movements are often created and sustained by a prophet (such as David Koresh of the Branch Davidians) who attracts followers, or they come from ideas presented by idealistic philosophers and other visionary thinkers. Dawson writes that “[New religious movements] have become social laboratories...where people can experiment with new forms of social relations.”¹⁶ New religions can be world-affirming, which “affirm the norms and values of conventional society and invite adherents to realize their untapped individual potential without distancing themselves from their everyday lives.” New religious movements can also be world-rejecting, meaning that they “demand that adherents separate from a society that is condemned as corrupt and doomed to ultimate destruction.”¹⁷ This categorization includes the Branch Davidians, who sequestered themselves at the Mount Carmel complex outside of Waco, Texas; and Peoples Temple after the group migrated to Jonestown, Guyana in the mid-and late 1970s. Most new religious movements are small and short-lived, as they often disband after the leader dies or is

¹⁶ Lorne L. Dawson, “The Meaning and Significance of New Religious Movements,” in *Teaching New Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 120.

¹⁷ Susan J. Palmer and David G. Bromley, “Deliberate Heresies: New Religious Myths and Rituals as Critiques,” in *Teaching New Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 138.

discredited,¹⁸ but they can have a giant influence or impact upon society as media sensations,¹⁹ cautionary tales, or as groups partially integrated within the mainstream.

In contrast to Dawson's more limited typology of new religions, the definition of new religious movement can be vast and all-encompassing. Wessinger lists five types of new religious movements in her text about women's leadership in new, or marginal, religions:

1) groups whose members separate willingly from the mainstream to preserve religious truth as they see it and tend to isolate themselves from what they consider to be a sinful world; 2) groups whose members may accept and conform to the social order, but reject the religious terms of the mainstream society. These groups tend to stress the importance of individual mystical experience; 3) groups whose members feel excluded from the mainstream due to racism, so they are compelled (or choose) to form separate religious structures; 4) groups whose members feel excluded from the mainstream of society due to sexism, so they are compelled (or choose) to develop separate religious structures; and 5) groups which are foreign religions imported into the mainstream culture, and which have gained converts from the mainland.²⁰

J. Gordon Melton offers another, perhaps more succinct definition: "New religions are religious groups that exist socially and culturally on the fringe, differ significantly in belief and practice from dominant religious institutions of the culture in which they are located, and have minimum ties to and allies within the dominant government, religious, and intellectual structures of the society in which they operate."²¹ Melton's description, when taken together with Wessinger's outlined characteristics, provides a definition of a large and diverse population of new religious movements, and is one that strives to be inclusive of all types of new religions.

¹⁸ Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 31. One exception to this argument is the Rajneesh movement, which is now called the Osho movement and exists worldwide.

¹⁹ James T. Richardson and Massimo Introvigne, "New Religious Movements, Countermovements, Moral Panics, and the Media," in *Teaching New Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 91.

²⁰ Wessinger, ed., *Women's Leadership*, 5-6.

²¹ J. Gordon Melton, "Introducing and Defining the Concept of a New Religion," in *Teaching New Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 33.

Of these three terminologies, I find Wessinger's thorough definition to be the most useful for my studies. The religious studies scholar includes a variety of reasons *why* new religions form, which gives the groups more dimensions than the other two definitions offered by Dawson and Melton. The definitions put forth by Dawson and Melton, although accurate, are more narrow and rigid constructions and do not fit all the new religions under study in this dissertation.

Cults

The differences between a *new religious movement*, *alterative religion*, *marginal religion*, *emergent religion*, and *minority religion*, as opposed to a *cult*, also need to be clarified. These terms are often used interchangeably, but I will not be using the word *cult* in this dissertation, unless it is in reference to how other people have labeled the groups. The definition of the term "cult" is more complex than "religion" or "new religious movement" and commonly has a negative implication. Wessinger explains that while the word originally referred to "an organized system of worship focused on an object of worship," which she believes to be a "neutral and descriptive definition," the word has since been altered.²² Wessinger argues that beginning in the 1970s, "The word *cult* has taken on pejorative connotations. It is a term widely used to refer to religious groups regarded as aberrant and dangerous. It is a convenient four-letter word to put into headlines" [emphasis Wessinger's].²³ Moore agrees, arguing that "cult is never a value-neutral word since it always carries an implicit criticism. We do not call Baptists or Catholics or Jews cultists; we only call religions of which we disapprove cults."²⁴ I agree with

²² Wessinger, *How the Millennium*, 3.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Rebecca Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 5.

Wessinger and Moore, as “cult” can be a very damaging term. The label is dismissive of a religious group’s sacred belief system, whether it is in harmony with mainstream society’s values or not.²⁵

Studies have also shown the overwhelmingly negative response by the participants to the use of “cult” to describe a religion. One such study, conducted by Paul J. Olson (2006), indicated that the respondents of his survey reacted much more disapprovingly to the word “cult” than “new religious movement” or “new Christian church” when asked how comfortable the respondent would be if his or her neighbor joined each of the aforementioned groups. In his paper, Olson also cites an earlier study by Jeffrey E. Pfeifer (1992) regarding indoctrination.²⁶ Pfeifer questioned ninety-eight undergraduate student participants about a hypothetical young man joining the “Moonies” [members of the Unification Church], the Marines, or a Catholic seminary. This study revealed results similar to Olson’s: an overwhelmingly adverse reaction from the respondents to “Moonies” and “cult,” even though the vast majority of the participants admitted they had never met a member of a new religion or been a member of a new religion and had gleaned most of their information from the media. The respondents believed that the “Moonie” would be less happy, more likely to be indoctrinated, and would have a more difficult time leaving the group.²⁷ Because there is already an implicit bias with the word “cult,” and in

²⁵ In opposition to these two religious studies scholars’ views about the terminology of these groups, sociologist Marion S. Goldman argues that “scholars frequently substitute *novel religion* or *new religious movement* for *cult*, although the latter is the least cumbersome, more accurate term. . . I hope that readers will rethink the stigma associated with *cult* and consider it to be a neutral and useful term” [emphasis Goldman’s].²⁵ I strongly agree with Wessinger’s and Moore’s more cautionary assessment and use of the term. I disagree with Goldman’s claim that one should use the “least cumbersome” term, which I find to delegitimize these religions and the people who have self-identified as members of a religious movement; “new,” “novel,” or otherwise.

²⁶ Olson, Paul J. "The Public Perception of "Cults" and "New Religious Movements"." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45, no. 1 (2006): 97-106. Accessed August 13, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/3590620.

²⁷ Jeffrey E. Pfeifer, “The Psychological Framing of Cults: Schematic Representations and Cult Evaluations,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 22, no. 7 (1992): 531-544.

harmony with religious studies scholars Wessinger and Moore and with Olson's and Pfeifer's conclusions in mind, again, I have elected not to use "cult" in this dissertation to describe new religious movements.

Power, agency, and devotion

This dissertation will also address themes related to the power, agency, and devotion of women in new religious movements; therefore, it is necessary to explain what I mean by each of these terms. When I write of *power*, I am referring primarily to women's positions of leadership in each movement that rivaled or exceeded the charismatic male leader's role. *Agency* describes the actions of women: the decisions they made to join, participate in, and remain members of the movement. *Devotion* comes in many forms, but in this dissertation, an array of types of worship are considered devotional. These actions can include everything from prayer to physical labor to making personal sacrifices to join a movement.

1.5 Why study new religious movements?

New religious movements are important to analyze not only within the context of theology and doctrine, but as they are situated within conventional society as well. The very existence of new religious movements raises questions: What is considered acceptable religious practice in mainstream society? Are new religious movements a threat to the status quo? Are they what Dawson calls a "protest against modernity"?²⁸ How much liberty should these new religions be given to operate under constitutional rights to religious freedom?

²⁸ Lorne L. Dawson, "The Meaning and Significance of New Religious Movements," in *Teaching New Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 119.

A few new religions do grow into tolerated, accepted, or even somewhat mainstream religions. For example, Mormonism's founder and prophet, Joseph Smith, was killed for his seemingly outlandish religious beliefs in 1844.²⁹ However, Mormonism has developed into a more socially acceptable religious practice, despite the scandals of Warren Jeffs and others. Mitt Romney, a Mormon, accepted the Republican presidential nomination in 2012, becoming an extremely visible member of a new religious movement. This recent more widespread acknowledgment of Mormonism as an unobjectionable or even satisfactory religion for a prominent politician would not have occurred when the group was first founded and was consequently persecuted for its ideological differences from mainstream religion. Mormonism is one example of how a new religious movement can evolve over time from an outside group into the mainstream, despite variations from dominant religions. The opposite can also hold true: new religions can shift from socially acceptable religions to bands of strange religious radicals to groups that can pose threats, both perceived and true, to society. The study of new religious movements allows us to question how and why some new religions become conventional, and others do not.

Dawson argues, "Many [new religious movements] have purposefully blurred the lines between the realms of religion, business, education, therapy, and social welfare services to secure a material and perhaps spiritual advantage."³⁰ Some examples of crossing over into the mainstream might include the social welfare organizations that were run by Peoples Temple, services offered by the Church of Scientology,³¹ or an extensive line of goods for sale under the

²⁹ Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 180.

³⁰ Dawson, "The Meaning and Significance," 122.

³¹ Dawson, "The Meaning and Significance," 122.

name of Bishop “Sweet Daddy” Grace of the House of Prayer.³² Therefore, it is essential to learn from new religions of the past to observe the groups’ trajectories in modern-day society and to ponder the answers to some of the previously stated questions.

1.6 Why people join new religious movements and societal reactions

Understanding controversy in new religious movements

Dawson writes that although most people have never met a member of a new religious movement, or a “cult,” there is a likelihood that “almost everyone has read articles or watched television shows about these groups.”³³ He explains the widespread curiosity with the groups as follows:

In our increasingly secularized and supposedly rational societies our curiosity is peaked [sic] by the intense and seemingly peculiar beliefs and practices of the minority of people who choose such alternative worldviews and their accompanying lifestyles. As social and ideological deviants they are fascinating yet threatening. Their religiosity may seem strangely more real and compelling than the anemic variety of mainstream religion so many of us experience as children and young adults in the churches, synagogues, and temples of our parents.³⁴

Because of public interest surrounding new religions, particularly sensationalized ones, it is imperative to understand the disputes that surround new religious movements. These arguments include debates over definitions of terms such as “cult,” the disagreements about who joins and why, and which groups oppose new religious movements and for what reasons. Knowledge about the backgrounds of movements opens the study to historical context and the debates in mainstream society that result from the presence of these groups. Although the roles of women in

³² Marie W. Dallam, *Daddy Grace: A Celebrity Preacher and His House of Prayer* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 2.

³³ Lorne L. Dawson, *Cults and New Religions: A Reader* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

these new religious movements are the focus of this paper, it is important to understand the controversial background of these movements and their members in modern-day society.

Who is likely to join a new religious movement, and why?

To understand new religious movements, it can be helpful to identify who joins them and why, for it may add more insight into the nature of the group. Dawson lists stereotypes of a recruit of new religions, writing that they are “thought to be young, idealistic, and gullible people duped by cunning cult recruiters. Sometimes they are maladjusted and marginal losers who have found a safe haven in the controlled life of a cult.”³⁵ Rather than accept these stereotypes, Dawson agrees that the actual adherents to a new religious movement are “disproportionately young,” but are “on average markedly better educated than the general public,” and “disproportionately from middle- to upper-class households, the advantaged segments of the population.”³⁶ On the subject of women, Dawson admits that there is no consensus about women’s membership. The religious scholar points out that although women tend to join new religions more often than men do, “there is no strong evidence that women are any more susceptible to joining [new religious movements] than men.”³⁷ Scholars have also disputed whether the members of new religious movements come from (mainstream) religious backgrounds more often than not.³⁸

John A. Saliba offers other qualities of individuals that may explain why they join new religions, writing, “In general, the individual who joins a new religious movement is deemed

³⁵ Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 72.

³⁶ Ibid, 87-88. These generalizations are not true for Peoples Temple or the Branch Davidians.

³⁷ Ibid, 88.

³⁸ Ibid, 89.

likely to possess several of the following characteristics: deprivation, alienation, inclination to be preoccupied with religious questions, uncertainty about his or her identity, and having experienced a personal crisis.”³⁹ Saliba also cites a document published by the American Psychiatric Association (Committee on Psychiatry and Religion, 1992), which explains who they have found to be most likely to join a new religious movement:

The white middle-class, idealistic young people who form the majority in most contemporary cults are often lonely, depressed, and fearful of an uncertain future. They tend to be dependent. They have strong needs of affection. Unable to provide for their own emotional sustenance, they need external forces for a feeling of self-worth, a sense of belonging, and a reason for living. They feel resentful and are often hostile towards society at large; it has disappointed them and does not value them. The freedom as well as the demands of adulthood, eagerly awaited by many, may be overwhelming to them.⁴⁰

I find the APA’s outdated definition of people who join a new religious movement to have inaccuracies and shortcomings. The organization’s determination of membership, which was published thirty years ago, makes claims about members of these groups, some of which may be accurate for some members, but does not account for the wide range of reasons why others might have joined. This profile of a potential member of these groups is narrow and does not explain the positive aspects of why one might join a new religion, such as for benefits such as camaraderie or true belief in the tenets of the movement.

There were other reasons to commit to a new religious movement. For one, some women felt the quadruple burden of being wives or lovers, mothers, housekeepers, and workers in mainstream society, and wanted the support of a communal group. They may have had a “nostalgia or utopian yearning for a simpler society,” writes Dawson.⁴¹ These women and others

³⁹ John A. Saliba, “Disciplinary Perspectives on New Religious Movements,” in *Teaching New Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 94.

may have wished to escape an undesirable aspect of traditional religions or mainstream society, such as sexism, racism, and classism. Still others were attracted to the power given to women in new religions such as the Rajneesh movement, as free love, the “superior spiritual energy” of women and the emphasis on the “wisdom of the feminine” were highly valued.⁴² Furthermore, the spiritual or sacred aspect of a new religious movement could attract women members, for this factor might be missing in their daily “secular, contractual” lives in the mainstream world.⁴³ These various qualities and priorities of the new religious movements validated the membership of women in the groups while providing community⁴⁴ or even the American Dream.⁴⁵

Not everyone in mainstream society supported the decision of a loved one to join a new religious movement, and there was much confusion about why the nation’s youth were suddenly so interested in new religions in the United States. James T. Richardson and Massimo Introvigne explain, “[New religious movements] were first greeted in the U.S. context as a welcome respite from the throes of the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and other civil disturbances and social movements. However, concern developed rapidly as word spread of many young people’s getting involved with ‘high-demand’ new religions that were encouraging or even requiring major changes in lifestyle and career plans.”⁴⁶ Eastern religions, in addition to American-born new religions, appeared in the United States in large numbers during this time of societal upheaval. Dawson argues that there are “three interrelated sets of cultural and social changes that have been affecting the daily lives of North Americas since at least the 1960s: 1) changes in

⁴² Ibid, 97.

⁴³ Ibid, 99.

⁴⁴ Susan Jean Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women’s Roles in New Religions* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 45.

⁴⁵ Carl J. Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York; Cornell University Press, 1994), 9.

⁴⁶ Richardson and Introvigne, “New Religious Movements,” 91.

values, 2) changes in social structures, and 3) changes in the role and character of religious institutions.”⁴⁷ Members of these new religious movements, as Richardson, Introvigne, and other scholars have pointed out, were often from “relatively well-educated and affluent backgrounds,”⁴⁸ which puzzled many people in mainstream society who watched friends and family join these religions, which were seemingly very different from the status quo.

Women in New Religions (2015) by Laura Vance is a recent book which also addresses this subject. In her text, Vance argues that new religions have flourished in the United States “at least in part due to the country’s cultural and religious pluralism, constitutional protections of religion, geographic expansion, lack of governmental control of religion, historical-social emphasis on religion, including religious dissent,” as well as the creation of sects and schisms which she claims are standard practices in “the Christian and Jewish traditions.”⁴⁹ I agree with most of the author’s list of reasons for the large number of new religions in the United States, but I take some exception about the lack of governmental control. While these factors may hold true for her case studies about Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism, The Family International, and Wicca, I do not find this to be true for the people of the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and the Rajneesh movement. The religions which I have explored in this dissertation were monitored by the U.S. government, which infiltrated and directly intervened at times. For example, FBI agent Robert Rodriguez disguised himself as a member of the Branch Davidians to gain intelligence on the group.⁵⁰ However, Vance makes the excellent point that only a few new religious movements are ever really noticed by the mainstream. Most are considered more or less

⁴⁷ Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 42.

⁴⁸ Richardson and Introvigne, “New Religious Movements,” 91.

⁴⁹ Wessinger, ed., *Women’s Leadership*, 2.

⁵⁰ Kenneth G.C. Newport, *Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 246.

mundane, unless something sensational happens, such as “a failed prediction of the end of the world, mass suicide, or sexual abuse.”⁵¹ Vance continues, “Though scandals can occur in established religions...the details [of new religious movement scandals] may seem more salacious, more novel, in the context of an unfamiliar religion, which also holds potential promise of peculiar beliefs and strange practices.”⁵² This argument is an important one, for not only are the women of these religions marginalized, but often the religions themselves as well.

Sociologist Susan Jean Palmer’s text about women in new religious movements, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women’s Roles in New Religions* (1994), includes a chapter about the women of the Rajneesh movement. According to the author, the group was “perceived by these women as offering *religious* solutions to problems of intimacy and family life that they have encountered in their previous life” [emphasis Palmer’s].⁵³ Palmer also makes claims about the type of women who join the Rajneesh movement: those who are “middle-aged, upper-middle-class... [and who are] accustomed to independence and a lucrative employment, and who [tend] to be childless, unmarried, and highly educated... [The Rajneesh movement] offers an alternative philosophy of sexuality that is consistent with her previous life-style, and that validates her life choices.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, Palmer states, “Women were dominant in ritual and were considered to have superior charismatic qualities to men in that they were more receptive than men...”⁵⁵ The women had personal reasons for joining that often reflected upon aspects of mainstream society that they found troubling, missing, or those which were similar to their already chosen lifestyle.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Palmer, *Moon Sisters*, 45.

⁵⁴ Palmer, *Moon Sisters*, 45.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 52.

The anti-cult movement and the brainwashing debate

The cult brainwashing debate is a controversial one, as many anti-cultists have taken the stance that members of new religious movements must have been indoctrinated through unorthodox “brainwashing” methods—what other explanation could there be for the sudden jump in membership in these groups, especially for young people? The rapid increase of the number of America’s youth who joined new religious movements led to moral panic in the United States in the post-1945 era, reaching its height in the 1970s and 1980s. “The term moral panic,” Richardson and Introvigne write, “refers to situations in which something that has been defined as a social problem becomes the focus of exaggerated attention from media, politicians and other opinion leaders, law enforcement, and action groups. The thrust of the focused effort is to garner public support and to take action against the perceived problem”⁵⁶; in this case, against new religious movements. Theologians are noticeably absent in the content of this quotation from Richardson and Introvigne; however, members of the clergy also saw new religions as dangerous and threatening to society, as evidenced by the beliefs of those involved in the anti-cult movement (ACM) who believed they were fighting the ultimate evil.

John A. Saliba writes that many scholars who have a negative view of the leaders of new religious movements believe that members are indeed brainwashed.⁵⁷ Saliba references psychiatrist Anthony Storr, who argues that “while not all gurus are pathological individuals, they are likely to be narcissistic, intolerant of criticism, and incapable of friendship.”⁵⁸ Some scholars, including Margaret Singer, argue that these individual recruits may have some

⁵⁶ Richardson and Introvigne, “New Religious Movements,” 96.

⁵⁷ Saliba, “Disciplinary Perspectives on New Religious Movements,” 43.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

predispositions that make them vulnerable and that leaders of the new religions may take advantage of these qualities.⁵⁹ Those who argue that the members are brainwashed, including Singer, point to situations in which the recruits are held back from mainstream society, emotionally and sometimes physically. Saliba writes, “do not freely choose their faith but rather, fall victims to it,” as they cannot question the group’s beliefs, which are constantly forced upon them psychologically and physiologically as their “time and environments are carefully controlled.”⁶⁰ Former members and defectors of new religions have claimed to have been brainwashed and then subsequently deprogrammed in order to escape the movement. According to Richardson and Introvigne, the tactic of testimonials from former members “helps with legitimization and ideological justification by claiming first-hand experience with the ‘evil cult’ from whence they somehow escaped.”⁶¹

Since the height of the anti-cult movement, the term “brainwashing” has become less popular; rather, the phenomenon has become “medicalized,” as terms such as “post-traumatic stress syndrome” and “dissociative states” are more commonly used.⁶² Cowan and Bromley argue,

We take the position that members of new religions want (and ought) to be taken as seriously as any other religious believer. Any preconceived notions that new religious adherents are brainwashed, spiritually deceived, or mentally ill are not only problematic from an empirical standpoint, but erect significant barriers to understanding these fascinating religions as sincere (if occasionally problematic) attempts to come to terms with what adherents regard as the most important issues in life is a far more productive endeavor than simply dismissing them as theological imposters, attacking them as social deviants, or capitalizing on them only when they appear newsworthy.⁶³

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Richardson and Introvigne, “New Religious Movements,” 94.

⁶² Ibid, 95.

⁶³ Douglas E. Cowan and David G. Bromley, *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History*, (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2015), 5.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the anti-cult movement flourished, and it continues to have a presence in mainstream society within such groups as the Citizens Freedom Foundation, Love Our Children Inc., the Council on Mind Abuse, the International Cultic Studies Association, and dozens of others, although Dawson points out that these groups have not been endorsed by, officially recognized by, or assisted by any government agencies.⁶⁴ Still, the reactions of these anti-cult groups to new religious movements often lead to “hostile public reaction, and scathing media coverage,” according to Richardson and Introvigne.⁶⁵ The scholars argue that the concept of brainwashing was popularized during media coverage of the Patty Hearst trial in the early 1970s, for it was a “culturally acceptable explanation of why otherwise intelligent and well-educated young people would participate in strange religions”⁶⁶; or, in Hearst’s case, the Symbionese Liberation Army, a radical counterculture movement. In either case, whether as a member of a new religion or another group under suspicion by the public, the argument is that “these people are not free to return to more useful, right, and properly *American* ways of life” [emphasis mine].⁶⁷

There are two main branches of the anti-cult movement that concern themselves with new religious movements, or what the members of the ACM call “cults.” One faction of the anti-cult movement takes issue with the “heretical” religious belief systems of new religious movements,⁶⁸ and often these movements are led by members of the clergy who see the new

⁶⁴ Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 7.

⁶⁵ Richardson and Introvigne, “New Religious Movements,” 92.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁶⁷ Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 106.

⁶⁸ David G. Bromley, “Teaching/Learning from New Religious Movements,” in *Teaching New Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9-10.

religious movements as “false religions” and sometimes “evil”⁶⁹ or “in league with the devil.”⁷⁰

Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda explain in their text *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (1994) that the people involved in new religious movements are sometimes referred to as “folk devils,” which are the “personification of evil.”⁷¹

The second division of the anti-cult movement is secular. These supporters focus on “behaviors of [new religious movements] (particularly recruitment practices and organizational structures) as the basis for their opposition,” explains David G. Bromley.⁷² According to Douglas E. Cowan and Bromley, the secular anti-cultists are less concerned with doctrine, and more concerned about “the psychological welfare” of new religious movement members.⁷³ This branch of the anti-cult movement focuses mostly on conversion; however, according to Cowan and Bromley, there is no single particular method of how the leaders of new religious movements gain members,⁷⁴ just as there is no exact consensus about who joins. Cowan and Bromley argue that because empirical studies have failed to provide any concrete reasons for why someone might join or convert to a new religion, there must be many variables to take into account, including “the agency [of the individual that] they exercise during the affiliation process.”⁷⁵ This again shows that perhaps the members of the new religious movements are not just simple brainwashed dupes, but have more agency than for which they have been given credit. As Dawson concludes, “We cannot simply discount the claims of converts to be acting in

⁶⁹ Richardson and Introvigne, “New Religious Movements,” 93.

⁷⁰ Cowan and Bromley, *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2015), 184.

⁷¹ Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 28.

⁷² David G. Bromley, “Teaching/Learning,” 9-10.

⁷³ Cowan and Bromley, *Cults and New Religions*, 1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

accord with some divine plan and to be acting freely. We have no conclusive way either to verify or to refute such claims.”⁷⁶

1.7 Historiography and texts about women in new religious movements

Although new religious movements have always existed in the United States, the scholarly study of these groups has not always been so vast. The intersectionality of religion and the counterculture movement in the United States sparked a new interest in the study of new religious movements. Bromley writes, “Throughout Western history there have been numerous periods of religious innovation... It was after World War II that serious social science scholarship began on several sectarian religious movements, such as the Amish, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Father Divine’s Peace Mission. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the beginning of an extraordinary period of religious and secular experimentation in Western societies... an unprecedented period of experimentation and innovation.”⁷⁷ With the proliferation of new religions during the post-1945 era, many of the groundbreaking academic studies have focused on this era. While many early texts focus primarily on the charismatic male leader, more recently there has been an increase in scholarship about women, as well as memoirs by survivors or defectors of these groups.

There are a few important works that specifically address women in new religious movements. One such book is *Women’s Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream* (1993), edited by Catherine Wessinger. This text contains material about charismatic women leaders, including Mother Ann Lee of the Shakers and Mary Baker Eddy, the

⁷⁶ Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 127.

⁷⁷ Bromley, “Teaching/Learning,” 3.

founder of The Church of Christ, Science. Wessinger succinctly argues that “charismatic women have played significant roles as religious leaders in America.”⁷⁸ Although this is a seemingly very simple statement, it supports my thesis, which posits that women led new religious movements as well as contributed in other, perhaps more mundane, ways. Wessinger writes, “Occasionally, a charismatic woman may break through the patriarchal structures and establish for herself a sphere of freedom based on her direct communication with the sacred.”⁷⁹ The author also illustrates another important point: after a religion is founded by a woman, the leadership often is turned over to a man.⁸⁰ Wessinger’s arguments indicate that women can be charismatic leaders of both mainstream religions and marginalized religions, but that this is not the usual role of women. There are few exceptional women in new religions with leadership roles and even those women have often been disregarded in most studies. Wessinger also points out the importance of the everyday woman, as she writes about nineteenth-century revivalism and the place of women during this era, which includes roles as “their culture’s guardians of morality,” which “began to extend that mission into the outer world” through missionary work and the like.⁸¹ These observations may pertain to some women who are members of twentieth-century new religions as well.

In the many books written about Peoples Temple, much information exists about high-ranking or otherwise outspoken and influential women of the new religion. Moore writes about the women of Peoples Temple as an integrated part of *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple* (2009), a text which I find unique because women are not relegated to a specific chapter

⁷⁸ Wessinger, ed., *Women’s Leadership*, 1.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 2.

⁸¹ Ibid, 10.

or section of the book, as is often the case. Moore puts the new religion into historical context, arguing that to understand Jonestown and Peoples Temple, as the title of the book suggests, one must investigate issues in American society such as class, colonialism, racism, and gender.⁸²

This argument is necessary to comprehend Peoples Temple and other new religions. Memoirs written by women survivors or defectors of Peoples Temple have been published in abundance.⁸³ However, one must approach these autobiographies with caution, as several decades have passed since the group violently disbanded in 1978, or the accounts may be skewed, biased, or atypical. Still, these accounts are useful in gaining knowledge about women's experiences in Peoples Temple.

Much of the literature about the Branch Davidians neglects three powerful leaders who presided over the new religious movement before David Koresh's leadership: Ellen G. White, Florence Houteff, and Lois Roden. The latter two women reigned after the deaths of their husbands, Victor Houteff and Benjamin Roden, respectively, but were leaders in her own right. Their leadership was not simply assumed: these women had to earn these positions. Each of these three women contributed to the theology and doctrine of the religion, as they made apocalyptic predictions, were prophets, and in the case of Lois Roden, introduced a feminist perspective through her assertion that the Holy Spirit was feminine. Such important parts of the Branch Davidian narrative should not be neglected.

Scholars of religion and sociology, such as Susan J. Palmer and Marion S. Goldman, have studied new religions (the Raelian movement and the Rajneesh movement, respectively)

⁸² Moore, *Understanding Jonestown*.

⁸³ Laura Johnston Kohl, *Jonestown Survivor: An Insider's Look* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2010); Deborah Layton, *Seductive Poison: A Jonestown Survivor's Story of Life and Death in the Peoples Temple* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), and many others.

from the inside. This approach is a hard one to take, for the insider/outsider relationship, or that of researcher/participant, can be difficult to establish in ways that are acceptable to both the scholar and the religious organization. Sometimes, shared values can help one gain access. For example, James Chancellor was able to study The Family International, as his Christian beliefs and practices, including participating in group prayer, earned him a trusted spot in the group.⁸⁴ David G. Bromley also points to other factors that might help in being granted access to a group: age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender, for example.⁸⁵ He cites Christel Manning's study about NRMs as one in which she was able to gain more information about the women of the groups because of her gender, as she "found that being a woman established a common bond and basis for mutual identification with woman informants in those movements, even though she did not share their social and religious conservatism."⁸⁶ These studies, while useful and important to note, as they add to the existing scholarship, are not methods that I have chosen to use for my exploration of women in new religious movements.

1.8 Methodology used for this dissertation

For this work, I have elected not to participate in any of the groups under study. One of these reasons is a practical one: although Waco and Jonestown ended violently, there are still living defectors and, in the case of the Branch Davidians, active members. There is concern that the defectors would share only negative experiences about the movements. This is especially true for the former members of Peoples Temple, who sometimes not only split from Jim Jones'

⁸⁴ David G. Bromley, "Methodological Issues in the Study of NRMs," in *Teaching New Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 69.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

movement, but created counter-groups such as the Concerned Relatives prior to the mass murder-suicides in Jonestown. Former members of the Branch Davidians, which also includes survivors and some who believe in the return of David Koresh or the impending end times, may also have conflicting views of the religion. Clearly, those loyal members who died in the Mount Carmel complex and at Jonestown are unable to tell their stories after the catastrophic events. These accounts may have been more positive than those who defected from the new religious movement. Rajneeshpuram, Oregon, may no longer exist; however, the Rajneesh movement lives on worldwide as the Osho movement. There are many survivors but interviewing members from one group out of the three case studies could provide an unbalanced view. Therefore, I have taken an approach that emphasizes primary source materials found in library special collections, digital archival collections, and secondary source literature about each of the groups.

This dissertation will add to the prevailing narratives and contribute to the historiography about the women of the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and the Rajneesh movement through careful examination of primary and secondary sources. I have consulted memoirs, newspapers, magazines, a multitude of scholarly sources, digital archives, websites, and the California Historical Society to build my arguments. While I am interested in exploring why women joined new religions and what they did in these groups, I also address themes of power, agency, and devotion within these movements. Finally, I argue that women were attracted not primarily to the male charismatic leader, although he certainly played a role in recruitment and as the face of the movement. Rather, women were loyal to the movement itself, as it sustained their religious, spiritual, and personal needs.

1.9 Navigating the chapters

I have arranged the three case studies in a particular order based on two factors. The first consideration was the year that each group was founded. As the Branch Davidians came from the Seventh-day Adventists, a splinter of the Christian tradition, I have elected to include them as the first case study. Peoples Temple, founded in the 1950s, underwent a series of name changes and associations. Reverend Jim Jones' group identified as the Community Unity Church, next, Wings of Deliverance, then as an offshoot of the Disciples of Christ, finally calling itself Peoples Temple.⁸⁷ The Rajneesh movement followed, as it was established in the 1960s in India and moved to the United States in 1980. Therefore, Peoples Temple and then the Rajneesh movement will follow the Branch Davidians in this dissertation.

The second reason why I have ordered these three new religions as such is to track their progression from the most traditional gender roles for women (again, the Branch Davidians under David Koresh's leadership), to what I have termed to be the most progressive (the Rajneesh movement). Peoples Temple originated before second-wave feminism, but certainly by the middle of the group's existence, it coincided with the women's rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Some women of Peoples Temple were afforded more agency than the Branch Davidian women during Koresh's leadership, although most Peoples Temple women were still subject to Jim Jones' authority. Lastly, the Rajneesh movement is the final case study of this dissertation, for its development in the 1960s through the 1980s (and beyond, as the group still exists worldwide under the name of the Osho movement) occurred alongside the women's rights movement. The women members of Rajneeshpuram had the most autonomy and power of the

⁸⁷ Rebecca Moore, "Peoples Temple," *WRSP: World Religions and Spirituality Project*, accessed August 16, 2021, <https://wrldrels.org/2016/10/08/peoples-temple/>.

three groups, including free love practices and women being heralded as superior to men, as my findings show.

Chapter 2: The Women of Waco

The second chapter focuses on the Branch Davidians, a multiracial religious group that was led by the group's prophet, David Koresh, in the late 1980s until 1993. The group was violently torn apart during a government standoff and subsequent siege, which resulted in the deaths of four federal agents and more than 80 members of the new religious movement. The Branch Davidians were an offshoot of the Seventh-day Adventists, although Adventists seek to distance themselves from Koresh's group. Members of the Branch Davidians looked to Koresh to interpret passages from the Book of Revelation and other biblical writings to support the conviction that the end times were soon approaching. During David Koresh's leadership, the Branch Davidians lived in the isolated Mount Carmel complex outside of Waco, Texas. The group gathered weapons, including semi-automatic weapons and grenades, at the compound, which gained attention from the United States federal government. The Branch Davidians were also accused of child abuse, drawing more attention to the group. As the leader of the movement, Koresh was the main spokesman for the Branch Davidians during the fifty-one-day standoff with the government officials at the compound. The standoff and siege ended as the compound went up in flames after a tank was driven into one of the complex's buildings. The story of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians became a media sensation, as the standoff and subsequent deadly inferno were widely televised.

Although Koresh is almost inarguably the most well-known of the Branch Davidians, the charismatic leader came from a long line of prophets and spiritual guides. Before David Koresh

assumed power, Ellen G. White, Florence Houteff, and Lois Roden took control of the group over different eras. Little has been published about these three important women as major works, and if they are written about, generally only a few pages or a chapter of the text are devoted to each woman. Much has been made of Lois Roden's relationship with Koresh, particularly their romantic entanglements. However, Roden played a significant role within the group on her own, as she was said to have been visited by an angel who represented the Holy Spirit Mother. Roden taught her followers that the messiah would come in the female form. She believed that it was her religious duty to spread this word, and she began to write pamphlets about her vision.⁸⁸ Although Koresh garnered attention from the media and scholarly writings during the FBI standoff in 1993, White, Houteff, and Roden are also necessary to study to understand the history of the Branch Davidians.

I also address the themes of patriarchy within the group and the disparity of power between the men and the women of the Branch Davidians, particularly during the era of David Koresh's leadership. Branch Davidian women became more involved in the labor of the group's tasks under patriarchal structures in the group. Koresh also disbanded marriages within the group, taking several women and girls as lovers, or "spiritual brides"; many of them bore his children as well. The Branch Davidians are an interesting case study, as women had disparities in power and leadership roles—women were either at the very top or the very bottom of the new religion's hierarchy, with patriarchal overtones influencing and shaping the religion.

Chapter 3: The Women of Jonestown

⁸⁸ Stuart Wright, ed., *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995), 36.

The third chapter focuses on Peoples Temple. Reverend Jim Jones created a multiracial church in Indianapolis, Indiana, in the 1950s, which was revolutionary in a time and place where racism was particularly rampant due to the large numbers of Ku Klux Klan members in Indiana. Peoples Temple was also unique because Jones was a white man, yet most of his followers were women, and most of them Black. The movement thrived in various parts of California in the 1960s and early 1970s, as the group became more politically involved and its membership grew. In the mid-1970s, the group began to migrate to the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project, also called Jonestown, a newly formed socialist utopian experiment constructed in the South American jungles of Guyana.⁸⁹

Peoples Temple is most known for the mass murder-suicides (an event which Jones called “revolutionary suicide”) of over nine hundred people on November 18, 1978, and the media coverage that followed. Although it is often believed that Jim Jones was solely responsible for the catastrophic event on that day, women secretaries and other women members also played important roles in the shaping of Peoples Temple and were privy to inside knowledge about the direction in which the movement was headed. Jones surrounded himself with mostly young, white women, who took on the roles of secretaries, confidantes, lovers, and sometimes, all of the aforementioned positions listed.

Not all women members of Peoples Temple were charmed by Reverend Jones. Harriet Tropp, a Jonestown resident, wrote public letters to Jones about his “selfish” behavior; Grace Stoen was an outspoken defector and member of the Concerned Relatives, a group whose aim was to return Peoples Temple members being held against their will to the United States; and

⁸⁹ Tim Reiterman and John Jacobs, *Raven: The Untold Story of the Rev. Jim Jones and His People* (New York: Penguin Group, 1982).

Christine Miller publicly implored Jones to change his mind about the mass murder-suicides that were about to take place on the final day in Jonestown.⁹⁰ Many of these women's stories have been left untold, except through memoirs, often self-published.

The chapter includes a discussion about race in Peoples Temple. There was a large disparity between the roles of white women and women of color in Jonestown.⁹¹ Women of color were most often excluded from these high-ranking posts. Therefore, it is imperative to explore the racial dynamics in Peoples Temple, particularly because most of the members were women of color, yet they were not represented in leadership roles.

Chapter 4: The Women of Rajneeshpuram

The fourth chapter focuses on the Rajneesh movement, which still exists as the Osho movement. Although it originated in India, this new religious movement/intentional community thrived in Rajneeshpuram, Oregon, from 1981 to 1985. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, a guru from India, led his people from Pune (Poona), India, eventually to rural Wasco County, Oregon. There, Ma Anand Sheela, a woman leader of the movement, purchased the Big Muddy Ranch to convert to the spiritual/religious commune called Rajneeshpuram. This movement attracted people of all backgrounds, from the homeless to millionaire benefactors, and people of all races. Gender roles among the neo-sannyasins in sexual matters were more fluid and flexible than in the other two groups examined in this dissertation, as free love was not only permitted, but encouraged. Bhagwan Rajneesh also argued that women were superior to men.⁹²

⁹⁰ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown*.

⁹¹ Mary McCormick Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 55-56.

⁹² Palmer, *Moon Sisters*, 52.

Despite the name of the movement and commune, several women, particularly Ma Anand Sheela, had important roles and carried out the necessary tasks to keep the group afloat. Sheela handled the responsibilities of public relations for the group, including television show appearances, interviews with the media, press conferences, and other visible tasks for the Rajneesh movement. I argue that Sheela and other women of the Rajneesh movement were just as, if not more so, influential in the development of the Oregon commune as Bhagwan Rajneesh himself. I have also devoted a section of this chapter to the division of labor among the everyday women members of the Rajneesh movement who did not hold visible positions of power.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The final chapter concludes the dissertation with a discussion of my answers to the hypotheses posed in the introduction about women's roles in the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and the Rajneesh movement. The presence of these groups reflects societal issues during particular eras in the United States, such as patriarchy, the disparity between the rights of whites and of people of color, and other factors which caused the formation of each new religious movement. The conclusion highlights the intersection of history, religious studies, race studies, women's studies, media studies, and counterculture. In addition, this final section of the dissertation addresses the present state of new religions in the United States and the influence of the Information Age on the way in which people interact with these movements. I also suggest topics for further study about the movements.

1.10 Concluding thoughts

The study of women in new religious movements in the United States is an unfinished one. While there are many books about women in the mainstream or even nineteenth-century new religions, not much scholarship exists specifically about women of the post-1945 religious intentional communities in Waco, Jonestown, and Rajneeshpuram. This dissertation will fill a space in that gap. Scholars of past narratives have looked at these new religions primarily from the inside and therefore their results have been narrower than the scope of this study, which will account for outside influence as well. This work will add to the prevailing narratives about these new religious movements, which tend to focus on the charismatic and most often male leaders, by addressing women in power and those who performed the everyday tasks needed to sustain the group. Women found meaning in their respective religions and had hopes to form new societies with new families and alternative ideas that would bring meaning and fulfillment to their lives. It is my intention to give voices to the women of the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and the Rajneesh movement and to acknowledge them for their important and necessary contributions to their respective communities and movements, which they at times prioritized over the male leader. Through power, agency, and devotion, the women made themselves essential members of the whole.

Chapter Two: The Women of Waco

I want people to know that there were families at Mount Carmel, people who loved each other, who wanted the best for each other, and who most of all wanted God.

-Sheila Martin, former Branch Davidian⁹³

2.1 Introduction

Maker of apocalyptic predictions. Earthly mouthpiece of God through hundreds of visions. Prophet. Authority on the teachings of the Bible. Author of numerous writings published to spread revelations to believers, including books and quarterly journals. Champion of “God’s law” over “man’s law,” resulting in a widespread distrust of government among the new religion’s followers. Promoter of missionary work around the globe. Holder of legal and financial control over an entire religious organization. Possessor of formidable influence over a new religious movement whose 150-year history has resulted in a lasting tradition of theological beliefs and practices worldwide.

These are not the achievements of the infamous Branch Davidian prophet and leader David Koresh (1959-1993), as one might expect. These are the triumphs of Ellen G. White (1827-1915), Florence Houteff (1919-2008), and Lois Roden (1916-1986), three women whose respective leadership predated David Koresh’s reign of the new religious movement that would eventually be called the Branch Davidians. The actions and teachings of Koresh are well-

⁹³ Sheila Martin, ed. Catherine Wessinger, *When They Were Mine: Memoirs of a Branch Davidian Wife and Mother* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 2.

documented and are the ones most often studied by scholars. For the most part, these powerful and influential women leaders have not been often widely recognized. In this chapter, I recount their lives and how Ellen G. White, Florence Houteff, and Lois Roden each contributed to the new religious movement for decades leading up to David Koresh's brief takeover in the mid-1980s until his death on April 19, 1993. Because the emphasis of this chapter is primarily about the Branch Davidians during the time when they were led by the prophet David Koresh, these pioneering women will be under discussion before the focus turns more deeply to the women of Mount Carmel in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the events that transpired under Koresh's rule.

The rank and file women members of the Branch Davidians under Koresh are also often left out of the narrative, rendering them nearly invisible. When women or girls in new religious movements are remarked upon, a salacious tale is usually told: a charismatic older man, abusing his power over his followers, takes child brides in the name of God and coerces them, perhaps through brainwashing, to bear his children—a common perception in popular media about new religions and cults. The women and girls of the Branch Davidians were individuals with names and stories of their own apart from their connection to Koresh, although it is important to note their vital roles as wives and mothers of the community. The documentation of the lives of women and children of the Branch Davidians should be given equal weight to Koresh in the prevailing and popular narratives, which presently focus almost exclusively on the prophet David Koresh and the siege at the Mount Carmel complex. This siege, of course, is just a short period in the history of the Branch Davidian tradition.

Most of the accounts of the Branch Davidians highlight the 51-day stand-off (February 28, 1993, to April 19, 1993) between the religious group and the U.S. government in a rural area

ten miles outside of Waco, Texas, at a community called Mount Carmel. Ultimately, the conflict with the FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF or ATF) under the direction of the Bill Clinton administration and Attorney General Janet Reno resulted in the deaths of 82 Branch Davidians, including 23 children.⁹⁴ All but nine of the Branch Davidians remaining in the complex perished after a government tank demolished a building in the Mount Carmel complex that the group called home, setting the facilities aflame.⁹⁵ David Koresh, the group's prophet, had predicted this apocalyptic end. The eschatology of the group is an important study, for it shaped the worldview of the members of the new religious movement. However, this chapter focuses on the existence of the group in the years before the catastrophic showdown with the FBI that ended it, and the complexity of the lives of the Branch Davidian women who served as leaders and as devoted followers. These women were primarily loyal to the movement itself, not to David Koresh as an individual, the latter of which is often speculated and put forth by the media and other sources.⁹⁶

Historian Gerda Lerner argues that women are not often discussed in historical narratives unless they are extraordinary women, and that everyday woman historical actors and contributors have been frequently omitted from these retellings in favor of the experiences of men.⁹⁷ Since the publication of Lerner's book in 1987, a concerted effort has been made to account for the experiences of women in history, as cultural studies and a history from the bottom up approach

⁹⁴ Catherine Wessinger in Bonnie Haldeman, ed. Catherine Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians: The Autobiography of David Koresh's Mother* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 121.

⁹⁵ There is much debate and controversy over the cause of the fire at Mount Carmel.

⁹⁶ An example of the "brainwashed by the cult leader" theory is found in Clifford L. Linedecker, *Massacre at Waco, Texas: The Shocking True Story of Cult Leader David Koresh and the Branch Davidians* (New York: St. Martin's Paperbacks, 1993).

⁹⁷ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 4-5.

have become more common in the field in the past decades. Still, ample space exists in which to write about the women of new religious movements such as the Branch Davidians.

In this chapter, I examine the history of the Branch Davidians under several leaders and prophets who came before the infamous Vernon Wayne Howell (also known as David Koresh). These leaders include Ellen G. White, Florence Houteff, and Lois Roden, three women essential to the shaping of the movement and evolution of the group's theology. The chapter also explores devotion and worship, family life and community within the Branch Davidian group under Koresh's leadership, the role of the children of Mount Carmel, plural marriage and other new philosophies implemented under David Koresh's New Light revelations, the apocalypse in Waco,⁹⁸ and, finally, concluding thoughts.

As with the subsequent chapters in this dissertation, in addition to expanding the narrative about women in general in these new religious movements, I argue that the women's dedication to the religion or movement itself often superseded their devotion to the individual leaders of these groups. Although in most cases, male leaders were responsible for the creation or co-creation of the movements, the movements themselves became the focus of devotional worship, not the men. For the Branch Davidians, the "ultimate source of authority" was their holy text, the Bible.⁹⁹ David Koresh was simply the teacher, the spiritual guide, and the living prophet who interpreted the Bible for his followers, but he was not worshipped. Some sources, including Clifford L. Linedecker's sensationalized account, state that Koresh was a self-proclaimed

⁹⁸ Although most of my sources, both scholarly and media-based, refer to both the location of the Mount Carmel complex and the cataclysmic event itself as "Waco," I will primarily be using the more accurate term "Mount Carmel" to describe their precise location. I wish to note that the Mount Carmel complex was ten miles outside the city of Waco, Texas.

⁹⁹ Catherine Wessinger, email message to the author, August 5, 2021.

messiah¹⁰⁰; however, others, including Bonnie Haldeman, David Koresh's mother and former Branch Davidian, refute this claim.¹⁰¹ Through dramatic reports such as Linedecker's, members of the media created a larger-than-life charismatic leader in David Koresh when this was an exaggeration or blatantly false, according to the surviving Branch Davidians.

Focusing on the roles of the women and how the women relate to the leader of a movement is a new perspective that adds to the existing scholarship about new religions. James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher write that "opponents of 'cults' often attribute virtually superhuman powers" to these leaders.¹⁰² They also write that charisma is "most often portrayed as simply an inherent personal characteristic," which puts "blame, power, and responsibility" with the leader and absolves the victimized "cult member" of any "personal responsibility for their actions."¹⁰³ Tabor and Gallagher argue that this is a gross misunderstanding of the concept of charisma put forth by German sociologist Max Weber, which is rooted in a social relationship.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, while an individual may claim authority as a charismatic leader, according to Tabor and Gallagher, "unless that charisma is recognized and acted upon by others, it can have no meaningful social consequences," making charisma a relational term, a characteristic which is often ignored by the anti-cult faction.¹⁰⁵ Many popular narratives, including mass media accounts, portray Koresh as a demigod worshipped by a harem of fawning women followers, a man who single-handedly orchestrated the rise and fall of the Branch Davidians. However, as Tabor and Gallagher write, "In a Weberian perspective, the story of

¹⁰⁰ Linedecker, *Massacre at Waco, Texas*, back cover.

¹⁰¹ Wessinger, email message to the author.

¹⁰² James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco?: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 141.

¹⁰³ Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 141.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 141-142.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

Waco cannot be the story of Koresh alone.”¹⁰⁶ This chapter will show that the Branch Davidians came from a long line of leaders for over 150 years, an indication that any one leader of the movement, woman or man, was not as essential as the tenets of the movement itself. This chapter also repositions David Koresh and the relationships that he had with the women of the Branch Davidians, emphasizing devotion to biblical teachings more so than the man himself.

The sources that I have used to construct my arguments come from a variety of authors: former Branch Davidians, interested scholars, journalists, and others. I have largely relied on memoirs by former Branch Davidians Bonnie Haldeman, Sheila Martin, and David Thibodeau for information about their experiences as part of David Koresh’s family and his Bible study group in Waco. The secondary sources that I have consulted include works by religious studies scholars, including Catherine Wessinger, Kenneth G.C. Newport, James D. Tabor, and Eugene V. Gallagher. I have mostly eschewed mass market paperbacks written by journalists shortly after the siege in Waco. As Newport points out, some of these accounts were penned mere weeks after the events unfolded, which is not nearly enough time for thorough information-gathering and deep analysis; furthermore, scholars might be concerned by the lack of citations found in these books.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, I have used these sources only to show how David Koresh was portrayed in media as a charismatic leader, how the members of the Branch Davidians as Koresh’s brainwashed or duped followers through mind control, and the ways in which the extraordinary events that occurred in Waco, Texas, from February 28, 1993 to April 19, 1993 were discussed shortly after the siege unfolded.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Kenneth G.C. Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

2.2 The history of the Branch Davidians, part I: Seventh-day Adventist leaders

The history of the Branch Davidians begins with the history and philosophies of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, despite the Church's later efforts to dissociate itself from David Koresh's group. Like the Branch Davidians, many of whom were Seventh-day Adventists before following Koresh's teachings, this Protestant Christian faith is particularly concerned with the end times and the second coming of Christ. Founder William Miller (1782-1849) predicted the time of Christ's return through precise calculations.¹⁰⁸ These computations came from "encoded answers" found in the symbolism and numerology of the Bible.¹⁰⁹ Starting in 1831, Miller preached that Christ would return in 1843; when that did not happen, the date was revised to October 22, 1844.¹¹⁰ The failure of Christ's appearance was known as the Great Disappointment, for Miller's followers had eagerly expected this event to transpire.¹¹¹ However, this failed expectation did not signal the end of the Seventh-day Adventist tradition, for loyal disciples continued to follow the church's teachings, including observing the Sabbath on Saturday rather than on Sunday, taking the position of conscientious objector in military matters, and following strict dietary guidelines taken from scripture.¹¹²

Ellen G. White (born Ellen Gould Harmon), the "messenger of the Third Angel,"¹¹³ succeeded William Miller's leadership. White, a central figure in the history and development of Seventh-day Adventism, was a vital part of the Church from approximately 1845 until her death

¹⁰⁸ William L. Pitts, "Women Leaders in the Davidian and Branch Davidian Traditions," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 12, no. 4 (2009), 51.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ William Miller was believed to be the messenger of the First and Second Angels of Revelation 14. Dick J. Reavis, *The Ashes of Waco: An Investigation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 57.

in 1915.¹¹⁴ Continuing with the tradition of the church, Seventh-day Adventists administered tests before accepting Ellen White as a “true prophet,” according to religious studies scholar Kenneth G.C. Newport,¹¹⁵ although she referred to herself as a “messenger,” not a prophet.¹¹⁶ These tests included “having believers cover her nose and mouth to see whether she could retain consciousness.”¹¹⁷ Sociologist and new religions scholar Laura Vance contends that as a woman, White was subjected to challenges that would not have been required of her male contemporaries, such as the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith.¹¹⁸ Newport asserts that David Koresh (or Victor Houteff or Benjamin Roden) would have failed these tests, had they been required to take them.¹¹⁹

White received numerous visions throughout her life, beginning when she was a teenager.¹²⁰ The visions numbered in total about three hundred in her eighty-eight years of life.¹²¹ Her followers believed that she had a “special gift of interpreting the Bible,” the revelations of which she put into writing.¹²² By the end of the nineteenth century, White had published more writings than any other woman in history.¹²³ Her works included her masterwork, *The Great Controversy* (1888), and approximately 3,000 writings about angels alone.¹²⁴ Sister White’s prophecies are still acknowledged as the true word from God within the Seventh-day Adventist

¹¹⁴ Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 50.

¹¹⁵ Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 40.

¹¹⁶ Laura Vance, *Women in New Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 53.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 40.

¹²⁰ Vance, *Women in New Religions*, 53.

¹²¹ Reavis, *The Ashes of Waco*, 54.

¹²² Pitts, “Women Leaders,” 52.

¹²³ Reavis, *The Ashes of Waco*, 52.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

Church, and her written works, which are “divinely inspired, truly Christ-centered, and Bible-based,” are still circulated worldwide.¹²⁵

Ellen White encouraged stringent dietary restrictions as interpreted through the Bible. She “insisted that Christians observe an Orthodox Jewish diet,” such as omitting pork and other “unclean” foods.¹²⁶ Dick J. Reavis argues that her “radical interpretation of the scriptures” limited their diet even further, as she also scorned all meats, alcoholic beverages, white flour, mixtures of milk and sugar, and “the custom of taking beverages with meals.”¹²⁷ Many orthodox Seventh-day Adventists still obey these dietary limitations, abstaining from foods such as hamburgers, soft drinks, coffee, and ice cream.¹²⁸

Schools and other institutions were created under White’s leadership. Health sanitariums under the teachings of John Harvey Kellogg (1852-1943) became Adventist hospitals. Educational institutions that segregated Adventist children emerged, as well as other businesses that “cater[ed] to Adventist needs” such as vegetarian grocery stores and restaurants.¹²⁹ These establishments led to enclaves of Adventists living in near proximity, or, as Laura Vance describes them, “Adventist ghettos... [which] reinforce[d] Adventist distinction and shared identity.”¹³⁰ These communities persist for the Seventh-day Adventists, and so it was not such a far stretch for them to evolve into Branch Davidian communes in the later twentieth century.

¹²⁵ In the present, this new religious movement continues to thrive. There were a reported approximately 92,000 Seventh-day Adventist churches and nearly 22 million people calling themselves Seventh-day Adventists as of September 2020, according to the church’s website. Seventh-day Adventist Church website, www.adventist.org, accessed August 9, 2021.

¹²⁶ Reavis, *The Ashes of Waco*, 55.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

¹²⁹ Vance, *Women in New Religions*, 55.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

Therefore, the community at Mount Carmel in Waco did not appear out of nowhere—it was a tradition built upon generations of Adventist belief.

Under White’s direction, women also became more central to the Seventh-day Adventist church. Although before 1860 White did not speak much, if at all, about women’s roles in the ministry, by the next decade she was quite outspoken about the importance of including women in leadership positions.¹³¹ By 1863, women participated in ministerial training for the church.¹³² In 1878 and 1879, White published a three-part series in the *Second Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (the *Review*) “calling for women’s increased participation in religious work, focusing on their work as colporteurs (literature evangelists), but also calling for their contributions in ministry.”¹³³ She believed that women could reach those who perhaps men could not reach, and she pushed for greater education in religious and other matters. For example, Seventh-day Adventist women used the home to gather new converts, eventually branching out to arenas in the outside realm.¹³⁴ In the *Review*, White writes,

I was shown... that there must be with men and women a general waking up to the needs of God’s cause. There is a wide field in which our sisters may do good service for the Master in the various branches of the work connected with his cause. Through missionary labor they can reach a class that our ministers do not... Women of firm principle and decided character are needed... Nothing will deter this class from their duty. Nothing will discourage them in the work. They have faith to work for time and for eternity.¹³⁵

Despite White’s declaration, Adventists did not ordain women. The motion to do so was shelved at the General Conference in 1881 before being put to a vote. White was not present at the meeting because she was mourning the recent loss of her husband, James White. White

¹³¹ Ibid, 57.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 57-58.

¹³⁵ Ellen G. White, “Address and Appeal, Setting Forth the Importance of Missionary Work,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 19 December 1878, in Vance, *Women in New Religions*, 58.

herself was not ordained, for she claimed that being ordained by God was enough and that this title did not need to be affirmed by men.¹³⁶ Laura Vance writes that the failure of the Adventists to ordain women was “not surprising” because despite the pro-women arguments made by White, Adventist women lacked the educational and economic opportunities and advantages from which the men already benefitted.¹³⁷

Ellen G. White also introduced a lasting legacy of aloofness and distrust of government, as she warned against following man’s law over God’s law.¹³⁸ Reavis explains, “That is why Adventists have never been partisan to the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, or other biblio-political movements, left or right.”¹³⁹ These teachings and ideology carried forth for nearly 150 years, from Ellen G. White’s tenure to David Koresh’s reign, as the Branch Davidians were also wary of the government.

White’s leadership in the church gave direction to Seventh-day Adventism, which had been discredited by many after the failed prophecies of the end times under Miller. Religious studies scholar William L. Pitts writes, “[Ellen G.] White... rescued the movement.”¹⁴⁰ The notion of women “rescuing” or somehow “saving” the Seventh-day Adventist/Davidian/Branch Davidian movement became a common one, as Florence Houteff and Lois Roden would be given the same credit during their tenures as the leaders of the Davidians and Branch Davidians, respectively, but this is a narrative seldom told. Although White was an influential member of the Church through her guidance and prophet status (much like David Koresh would become

¹³⁶ Vance, *Women in New Religions*, 59.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Reavis, *The Ashes of Waco*, 55, 56.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 55.

¹⁴⁰ Pitts, "Women Leaders," 52.

decades later for the Branch Davidians at Mount Carmel), the Seventh-day Adventists still valued the Bible and its interpretation as the primary source of truth.¹⁴¹

2.3 The history of the Branch Davidians, part II: Davidian leaders

Victor Houteff (1885-1955), who immigrated to the United States from Bulgaria in 1907, founded the Davidian group in 1929. After attending meetings in Rockport, Illinois, Houteff converted from Bulgarian Orthodox Christianity to Seventh-day Adventism.¹⁴² He then moved to California, where he determined that the Seventh-day Adventists had lost their way, claiming that they had become “lethargic, self-satisfied, and complacent, and were increasingly succumbing to ‘worldly’ influences.”¹⁴³ Houteff believed that he was on a mission from God to “purify the church from within” and to gather together a group of 144,000 [of the most devout followers of the half million Seventh-day Adventists] before the coming of Christ.¹⁴⁴ The group would be called to a “literal, physical, millennial rule on earth,” which differed from previous teachings by Ellen G. White and other Seventh-day Adventists who argued that the “Kingdom of God was a spiritual phenomenon” and that they would “spend the millennium in heaven with Christ, while the earth lay desolate, awaiting the creation of a new heaven and earth following the final Day of Judgment.”¹⁴⁵ Consequently, Houteff penned tracts titled the *Shepherd’s Rod* to outline his beliefs and to call for reform.¹⁴⁶ Seventh-day Adventists widely rejected Victor Houteff’s teachings, thus distancing themselves from Houteff and his newly acquired followers.

¹⁴¹ Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 41.

¹⁴² Pitts, "Women Leaders," 52.

¹⁴³ Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 34.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Pitts, "Women Leaders," 53.

This exodus led to the establishment of the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists (or the Davidians, as they were called by the early 1940s), a group born of Houteff's convictions. The Davidians emphasized Christ's impending return in new ways, a perspective that would be influential for later generations of Davidians and Branch Davidians.¹⁴⁷

Victor Houteff was succeeded by his widow, Florence Houteff, after his death in 1955. She emerged victorious as the leader of the Davidians after a power struggle with at least four other individuals.¹⁴⁸ According to Newport, Houteff had already begun to position herself as the head of the Davidians before her husband's passing.¹⁴⁹ Newport concedes that not many of the specifics about Florence Houteff's takeover exist, as the records have not survived over the ensuing decades, but that Davidian George Saether's account recalls that Florence Houteff immediately assumed the leadership role.¹⁵⁰ Saether stated that Houteff presented her case before the Executive Council, claiming that her husband had verbally appointed her to be the vice president of the Davidians. She was then accepted into this position.¹⁵¹ Florence Houteff did have a privileged position as the wife of the former president, and she had family members serving as officers on the council board.¹⁵² Pitts argues that despite these advantages, Houteff's "legal arguments were more decisive," as she was able to argue her position through the Davidian constitution. He notes that the Executive Council members could not establish their legitimacy because their terms of office, which lasted for one year, had expired.¹⁵³ The legal

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ These contenders for Davidian leadership were M.J. Bingham, M.W. Wolfe, E.T. Wilson, and Ben Roden. Pitts, "Women Leaders," 55; Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 96.

¹⁴⁹ Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 96.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Pitts, "Women Leaders," 55.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

arguments that Florence Houteff made are significant, for they show that marriage to the prophet alone was not enough to gain leadership over the group—Houteff had to overcome rivals and plead her case in front of the board. Eventually, she was accepted as the vice president of the Davidians. In this position, Florence Houteff had much power within the organization. However, according to Davidian resident Glen Green, she was not considered a prophet in the way in which Victor Houteff had been, and her authority was questioned.¹⁵⁴

Florence Houteff interpreted the Bible congruently with Davidian beliefs, espoused the conviction that her late husband would rise from the dead, and made apocalyptic predictions.¹⁵⁵ The end times were meant to take place on April 22, 1959, at which time “the faithful would be slaughtered, then resurrected and carried to heaven on clouds.”¹⁵⁶ The fact that a specific date given was dangerous, according to Newport, as others had done the same in the past, with disastrous results.¹⁵⁷ Sure enough, when the end times did not materialize, there was frustration within the Davidian group, referred to as the Lesser Disappointment, and members departed.¹⁵⁸ This exasperation with yet another failed Apocalypse would lead to the ascension of Benjamin Roden as the leader of the group¹⁵⁹ after Florence Houteff and members of the Executive Council and other positions wrote a letter of resignation dated March 11, 1962.¹⁶⁰ In the letter, the signatories concluded that not all of the teachings of *The Shepherd’s Rod* were in harmony with the Bible,¹⁶¹ thereby admitting some mistake in their unsuccessful prophecies for the end

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 95.

¹⁵⁶ Reavis, *The Ashes of Waco*, 62.

¹⁵⁷ Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 97.

¹⁵⁸ Reavis, *The Ashes of Waco*, 62.

¹⁵⁹ David Thibodeau with Leon Whiteson and Aviva Layton, *Waco: A Survivor’s Story* (New York: Hatchette Books, 2018), 33-34.

¹⁶⁰ Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 110.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

times. This public acknowledgement of error resulted in long-lasting implications for Florence Houteff, as Pitts states that Branch Davidians “do not accord Florence status as a prophet.”¹⁶² The people of the Davidians and Branch Davidians did not depend on leaders and prophets to ensure their loyalty to the movement. They carried forth after the disappointments without the Houteffs, indicating that the religion did not end with failed prophecies made by human error. To the adherents of the movement, the Houteffs were not all-powerful or all-knowing, and the Davidian and Branch Davidian movement continued despite eschatological predictions that never came to fruition.

The Davidian leaders were not inherently charismatic. If we are to follow the Weberian definition of charisma as a relational term, then the meaning assigned to the Houteffs as charismatic leaders would have been put forth by the Davidian devotees themselves. The Houteffs were fallible, for they made miscalculations and other mistakes. I find that they were not charismatic leaders in the sense that anti-cultists would view them—as leaders with inherent, natural-born characteristics that would make them seem worthy of devotion as supreme individuals. Instead, the movement itself was united under biblical study, regardless of who was the current head of the Davidians.

2.4 The history of the Branch Davidians, part III: Branch Davidian leaders

Following Victor and Florence Houteff’s tenures as the leaders of the new religious movement, Benjamin Roden (1902-1978) came to the forefront in 1962. Under Ben Roden’s leadership, the movement began to be known as the Branch Davidians. Roden asserted that he

¹⁶² Pitts, "Women Leaders," 58.

was the anointed “Branch,” to which reference was made by the prophet Zechariah (3:8; 6:12), and that “his task, as the Davidic figure, was to organize the theocratic Kingdom in preparation for Christ’s return.”¹⁶³ Ben Roden also purchased the land that was to become the Mount Carmel complex outside of Waco, Texas, from the Davidian group. The official name on the deed was the General Association of the Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists.¹⁶⁴

Lois Roden, who was married to Ben Roden, became the co-prophet of the movement in 1977 after she received a vision of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶⁵ Roden recalls, “It was at night, between 2 or 3 o’clock, that I saw this vision pass my window. It was of a silver angel, shimmering in the night. It was a feminine representation of this angel. I had been studying Revelation 18 and it said that this mighty angel was to come down to earth and that was my understanding. I had been studying about it.”¹⁶⁶ Following her revelation, Roden was left in a “natural position” to take power after her husband’s passing, according to Pitts.¹⁶⁷ Roden ascended to the head of the Branch Davidians after the death of her husband in 1978,¹⁶⁸ a position she remained in until the mid-1980s, when Vernon Howell (David Koresh) took leadership of the group.

Roden proved to be one of the most influential leaders of the movement, for she altered the group’s long-standing theology in meaningful and lasting ways. Roden introduced to her followers her notion that the Holy Spirit was female, and she continued to emphasize the importance of biblical women throughout her tenure as the leader of the group.¹⁶⁹ Perhaps most

¹⁶³ Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 39.

¹⁶⁴ Wessinger, email message to the author.

¹⁶⁵ Pitts, “Women Leaders,” 59.

¹⁶⁶ “An Interview With Lois Roden,” *The Paul Bryan Talk Show*, 4 November 1980, reprinted in *SHEkinah* vol. 1, no. 1 (December 1980), 8.

¹⁶⁷ Pitts, “Women Leaders,” 59.

¹⁶⁸ Lois Roden called this group The Living Waters Branch. Wessinger, email message to the author.

¹⁶⁹ Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 40.

startlingly, Roden and her followers “excoriated” society for the oppression and subjugation of women.¹⁷⁰ Her criticisms included the Seventh-day Adventist practice of denying ordination to women, and she attacked the Catholic Church, claiming it had purposefully obscured the importance of the Holy Spirit, a practice that was “in league with Satan’s plan to keep the Spirit’s femininity unknown.”¹⁷¹ As evidence of this, Roden cited past writings about the Holy Spirit that were in accordance with her convictions.¹⁷² The feminization of the Holy Trinity and the call for more women in leadership positions did not meet with all the members’ approval, but many remained to listen to Roden’s message.¹⁷³

Another of Lois Roden’s lasting legacies was the publication of *SHEkinah*,¹⁷⁴ a journal that included articles from magazines and newspapers in reference to her teachings.¹⁷⁵ Lois Roden and Branch Davidian Clive Doyle, the editors of *SHEkinah*, directly addressed the controversial stance about the femininity of the Holy Spirit. This is evident by what Roden and Doyle chose to publish: articles, interviews, and even cartoons that clarified Roden’s position about the Holy Spirit and feminism in general as well as giving a voice to the opposition. In the premiere issue of *SHEkinah*, these opposing voices included a Seventh-day Adventist minister, assorted religious students and scholars, and dissenters within the Branch (or the Living Branch, as it was called at the time) itself. On the first page of the first issue of *SHEkinah*, the editors addressed the debate immediately. In a reprinted article from the *Dallas Times Herald*, reporter

¹⁷⁰ Reavis, *The Ashes of Waco*, 65.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Mary Barrineau, “Sect says Holy Spirit is a woman,” *Dallas Times Herald*, 27 October 1980, reprinted in *SHEkinah* vol. 1, no. 1 (December 1980), 1.

¹⁷³ Thibodeau with Whiteson and Layton, *Waco: A Survivor’s Story*, 42.

¹⁷⁴ “Shekinah,” a feminine Hebrew word for the “manifested presence or ‘Spirit’ of God,” indicates the emphasis on the “female aspects of the Divinity.” Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 40.

¹⁷⁵ William L. Pitts, Jr., “SHEkinah: Lois Roden’s Quest for Gender Equality,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, vol. 17, no. 4 (May 2014), 38.

Mary Barrineau writes of Roden losing “nearly half her flock... the male half.” She reports that Perry Jones, a Branch Davidian, voiced his concerns:

“It was terrible,” said one of the men, Perry Jones. “I thought it was blasphemy. I couldn’t sleep at night.” But gradually, Jones and the rest of the men came to accept the unorthodox teaching—that the Holy Trinity consists of the Father, Mother [sic] and Son. Now, living together on a farm east of Waco, Mrs. Roden and her reformist sect members are fighting an uphill battle to convince the rest of the world it’s true.¹⁷⁶

Barrineau continues this sentiment, writing,

They haven’t won any friends in the mainline Seventh-Day [sic] Adventist Church with their teachings, either, particularly since Mrs. Roden believes in ordaining women as ministers. Church leaders have dismissed them as “ridiculous.” “Women preaching is like a dog walking on two legs. It’s interesting but it’s not right,” a Los Angeles preacher told Mrs. Roden’s followers... Mrs. Roden said ordaining women into the ministry is a corollary of their belief in a female Holy Spirit. Just as the Father and Holy Spirit are equals in heaven, so are man and woman equals on earth.¹⁷⁷

The goal of *SHEkinah* was for one to be able to formulate one’s own opinion about Roden’s proposed femininity of the Holy Spirit. In the debut issue of *SHEkinah*, Doyle notes the publication’s mission statement: “In forthcoming issues of ‘Shekinah’ [sic] we want to explore this mystery of the Holy Spirit, the ‘Unknown God,’ from all sides and all angles. You the reader will then be able to choose, knowledgeably, through the convicting power of that Spirit, just what you believe, and be able to ‘give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear’ (1 Pet. 3:15).”¹⁷⁸ Doyle also points out that G.C.

Berkouwer, writing in *Christianity Today* (May 22, 1970) adds this word of caution:

The Word has to be free to remake and reform the Church (and the individual— [ed. Clive Doyle’s addition]) over and over again. The moment the Church loses interest in working the mines of the Word because it thinks it has seen all there is to see, that moment the Church also loses its power and its credibility in the world. When the Church thinks it knows all there is to know, the opportunity for surprising discovery is closed.

¹⁷⁶ Barrineau, “Sect says Holy Spirit,” 1.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Clive Doyle, “From the Editor: The Unknown God,” *SHEkinah*, vol. 1, no. 1 (December 1980), 2.

The Church then becomes old, without perspective, and without light and labor and fruitfulness.¹⁷⁹

The preceding quotation makes it clear that Lois Roden, Clive Doyle, and other faithful members of the Branch were open to new interpretations of scripture, even if those interpretations proved to be unpopular.

Pitts contends that this journal blended religious traditions of the Seventh-day Adventists and Davidians with secular feminism, creating a new dimension to the Branch Davidians.¹⁸⁰ As Pitts argues, this journal helped bridge the gap between the inside world of the Branch Davidians and outside society, as Lois Roden and Clive Doyle's *SHEkinah* "were more captivated by cultural currents than at any other time in their history," according to Pitts.¹⁸¹ However, it should be noted that Roden did not consider herself a feminist. When asked by radio host Paul Bryan if she was a feminist, Roden emphatically responded, "No! I approach the personality of the Holy Spirit as being feminine purely from a Scriptural basis, not from a feminist view."¹⁸² Still, Roden does espouse beliefs consistent with feminist thought, such as equality in ordination, which is controversial within the group and the Seventh-day Adventist Church even in the present,¹⁸³ and some of her notions about women's equality within the Church echo those of Ellen G. White from a century earlier.

Seventh-day Adventist Ellen G. White, Davidian Florence Houteff, and Branch Davidian Lois Roden all exemplified strong female authority over the life of the religious tradition. Their

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Pitts, Jr., "SHEkinah," 38, 40.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 40.

¹⁸² Emphasis in original document. "An Interview With Lois Roden," 9.

¹⁸³ Although women can serve as pastors for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, ordination for women is a more complicated issue that is still debated worldwide within the Church. On August 21, 2022, the Rocky Mountain Conference (RMC) of the Church narrowly voted (51% in favor) to ordain women within the RMC's jurisdiction. Berlin Flores, "Seventh-Day Adventist's Rocky Mountain Conference in Denver Approves Ordination of Women Pastors," *Christianity Daily*, 25 August 2022, christianitydaily.com.

respective leadership also indicated that many people of the movement were unafraid to submit to women's authority.¹⁸⁴ I argue this to be true because the movement itself was the primary focus, not the specific leader at that moment in time. This is especially important when one considers that the gift of prophecy and assumed leadership were not handed down the line, such as in a monarchy, but had to be earned by these women, even if they had been married to the previous prophet. Newport writes, "Numerous publications outline the various 'tests' that an individual must pass in order to be accepted as a true prophet...giving expression to the view that there could be another [prophet]."¹⁸⁵ This shows that leaders, including these women, had to work for the title, and that the group was open to the notion of a new prophet. The authority of women was sometimes affirmed, and other times challenged, not unlike the male leaders of the tradition. Despite these trials, Ellen G. White, Florence Houteff, and Lois Roden united the movement, implementing significant changes to its theology throughout its long history, much like David Koresh would many years later.

2.5 The history of the Branch Davidians, part IV: Vernon Howell

An enthusiastic and knowledgeable young man named Vernon Wayne Howell, who was not yet known as the more recognizable name of David Koresh,¹⁸⁶ appeared at the Mount Carmel community in 1981 during Lois Roden's tenure. In addition to showing great interest in music and playing guitar, Howell was a serious student of religion, and of the Seventh-day Adventist

¹⁸⁴ Pitts, "Women Leaders," 52.

¹⁸⁵ Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 40.

¹⁸⁶ For the sake of accuracy, I will refer to David Koresh as Vernon Howell before he changed his name in 1990. His mother, Bonnie Haldeman, calls her son by "David" from when he was nineteen until his death in 1993 at thirty-three, although he did not change his name until he was thirty or thirty-one. Wessinger in Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, xi.

and Davidian traditions especially. Branch Davidian Annetta Richards found his understanding of the Bible particularly impressive.¹⁸⁷ Richards, who had been a Seventh-day Adventist for over thirty years before joining the Branch Davidians, recalls in an interview that the man she knew as David Koresh claimed to have just a ninth-grade education, yet “his knowledge surpassed his schooling [and] his education.”¹⁸⁸ The former Branch Davidian Richards marvels that he was able to explain the holy books so well that “even a child could understand,”¹⁸⁹ which could explain his mass appeal to people of all origins.

Vernon Howell did not initially make much of an impression as the charismatic leader that he would later be labeled by the media. Journalist Clifford L. Linedecker argues quite sensationally and without much substantiation that the man who would become David Koresh “used his rock-star good looks [and] his dark sexual charisma” to “woo hundreds to a desolate spit of Texas land, where he preached Armageddon and lived like a king.”¹⁹⁰ These types of reports indicated that Howell somehow had an innate charisma that drew the Branch Davidians to him; however, the devotional aspects of the religious group outweighed any charms the individual man may have possessed. The disciples followed scripture and the message of the group as interpreted by Howell, not Howell himself.

Furthermore, others saw Vernon Howell quite differently than was suggested by Linedecker’s description of the prophet. Reavis argues that Howell was “far from being charismatic [and] had in most senses only been a redneck from the suburbs of Dallas.”¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ Clarence Waldron, “Two black women tell why they followed white cult leader,” *Jet* vol. 84, no. 2 (May 10, 1993), accessed August 8, 2021, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A13805691/AONE?u=milwaukee&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=7a915309>.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Linedecker, *Massacre at Waco, Texas*, back cover.

¹⁹¹ Reavis, *The Ashes of Waco*, 15.

Likewise, David Thibodeau, a disciple in Mount Carmel, describes the leader as “a skinny, casual kind of guy, not charismatic or physically compelling.”¹⁹² Kathryn Schroeder, who would become one of Howell’s wives years later, was similarly unimpressed with the prophet. She did not care for Howell much at first, although her admiration for his convincing biblical interpretations ultimately endeared him to her.¹⁹³ Even Howell’s mother, Bonnie Haldeman, did not see him as “a Christ.”¹⁹⁴ This further shows that it was the mission and movement that were the primary interests to the group’s members, not the adulation of Vernon Howell as anyone more than a knowledgeable and persuasive teacher of the Bible. Howell eventually took over the movement after Lois Roden’s death in 1986, calling the assembly simply “Bible Study group,”¹⁹⁵ although the organization is better known by the more formal title of the Branch Davidians.

Howell’s takeover was not without controversy. Ben and Lois Roden’s son, the violent and unpredictable George Roden, also claimed authority over the Branch Davidians. A power struggle between Howell and George Roden ensued, intensifying between 1984 and 1988.¹⁹⁶ The younger Roden frequently threatened Howell with assault and he had “taken to wearing a .357 Magnum pistol on his hip to the Bible study meetings and often threated [Howell] and those who backed him,” which split the group into two warring factions, write Tabor and Gallagher.¹⁹⁷ Howell ultimately emerged victorious after George Roden was found guilty of an unrelated

¹⁹² Thibodeau with Whiteson and Layton, *Waco: A Survivor’s Story*, xii.

¹⁹³ Wessinger, email message to the author.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 42-43.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

murder. Roden was sentenced to time at a state hospital by reason of insanity in 1988,¹⁹⁸ where he remained until his death in 1998.¹⁹⁹

2.6 David Koresh and the expansion of the Branch Davidians

Vernon Wayne Howell, now the uncontested leader of the reunited Branch Davidians, changed his name to David Koresh in 1990. Although Howell argued in court that his new name was for the purpose of his musical career, Newport argues that his reasoning was more theological in nature.²⁰⁰ Howell took his new first name from King David to indicate his connection to the Davidic tradition²⁰¹ and his belief that he was the “antitypical King David who had come to rule in the new kingdom.”²⁰² The surname Koresh originated from the Hebrew word for Cyrus, king of the Persians and messianic figure (Isaiah 45:1) who freed Jewish captives from the Babylonians, and with whom Howell identified.²⁰³ This self-chosen new name suggests a marked shift from ordinary man Vernon Howell to extraordinary religious leader and prophet David Koresh.

Koresh’s ascension to the top of the Branch Davidian hierarchy came mostly through hard work, persistence, and extensive knowledge of the Bible, which he interpreted in new and convincing ways. Whereas past prophets received visions from God that shaped their worldviews and theological beliefs prior to becoming the leader of the movement, Koresh could be considered a “self-made” man because of his later revelations. He did not receive his influential

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 43.

¹⁹⁹ Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 196.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 204.

²⁰¹ Wessinger in Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 126.

²⁰² Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 216.

²⁰³ Wessinger in Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 126.

New Light vision from God until 1989, which shifted the focus of the group from individuals to community and family. This differed from the women prophets before him, who became leaders of the organization *because* they were first and foremost conduits of God; for example, Ellen G. White received visions from a young age and then ascended to a powerful position in the Seventh-day Adventist tradition. The man born Vernon Wayne Howell even changed his given name to one that might lend more credibility to his assertions of an elevated status.

The man now known as David Koresh was said to be the Lamb of God. His mission was to open the Seven Seals, after which his followers at Mount Carmel would lead 144,000 souls,²⁰⁴ a key difference from the role of past prophets. This marked change can most likely be attributed to Koresh himself, as he expanded the theological beliefs of the group to include himself and his progeny as key to Armageddon—they were not simple observers, as past prophets had been, but active participants. James D. Tabor and J. Phillip Arnold explain,

The key to understanding Koresh and his perception of identity and mission clearly centers on one question from the book of Revelation: “Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?” (Rev: 5:2). The text identifies a figure known as the Lamb, or “Root [Branch] of David,” who alone is able to open this mysterious book sealed with Seven Seals (Rev. 5:5). Traditional Christianity, of course, always understood this figure as Jesus Christ... [While Koresh did not claim to be Jesus Christ] he certainly *did* claim to be the Lamb who opens the sealed scroll, as well as the figure who rides the White Horse when the First Seal is opened and who appears at the end of the book, still mounted on the same White Horse, when the “marriage of the Lamb” takes place (Rev. 6:1-2, 19:7-19) [emphasis Tabor and Arnold’s].²⁰⁵

Therefore, while Tabor and Arnold argue that Koresh did not see himself as Jesus Christ, he did believe that he would play a major role in the impending Armageddon. This was a change from

²⁰⁴ Thibodeau with Whiteson and Layton, *Waco: A Survivor’s Story*, 49.

²⁰⁵ James D. Tabor and J. Phillip Arnold, “Commentary on the Koresh Manuscript,” in Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 205.

past versions of the movement, in which the prophets did not claim to have active roles in the end times but could make apocalyptic predictions through careful calculations.

David Koresh traveled the world, looking to expand his flock of disciples. He was accompanied first by his father-in-law, established Branch Davidian member Perry Jones, and later, other early and vital members of the movement. Although mostly men accompanied Koresh, convert Elizabeth Baranyai was instrumental to the recruitment process in Australia, setting up meetings between Koresh and potential converts before his arrival.²⁰⁶ Koresh also visited Seventh-day Adventist churches in California to spread his message, but he was said to have lacked the confidence during his sermons that he would gain in the years to follow,²⁰⁷ so he relied upon his fellow missionaries to make connections. He met the Australian Clive Doyle, who assisted in recruiting new members of the fold through previously established connections. Doyle had been a loyal member of the movement since 1966, when he arrived at Mount Carmel, and served as the co-editor of Lois Roden's journal, *SHEkinah*, in the early 1980s. In addition to visiting Australia, Koresh sent audio tapes to potential converts who had already shown interest in the group. After his time in Australia, Koresh trekked to Hawaii, Wisconsin, and other areas of the continental United States. While the Hawaii trip proved to be fruitful, Koresh's venture in Wisconsin was not as successful. This failure was attributed in part to Branch Davidian deputy Steve Schneider's sister, who spread the word that Koresh and her brother were simply "wrong" about their message, deterring potential members.²⁰⁸ Even so, Koresh and his cohort managed to gain a following from other parts of the United States and other countries, bringing many individuals and families to Mount Carmel to hear his teachings.

²⁰⁶ Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 192.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 193-194.

2.7 New roles for Branch Davidian women under David Koresh's leadership

During David Koresh's reign of the Branch Davidians, roles for women and for the role of the prophet shifted. No longer did women head the organization, as Ellen G. White, Florence Houteff, and Lois Roden did during different times over the past century-and-a-half. The change in leadership to a male prophet was not terribly unusual in the group—the organization's leadership had been interspersed with men, including Victor Houteff and Ben Roden, in between the aforementioned women. In sum, the leadership of the Branch Davidian tradition alternated between female and male prophets; therefore, it does not appear that there was an outright denigration of any gender over the duration of the group's history.

The women of the Branch Davidians under David Koresh existed within a patriarchal system. This was not unusual, for men and women usually worked in separate spheres within this movement, with most women operating in vital behind-the-scenes capacities while men held more highly recognized titles and positions. Unlike Peoples Temple or the Rajneesh movement, where women often worked alongside Reverend Jim Jones or Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh near the top of the hierarchy and sometimes even superseded his authority, Koresh's right-hand man and deputy was a man named Steve Schneider.²⁰⁹ However, the power held by men appears to have been agreeable to most of the women Branch Davidians, as the group offered sought-after stability and cultural familiarity regarding gender roles under this structure. The women believed that they were doing God's work, as interpreted by the prophet and teacher. They lived as wives of Koresh, the mothers of his children, and as rank and file students under the prophet's

²⁰⁹ Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 27.

guidance. This arrangement was not so different from earlier versions of the organization, for even under the leadership of Ellen G. White, Florence Houteff, and Lois Roden, women were primarily disciples who learned scripture and the interpretations put forth by the current prophet. One of David Koresh's contributions to the Branch Davidians was to prioritize family on the list of women's duties in the movement, as the once private sphere of women's lives became more public and was essential to building the community in Mount Carmel.

2.8 Biblical devotion and worship in Mount Carmel

The Branch Davidians' days revolved around Bible study under prophet David Koresh's guidance. Twice a day, the disciples gathered to hear Koresh's lectures.²¹⁰ They also took communion twice a day,²¹¹ at three and nine hours past sunrise, as they interpreted the Old Testament to mean.²¹² The group added daily foot washing to their routine,²¹³ which Seventh-day Adventists do only four times a year; however, the Branch Davidians understood the word "often" in the Bible to indicate that foot washing could be a meaningful daily activity.²¹⁴ The group celebrated Passover and the Day of Atonement annually, bringing in many visitors to Mount Carmel. This became a time of Bible study more so than enacting rituals, as Koresh was opposed to the performance aspect of ceremonies.²¹⁵ Because they eschewed many trappings of any particular organized or traditional religion, the group was considered by Bonnie Haldeman,

²¹⁰ Bonnie Haldeman, ed. Catherine Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 34.

²¹¹ Martin, ed. Wessinger, *When They Were Mine*, 22.

²¹² Thibodeau with Whiteson and Layton, *Waco: A Survivor's Story*, 28.

²¹³ Foot washing was a typical practice for Seventh-day Adventists as far back as the nineteenth century under Ellen G. White's leadership and was not the invention of David Koresh. Vance, *Women in New Religions*, 56.

²¹⁴ Martin, ed. Wessinger, *When They Were Mine*, 22.

²¹⁵ Thibodeau with Whiteson and Layton, *Waco: A Survivor's Story*, 71.

Koresh's mother, as "kind of non-denominational in a sense."²¹⁶ The members simply saw themselves as devout students of the Bible or as members of David Koresh's family, according to David Thibodeau,²¹⁷ and not as the cult that they would be later be labeled by members of the media and even some scholars.

Thibodeau's acknowledgment of the members of the Branch Davidians considering themselves members of Koresh's family is an important one, and different from the relationships adherents had with past prophets. The turn towards an emphasis on family under his leadership is a sign of Koresh's higher status within the group; that is, his transition from Brother David, one member of the flock, to Father David, the uncontested and patriarchal head of the flock. Past versions of the Davidian tradition more closely resembled typical structures of religious organizations, with a leader/follower dynamic between the prophet or co-prophets and the disciples. However, under Koresh, the students became intimately bound to their teacher through marriage or biology, as he sought to expand and strengthen his leadership in the House of David, as his extended family unit was known.

The appearances of Koresh's disciples more closely resembled an orthodox religious movement. Women dressed differently than most women outside of Mount Carmel. David Thibodeau recalls that they wore "very sober clothes, long skirts and tops, and no makeup. Their only female extravagance was their long hair,"²¹⁸ perhaps in the vein of traditionalist Seventh-

²¹⁶ Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 54.

²¹⁷ Wessinger in Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 138. Some of the survivors of the group, including David Thibodeau, have rejected the label "Branch Davidians," calling themselves students of the Bible or family members of David Koresh instead. However, I will use the name "Branch Davidians" to describe these students and the community, as the use of this terminology seems to be the consensus of scholars, other survivors, and members of the media.

²¹⁸ Thibodeau with Whiteson and Layton, *Waco: A Survivor's Story*, 29.

day Adventist women. In this way, the women defied convention during their time and showed their devotion to the movement.

While the biblical message itself was the source of commitment for Branch Davidians, David Koresh's unique theological interpretations should not be discounted. Eschatology was the focus of the group's lessons, with the King James Version of the Book of Revelation emphasized in the movement.²¹⁹ The focus on the end times was not new to this tradition, for the Seventh-day Adventists and Davidians had also made millennial predictions. Koresh explained that there would be an apocalyptic end to the world, brought about by the opening of the Seven Seals. As the God-appointed Lamb of God (according to Koresh), or Lamb of Revelation, he would play an important role in the Apocalypse. Koresh told his followers that only he could interpret the Bible correctly, for he was the true living prophet.²²⁰ Koresh referenced Joel 2:23, which speaks of an early and later "rain," indicating a teacher to come, who would be essential for "proper understanding."²²¹ This would be Koresh himself. If Koresh was a false prophet or a charlatan, then the Bible itself was unreliable, write Tabor and Gallagher of the Branch Davidians' beliefs,²²² despite previous "disappointments," which did not end the religious tradition. Tabor and Gallagher continue,

This is the measure of [the Branch Davidians'] conviction that what he had shown them in the texts of the Scripture was unrivaled in their experience. The twenty-two adults, most of whom died in the April 19 fire, who were interviewed on video tape on March 8 inside Mount Carmel, say much the same thing when asked what led them to become part of the group. Each in his or her own way tells of being drawn to the group because of the way in which David Koresh expounded the Scriptures.²²³

²¹⁹ Seventh-day Adventists do not currently prefer any one version of the Bible over another. Email to the author from the Seventh-day Adventist Church representative "Hellen," September 1, 2022.

²²⁰ Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 28.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid.*, 29.

²²³ *Ibid.*

Therefore, while the interpretation of scripture was what kept the group together, I admit that Koresh's specific interpretation was appealing to many curious disciples and committed followers. While David Koresh himself was not the focus of worship for Branch Davidians, his teachings did attract and retain many followers in Mount Carmel.

The group began to prepare themselves for the ultimate battle that was to take place during the Apocalypse. According to former member Sheila Martin, the Branch Davidians were trained to become an army of God. Martin writes, "Armies do not sit with lemonade under the trees relaxing. They're supposed to be ready at a moment's notice. We recognized then that God was trying to get us to realize that no matter where we came from in our earlier lives, our whole thinking had to be very different now."²²⁴ Therefore, I argue that this "different" thinking was a return to the religious tradition's nineteenth-century urgency of preparing for the imminent end times, beginning with William Miller.

2.9 Family and community

Under David Koresh's leadership, family became the nucleus of the Branch Davidians as members were bound to one another like never before in this religious tradition. Koresh's mother, Bonnie Haldeman, describes the group as "one big happy family,"²²⁵ an observation that might have seemed unusual in popular accounts of the group. Although members had been living at Mount Carmel in close quarters since its purchase, family had never been made so important; however, as the House of David would play a key role in the Armageddon, it became necessary to emphasize the family unit. Tying members together through marriage and subsequent children

²²⁴ Martin, ed. Wessinger, *When They Were Mine*, 38.

²²⁵ Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 96.

also became a way for Koresh to consolidate his power and influence over the disciples of the movement, as this “one big happy family” became bound together in new ways not seen under previous prophets’ leadership.

The global nature of the community and the diversity of the Branch Davidian population under David Koresh’s leadership often goes unnoted. Tabor and Gallagher report that during the 1980s and 1990s, people came from all over the United States, as well as countries such as Britain, Canada, Australia, Israel, Mexico, Jamaica, the Philippines, and New Zealand, to hear David Koresh’s teachings.²²⁶ Tabor and Gallagher write that “at least half [of the approximately 130 members living in Mount Carmel during the siege] were foreign nationals, with one-third of the group from Britain. Over half of the community members were people of color: about forty-five were Black, and another twenty-five were either Asian or Hispanic. Often, they came with families,”²²⁷ which runs counter to the usual account of cult membership as young, white, and educated people. Of these members, Tabor and Gallagher write that 42 were men, 46 were women, and 43 were children aged sixteen or younger.²²⁸ The members were from all different educational backgrounds as well. Former Branch Davidian Annetta Richards, a 62-year-old registered nurse, reports that “every professional person that you can think of...has been in the group.”²²⁹ Bonnie Haldeman recalls that people came to Mount Carmel because they had met Koresh and liked his message, while children were “born into it.”²³⁰ The adult followers wanted to be in closer proximity to the prophet, sometimes giving up their homes, families, and

²²⁶ Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 24.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

²²⁹ Clarence Waldron, “Two black women tell why,” *Jet*.

²³⁰ Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 94.

businesses to do so.²³¹ In Mount Carmel, the religious seekers found a new home, one with likeminded people who had gathered from around the world to form a new community under his guidance.

For the most part, women and men had segregated tasks. Tabor and Gallagher write that there was much work to do in the community of Mount Carmel, including “providing daily meals for over one hundred people, schooling the children, and maintaining the property.”²³² The women cared for the community’s children, cooked, sewed, and made clothing to sell. The men constructed buildings at Mount Carmel and worked other jobs inside and outside of the community, such as auto repair and landscaping.²³³ Some women also worked jobs outside of Mount Carmel; for example, Koresh’s mother, Bonnie Haldeman, attended nursing classes and worked as a nurse. By her own testimony, her son was supportive of these endeavors, despite his frequent wariness of the world outside of the complex.²³⁴

2.10 The children of Waco

The children of Waco were vital to the Branch Davidian movement. They participated in group activities, including long Bible study sessions.²³⁵ The children were homeschooled at Mount Carmel, as Koresh did not trust secular schools to educate them properly.²³⁶ Older children read to the younger ones and taught them theology and other subjects.²³⁷ According to David Thibodeau, a resident of Mount Carmel, the children “were all brothers and sisters to one

²³¹ Ibid, 95.

²³² Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 32.

²³³ Thibodeau with Whiteson and Layton, *Waco: A Survivor’s Story*, 28.

²³⁴ Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 64-65.

²³⁵ Thibodeau with Whiteson and Layton, *Waco: A Survivor’s Story*, 113.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

another, playing games and studying as equals.”²³⁸ Koresh’s biological children were born in Mount Carmel, delivered by midwives, as the prophet often did not trust the outside world. One major exception to this was for the employment of Branch Davidian adults in nearby cities, for which Koresh showed his support.²³⁹ For the children of the group, the situation was different. For example, they were not permitted birth certificates, for they “belonged to God, not the state,” according to David Koresh.²⁴⁰

The community was not without its troubles, particularly as viewed from the outside. Alleged child abuse at the complex became a concern, one which the government would use to make its case for the siege of 1993 despite an investigation by Child Protective Services (CPS) that returned no reports of abuse due to lack of evidence.²⁴¹ These claims were made by Branch Davidian defectors as well as the ATF, who put the charges in an affidavit after visiting the complex.²⁴² Some argue that children in Mount Carmel were excessively punished for misbehaviors. As an insider, Bonnie Haldeman asserts that the children of the Branch Davidians were not abused. She remembers the following:

There was a paddling stick on the wall in the kitchen for the children. Most people had their own little wooden paddles... When children misbehaved, the mothers were usually the ones who took them back to the pantry and put them across their knees and told them why they were being disciplined. They would go back in private and just pat them on their little butts. They didn’t leave bruises. And then they would love them.²⁴³

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 49, 64-65.

²⁴⁰ Thibodeau with Whiteson and Layton, *Waco: A Survivor’s Story*, 105.

²⁴¹ Wessinger in Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 145.

²⁴² The ATF also had an undercover agent, Robert Rodriguez (known to the Branch Davidians as Robert Gonzalez), infiltrating the group when these charges were made. Wessinger in Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 144-145.

²⁴³ Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 100.

David Thibodeau, a former student of David Koresh, does admit that he witnessed “strict but fair” discipline, which included spanking.²⁴⁴ This punishment could sometimes be quite hard, but Koresh argued that the purpose of the paddling was to “show a child how to behave, not as a release for grownups’ frustrations,” and Thibodeau remarks that “the whole chastisement was carried out coolly, with a kind of old-fashioned solemnity.”²⁴⁵ Furthermore, an attorney for the Branch Davidians argued that society should not interject with its own values (or “yuppie values,” as he called them), which were placed upon the group.²⁴⁶

Despite describing physical punishment used against the children of the group by some parents, former Branch Davidian Bonnie Haldeman maintains that the children of Mount Carmel were happy. She states: “I’ve got to say those kids loved David [Koresh]... [When he] set up his musical equipment on that stage and played, the kids were always right there. Or if he came down from the stage, they would want to sit on his lap. Those kids all loved David.”²⁴⁷ Of course, children can love their father *and* be on the receiving end of corporal punishment simultaneously, but Haldeman also recalls, “I don’t ever remember seeing David spank a child.”²⁴⁸ Therefore, according to some members of the group’s own testimony, children living in Mount Carmel were not punished any more strictly than children who were not Branch Davidians and who lived outside of the community.

Catherine Wessinger also argues against the allegations of child abuse, writing that these charges could have been exaggerations from defectors’ recollections.²⁴⁹ Bonnie Haldeman names

²⁴⁴ Thibodeau with Whiteson and Layton, *Waco: A Survivor’s Story*, 114.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 114-115.

²⁴⁷ Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 99.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven’s Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000), 63.

apostates Marc Breault and Elizabeth Baranyai as the perpetrators of these charges, which were made prior to the FBI siege.²⁵⁰ Wessinger acknowledges that it was standard Davidian practice to spank children with a wooden spoon named “the helper” in a “whipping room,” but also argues that this is common practice for children of conservative Protestant denominations.²⁵¹ Former Branch Davidian Annetta Richards maintains that “there was no indication of child abuse... Those children were well cared for.”²⁵² The practice of spanking children was and is still controversial and a fine line between punishment and child abuse exists. Undeniably, even with the concerns about child abuse, which CPS found to be unsubstantiated, the Branch Davidians did not deserve to die because of these allegations. Wessinger also points out that the federal raid involved 2-chlorobenzylidene malononitrile (CS) gas, which killed the very children that the government had claimed to be protecting from the adult Branch Davidians.

The child abuse accusations, which were intermingled with firearms charges, came as a part of BATF agent Davy Aguilera’s “Probable Cause Affidavit.” Aguilera’s document was signed by U.S. Magistrate Judge Dennis Green on February 25, 1993, and was used to obtain the search warrant of the Mount Carmel complex.²⁵³ In Aguilera’s report, former members of the Branch Davidians who had left the group²⁵⁴ claimed that Koresh and others at Mount Carmel were abusing children and performed “unconventional sexual practices” in the community.²⁵⁵ Tabor and Gallagher claim that their “animus” against Koresh and disapproval of his leadership

²⁵⁰ Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 41.

²⁵¹ Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 63.

²⁵² Waldron, “Two black women tell why,” *Jet*.

²⁵³ Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 100.

²⁵⁴ Aguilera’s interviews were with former members Robyn Bunds, Jeannine Bunds, Deborah Sue Bunds, Poia Vaega, Marc Breault, and David Block, all of whom had left the group voluntarily. Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 101.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 100.

“decisively shaped Aguilera’s expectations and opinions,” leading him to report about more than the firearms charges he was meant to be investigating.²⁵⁶ Tabor and Gallagher point out that these child abuse accusations were outside of BATF jurisdiction. Furthermore, Aguilera failed to mention in his report that the Texas Department of Human Services did not find sufficient evidence of child abuse within the group.²⁵⁷ Still, the introduction of these charges raised questions about the Branch Davidians and established an urgency of government investigation and intervention.

The allegations against the Branch Davidians also included statutory rape. Kiri Jewell, the daughter of Branch Davidians David and Sherri Jewell, testified in a congressional hearing that at ten years old, she had been left alone in a hotel room with Koresh, where he engaged in sexual acts with the minor.²⁵⁸ These charges have been denied by Branch Davidian survivors and Ruth Mosher, Kiri Jewell’s grandmother.²⁵⁹ However, Jewell’s story remains important, as the Waco survivor’s testimonials may reveal insight into the character of David Koresh and the dynamics between the leader and his congregation, particularly the girls and young women of the Branch Davidians at the Mount Carmel complex, and these charges are more troubling than any spankings the children may have received.

2.11 Plural marriage, spiritual brides, and New Light revelations

In October 1989, Koresh returned to his flock with a startling revelation from God, which was termed the New Light message. Former Branch Davidian Sheila Martin states that Koresh

²⁵⁶ Ibid, 101.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Wessinger in Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 135.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

asked many questions of his followers regarding marriage and other intimate pairings, stressing the importance of communal love over individual love.²⁶⁰ He cited Zechariah 12:12-14, which states that “people are going to mourn apart from their mates,” Martin writes.²⁶¹ Koresh advised the single men of the commune to stay uncoupled, as their true match would be revealed by God in the kingdom.²⁶² For those already paired, Koresh declared that their chosen partner may not have been the same choice made for them by God.²⁶³ Martin recalls that Koresh pointed out the superficiality of relationships, writing that the prophet told the group that “maybe you husbands and wives do not really love each other, you just love parts of your bodies,” encouraging his disciples to reconsider their current relationships as part of his New Light message.²⁶⁴

David Koresh’s practice of marrying young women and girls to call his “spiritual brides” was one of the most controversial aspects of the Branch Davidians under his leadership. Many of these women and girls would bear Koresh’s children in the House of David, the name for Koresh’s large family. However, the spiritual brides of Koresh were protected by the Branch Davidian community. Wessinger writes that “the young women were legally married to other Davidian men in order to protect Koresh from charges of statutory rape, but the young women were considered Koresh’s wives by members of the community.”²⁶⁵ Sheila Martin, a Branch Davidian since 1985, states in an interview with *Jet* magazine that the group “accepted what the message was as far as what [Koresh] had said that God wanted righteous children and that David in the Bible had 800 wives.”²⁶⁶ Thus, by using the example of the Bible, Koresh and other

²⁶⁰ Martin, ed. Wessinger, *When They Were Mine*, 42, 43.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 42, 43.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁶⁵ Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 63.

²⁶⁶ Clarence Waldron, “Two black women tell why,” *Jet*.

Branch Davidians justified plural and child marriage within the group, yet they circumvented any potential legal issues that may have arisen in the world outside of Mount Carmel.

David Koresh was sometimes known as the “sinful messiah” because he claimed that he was taking the burden of sex and sin from his disciples, upon whom Koresh imposed celibacy.²⁶⁷ Former Branch Davidian Marc Breault wrote a seven-part series in the *Waco Tribune-Herald* under the title of “The Sinful Messiah.” As the sinful messiah, Koresh was imperfect, unlike Yeshua (Jesus), for he would marry and have children.²⁶⁸ These progeny would be “the Lord’s children,” and Koresh was meant to sire twenty-four of them to represent the twenty-four elders discussed in the Book of Revelation (4:4 and 5:10).²⁶⁹ These children would “participate in the judgment of humanity and help rule God’s kingdom,” according to Wessinger.²⁷⁰ This is a marked difference from the roles of past leaders in the Branch Davidian tradition and under Seventh-day Adventists, for they did not insist upon celibacy for their disciples, nor were they polygamous.

David Koresh’s legal marriage to fourteen-year-old Rachel Jones in Texas set a controversial precedent for taking young brides. After his marriage to Jones, Koresh brought other spiritual brides and sexual partners into the House of David, some as young as twelve and thirteen years old. These relationships began after Koresh returned from Jerusalem, where he received a vision on Mount Zion in 1985.²⁷¹ Koresh relayed to the Branch Davidians that he had

²⁶⁷ An unrelated American man, Cyrus R. Teed, made similar statements about being a “sin-blotched savior,” whereas Jesus was the “perfect Messiah.” Teed (who went by the name Koresh) and his followers established a utopian community near Fort Myers, Florida. The founder died from natural causes in 1908 and there are “no traces” of a Koreshan movement at the time of Reavis’ writing on the matter. Reavis, *The Ashes of Waco*, 90-92.

²⁶⁸ Wessinger in Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 133.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Thibodeau with Whiteson and Layton, *Waco: A Survivor’s Story*, 103.

received a command from God to impregnate his wife's eleven-year-old sister, Michele.²⁷²

According to David Thibodeau, Rachel was “devasted” at the news that her young sister was to be taken as one of Koresh's brides with the expectation that the younger Jones would bear his children.²⁷³ However, because these orders came from God, according to the prophet Koresh, the family acquiesced.

These dictated couplings became standard practice for the group's leader and his young brides,²⁷⁴ as Koresh's religious teachings originated from divine instruction and often went unchallenged by the devotees, many of whom saw the procreation of Koresh's children as “central to their communal goals.”²⁷⁵ Newport writes, “The women saw it as an honour to bear Koresh's children; the men saw it as a sacrifice that had to be made, tough as it was.”²⁷⁶ Another possibility seems “obvious” to Newport: [David Koresh's] “sheer sexual gratification, and the sense of power that he got over the whole group by virtue of having exclusive sexual access to the women of the community.”²⁷⁷ Newport points out that Koresh certainly did get a “huge ego boost” from these relationships. While this could be the case, Newport also writes that the collective interest of the group in Mount Carmel was prioritized over the individual's needs, and that these two explanations for Koresh's young spiritual brides—to boost Koresh's ego or to act in the self-interest of the group—were not mutually exclusive.²⁷⁸

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ David Koresh's “spiritual brides” welcomed into the “House of David” included girls as young as twelve, although he did partner with adult women as well. David Thibodeau lists some of the young brides: Michele Jones (12), Aisha Gyarfas (13), Karen Doyle (14), Robyn Bunds (17), Nicole Gent (19), and Dana Okimoto (20). Thibodeau with Whiteson and Layton, *Waco: A Survivor's Story*, 105.

²⁷⁵ Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 203.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid, 202-203.

Koresh claimed that only he should propagate children; therefore, the men of the community must practice celibacy.²⁷⁹ Sex and intimacy between the disciples would distract from their greater purpose as students of the Bible striving to develop their spiritual lives and devotion.²⁸⁰ Thibodeau wondered if some of these revelations were not revelations at all, but perhaps a test for Koresh's disciples to judge their devotion to the man and the movement.²⁸¹ Although not all the followers agreed with the New Light revelations, the word of God as interpreted through David Koresh was the divine guidance that many Branch Davidians looked to for answers in matters such as sex, love, and marriage. Those who disagreed with Koresh's New Light revelations were free to leave the group.

2.12 The end times: Armageddon in Waco, Texas

Controversy surrounds the Branch Davidians' apocalyptic end in the Mount Carmel complex near Waco, Texas. Wessinger calls the FBI and BATF raids on the compound "completely unnecessary,"²⁸² as the religious studies scholar does not consider the group to have been dangerous. The incredible events of the siege were obvious. Armageddon was televised. Thibodeau recalls the stand-off:

It is hell. Day and night booming speakers blast us with wild sounds—blaring sirens, shrieking seagulls, howling coyotes, wailing bagpipes, crying babies, the screams of strangled rabbits, crowing roosters, buzzing dental drills, off-the-hook telephone signals. The cacophony of speeding trains and hovering helicopters alternates with amplified recordings of Christmas carols, Islamic prayer calls, Buddhist chants, and repeated renderings of whiny Alice Cooper and Nancy Sinatra's pounding, clunky lyric, "These Boots Were Made for Walking." Through the night the glare of brilliant stadium lights

²⁷⁹ Wessinger in Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 133.

²⁸⁰ Thibodeau with Whiteson and Layton, *Waco: A Survivor's Story*, 49.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁸² Wessinger in Haldeman, ed. Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 252.

turns our property into a giant fishbowl. The young children and babies in our care, most under eight years old, are terrified.²⁸³

Whether or not the Branch Davidians were a threat to outsiders or to themselves has been debated. Wessinger describes the Branch Davidians as an example of a catastrophic millennial group that was assaulted by the United States government.²⁸⁴ She argues that Koresh's students were not a fragile millennial group, for they experienced no "internal weaknesses that made the believers despair about the accomplishment of their ultimate concern."²⁸⁵ Thibodeau agrees, writing in his memoir that he and his fellow Bible students had "long lived in peace with our neighbors," and that "above all, we have never threatened anyone."²⁸⁶

The widespread media coverage of the events in the small, rural area near Waco, Texas, unfolded in an increasingly public and sensationalized way. Many people wondered why David Koresh and his most loyal followers and family members did not simply surrender themselves to the authorities as directed to by federal negotiators. However, after voluntarily leaving the complex during the standoff, Branch Davidian Sheila Martin was arrested as a material witness and was placed in a shelter, and her three children were sent to a foster home.²⁸⁷ Others met the same fate. This startling consequence might have frightened many Branch Davidians into remaining in the complex with their families.

A more likely or additional scenario was that the self-proclaimed students of the Bible were holding fast to their religious faith inside Mount Carmel during the 51-day standoff with the government. As noted earlier, the prophet Ellen G. White had conveyed her distrust of the

²⁸³ Thibodeau with Whiteson and Layton, *Waco: A Survivor's Story*, vii.

²⁸⁴ Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 56.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Thibodeau with Whiteson and Layton, *Waco: A Survivor's Story*, ix.

²⁸⁷ Waldron, "Two black women tell why," *Jet*.

government to the Seventh-day Adventists, some of whom became Branch Davidians and still followed the principle of God's law over man's law. Martin recalls of the people left in Mount Carmel during the siege, "We were waiting for God to give the message to [Koresh] on what to do."²⁸⁸ Because Koresh was most likely going to die due to an abdominal wound from a gunshot (for which he refused medical care) sustained during the initial raid, or be imprisoned, he said goodbye to the adult Branch Davidians.²⁸⁹ Reavis contends that they "believed that their own deaths were near, either because the end of human existence was at hand or because, if not, the FBI would prophetically slaughter them once Koresh's fate was cast."²⁹⁰

If the intention of the government was to save this millennial group, the siege was a massive failure. The way in which the perceived crisis and fears of the government, the media, and the public were handled was excessive and insensitive to the group's theology. During the long stand-off, the government and the media put forth provocative buzzwords meant to shock the public and to win the favor of the federal agents, argues Reavis. These included calling the group the "Texas-Child Molester-Gun Cult-Crazies," and suggesting that the group would commit suicide.²⁹¹ In addition to persuading the public that the group was a danger to itself and outsiders, I would add that those not versed in the long tradition from which Branch Davidian theology came were simply scared and did not know what to do with this group of "religious fanatics," or, even worse, what they believed to be a cult in the vein of Peoples Temple in Jonestown.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Reavis, *The Ashes of Waco*, 215.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, 216.

²⁹¹ Ibid, 14.

The government's lack of understanding Koresh's interpretation of the Bible prevented the two groups from connecting properly with one another during the stand-off and siege. As Tabor and Gallagher point out, "The FBI agents [could] hardly be expected to have packed their Bibles. In retrospect, it would not have been such a bad idea."²⁹² Koresh made numerous biblical references during the siege, which were misunderstood by authorities to be what they would call "Bible babble" or "mumbo jumbo."²⁹³ When asked if he was getting enough to eat, Koresh remarked that he was a "ravenous bird from the east," which seemed bizarre to the negotiators and those unfamiliar with Isaiah 26:11, a biblical passage.²⁹⁴ Theologians and members of the clergy would have been useful in this crisis situation, as a greater understanding of the Branch Davidians might have been achieved and their interactions would have been more productive. FBI representatives were not adequately prepared to communicate with Koresh and the other Branch Davidians with whom they spoke because they were not well-versed in their seemingly odd language; however, the messages were quite specific and meaningful to understanding the religious group's mission and convictions about the impending Apocalypse.

Tabor and Gallagher also argue that David Koresh was not a "cult" leader who "somehow existed outside of time and place," but rather, he was an Adventist "from start to finish."²⁹⁵ This specific terminology is important to note, as the Branch Davidians under Koresh have often been labeled a "cult." Tabor and Gallagher maintain that is a "superficial identification [that] not only fails to do justice to the long and complex history of the Millerite-Adventist-Davidian tradition but also underlies the authorities' misunderstanding of Koresh."²⁹⁶

²⁹² Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 1.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

The same could be said for the events in Jonestown, for it was easiest for Peoples Temple to be called a “cult,” with Reverend Jim Jones solely at the head. As with Peoples Temple, often the long history of the Branch Davidians has been pushed aside, with the media attention focused on the final day.

2.13 Conclusion

The end of the Branch Davidians at Mount Carmel is a necessary part of the Branch Davidian narrative, but it is only 51 days in a much longer story. To get the whole picture of the new religious movement, one must look back at the life of the group. An integral part of the Branch Davidian (as well as the Seventh-day Adventist and Davidian) organizations was the role of women and their devotion to the religious tradition that bound them together.

Branch Davidian women acted in many roles and should be recognized as individuals, not simply as they related to David Koresh as his wives and the mothers of his many children (although these relationships are important to note to understand the women). Without the leadership and influence of Ellen G. White, Florence Houteff, and Lois Roden, the Branch Davidians would not have held the same religious worldviews as they did by the time Koresh assumed power. Women built the community, for they worked to physically construct the commune and kept the group together through kinship ties and dedication to the Bible, God, and, to a lesser extent, the prophet David Koresh.

Whether or not David Koresh was truly a prophet is inconsequential, as his disciples believed that he was the conduit to God. The women of the Branch Davidians do not appear to have been misled or deceived, for they followed God’s word as interpreted by their teacher and guide. According to their own accounts, they believed that Koresh deciphered scripture in a new,

unique, and the most accurate way, and his persuasive interpretations led the curious students to participate in group Bible study under his leadership.²⁹⁷ However, the Bible and God were prioritized over the man himself, as the mission was stronger than Koresh alone, as evidenced by its long tradition of leadership under several prophets.

Women who followed the teachings of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians may not have had the variety of options that women in the outside world did. However, they were intent to do God's work that was complementary to their male counterparts, whether as wives, mothers to Koresh's children, students of the Bible, or rank and file members who were dedicated to the message put forth by David Koresh.²⁹⁸ The Branch Davidian group, or "an organization that reads the Bible," as Martin labels them, were drawn to Koresh's interpretation of the holy texts.²⁹⁹ They believed that Koresh was the prophet and voice of God. The decision to compromise certain liberties for a more traditional religiously devoted lifestyle may seem unusual to those outside of the movement, but the women of the Branch Davidians found peace in their decision to adhere to the guidance of the prophet Koresh, and in this way, exercised great agency over their lives.

²⁹⁷ Wessinger, email message to the author.

²⁹⁸ This argument is more complicated for the minors who were members of the Branch Davidians, as they did not freely seek out the group, but joined with their families.

²⁹⁹ Waldron, "Two black women tell why," *Jet*.

Chapter 3: The Women of Jonestown

Nobody joins a cult. Nobody joins something they think is going to hurt them. You join a religious organization, you join a political movement, and you join with people that you really like.

-Deborah Layton, former Peoples Temple member³⁰⁰

3.1 Introduction

On November 18, 1978, Peoples Temple shocked the world with the mass murder-suicides of over 900 people in the remote socialist commune of Jonestown, Guyana. Reverend Jim Jones, the founder of Peoples Temple, had ordered the act of “revolutionary suicide,”³⁰¹ which according to Jones, was meant to “[protest] the conditions of an inhumane world.”³⁰² This call immediately followed the murders of visiting California Congressman Leo Ryan and his entourage by Peoples Temple members at the Port Kaituma airstrip as they attempted to leave Guyana. Soon after, some members of the group took their lives willingly, others not, by drinking cyanide-poisoned Flavor-Aid. This day is often known in popular culture simply as “Jonestown,” indicating that the fatalities in the commune overshadowed all else in Peoples Temple. The life of the Christian church-turned-socialist counterculture movement has often

³⁰⁰ Deborah Layton quoted in Stanley Nelson, dir., *American Experience: Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple* (PBS, 2006), program transcript. https://www-tc.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/media/pdf/transcript/Jonestown_transcript.pdf, accessed March 22, 2021.

³⁰¹ This term was misappropriated from Black Panther Party leader Huey P. Newton, who used the term “revolutionary suicide” to take a more defensive position rather than Jones’ planned pre-emptive strike against his enemies, which Jones believed would promote him to martyr status. Rebecca Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 101; Catherine Abbott, “Racial Thinking and Peoples Temple,” *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=67336, accessed March 27, 2021.

³⁰² Jim Jones quoted in Nelson, dir., *American Experience: Jonestown*.

been neglected in popular narratives and media; instead, the focus has been on the death of the movement and the final day in Guyana. This perspective does not account for the vitality of Peoples Temple, as its members strove to live out their utopian vision in Jonestown, building and nourishing the commune from its modest beginnings to its catastrophic last days.

The story of Jonestown has been told many times. Unsurprisingly, Jim Jones is almost always positioned solely at the helm as the megalomaniacal orchestrator of Peoples Temple, from its earliest days in Indianapolis to its last in Jonestown. This follows reasonably, for Jones did create and, decades later, call for the end of Peoples Temple. However, this chapter explores life in the experimental utopian commune with the often unheard and unknown women of Peoples Temple, who worked in top positions in the group and as essential workers behind the scenes. About two-thirds of the workforce in Jonestown were women and nearly 70 percent of the workers were Black,³⁰³ so women and people of color had a large impact on sustaining the movement. I argue that Jim Jones was not a lone actor but was supported and at times superseded by the many women of Peoples Temple, especially after he became ill and could no longer serve as the sole director of the group. This was particularly true in Jonestown, Guyana, to where this chapter will turn much of its focus after brief histories of the group's time in Indianapolis and various locations in California.

Although women in new religious movements are often thought of as passive sycophants, women in Peoples Temple took on active roles, particularly in Jonestown. They shaped the movement as leaders, advisors, decision-makers, administrators, secretaries, ambassadors, bankers, counselors, bus drivers, procurers of goods, teachers, family members, historians,

³⁰³ Tim Reiterman with John Jacobs, *Raven: The Untold Story of the Rev. Jim Jones and His People* (New York: Penguin Group, 1982), 346.

dissenters, and more. While some women carried forth intimate sexual relationships with Jones and defended his character, other women challenged him. While it seemed that Jones made executive decisions for the group, women headed committees, saw to overseas banking accounts, represented Peoples Temple in international dealings, and performed other administrative tasks essential to keeping the movement running smoothly. While Jones tormented Peoples Temple members in public forums through physical and mental discipline and humiliation, women nursed the sick, taught classes, and cared for children and the elderly residents of Jonestown. While Jones audiotaped his own sermons and talks, Peoples Temple member Edith Roller recorded the group's history in a long series of detailed journal entries, and member Annie Moore left the group's final written words from Jonestown. While Jones dreamed of a utopia, women actualized that dream.

To construct my arguments about the importance of the roles of women and their dedication to the Peoples Temple movement, I have used an interdisciplinary approach that draws from work by scholars of religious studies, Black studies, history, and sociology. Additionally, I have relied upon the vital testimonials of women through their memoirs, letters, memos, notes, and other recollections, most of which were written from Jonestown, Guyana. The array of remembrances among the women are complicated and occasionally paradoxical, sometimes within the same document. However, when taken together, these primary and secondary sources show the complexity and diversity of experiences among the women of Peoples Temple.

3.2 Civil rights and the early days of Peoples Temple in Indianapolis, Indiana

In the mid-1950s in Indianapolis, Indiana, Peoples Temple emerged essentially as a Christian church³⁰⁴ with an emphasis on social work and the promotion of equal rights. Reverend James (Jim) Warren Jones, a white man from rural Crete, Indiana, dreamed of a racially integrated congregation during a time and place where this idea seemed nearly impossible—and often still does. African American and African Studies scholar Milmon F. Harrison suggests that Peoples Temple resembled a typical Pentecostal church in many ways, including its call and response participation, ecstatic worship services, and through Jones’ expository preaching.³⁰⁵ From early on, the anomalous church began to attract African American parishioners in addition to whites, as Jones’ dream of integrated services became reality. The multiracial congregation of Peoples Temple was unpopular with many in the community, as the growth of the church coincided with the Ku Klux Klan’s increasing membership and political power in Indiana,³⁰⁶ which fostered and emboldened the overt racism and discriminatory practices that were already commonplace in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s.

Despite hostility from some residents of the city, Peoples Temple worked toward racial equality in Indianapolis, both inside and outside of the church. Marceline Jones documented that her husband, Reverend Jones, protested discriminatory practices in local businesses.³⁰⁷ The members of the church also worked to improve the well-being of the poor. They opened a soup

³⁰⁴ In 1954, Jones established the Community Unity Church; in 1955, Peoples Temple was first incorporated as Wings of Deliverance; in 1960, Peoples Temple became affiliated with the Disciples of Christ. Catherine Abbott and Rebecca Moore, “Women’s Roles in Peoples Temple and Jonestown,” *World Religions and Spirituality*, <https://wrlrdrels.org/2018/09/27/peoples-temple-and-womens-roles/>, accessed March 26, 2021.

³⁰⁵ Milmon F. Harrison, “Jim Jones and Black Worship Traditions,” in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, eds. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 128-130.

³⁰⁶ Catherine Abbott, *The Reverend Jim Jones and Religious, Political, and Racial Radicalism in Peoples Temple* (Master’s Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015), 73.

³⁰⁷ Marceline Jones, “Jim Jones as Seen Through the Eyes of Those He Loved,” reprinted in Denice Stephenson, ed., *Dear People: Remembering Jonestown* (Berkeley: Heyday Press, 2005), 13.

kitchen for the hungry and helped the unemployed search for jobs, giving those in need the proper clothing to wear to interviews.³⁰⁸ Even the Jones family was racially integrated. Their “rainbow family,” as they called it,³⁰⁹ consisted both of biological children and adopted ones of various races. This set an example for the Peoples Temple congregation and the outside community by showing that Reverend Jones truly “practiced what he preached.” Onlookers were drawn to Peoples Temple’s unique vision of racial integration and to its members’ work in the community, and so the church’s membership expanded quickly in Indianapolis.

In the early years of Peoples Temple, women did not exercise as much power as they would in later years. The chief tasks of women members were performing the drudgery that comes along with maintaining an organization, such as putting out chairs and stuffing envelopes. Women also recruited and welcomed new members. Marceline Jones was the most powerful woman in Peoples Temple during this time, as she assisted Reverend Jones and coordinated the group’s work in the community. At this time in the history of the group, the roles for women in Peoples Temple were not significantly different from the roles one might expect to find in most mainstream churches.³¹⁰ The authority and power of these women would grow with each stage of Peoples Temple in the subsequent decades. Still, in Indianapolis, Reverend Jones wielded the most power and influence over the group as a traditional minister, albeit a more racially liberal one than most church leaders during this era.

³⁰⁸ IndyStar, “Retro Indy: Jim Jones and the People’s Temple in Indianapolis,” <http://www.indystar.com/story/news/history/retroindy/2013/11/18/peoples-temple/3634925/>, accessed March 26, 2021.

³⁰⁹ Jim Jones, Jr., quoted in Nelson, dir., *American Experience: Jonestown*.

³¹⁰ Rebecca Moore argues that “most women in the world remained second class citizens” despite gains in mainstream society during the twentieth century and that this was “no less true in many Christian organizations as in other religions and secular institutions.” Rebecca Moore, *Women in Christian Traditions* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 129.

3.3 Peoples Temple and politics: the move to California

Although Jones had gathered a large flock due to his alleged healing powers and the church's community services, Peoples Temple had outgrown Indianapolis by the mid-1960s. The members decided it was time to move on and to seek a place for their church in a new location, one that would be more receptive to their liberalism. The group perceived California to be the Promised Land—one which would welcome their interracial congregation more openly than in Indiana.³¹¹ Many Peoples Temple members boarded church-sponsored Greyhound-style buses bound for California. These buses were sometimes driven by women, including former member Laura Johnston Kohl, and traveled in a caravan across the country.³¹² Most of the members who made the move to California did so by 1965.³¹³ Peoples Temple expanded the number of its physical locations to accommodate more members, establishing churches first in Redwood Valley and then in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Women, including long-term member Carolyn Moore Layton, adopted more responsibilities as administrators of these new churches.³¹⁴

In California, the group concerned itself with politics in addition to religion. Members of Peoples Temple canvassed for San Francisco mayoral candidate George Moscone,³¹⁵ had ties to politician Harvey Milk,³¹⁶ and saw the appointment of Jones as the chair of the Housing

³¹¹ Rebecca Moore, quoted in Nelson, dir., *American Experience: Jonestown*.

³¹² Laura Johnston Kohl, *Jonestown Survivor: An Insider's Look* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2010), 34.

³¹³ Rebecca Moore, "The Transformation of Peoples Temple in California: From Pentecostal Church to Political Movement," *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=61279, accessed March 29, 2021.

³¹⁴ Mary McCormick Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown: Putting a Human Face on an American Tragedy* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 58.

³¹⁵ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown*, 30.

³¹⁶ Michael Bellefontaine, "Research on Harvey Milk Renews Calls for Reappraisal of Peoples Temple." *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*. https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=16566, accessed March 22, 2021.

Commission in San Francisco.³¹⁷ In addition to those who came to hear the growing political message of the church, Peoples Temple began to attract more white members from middle-class backgrounds, particularly those who were interested in the counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s.³¹⁸ Peoples Temple also drew in African American atheists, humanists, and communists,³¹⁹ all of whom would influence the direction in which Peoples Temple would take in Guyana as they moved away from traditional Christianity and towards actualizing a socialist counterculture movement with an emphasis on racial equality and communalism.

During Peoples Temple's time in California, Jones moved beyond his assertion to be a messenger of God, now asserting to be God. "I am God," Jones states matter-of-factly in an address given in the mid-1970s.³²⁰

The more you see God or power or love in me, the more I can reproduce in you, and I wish to reproduce all the good that I have... I'm living in the presence of health. I'm able to walk all night and all day, and days without sleep or rest, without food, because I have entered into that which you said was God in the suppositional sky, but he never came near you. I am God Almighty.³²¹

Jones recognized that not everyone would agree with his claims, declaring, "[A] lot of people fight against me, too ... 'cause they want to prove I'm not God tonight, because I tore up their Skygod. But I'm going to prove I am God."³²² Therefore, already before the move to Jonestown, Jones was cultivating an "us versus them" mentality in Peoples Temple, placing himself as his people's savior.

³¹⁷ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown*, 30.

³¹⁸ John R. Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 68.

³¹⁹ Anthony B. Pinn, "Peoples Temple as Black Religion: Re-imagining the Contours of Black Religious Studies," in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion*, 15.

³²⁰ The Jonestown Institute, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, "Q1059-3 Transcript," http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=28038, accessed March 28, 2021.

³²¹ *Ibid.*

³²² *Ibid.*

During at least one sermon, Jones remarked they had to create heaven in the here and now, on Earth, because there was no God to hear their prayers.³²³ “If there were no rich, no poor, if everyone were [sic] equal, religion would be soon to disappear,” Jones proclaimed in 1973 during an address in Redwood Valley. He continued, “People only develop religion when they’re unhappy with this world. But if this world were [sic] equal, if everything was equal, every opportunity... people would soon lose their religion.”³²⁴ These radical messages indicated the directional shift in Peoples Temple, as Jones placed himself as the sole head of the group and of the Christian belief system as God.

In California, the roles of women expanded dramatically from those they held in Indianapolis. During its early years, Peoples Temple had more closely resembled a traditional Christian church, with a heavy focus on social issues and civil rights in the community. They also focused on creating “heaven on earth,” according to former member Laura Johnston Kohl.³²⁵ However, once the group reached California, the church began to spread out, with new churches being established in San Francisco and Los Angeles, which gave the women of Peoples Temple more opportunities for leadership. Carolyn Moore Layton became the “Assistant to the President and Pastor,”³²⁶ a high position that women did not hold in Indianapolis, save for Marceline Jones. Layton also held the title of “Vice President and Director of Peoples Temple” and “Advisory Chairman” of the church’s finances.³²⁷ In San Francisco during the 1970s, Marceline Jones presided over meetings when Jim Jones was away in Jonestown, although her

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Jim Jones, “From a Sermon in Redwood Valley, 1973,” reprinted in Denice Stephenson, ed., in *Dear People*, 60-61.

³²⁵ Kohl, *Jonestown Survivor*, 53.

³²⁶ Carolyn Layton, quoted in Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 58.

³²⁷ Ibid.

position as a leader did not attract the same large numbers of parishioners as Reverend Jones, who was “the Temple’s drawing card.”³²⁸ Many who attended the church services in the United States after the construction of Jonestown in Guyana “sensed that they were a part of a dying organization.”³²⁹ This sentiment shows the immense influence of Jim Jones in the congregation, which was perhaps spread too thinly in their attempt to make Peoples Temple a nationwide movement. In Jonestown, a select number of women would gain even more positions of power than they had held in the United States.

3.4 The Peoples Temple Agricultural Project: migrating to Jonestown, Guyana

Peoples Temple members spent approximately a decade in California before ultimately deciding to build an isolated commune away from the United States. In 1974, Peoples Temple began talks with the socialist republic of Guyana to purchase land, and by 1976, the group had signed a formal agreement with the Guyanese government. Almost one thousand Peoples Temple members migrated to the site between 1977 and 1978,³³⁰ although some members moved earlier to begin construction in the former jungle. This land became the commune of Jonestown, or, as the sign above the entrance proclaimed, the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project, indicating a move away from a traditional religion-centered group to an agrarian society with Jim Jones at the helm, at least in name.

Many members of the group left the United States for South America, each with their own reasons. “They feared that the IRS might freeze the Temple’s assets,” Rebecca Moore

³²⁸ Reiterman with Jacobs, *Raven*, 461.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 260.

³³⁰ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown*, 41; Moore, “The Transformation of Peoples Temple in California.”

explains.³³¹ “They worried that the results of a child custody battle might remove one of the children from the community. They responded to Jones’ prophecy that a fascist takeover was imminent in the United States.”³³² For these motives and others, the most committed members of Peoples Temple moved away from their homes in the United States, “believ[ing] they were not just deserting something worse but also moving *to* something better. They set the goal of creating a community without racism, in which all children would be free and equal.”³³³ Therefore, while there were many reasons for the mass migration to Guyana, the main goal for many was to establish a peaceful and isolated utopian commune, the new Promised Land away from the oppressive United States.

For decades, the minister had espoused socialist and communist ideology³³⁴ as well as religious messages. However, ultimately, Jones’ pro-Marxist beliefs came to fruition and overshadowed any semblance of Christian thought that remained. In a document written in 1977 or 1978, Reverend Jones mused, “I decided, *how* can I demonstrate my Marxism? The thought was ‘infiltrate the church.’ I consciously made a decision to look into that prospect,”³³⁵ indicating Jones’ plan to transform Peoples Temple into a political movement. In a sermon given in 1973 in Redwood Valley, California, Jones began to promote more socialist beliefs, proclaiming, “I do not believe in private ownership of property. I believe that all property should

³³¹ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown*, 41.

³³² This statement refers to the Stoen family custody battle, which sought to bring son John Victor Stoen back to the United States. Moore, *Understanding Jonestown*, 41.

³³³ *Ibid*, 41-42.

³³⁴ Jim Jones attended meetings of the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA). Moore, *Understanding Jonestown*, 20. His wife, Marceline Mae Baldwin Jones, recalled that he was already a committed communist at the time of their marriage in 1949. David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 4.

³³⁵ Emphasis in original document. Jim Jones, “Jim’s Commentary about Himself, 1977-1978,” *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/JJAutobio1.pdf>, accessed March 30, 2021.

be held in common. Just like this church belongs to all of us. Just like the lands out here, the fruit, everything is shared by all of us,”³³⁶ indicating a turn to communalism and apostolic socialism³³⁷ of which Jones continually spoke.

To prove their dedication to the new direction to which the group was shifting, Peoples Temple members read socialist, communist, and Marxist literature. They began to use textbooks such as *Introduction to Socialism* in classes, according to a diary entry penned by member Edith Roller dated February 3, 1978.³³⁸ They learned Russian and called each other by other adopted names such as Stalin and Lenin, although they were warned to keep these monikers secret from outsiders.³³⁹ As early as during their time in Redwood Valley, California, Peoples Temple members, including children, read the works of Karl Marx and Chairman Mao Tse Tung and became “very well versed in Communism.”³⁴⁰ Christianity was still discussed alongside these more radical ideas, according to former member Leslie Wagner-Wilson,³⁴¹ although the biblical teachings were often derogatory.

I will turn now to primarily the women and community of Peoples Temple in Jonestown. In Jonestown, women had the most influence and performed roles not held in earlier versions of the group, and so more about their duties was written during this era. On a more practical level, most of the primary source material written by the women of Peoples Temple comes from Jonestown defectors, including Deborah Layton, or by the very few survivors of that last day in Guyana, including Catherine (Hyacinth) Thrash, who slept through the entire massacre. Some

³³⁶ Jim Jones quoted in Denice Stephenson, ed., *Dear People*, 61.

³³⁷ The term “apostolic socialism” will be addressed in the next section of the chapter.

³³⁸ Edith Roller, “February 1978 Journals,” *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=35693, accessed March 29, 2021.

³³⁹ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown*, 54-55.

³⁴⁰ Leslie Wagner-Wilson, *Slavery of Faith* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2008), 25.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

texts come from those who died in Jonestown, including letters, journal entries, and memos, all of which are invaluable sources of information.

3.5 Peoples Temple and faith

After leaving Indianapolis, Peoples Temple moved away from Pentecostal theology and practices and towards apostolic socialism. This new ideology was “a mix of the ethical teachings of Jesus with the social critique of Marx,” religious studies scholar Mary McCormick Maaga writes.³⁴² Peoples Temple began as a Pentecostal church, but “[Jones] took a path out of modern Pentecostalism, back to the radical ministry to Jesus and the communalism of apostolic Christianity,” explains sociologist John R. Hall.³⁴³ Jones often cited Matthew 25:35-40, a Biblical passage about caring for others in times of need. This message was printed on Peoples Temple stationery and pamphlets, indicating its extreme importance to the group.³⁴⁴ Acts 2:44-45, which concerns communal sharing, was also used to promote this idea of apostolic socialism.³⁴⁵ Hall writes, “Jim Jones and those who followed him established a movement that fused the central dilemmas of modern Christianity: personal salvation versus the social gospel, with the philosophical antithesis of Christianity, a ‘godless’ yet prophetic version of communism.”³⁴⁶ Still, the group kept up the “religious masquerade” for at least three reasons, according to former member Bonnie Thielmann: to keep the FBI at bay, to continue receiving tax exemptions, and to ingratiate itself with political figures and the public who approved of the

³⁴² Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 8.

³⁴³ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 23.

³⁴⁴ Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 8.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁶ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 303.

good works that Peoples Temple performed in the community.³⁴⁷ Because of all of its religious trappings, many outsiders still considered Peoples Temple a church.

By the early 1970s, had Jones cast off traditional Christian beliefs in his sermons by questioning and denigrating the Bible. During Peoples Temple's tenure in California, the minister started throwing Bibles away.³⁴⁸ Jones also physically displayed disdain for the holy book in public meetings. According to religious studies scholar David Chidester, "Occasionally in his sermons, Jones would spit on the [Bible], throw the Bible on the floor, jump up and down on it, and declare that the letter kills."³⁴⁹ He instructed his followers to use the pages of the Bible as toilet paper after they ran out in Jonestown, according to former member Catherine (Hyacinth) Thrash, who also recalls that she was told to leave her treasured family Bible in California because it was too costly to ship to Guyana.³⁵⁰ Jones left a 24-page undated document called "The Letter Killeth, but the Spirit Giveth Life," in which he critiqued the Bible's teachings, pointing out errors, inconsistencies, and questionable acts by God. This work shows Jones' religious radicalism, as he no longer used the Bible as a tool for teaching, but as an example of a text to be scrutinized, criticized, discarded, and even destroyed.³⁵¹

Jones also questioned the place of women in the Bible, using the Book of Genesis as an example of why women were marginalized in society. During a community meeting in 1974, Jones blamed the mistreatment of women on the story of Adam and Eve and the Fall of

³⁴⁷ Bonnie Thielmann with Dean Merrill, *The Broken God* (Elgin: David C. Cook Publishing Co, 1979), 74.

³⁴⁸ Catherine (Hyacinth) Thrash as told to Marian K. Towne, *The Onliest One Alive: Surviving Jonestown, Guyana* (Indianapolis: Marian Kleinsasser Towne, 1995), 104.

³⁴⁹ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 64.

³⁵⁰ Thrash as told to Towne, *The Onliest One Alive*, 104.

³⁵¹ Catherine Abbott, *The Reverend Jim Jones*.

Humanity, proclaiming, “God was a liar. The snake told the truth.”³⁵² He continues in an expletive-filled rant, expressing anger towards biblical teachings about the Garden of Eden and states again that he is the one true God.³⁵³ At first, this address appears to be somewhat an endorsement of women’s rights, as Jones blames the Christian God and Adam for the oppression of women. However, I argue that Jones’ words were manipulative and meant to place himself as the sole God by discrediting the Christian “Skygod” and the Bible. This claim was directed towards the members of Peoples Temple, whom he vowed to protect from the evils of society if they would follow him and his vision of religion.

Despite the anti-Christian overtones of Peoples Temple, particularly in Redwood Valley, California, and even more so in Jonestown, some women held onto the group’s early days of traditional Pentecostal practices. They continued to believe in the Christian God and followed the teachings of the Bible. Wagner-Wilson writes in her memoir, “My faith in the real God did not waver. Jim [Jones] taught us that there were discrepancies and errors in the Bible, but the basic Ten Commandments applied to everyone. This is what I kept close to my heart. It provided a blueprint for a good life, for a peaceful and loving world. Why could people not follow it?”³⁵⁴

Some women did consider Jones to have God-given abilities in Indianapolis. Thrash believed in Jim Jones’ divine gifts in the early days of Peoples Temple. In her memoir, Thrash writes that Jones spoke in tongues and could heal the sick,³⁵⁵ and that he even cured her of a cancerous tumor.³⁵⁶ She claims that he had “psychic powers.”³⁵⁷ However, Thrash later recants

³⁵² The Jonestown Institute, Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, “Q1059-6 Transcript,” http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=63620, accessed April 7, 2021.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Wagner-Wilson, *Slavery of Faith*, 83.

³⁵⁵ Thrash as told to Towne, *The Onliest One Alive*, 48.

³⁵⁶ Ibid, 51-52.

³⁵⁷ Ibid, 52.

her earlier convictions about Jones' faith healing and his promises by the time the group had reached Jonestown, writing, "We were brainwashed!"³⁵⁸

Catherine (Hyacinth) Thrash's sister, Zipporah Edwards, supported Jim Jones, the socialist cause, and his claims to be a prophet or the messiah. In a letter addressed to "Dad" (Jones) in 1977 or 1978, Edwards wrote, "I was outside the other night... [and the stars were] all twinkling as though they were saying to me welcome, I am glad you are free from that capitalist society... I have always wish [sic] I could have walked with the Christ but you proved to be much greater than the one I thought about."³⁵⁹

Not all women were so interested in Reverend Jim Jones' religious messages. Laura Johnston Kohl enjoyed Peoples Temple's pro-integration ideas first and foremost, and she even eschewed belief in a benevolent God. In her memoir, she writes, "In college, I also participated in a group called Honest to God. It was a discussion group to determine if God existed – and if not, how do you explain life? I did try to figure it all out, but at some point, I lost interest in the issue and dropped out of that group. Eventually, I just decided that with the inequalities in the world, there couldn't be a 'just' god [sic]."³⁶⁰ Thus, while the religious aspect of Peoples Temple appealed to some women members, others were more cynical about religion in general.

Some women believed in Jim Jones and his God- or Christ-like claims; however, others continued to pray to the Christian God. Devout Christian women followed the teachings of the Bible even after Jones' outspoken contempt for it in California and more so in Jonestown. This shows the complexity of reasons why women remained in Peoples Temple, for everyone took

³⁵⁸ Ibid, 92.

³⁵⁹ Zipporah Edwards, in Denice Stephenson, ed., *Dear People*, 87-88.

³⁶⁰ Kohl, *Jonestown Survivor*, 18.

something different out of the messages of the church-turned-socialist movement. For some, such as Edwards, Jones was indeed the savior and preached the truth. For others, such as Wagner-Wilson, internal conflict arose as Jones expounded this new message, one which went against the early teachings of Peoples Temple. Still others, including Thrash, were uncertain about Jones' divine powers, and Kohl was not convinced there even was a God. Many women members continued to believe in traditional Christianity, or had agnostic or atheist tendencies, yet still clung to the dream of a racially integrated utopian society and were willing to overlook Jones' condemnation of the Bible and grandiose claims.

3.6 Family and community in Jonestown

By the time Peoples Temple members reached the isolated commune in Guyana, the community's dynamics had changed. In Indianapolis, Peoples Temple members lived in their own homes, separate from the church's influence most of the time. During their time in California, most Peoples Temple members living in the cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco lived apart, some working day jobs independent from the group. They kept their Peoples Temple affiliations secret from outsiders.³⁶¹ This could be taxing, as former member Leslie Wagner-Wilson writes,

I was trying to escape the church... I felt as if I was living a lie and suffocating at the same time. Here I was 19, and it seemed as if my entire life was built around the organization. I was told when to eat, how to dress, and had to live two lives: one for the public and one for the church. Working in the outside world, lying about your life, I was exhausted of being controlled.³⁶²

³⁶¹ Ibid, 50.

³⁶² Wagner-Wilson, *Slavery of Faith*, 55.

Membership in the church began to be by invitation only, for current members worried about potential enemies and spies, showing their increasing paranoia,³⁶³ a sentiment which would continue to grow in Guyana.

In Jonestown, the members lived communally in a members-only society, completely closed off to outsiders. Although Jonestown was a fledgling commune, it was mostly self-sufficient, for its members grew food and physically built the commune in the jungles of Guyana. As a microcosm of society, Peoples Temple's utopian experiment would reveal hierarchies and varied roles of its members more so than before. This was true for women in particular, as their positions in this new society were reimagined and reconstructed. In some ways, women exercised more freedom in the commune than in the outside world and experienced unity with other members. In other ways, they were restricted by the parameters of the rules of Peoples Temple and became closed-off not only to outsiders, but to those within the group as well.

As the group headed towards a socialist counterculture movement in Jonestown, historian Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo's study of women in counterculture movements serves as an apt comparison between those she terms "hippie" women and women of Peoples Temple. Lemke-Santangelo argues that women in counterculture movements took on new roles of authority. They challenged gender roles within their communities and defied the expectations of women in mainstream society during the 1960s. She writes that the hippie women of the counterculture were "launching a subtle rebellion against prevailing class and gender roles,"³⁶⁴ which we see in Peoples Temple, as some women (mostly white, young, and college-educated) took on

³⁶³ Thrash as told to Towne, *The Onliest One Alive*, 72.

³⁶⁴ Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Daughters of Aquarius: Women of the Sixties Counterculture* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2009), 2.

extraordinary positions of leadership. Lemke-Santangelo argues that women living communally during the 1960s often rejected the concept of the nuclear family; instead, they formed their own “tribes.”³⁶⁵ These groupings allowed for women to “share chores, conversation, advice, and practical knowledge,” the historian explains.³⁶⁶ The same was true in Jonestown, where women toiled in the jungles together, physically constructing the commune, as well as sharing tasks such as childcare, healthcare, agricultural management, and assisting the senior residents.

While friendships and other relationships were forged, caution and distrust were also familiar to the members of the group. Several former members have written about the secretive nature of Peoples Temple. Kohl, “Secrecy within cults is fairly commonplace,” particularly between insiders and outsiders, as personal information was not given to those outside of the group.³⁶⁷ Despite the secrecy, Kohl, a white woman, also recalls commiserating and laughing with fellow members during work assignments. Kohl remembers that in Jonestown, “It was a time of great camaraderie.”³⁶⁸ She writes in her memoir, “One of the reasons I was happy in the Temple was because of the variety of jobs I could do. My life rushed by and I had a ball. I was happy, invigorated and challenged. It was never dull, and each day brought new unexpected experiences.”³⁶⁹

Wagner-Wilson, a Black woman, had a different experience in Peoples Temple. She writes of her time on the Learning Crew, a group created for those who had broken the rules or complained about the conditions in Jonestown. Wagner-Wilson recalls that “no one was allowed to look at us or speak to us, nor could we speak to anyone who was not on the learning crew

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Kohl, *Jonestown Survivor*, 50.

³⁶⁸ Ibid, 66.

³⁶⁹ Ibid, 51.

[sic]. We were all quiet around each other as well, in large part because we knew that we could not trust anyone.”³⁷⁰ Former member Deborah Layton, a white woman, had a similar reaction to the constrained social dynamics in Jonestown as Wagner-Wilson did. She describes her initial entry into the commune in her memoir:

There seemed to be a detached and apathetic atmosphere among the residents. I felt an absence of camaraderie and warmth. Father [Jones] had talked so much about the closeness of those who lived in the Promised Land, but what I observed... was that everyone was careful, reticent, and almost afraid to make connections. There was no giggling or small talk during the long ride; everyone seemed on edge and guarded.³⁷¹

Therefore, while Lemke-Santangelo’s arguments about the solidarity of hippie women in counterculture movements may hold true for some members of Peoples Temple who worked together, other accounts exist to the contrary.

In addition to the control over labor in Peoples Temple, the family unit was tightly monitored within Peoples Temple. While some members joined the congregation already married, the Relationships Committee controlled pairings. The committee approved of or rejected marriages and partnerships, but only between people who were already members of Peoples Temple—no ties to outsiders would be permitted.³⁷² The cause was primary, according to Wagner-Wilson. In her memoir, she writes, “The ‘cause’ came first, and everything else came after. If you had a family member who refused to join the church, it was expected that you would sever the relationship.”³⁷³ Deborah Layton reminisces, “All of us were taught to spy and report on each other—our families, our loved ones, our friends. Loyalty to Father [Jones] required

³⁷⁰ Wagner-Wilson, *Slavery of Faith*, 83.

³⁷¹ Deborah Layton, *Seductive Poison: A Jonestown Survivor’s Story of Life and Death in the Peoples Temple* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 156.

³⁷² Catherine Abbott and Moore, “Women’s Roles in Peoples Temple.”

³⁷³ Wagner-Wilson, *Slavery of Faith*, 26.

it.”³⁷⁴ She recalls that Jones personally devised the breakup of Carolyn Moore Layton and her husband, Larry.³⁷⁵ Sex was “selfish and harmful,” according to Deborah Layton, for it took attention away from the cause, and that Peoples Temple members were taught to “let go of such petty desires as living in a nuclear family.”³⁷⁶ The Relationships Committee and strict rules about relationships in Peoples Temple were yet another way for Jones and other high-ranking members to exercise their influence over the group. The guidelines for relationships were meant for members to prove their loyalty to the movement, and, according to some former members, to Jones himself. Reverend Jones’ increasing paranoia and controlling behaviors, as indicated by the Relationships Committee, began to manifest in California and would only worsen after the move to Guyana.

Still, many Peoples Temple members considered themselves to be a family, even if a secretive and distrustful one by many accounts. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Peoples Temple family was quite dysfunctional. Jones and his enablers publicly humiliated members during community meetings through beatings and other exploitations.³⁷⁷ Reports emerged that the minister abused his followers, including children, by putting them in “the Box,” a small, underground, claustrophobia-inducing space.³⁷⁸ The few residents who persisted in voicing their unhappiness were sent to the Medical Unit to be drugged.³⁷⁹ Kohl recalls, “We thought of ourselves as one big family that did handle our own discipline. I was in a lot of meetings where people were spanked or beaten, and I was slapped once, also in a public meeting.”³⁸⁰

³⁷⁴ Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 5.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁷⁷ Thrash as told to Towne, *The Onliest One Alive*, 95.

³⁷⁸ Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 176.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁰ Laura Johnston Kohl quoted in Nelson, dir., *American Experience: Jonestown*.

Usually, Reverend Jones himself did not administer these punishments himself; rather, members of Peoples Temple did. Ruby Carroll, a Black woman who Tim Reiterman and John Jacobs contend was “chosen for her physical strength, not her mean disposition” administered some of the “severe” disciplines.³⁸¹ They continue, “Like a master of ceremonies, Jones supervised, but the audience participated, particularly when the disciplined person was deserving or disliked.”³⁸² The punishments were approved by Jones, who “justified his psychodrama by saying that society was full of rough conditions, that people needed to be rugged and capable of self-defense,” which included boxing matches between children and eventually between adults as well, all while the group was still in the United States.³⁸³ The journalists argue that “through corporal punishment, Jones could simultaneously strengthen internal order, mete out justice and indoctrinate.”³⁸⁴ The punishment sessions also served as a type of group catharsis, as it blended physical aggression and pain with psychological release.³⁸⁵ While Jones asked the group to “prescribe a punishment,” it was Jones who suggested the severity of the discipline and voiced the rationale for it.³⁸⁶ Then, the congregation voted on the punishment by a show of hands—just a majority was needed.³⁸⁷ In San Francisco, for example, the following occurred: the mother of a child under scrutiny seconded the motion, after which, according to Reiterman and Jacobs, “the crowd applauded her.”³⁸⁸

³⁸¹ Reiterman with Jacobs, *Raven*, 259.

³⁸² *Ibid.*

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 260.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Humiliation was also commonplace in Peoples Temple during their time in Jonestown. Former members Juanell Smart and Hue Fortson, Jr., remember one incident in which a woman was forced to undress in front of the group, her body completely exposed and subject to criticism by Peoples Temple members. According to Fortson, Jr., “Jones was sitting, looking over his sunglasses, but he had a smile on his face like he’s really enjoying this woman being torn down.”³⁸⁹ While Jones did not enact the punishments himself, this instance shows that he was in full support of the disciplinary actions of his people. In this way, the members of Peoples Temple showed their support of Jones and his philosophies about how the group should behave and the consequences of going against these expectations.

These examples show how members of Peoples Temple were mistreated and abused after the move from the earliest days in Indianapolis as the church-turned-counterculture movement became increasingly isolated from the outside world. The abuse that Peoples Temple members suffered should not go unacknowledged, for these incidents were indicative of Jones’ attitude toward them, particularly women and children. Members were to be used for the pastor’s own pleasure and exploitation, all in the name of the “cause,” although Reiterman and Jacobs write that several in Peoples Temple were glad to have been punished. For example, in 1975, Joyce Shaw “volunteered for five swats” after shoving her stepdaughter, Judy Houston.³⁹⁰ They also give the example of “little John V. Stoen,” who “took a spanking in front of the group [and] stood with tears in his eyes, raised a clenched fist, and said bravely, ‘Thank you, Father.’”³⁹¹ In this way, although acting upon orders from Jim Jones, at least some of the members of Peoples Temple agreed that physical punishments were appropriate for their misdeeds.

³⁸⁹ Hue Fortson, Jr., quoted in Nelson, dir., *American Experience: Jonestown*.

³⁹⁰ Reiterman with Jacobs, *Raven*, 160.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 260.

This course of disciplinary action was not met with approval by all members of Peoples Temple, however. Marceline Jones wrote a letter to Jim Jones voicing her concern about punishment in the group. One of the reasons for her hesitation was the bad publicity that Peoples Temple was receiving, and so perhaps this was more about image rather than concern about the painful and humiliating punishments exacted on the members. She writes in a letter, dated August 15, 1977, about her fears, although she remarks that these charges of corporal punishment were “certainly...grossly exaggerated.”³⁹² She continues, suggesting that Jones consider “peer pressure” and “[not] speaking to the offender” as alternatives to discipline in Jonestown.³⁹³ In this way, Marceline Jones showed devotion to the movement and also questioned Jones’ decisions, as she wished to continue their lives in Jonestown and offered new solutions to the negative publicity problem, even if it meant opposing her husband’s actions. While it is difficult to ascertain whether Marceline Jones truly disagreed with the punishments in Jonestown or was only concerned about the attention that it drew to the group, she did advise Jones as to the safer course of action. This advice was rejected, however, as excessive humiliation continued in Peoples Temple, spurred on by Jim Jones, but consented to by the congregation, who meted out the punishments.

3.7 Women and sex in Peoples Temple

In most popular and even some scholarly narratives, women members of Peoples Temple have been discussed almost exclusively in relation to their interactions with Jim Jones. Jones’ wife, Marceline Jones, and his long-term lover, Carolyn Moore Layton, have been primarily

³⁹² Marceline Jones, “Letter to Jim Jones,” in *Dear People*: edited by Stephenson, 79.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

written about as extensions of Jones rather than as individuals separate from the pastor. Maaga writes that “gender roles and sexual behavior are generally treated together, the assumption being that if one is writing about women, then sexual behavior must be addressed as well,” pointing out that this is not true for the study of men.³⁹⁴ Maaga writes that although there is “clear evidence of women exercising institutional authority [in Peoples Temple], their power is addressed... almost always in the context of the women’s sexual relationship with Jim Jones.”³⁹⁵ Nevertheless, Jones was certainly an influential figure whose importance within the movement and his relationships with the women of Peoples Temple must not be overlooked. The intimate relationships between Jones and women members do reveal hierarchies within the group based on the women’s physical proximities to Jones as lovers, as they often became confidantes and close advisers to him as well.

Although married to Marceline Jones, Reverend Jim Jones indulged in many extramarital affairs. Some of these courtships were long-lasting; others were brief encounters, despite Jones’ call for celibacy within the group. Deborah Layton recalls, “What he explained to each of us, and in sermons, was that sexual relationships were very selfish and took away from the focus of the church—and that was to help others. Jim was not celibate. Nobody knew that until perhaps it was their time to find out. What he spoke from the pulpit wasn’t what he did behind the scenes.”³⁹⁶ Whether these relationships were consensual or not appears to have varied by case. Deborah Layton says that Jones raped her and contends that he manipulated his followers, abusing his power to engage in these sexual conquests; other relationships, such as with Maria Katsaris and

³⁹⁴ Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 17.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁹⁶ Jones also propositioned men for sex, according to former members Tim Carter and Hue Fortson, Jr. *American Experience: Jonestown*.

Carolyn Moore Layton lasted for years and mutual interest existed between Jones and the women.³⁹⁷

During an interview conducted by Maaga, former Peoples Temple member Grace Stoen recalls that Jones often complimented his women followers' looks, making them feel "valued and beautiful."³⁹⁸ Stoen also claims that Jones used sex to "draw people in and make them feel special."³⁹⁹ During the interview, Stoen is unclear, or perhaps uncertain, about whether Jones purposefully used this tactic to "increas[e] [women's] commitment to the movement and loyalty to him personally."⁴⁰⁰

Reiterman and Jacobs have argued in the affirmative, using Shanda (Shonda) James, a young African American member, as an example of Jones' desire to control women through sex.⁴⁰¹ Jones claimed that the married nineteen-year-old pressured him into a relationship. He allegedly relented because James was a Black woman and had been subject to oppression all her life.⁴⁰² Jones took the situation to his closest confidantes for advice on the matter. "Without exception, all the women [in Jones' inner circle of advisers] told Jones to keep sleeping with Shanda James to make her a better worker, more loyal to the cause," Reiterman and Jacobs maintain.⁴⁰³ According to Wagner-Wilson, James was drugged with Thorazine "to keep her quiet," arguing that Jones abused his power to gain James' trust.⁴⁰⁴ In this regard, Wagner-

³⁹⁷ Catherine Abbott and Moore, "Women's Roles in Peoples Temple."

³⁹⁸ Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 56-57, 66.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Reiterman with Jacobs, *Raven*, 453.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Wagner-Wilson, *Slavery of Faith*, 91.

Wilson agrees with Deborah Layton's perception of Jones and his manipulative relationships with his followers.

One can only speculate whether Jones would have ended his relationship with Shanda James had the insider group in Jonestown endorsed it. Whether the advice given by those in Jones' inner circle was truly influential or just sycophantic confirmation of his existing convictions is also debatable. Jones did not always listen to their advice, as evidenced by Harriet Tropp's letter to the leader, "The Uglification of Jonestown" (see 3.10), which shows their clashing opinions. This letter and other voices of dissent have led me to argue that the women were not always in agreement with Jones. In the case of Shanda James, I argue that these women gave their advice freely to Jones and were not simply agreeing with his intended course of action, but that he made his own decisions regardless of their counsel.

To undo some of these common perceptions about the women of Peoples Temple as mere extensions of Reverend Jones, I will turn the focus to the women themselves. While these intimate relationships are important to discuss, for they reveal much about who had authority and influence in Peoples Temple and the closest physical proximity to the minister, they do not tell the whole story. I then turn to the labor performed by women who did not have an intimate relationship with Jones.

3.8 Women leaders in Jonestown

With or without these intimate ties to Jones, for most women of Peoples Temple, their focus was the dream of constructing a racially integrated socialist movement, enacting social change, and realizing the Promised Land. To promote this goal, women held important responsibilities in Jonestown, including decision-making as members of the inner circle, heading

committees, seeing to the group's finances, and dealing with legal issues. Maria Katsaris, Teri (Terri) Buford, and Debbie Blakey were trusted with banking duties for the Peoples Temple organization, whose assets totaled over \$8.5 million.⁴⁰⁵ The women in these top positions were “mostly white, privileged, young people in their twenties and thirties,” despite Jim Jones’ “condemnation of elitism.”⁴⁰⁶

Women of color were largely excluded from the Planning Commission, the largest administrative body of Peoples Temple in the United States. The Planning Commission also went by that name initially in Jonestown; later, it was called the Steering Committee. The operation was comprised mostly of young, white women. According to Thrash, “Just a few in the inner circle knew everything that was going on. Most of us poor black folks didn’t know anything.”⁴⁰⁷ The members of the Planning Commission handled organizational responsibilities such as event-planning, attending to financial matters, security issues, letter-writing, and performing other necessary business tasks for Peoples Temple. The committee was reserved primarily for the most trusted advisers and the hardest-working members, but it also included people whom Jones wanted to “keep a closer eye on [or] those he didn’t trust fully,” according to Kohl.⁴⁰⁸ Sometimes meetings of the group turned sadistic—beatings, death threats, and loyalty tests called “white nights,” during which members were told they had ingested poisoned drink in

⁴⁰⁵ Rebecca Moore, *A Sympathetic History of Jonestown: The Moore Family Involvement in Peoples Temple* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985).

⁴⁰⁶ Reiterman with Jacobs, *Raven*, 157.

⁴⁰⁷ Thrash as told to Towne, *The Onliest One Alive*, 75. This disparity between those few “in the know” and on the outside is important to note, as not all the women in Peoples Temple had full knowledge of all the behind-the-scenes activities, and therefore were acting with the limited information that they did have. In this way, Peoples Temple transformed into a type of oligarchy in Jonestown, where very few women, mostly white, had power over the majority, most of whom were African American.

⁴⁰⁸ Laura Johnston Kohl, “The Peoples Temple Planning Commission,” *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=33200, accessed March 22, 2021.

order to judge their reactions, were all part of being a member of the committee.⁴⁰⁹ Still, according to former Planning Commission member Kohl, “Being on [the Planning Commission] was considered a status symbol.”⁴¹⁰

The demographics of the Planning Commission reveal much about which members had roles of prominence and power in Peoples Temple. Although the number of committee members varies depending on the year and location of the group, statistics obtained by the FBI provide some insight. Of the 37 recorded members of this group, 25 were women, and twelve were men; 31 were white, and six members were Black.⁴¹¹ This small sample of numbers shows an enormous disparity in leadership roles between whites and people of color in Peoples Temple. The data show that white women outnumbered people of color in positions of authority and decision-making, even though African American women constituted the largest percentage of the group’s population.⁴¹² As we turn to the narratives of some important women leaders in Jonestown, we will see that they were all white, as very few women of color were afforded such opportunities for upward mobility within Peoples Temple.

One such significant woman, the enigmatic Marceline Jones, a white woman, was more than Jim Jones’ dedicated wife. She was an integral part of the group in her own right, although often overlooked in popular and scholarly literature and often considered a behind-the-scenes actor. By almost all accounts, Marceline Jones was a devoted wife, mother, and member of Peoples Temple who was primarily concerned with protecting her children.⁴¹³ Members

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ The Jonestown Institute, “Planning Commission Members,” *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*. https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=35661, accessed March 22, 2021.

⁴¹² Rebecca Moore quoted in Milmon F. Harrison, “Jim Jones and Black Worship Traditions,” in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion*, eds. Moore, Pinn, and Sawyer, 123.

⁴¹³ Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 115.

affectionately called her “Mother” due to both her loving nature and in the spirit of “Mother Divine,” partner to Reverend Father Divine⁴¹⁴ of the influential Peace Mission Movement in Philadelphia. While Marceline Jones was a dedicated leader and an able administrator of Peoples Temple in the earliest days in Indianapolis, her commitment to the movement itself in later years has been called into question. In her will, which was updated on August 8, 1977, Marceline Jones requested that her assets be left to the Communist Party USA in the event of the deaths of her children prior to her own.⁴¹⁵ However, her son Stephan Jones argues that his mother “was not an activist, let alone a revolutionary,”⁴¹⁶ which contradicts the nature of her character and motives. If we are to trust Stephan Jones’ assessment of his mother, Marceline Jones might have left her estate to the Communist Party in a show of loyalty to her husband, who had enacted the same clause in his own will.⁴¹⁷

Regardless, Marceline Jones led Peoples Temple and the movement in Jonestown. She cared for patients in psychiatric healthcare units⁴¹⁸ and oversaw the medical department in Jonestown.⁴¹⁹ She was also an important face of Jonestown, as she often handled public relations for the group. She welcomed Congressman Leo Ryan and his staff to Jonestown, giving the group a tour of the commune.⁴²⁰ She was also left behind in San Francisco to “keep the fortress strong” when Jones was not present shows that she was a “staunch believer” in the cause.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁴ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown*, 16-17.

⁴¹⁵ The Jonestown Institute, “The Wills of Jim Jones and Marceline Jones,” Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=14027, accessed March 22, 2021.

⁴¹⁶ Stephan Jones, “Marceline/Mom.” Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple. https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=32388, accessed March 22, 2021.

⁴¹⁷ The Jonestown Institute, “The Wills of Jim Jones and Marceline Jones,” Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple.

⁴¹⁸ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 81; Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 3.

⁴¹⁹ Reiterman with Jacobs, *Raven*, 346.

⁴²⁰ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 272; Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 153.

⁴²¹ Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 115.

Marceline Jones has rightly been depicted primarily as the doting wife and mother of her family and Peoples Temple members, yet her other contributions to the church and to the movement have often been eclipsed by her infamous husband.

Carolyn Moore Layton became one of the most powerful people in Peoples Temple as one of Jones' "chief administrative officers."⁴²² She was a high school teacher,⁴²³ and so she worked in educational capacities for the group. Layton wrote that she was also tasked with important positions as an administrator, trainer of staff members, researcher, budgetary planner, "Advisory Chairman" of the church's finances, "Assistant to the President and Pastor," "Vice President and Director of the Peoples Temple," and others.⁴²⁴ Consequently, Layton gained much clout within Peoples Temple through various roles and was a vital devotee both as a member of the group in top positions and as a close adviser to Jones.

However, Carolyn Layton's status within the group and with Jim Jones was complicated. Like other women of Peoples Temple, Layton had an ongoing sexual relationship with Jones, which resulted in the birth of their son, Jim-Jon (Kimo), in 1975.⁴²⁵ Maaga writes that for Carolyn Layton in particular, the "love for the male charismatic leader grew out of love for the movement."⁴²⁶ This seems to be the case, as in a letter to her family dated December 6, 1977, Layton defends Jones, the members of Peoples Temple, and their desire to live in Jonestown as "Marxists."⁴²⁷ If we are to follow Maaga's thesis, Carolyn Layton served as both a dedicated

⁴²² Reiterman with Jacobs, *Raven*, 346.

⁴²³ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown*, 26.

⁴²⁴ Carolyn Layton, quoted in Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 58.

⁴²⁵ Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 56.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴²⁷ Carolyn Layton, quoted in Rebecca Moore, "Letters from Carolyn Moore Layton," *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=13232, accessed March 22, 2021.

follower of Jim Jones and of Peoples Temple's utopian dream in Jonestown, although the former may have developed from dedication to the latter. It is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to ascertain which came first or which was the principal reason for Layton's dedication to Jones and Peoples Temple's socialist goals. I argue that this was inconsequential, for regardless of motives, Layton showed her devotion to the entire movement, including its founder.

Another disciple of Jim Jones, Carolyn Layton's sister Annie Moore, was another powerful person in Peoples Temple. Moore, a dedicated member since the group's tenure in California, was part of Jones' inner circle of confidantes and advisers. She also had a personal connection to Jim Jones as a caregiver. As a nurse, Moore cared for Jones when he was unwell both physically and mentally⁴²⁸ and was at times unable to make important decisions for the group on his own. Jones' various ailments, including mental exhaustion, high fevers, fungal disease in his lungs,⁴²⁹ and "erratic ramblings," possibly due to Percodan and amphetamine usage⁴³⁰ are important to note. I argue that the leader's deteriorating state is one reason why women were able to gain so much influence in Peoples Temple in the later years of Peoples Temple's existence. As Jones' mental and physical health declined, he began to relinquish control and delegate major responsibilities to his inner circle, and women (mostly white), assumed more positions of power in Jonestown. However, Jones was still the face of the movement, giving addresses to the group when he was able and playing recordings of these speeches when he was too ill to do so.

Annie Moore died on the final day of Peoples Temple. During the murder-suicides, she penned a note to be discovered after the deaths in Jonestown. In the letter, Moore defends Jones

⁴²⁸ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown*, 74-75.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴³⁰ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 243.

as “the most honest, loving, caring, concerned person whom I ever met and knew,”⁴³¹ and also writes that negative statements made about Peoples Temple were lies. She concludes the note with the following: “We died because you would not let us live in peace!”⁴³² The “you” to whom Moore is writing is presumably the perceived enemies of Peoples Temple, including the Concerned Relatives. This group, comprised of defectors and friends and family members who worried that their loved ones were being held in Guyana against their will, called for an investigation into Peoples Temple and had urged Congressman Leo Ryan to visit the commune,⁴³³ an event which would precipitate the deaths in Jonestown. Although Annie Moore’s suicide letter defends Jim Jones’ character, she ends the note speaking on behalf of the group during the last moments of Peoples Temple’s existence. Moore asserts that they died for the cause and for their desire to live in Jonestown undisturbed. This letter might provide insight into why members may have taken their lives on that final day—not solely out of commitment to Jim Jones, although many certainly felt a strong personal allegiance to him, but also to the movement itself and out of the desire to protect the Promised Land they had built together.

3.9 Essential women workers in Jonestown

Not every woman in Jonestown may have been a high-ranking decision-maker such as those on the Planning Commission, but those who performed everyday rank and file tasks were just as essential to the movement. Laura Johnston Kohl writes in her memoir about her ten years in Peoples Temple, where she served in the United States as a member of the Planning

⁴³¹ Annie Moore, quoted in Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 288.

⁴³² Annie Moore quoted in “Annie Moore’s Last Letter, November 18, 1978,” *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=13939, accessed March 22, 2021.

⁴³³ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 255-256.

Commission, a bus driver, a counselor, a security coordinator, an organizer and indexer of Jones' recorded sermons, and a "greeter" who would wait outside of services to judge if potential members were "friend or foe," information which would be passed along to Jones.⁴³⁴ Of her position on the Advance Crew, a committee put together to scout out locations and potential members, Kohl writes, "As a single white woman, there would have been very few ways for me to have that rich and lovely experience. The Temple opened doors for us with all colors mixing with all colors. I miss that sharing and inclusion very much."⁴³⁵ In Guyana, she performed a number of different tasks, including becoming the major "procurer" of food and other supplies. Others in Jonestown were assigned to the kitchens, the radio room, tending to the children of Jonestown, and doing hard manual labor when they first arrived at the commune.⁴³⁶ Peoples Temple members taught classes for the children of Jonestown, which included the study of socialism, among more typical subjects that one might find in a classroom, such as reading and writing.⁴³⁷ Seniors exercised with the aid of nurses, read at their leisure, worked on projects for the community such as making dolls and other crafts to be sold in Georgetown,⁴³⁸ cleaned rice,⁴³⁹ and tended small gardens, but mostly, they were able to relax from the arduous labor that other members performed.⁴⁴⁰ Jobs were available for everyone able to work, as all were expected to participate in sustaining Jonestown, no matter how large or small their contribution.

⁴³⁴ Kohl, *Jonestown Survivor*, 34, 49, 52-53, 50, 63.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴³⁶ Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 157.

⁴³⁷ Reiterman with Jacobs, *Raven*, 347.

⁴³⁸ Thrash as told to Towne, *The Onliest One Alive*, 87.

⁴³⁹ Wagner-Wilson, *Slavery of Faith*, 73.

⁴⁴⁰ Reiterman with Jacobs, *Raven*, 347.

Women of color were a vital part of the movement as rank and file members. Reiterman and Jacobs refer to the women of color in the group as the “lifeblood of the Temple,”⁴⁴¹ for although they did not attend to Jones as closely as white women did, they performed necessary tasks for the operation that kept the movement in motion. Women of color were also called “the troops” by outsiders⁴⁴² because of the ample work delegated to them. For example, according to Reiterman and Jacobs, in the United States they “set up chairs for the meetings and filled the offering boxes. They brought in thousands of dollars in the form of donations, tithes, signed-over government checks and property, personal savings and possessions that could be converted to cash at flea markets or church-owned secondhand stores.”⁴⁴³ Without the hard work of the women who had been excluded from the higher positions, I argue that Peoples Temple would not have functioned as it did. The church, or movement, needed the money that the women were able to obtain, and even chores such as cleaning and preparing physical spaces for services or other meetings were all necessary parts of maintaining Peoples Temple. These rank and file members were the glue of the movement, and they were the ones who kept the organization running smoothly on the ground level.

In addition to these tasks, women were also subject to positions that required a great deal of physical labor, sometimes forced. While imperative to building Jonestown, these jobs were meant to be punishments, or were reserved for new arrivals to the commune. Layton recalls that the Learning Crew “looked like a group of prisoners on a chain gang.”⁴⁴⁴ Wagner-Wilson writes that joining the Learning Crew was a penalty for “the bad folk” who had broken rules of

⁴⁴¹ Ibid, 156.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁴ Layton, *Seductive Poison*, 158.

Jonestown, including wanting to leave the commune, which Jones considered traitorous.⁴⁴⁵ She recalls that those on the Learning Crew were given undesirable tasks such as digging ditches for outhouses. They ate last, and they were not allowed to walk—they had to run everywhere.⁴⁴⁶ In her memoir, Wagner-Wilson expresses frustration toward Jones by calling him a “madman” and questioning why he chose to keep them all hostage in Jonestown.⁴⁴⁷ She writes, “We [the members of Peoples Temple] had made this work. We built Jonestown, kept Jonestown running. [Jones] didn’t do a thing but suck the life out of it. He was a leach [sic].”⁴⁴⁸ Jim Jones would readily accept any accolades given about Jonestown, which, after all, was named after him; however, it was the people of Peoples Temple who made Jonestown happen. Women, the majority group of the residents, were a significant part of the creation and continuation of Jonestown, although for some, their labor was greatly exploited to meet the needs of the community.

3.10 Voices of dissent in Jonestown

For the most part, women of color had different experiences as members of Peoples Temple than did whites, which did not go unstated. Estimates place the African American population of the congregation at 70 percent in Jonestown, Guyana, and most of the people who lived in the commune were women, children, and the elderly.⁴⁴⁹ However, despite making up the largest demographic of the group, women of color have been largely left out of Peoples Temple’s

⁴⁴⁵ Wagner-Wilson, *Slavery of Faith*, 82.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁹ Moore quoted in Harrison, “Jim Jones and Black Worship Traditions,” in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, eds. Moore, Pinn, and Sawyer, 123.

story. With few exceptions, women of color were not given the chance for upward mobility either in the outside world or in Peoples Temple. Maaga writes that “within Peoples Temple there was an opportunity for some women to exercise power and authority beyond what either their gender or educational training would have allowed in mainstream society.”⁴⁵⁰ The key words in Maaga’s quotation are “for some women,” for not all women in Peoples Temple were afforded these opportunities. While essential to the movement, people of color did not enjoy the same privileges and prospects as the top-ranking white women members, and they often worked without recognition or reward, despite Peoples Temple’s messages of unity and racial equality.

The Eight Revolutionaries (also known as the Gang of Eight), a multiracial group of men and women Peoples Temple defectors, pointed out these hypocrisies in an internal memo. In 1973, the eight former members wrote to Jim Jones, “You said that the revolutionary focal point at present is in the black people. There is no potential in the white population, according to you. Yet, where is the black leadership, where is the black staff and black attitude?” They continue, “Black people are being tapped for money, practically nothing else. John Brown doesn’t know what Socialism is, all he’s used for is to take offerings,”⁴⁵¹ showing the exploitation of Black members of Peoples Temple.

The Eight Revolutionaries also point to prejudices created by racial anxieties in Peoples Temple. They posit that “the Staff [sic] being uppity white folk fear blackness, they fear what some of us had to offer, they fear the consequences of a do it now philosophy, they fear action.” These frustrations are justified, as people of color were often pushed aside or were otherwise neglected, and so was the message and leadership of the Black-led revolution for which Jones

⁴⁵⁰ Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 55-56.

⁴⁵¹ The Jonestown Institute, “The Eight Revolutionaries,” *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=14077, accessed March 25, 2021.

had called. The Eight Revolutionaries brought the racism and discrimination in Peoples Temple to light, pointing out the inconsistencies of a movement meant to be racially integrated and equal. I argue that the utopian dream of racial equality was not realized in Jonestown, as people of color went underrepresented in positions of leadership, were often unheard, and were at times used solely for their money and labor without the opportunity to give valuable input or steer the direction of Peoples Temple as white women did.

In addition to the Eight Revolutionaries in San Francisco, some individual women residents of Jonestown challenged Jim Jones' abilities to make good decisions for the group. These rebellious acts show that some Jonestown women disagreed with Jones' ideas and were willing to oppose him in public forums. These confrontations may be surprising, as popular narratives about women in new religions, or cults, frequently paint women as unquestioning followers subject to every whim of the charismatic male leader. However, as the following examples will show, women members of Peoples Temple, not just defectors of the group, did question Jones' actions.

Harriet Sarah Tropp, a white woman and high-ranking member of Peoples Temple, touted much power in administrative and secretarial positions. She handled media relations and spoke with top Guyanese ministers of state about various affairs, among performing other tasks for Peoples Temple.⁴⁵² However, despite her loyalty to Jones and the movement, mere months before the murder-suicides in the November of 1978, Tropp wrote a confrontational memo to Jones titled "The Uglification of Jonestown." In the letter, Tropp writes that there are problems

⁴⁵² Mike Cartmell, "Remembering Harriet," *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=32384, accessed March 25, 2021.

with the decision-making process in Peoples Temple and with the stubborn Jim Jones. She concludes in her letter to Jones,

I'm sorry if any of this sounds intemperate, but I am extremely upset at the ugly mess I see we've made of this project, especially with guests coming. And it was all unnecessary, if we'd just followed advice⁴⁵³ ... I think the essence of the problem, or at least one aspect of it, is that no one is willing to oppose your opinion in certain matters, and I frankly think that sometimes you are wrong, and no one is willing to say so. I realize this is quite a volatile statement, but I think it is one factor in the dynamics of how this organization functions that gets us in trouble.⁴⁵⁴

Harriet Tropp's forthrightness may have been rare; however, there was at least one other publicly outspoken woman in Peoples Temple. Christine Miller, a Black woman, questioned Jones' call for revolutionary suicide. On the infamous Death Tape, which was recorded during the murder-suicides, Miller can be heard imploring Jones to consider the children of Jonestown.⁴⁵⁵ She is shouted down by other members in favor of Jones' suicidal plan, or who were at least willing to go along with it. Miller asks Jones if it is too late for Russia,⁴⁵⁶ referring to Jones' plan to move Peoples Temple to the Soviet Union or Cuba, places where he believed the movement's communist ideals would be welcomed. Jones tells Miller that these plans are unachievable.⁴⁵⁷ According to sociologist John R. Hall, neither the Soviet Union nor Cuba had encouraged Peoples Temple's potential move to these places,⁴⁵⁸ another promise made by Jones which went unfulfilled.

⁴⁵³ According to Tropp, the advice given to the group was to postpone the meeting with their upcoming guests because the weather was going to be rainy, which would hinder the construction of roads and paths in Jonestown. Tropp writes that Peoples Temple members consulted with residents of Jonestown who had lived there for years, as well as Guyanese locals with knowledge of the area and its seasons. Harriet Tropp quoted in Stephenson, ed., *Dear People*, 101.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Christine Miller quoted in Nelson, dir., *American Experience: Jonestown*.

⁴⁵⁶ Timothy Lisagor, "Jim Jones and Christine Miller: An Analysis of Jonestown's Final Struggle," *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=30294, accessed March 25, 2021.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 249.

After much discussion with Jones, Miller asserts, “I feel like as long as there’s life, there’s hope. That’s my faith,” and later, “We all came here for peace... When we destroy ourselves, we’re defeated. We let them, the enemies, defeat us.”⁴⁵⁹ Her wishes for peace and survival are unfulfilled, however, as Jones continues to spout violent rhetoric and makes incessant calls for the group’s mass suicide. Christine Miller finally relents, and her body is found among the dead. Her protests should not go unnoted, however, as she was one of few women to publicly challenge Jim Jones and his decision-making. Reiterman and Jacobs allege that “enormous peer pressure” kept most Peoples Temple members, particularly in Jonestown, from questioning Jones and the notion that “self-destruction was insane, meaningless and sure to be interpreted differently than intended.”⁴⁶⁰ Therefore, the words of Christine Miller were remarkable, as she broke through the quiet and the secrecy of the group. She voiced the unstated thoughts of Peoples Temple members, even though she met the same end as over 900 of her fellow brethren in Jonestown who died of cyanide ingestion.

3.11 Conclusion

Women in Peoples Temple had important positions starting with the founding of the church, although their influence and power within the organization grew over the following decades. In Indianapolis, Marceline Jones worked closely with her husband, Reverend Jones, and other women took on menial but essential tasks. Women showed their devotion to Jones and the church by spying on other members and reporting back to Jones, who used this knowledge to convince his followers of his divine psychic powers and healing abilities. Despite the work of the

⁴⁵⁹ Miller quoted in Nelson, dir., *American Experience: Jonestown*.

⁴⁶⁰ Reiterman with Jacobs, *Raven*, 406.

women congregants in Indianapolis, we do not yet see the fierce devotion to Jones and the movement that developed in the ensuing decades.

Women held the most powerful leadership positions in Peoples Temple history in the mostly self-sufficient, isolated commune in Jonestown, Guyana. They took on important roles and responsibilities, whether in coveted leadership roles or as essential rank and file members, to promote the movement and the socialist cause. This argument goes against the common popular narrative, which often portrays the women of Peoples Temple as unquestioning devotees with personal loyalties first and foremost to Reverend Jones rather than to the movement itself. The stories and contributions of all women, whether leaders or rank and file members, should not be overshadowed by Jones' admittedly dominant role in the Peoples Temple as a decision-maker. Jim Jones was undoubtedly the face of the movement, largely due to the sensationalism of mass media that followed the murder-suicides, and due to the name of the commune, which suggested that he alone was at the top of the Peoples Temple hierarchy. Some women had intimate relationships with Jones, but for many women members, their commitment was primarily to sustaining the movement; that is, achieving the socialist utopian dream far from the oft-perceived oppressive climate of the United States. This movement was one that many would (and did) die to protect.

The concept of women as brainwashed followers of charismatic male leaders of new religious movements, or cults, as they are frequently depicted in popular culture and media, is not a new one, yet it is an idea that should be challenged. Women influence religions and movements through various roles and positions, whether at the top or at the bottom of the often-pyramidal structures. Some women have more power than others within new religions and traditional ones, but women have always been significant contributors. Although not as common

as religions established by men, there have been women founders and top leaders of new religious movements, including Mary Baker Eddy of Church of Christ, Science, and Mother Ann Lee of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming (the Shakers). For every David Koresh of the Branch Davidians, there is an Ellen G. White, a Florence Houteff, and a Lois Roden, influential women who came before; for every Reverend Jim Jones of Jonestown, there is a Marceline Jones and Carolyn Moore Layton; for every Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh of the Rajneesh movement, there is a powerful Ma Anand Sheila, and behind them, more women ready to serve the religion or movement with laborious and often thankless tasks.

Whether leading the way as high-ranking members or tending to humble tasks and chores in Jonestown, women created a space for themselves as the center and life of the movement. This sphere of influence, no matter the size or status of the role, allowed for women to create meaning for their own existence as necessary parts of the operation, as they held the movement together in often unacknowledged ways. They worked in positions ranging from powerful administrative leaders to vital physical laborers and assisted with everything in between. There were women bold enough to question Jones' ability to make competent choices for the group, including his call for the murder-suicides on the final day. Jonestown was a utopian experiment, the group's Promised Land. The women of Peoples Temple actively worked toward the goal of a socialist paradise, pursuing the dream in crucial ways, both with and without Jim Jones.

Chapter 4: The Women of Rajneeshpuram

Many years later, after I left Bhagwan, many thought that I would take back my old name... This gift, which was given to me in love, I will not return... I know many who think that they can solve problems by taking back their old name again and behaving like before. I think that if they can do that, then they were never really with Bhagwan. Above all, I believe they never understood what He was all about. They never learned anything.

-Ma Anand Sheela, former personal secretary to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh⁴⁶¹

4.1 Introduction

Rajneeshpuram, a commune constructed in rural Oregon in 1981, became a lively and self-sufficient metropolis, one perhaps even more impressive than the Jonestown experiment in Guyana. The commune was comprised of approximately 64,000 acres of land, and, according to community leader Ma Anand Sheela, housed roughly 5,000 neo-sannyasins by 1985.⁴⁶² Sheela recalls in her memoir that Rajneeshpuram was “like a city in itself... Over time, it developed its own urban infrastructure, complete with fire departments, a transportation system, a police station, shopping malls, a water reservoir, a well-staffed security force, and even a 1,3000-metre-long airstrip.”⁴⁶³ Considering that the commune only existed for about five years, these developments were remarkable.

⁴⁶¹ Ma Anand Sheela, *Don't Kill Him!: The Story of My Life with Bhagwan Rajneesh* (New Delhi, India: Prakash Books India Pvt. Ltd. 2012), 125.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*

The expansive and intricately designed Rajneeshpuram, erected relatively quickly in place of the formerly desolate Big Muddy Ranch, had all the trappings of a burgeoning city. There were apartments, often occupied by groups of neo-sannyasins, some members romantically linked, others not.⁴⁶⁴ The rapid growth of this city required sacrifices of the neo-sannyasins, including their time and labor. Sociologist Elizabeth Puttick describes the intensity of the work conditions in Rajneeshpuram, writing that the commune “began to resemble a glorified labour camp,” as the neo-sannyasins often worked 16- to 18-hour workdays.⁴⁶⁵ “Responses to this grueling regime varied, but eventually even the most dedicated disciples began to find the exhaustion insupportable,” Puttick explains.⁴⁶⁶ While the city itself thrived, this growth was due to the extremely long hours of work performed by the neo-sannyasins for this social experiment, which began to take its toll on the devotees.⁴⁶⁷

This chapter focuses on the power, agency, and devotion of the women of the Rajneesh movement. I will explore not only what women did in Rajneeshpuram and the satellite ashrams, but why they would subject themselves to such strenuous labor in the name of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. While women worked towards enlightenment by working for the greater good of the community, they were also devoted to their teacher, Bhagwan Rajneesh. Perhaps because of the guru’s deliberate celebrity, the neo-sannyasins of the Rajneesh movement felt connected to the man himself, despite his long vow of silence and aloofness in the later years of his life, which kept the guru removed from all but his inner circle of advisors. While Bhagwan Rajneesh’s

⁴⁶⁴ Jane Stork, *Breaking the Spell: My Life as a Rajneeshee, and the Long Journey Back to Freedom* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2009), 98.

⁴⁶⁵ Elizabeth Puttick, *Women in New Religions: In Search of Community, Sexuality, and Spiritual Power* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 162.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

celebrity is an important and worthwhile discussion, the main focus of this chapter is on the power, agency, and devotion of the women.

Although the Rajneesh movement included ashrams across the world, for the bulk of the chapter, I will analyze Rajneeshpuram, Oregon. The chapter begins with a short discussion of Bhagwan Rajneesh's beginnings. The history of the group, beginning in India and eventually spreading worldwide, is also addressed. Next, Bhagwan Rajneesh's philosophies about life, love, and capitalism, among other topics, are analyzed. I explore the role of the women leaders of the movement, followed by the rank and file workers, who maintained the structure of Rajneeshpuram. Women's devotion and labor follows, as well as the concept of "spiritual surrender" to Bhagwan Rajneesh. Sex, love, and intimacy in the commune are studied, including how much control the guru had over intimate relationships in Rajneeshpuram. Family and community, including the children of the Rajneesh movement, are addressed next. The chapter concludes with a description of the crimes committed in Rajneeshpuram by Bhagwan Rajneesh and prominent women of the movement, which effectively ended the group's tenure in Rajneeshpuram, Oregon.

Throughout the chapter, the immense influence of Ma Anand Sheela, the guru's personal secretary and spokesperson, is emphasized. The woman leader exercised great power through her high-ranking position leadership in Rajneeshpuram, Oregon. Sheela, as she was most often known, "appears to have had equal or greater power than [Bhagwan Rajneesh] for several years," Puttick contends, explaining that Sheela was "sometimes unofficially called the queen of Rajneeshpuram and also—as acting head of the new 'religion' of Rajneeshism—the 'Pope.'"

Thus she united secular and spiritual power in her own person.”⁴⁶⁸ Therefore, a study of the woman whose power rivalled that of Bhagwan Rajneesh’s is more than a worthwhile endeavor.

Women in Rajneeshpuram and its satellite ashrams in other parts of the world lived complex lives and had differing experiences. Their roles in the community were an amalgam of life both reminiscent of and free from the structures and expectations of their former lives outside of the commune. Despite Bhagwan Rajneesh’s radical and unique philosophies about gender roles and the importance of women to the movement, there were still restrictions and expectations placed on women, particularly regarding reproductive rights. Bhagwan Rajneesh had tight control and influence over the women disciples of the Rajneesh movement. While women may not have been forced to act in the manner prescribed by the guru, there was immense pressure placed on them by Bhagwan Rajneesh to abide by the guidelines of the community. This pressure contradicted Bhagwan Rajneesh’s championing of free will, and I find that the guru often spoke in paradoxical ways.

A note about the terminology and sources that I will be using in this chapter is warranted before proceeding. Scholars generally refer to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh as “Rajneesh,” although his devotees traditionally use “Bhagwan,” meaning “blessed one.”⁴⁶⁹ I will compromise by calling the leader of the Rajneesh movement “Bhagwan Rajneesh,” as it includes both his name and given title. Members of the Rajneesh movement often refer to themselves as sannyasins; however, I will use the term neo-sannyasins, the more accurate descriptor for the adherents. Ma

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid, 177. It was Bhagwan Rajneesh himself who gave Sheela this power in the later years of Rajneeshpuram, although she expanded her role in the movement beyond her initial limited position as his secretary in later years, at according to Bhagwan Rajneesh. Hugh B. Urban, *Zorba the Buddha: Sex, Spirituality, and Capitalism in the Global Osho Movement* (Oakland; University of California Press, 2015), 121.

⁴⁶⁹ Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh is now generally referred to as Osho (meaning “oceanic” or “encompassing the world”), his chosen name beginning in late 1989. For this chapter, I will be using the name by which he was known in Rajneeshpuram, Oregon (1981-1985), for this setting is the major focus of my work.

Anand Sheela biographer Manbeena Sandhu explains that Bhagwan Rajneesh's neo-sannyasins differed from traditional Indian sannyasins: "Ordinarily, the term sannyasi or sannyasin signifies a person who has renounced the materialistic world and all its comfort in search of God and truth."⁴⁷⁰ Sandhu continues, "In contrast, Bhagwan's sannyasins or neo-sannyasins, as they were called, were not renouncers but celebrators."⁴⁷¹ Some scholars and even former neo-sannyasins prefer to use the title "Rajneeshees" to define the participants of the group or residents of the community. I have found this term to be used mostly by scholars who studied the group from outside of the movement. As it was not what most of the disciples called themselves, I will not be applying the term "Rajneeshee" to the members of the group, opting for "neo-sannyasin" instead.

I will also refrain from calling the neo-sannyasins "followers" of Bhagwan Rajneesh, instead choosing to use "devotees" or simply "neo-sannyasins" to describe the members of the movement. In her memoir, former neo-sannyasin Jane Stork, refers to herself as a "devotee."⁴⁷² The word "follower" was heartily rejected by Bhagwan Rajneesh himself in *The Rajneesh Bible: Volume 1*.⁴⁷³ The founder of the movement claims that he simply shares his knowledge with others but does not encourage them to "follow" him, as Jesus did. According to the guru, asking others to follow oneself is a "fascist attitude."⁴⁷⁴ In his Bible, Bhagwan Rajneesh explains that the neo-sannyasins of the movement are not his "followers," but "fellow travelers," "friends,"

⁴⁷⁰ Manbeena Sandhu, *Nothing to Lose: The Authorized Biography of Ma Anand Sheela* (Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2020), 59.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 159.

⁴⁷³ Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, *The Rajneesh Bible Volume 1* (Rajneeshpuram, Oregon: Rajneesh Foundation International, 1985), 15.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

and “lovers.”⁴⁷⁵ In this way, Bhagwan Rajneesh separated himself from other leaders of religious movements and distinguished his teachings and novel philosophies as an alternative to established, or “mainstream,” religions.

4.2 The history of the Rajneesh movement

The focus of this dissertation is women; however, it is necessary to present biographical information about Bhagwan Rajneesh and his philosophies before turning to a discussion of prominent women and the community of Rajneeshpuram. Prior to taking the name Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, the leader of the Rajneesh movement was known as Chandra Mohan Rajneesh. He was born on December 11, 1931, to a Jain family in the small village of Kuchwada, Madhya Pradesh, India.⁴⁷⁶ After earning a degree in philosophy in 1955, followed by a master’s degree, he began to teach at Raipur Sanskrit College.⁴⁷⁷ His lectures were often controversial, as he “presented himself and his ideas as radical, iconoclastic, and dangerous,”⁴⁷⁸ resulting in the resignation from his position at the University of Jabalpur in 1966.⁴⁷⁹ He began to use the name “Acharya” (teacher, or professor) Rajneesh, and started his quest as a guru in India, providing counseling and mediation classes.⁴⁸⁰ He then traded “Acharya” for the more expansive Bhagwan (meaning “blessed one,” or as some have translated the title, “God”) Shree Rajneesh. The guru revealed that he had attained enlightenment at the age of twenty-one,⁴⁸¹ which gave him more

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁶ Sandhu, *Nothing to Lose*, 80.

⁴⁷⁷ Marion S. Goldman, *Passionate Journeys: Why Successful Women Joined a Cult* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 21.

⁴⁷⁸ Urban, *Zorba the Buddha*, 25.

⁴⁷⁹ Goldman, *Passionate Journeys*, 21.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid, 22.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

credibility as a spiritual leader.⁴⁸² He gave discourses and developed meditative and therapeutic groups in Bombay (Mumbai), India. It was there that Bhagwan Rajneesh created what would be informally called the Rajneesh movement (now the Osho movement) to share his experiences and philosophies with devoted neo-sannyasins and curious onlookers from India and the West.

Bhagwan Rajneesh was a prolific writer, publishing numerous books available in dozens of languages.⁴⁸³ The guru also recorded audiotapes of his discourses for neo-sannyasins and potential neo-sannyasins to listen to when they were unable to attend his in-person speeches. Therefore, many of the disciples of the Rajneesh movement were aware of the group's early philosophies before taking sannyas (giving themselves over to Bhagwan Rajneesh's teachings and renouncing their past lives to create new ones), although some felt baffled and betrayed by his later turn to religion,⁴⁸⁴ which I argue destabilized the group and confused its goals. Deciding to live and practice meditations and the philosophies of Bhagwan Rajneesh among fellow neo-sannyasins also meant the rejection of the expected societal norms for women as they were envisioned in the outside world.

After its tenure in Bombay, Bhagwan Rajneesh decided to move the group to Poona (Pune), India, to accommodate more neo-sannyasins and because of the city's proximity to an international airport.⁴⁸⁵ Within two years of the ashram's existence in Poona, the number of neo-sannyasins grew to approximately 3,000-5,000 residents and had an estimated 25,000-35,000

⁴⁸² Bhagwan Rajneesh would later famously remark, "I *sell* contentment. I *sell* enlightenment [emphasis in original]." This indicates that perhaps the guru's claim to attaining enlightenment was a tool used to attract devotees and donors. Whether Bhagwan Rajneesh did achieve enlightenment is inconsequential for this study, as I am interested primarily in how he related to the neo-sannyasins of the movement. Hugh B. Urban, *Zorba the Buddha*, 134.

⁴⁸³ Sheela, *Don't Kill Him!*, 7.

⁴⁸⁴ James Gordon, quoted in Urban, *Zorba the Buddha*, 122.

⁴⁸⁵ Sheela, *Don't Kill Him!*, 139-140.

visitors each year.⁴⁸⁶ The group began to arouse curiosity from the news media, as more people gathered in the ashram from around the world to hear Bhagwan Rajneesh's controversial teachings, which added to his growing celebrity. Sociologist Lewis F. Carter writes that the guru publicly criticized Mahatma Gandhi, socialism, and other topics.⁴⁸⁷ He cites Bhagwan Rajneesh: "With or without reason, I was creating controversies... there seemed even if just for fun, a necessity to create controversies."⁴⁸⁸ He also called for "more open and free acceptance of sex," which "startled" the Indian audience at a Bombay cultural center.⁴⁸⁹ Bhagwan Rajneesh's discourses were sometimes offensive, and Hindu leaders in India began to take notice. Nevertheless, he was invited to speak at the Second World Hindu Conference in 1969, where he criticized "all organized religions and their priests," consequently angering the highest priest of Hinduism.⁴⁹⁰ According to Carter, the guru called the disastrous event "play."⁴⁹¹ Despite offending the sensibilities of some, Bhagwan Rajneesh drew bigger and bigger crowds, attracting 15,000 people to a public assembly in Bombay.⁴⁹² I argue that these scandals were a tactic to recruit more followers who were interested in the sensationalism and the possibility of adventure that they might find in the Rajneesh movement.

Because of these teachings and the Indian government's suspicion about drug trafficking and other offenses taking place in the ashram, the group relocated to the United States in 1981 with the wealth they had accumulated in India. They settled for a short time in New Jersey,

⁴⁸⁶ Lewis F. Carter, *Charisma and Control in Rajneeshpuram: The Role of Shared Values in the Creation of a Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 58.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid, 44

⁴⁸⁸ Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, quoted in Carter, *Charisma and Control*, 44.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid, 44-45.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid, 45.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

where Ma Anand Sheela joined Bhagwan Rajneesh and his disciples. She had visited the guru to hear his discourses in India prior to committing herself fully to the movement in the United States. Although Bhagwan Rajneesh was the founder of the group, Sheela was one of the most important members of the movement—I argue even more so than the guru himself at times, particularly after he took a long vow of silence in Rajneeshpuram. Born Sheela Patel in India in 1949, the woman “almost universally known as Sheela” attended Montclair State University in New Jersey.⁴⁹³ In college, she met and married an American named Marc Silverman (later known as Swami Prem Chinmaya), who also joined the Rajneesh movement. Sheela took the name Sheela Silverman until Bhagwan Rajneesh gave her a new name on February 11, 1973: Ma Anand Sheela,⁴⁹⁴ meaning Mother (Ma) Bliss (Anand) and Sheela, her given name, which “[signified] a strong and good character.”⁴⁹⁵

Sheela has been described by fellow neo-sannyasin Jane Stork as “charming and outrageous”⁴⁹⁶ as well as “simply bad news,”⁴⁹⁷ demonstrating her polarizing presence in the movement as a leader. Journalist Win McCormack writes, “Sheela indisputably turned out to be the most tyrannical, amoral, and ruthless of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh’s executive assistants...both in her conduct toward those outside the commune whom she perceived to be enemies of Bhagwan and in her treatment of those inside the commune whom she perceived to

⁴⁹³ Carl Abbott, “Revisiting Rajneeshpuram: Oregon’s largest utopian community as Western History,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* (Winter 2015), 414. *Gale Academic OneFile*, accessed August 14, 2020. <https://link->

[gale.com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/apps/doc/A437223311/AONE?u=milwaukee&sid=AONE&xd=64254aab.](https://link-gale.com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/apps/doc/A437223311/AONE?u=milwaukee&sid=AONE&xd=64254aab)

⁴⁹⁴ Carl Abbott, “Revisiting Rajneeshpuram.”

⁴⁹⁵ Sandhu, *Nothing to Lose*, 61.

⁴⁹⁶ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 187.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 208.

be threatening to her own power and standing.”⁴⁹⁸ However, former neo-sannyasin Susan Harfouche recalls, “[I] enjoy[ed] the meeting [with Sheela] and the experience of seeing her for the first time. I thought she was very witty and cute.”⁴⁹⁹ Sheela describes herself in her memoir in third person as follows: “Apart from [her husband] Chinmaya nobody could stand her. For every small thing that did not suit her, she would run to Bhagwan and cry into His⁵⁰⁰ ears. But she came through with everything. Bhagwan let her do whatever she wanted.”⁵⁰¹

Most likely, Ma Anand Sheela was all of these things. She also describes herself and former secretary Ma Yoga Laxmi, as accused of being “power-hungry” by “unhappy and disappointed” neo-sannyasins from Bombay who blamed Laxmi for Bhagwan Rajneesh’s departure from the city.⁵⁰² According to Sheela, these discontented devotees of the guru believed that “Bhagwan had left Bombay against His will.”⁵⁰³ I argue that Sheela was a strong, determined, and loyal leader, one who was tough and strict, as she relays in her memoir that the guru demanded of his administrative workers and secretaries.⁵⁰⁴ Sheela writes, “He allowed no negativity, no complaints. The time of courting people to come to Him, as in Bombay, were gone. He made it clear to us that we had to either become better or go. Uncertain behavior was no longer accepted.”⁵⁰⁵ The new secretary followed these new guidelines put forth by the guru. In this way, Sheela argues that she was not totally in control of her actions—Bhagwan Rajneesh

⁴⁹⁸ Win McCormack, “Bhagwan’s Sexism,” in *The Rajneesh Chronicles: The True Story of the Cult That Unleashed the First Act of Bioterrorism on US Soil*, 2nd ed. (Gurugram, India: Hachette Book Publishing India Pvt. Ltd, 2010), 102.

⁴⁹⁹ Susan Harfouche, “Death of a Dream: Memoirs of an Ex-Sannyasin,” in McCormack, *The Rajneesh Chronicles*, 102.

⁵⁰⁰ In her memoir, Ma Anand Sheela capitalizes “He/Him/His” in reference to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh.

⁵⁰¹ This quotation is in the third person perspective and is written as Sheela penned it in her memoir. Sheela, *Don’t Kill Him!*, 136.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 140-141.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 140-143.

was dictating her behavior. Still, Sheela would become the most powerful woman in the movement in Rajneeshpuram.⁵⁰⁶ Sheela was also the president of the Rajneesh Foundation International (RFI),⁵⁰⁷ an organization created by lawyers and businesspeople of the Rajneesh movement to keep the multi-national group tax-exempt as an established church.⁵⁰⁸

Soon after the group's mass migration to the United States, Ma Anand Sheela secured land in rural Oregon for a settlement. The Big Muddy Ranch, as it was called, was purchased by Sheela for \$5.9 million, well below the asking price of \$7.5 million.⁵⁰⁹ The group began to migrate to the area, known as Rancho Rajneesh, which would later be renamed Rajneeshpuram. Ma Anand Sheela estimates that 2,500 neo-sannyasins embarked on the journey across the ocean to their new home in the United States.⁵¹⁰ There, they would attract even more attention than in India due to dramatic and controversial local elections, Bhagwan Rajneesh's sensationalism in the news, and a strong visual presence in the community and the small town of Antelope, Oregon nearby, many of whose residents vehemently opposed the group's influence. It is during the time after the move to Oregon that the remainder of this chapter is focused.

4.3 The philosophies and teachings of Bhagwan Rajneesh

The Rajneesh movement was a fusion of Eastern and Western philosophies, which sociologist Marion S. Goldman calls "an interesting, palatable spiritual stew that was dominated

⁵⁰⁶ It is important to note that domination of others by these women does not necessarily equal freedom, but it does exemplify their powerful status in the Rajneesh movement. Because there has been debate about the true agency of Ma Anand Sheela and other high-ranking women, such as whether their actions were their decisions or were upon orders from Bhagwan Rajneesh, it is difficult to determine how much agency and freedom women had in positions of power.

⁵⁰⁷ Goldman, *Passionate Journeys*, 36.

⁵⁰⁸ Urban, *Zorba the Buddha*, 109-110. Jane Stork notes that the Rajneesh Modern Car Collection Trust and the Rajneesh Jewelry Trust were established to protect his luxury assets. Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 130.

⁵⁰⁹ Sheela, *Don't Kill Him!*, 218-219.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 204.

by Zen Buddhism,” although Bhagwan Rajneesh also spoke about “Christianity, Hassidism, Sufism, the Upanishads, Yoga... Marx, Freud, and Henry Ford” in his discourses.⁵¹¹ His teachings included the imagined ideal new man, or *Homo Novus*, who would be dubbed “Zorba the Buddha.”⁵¹² The guru also spoke of Armageddon, which would bring about the “new age of the new man”: the aforementioned Zorba the Buddha. The neo-sannyasins would survive Armageddon by living underground until it was time to emerge from their hiding place. They would be the only people to live through the apocalypse, according to their spiritual guide and teacher.⁵¹³ While Bhagwan Rajneesh spoke of reincarnation, he also emphasized salvation on Earth, that is, the possibility of living through Armageddon, indicating the contradictory messages given to his people yet again. However, his survival and longevity depended on “how hard [the neo-sannyasins] worked,” which was a tactic used to ensure loyalty, devotion, and physical labor from his disciples.⁵¹⁴

This apocalyptic scenario was sometimes met with skepticism. Stork writes, “It sounded like science fiction to me... I didn’t give it much thought.”⁵¹⁵ Therefore, I argue that because some women neo-sannyasins rejected elements of the guru’s teachings, Bhagwan Rajneesh was not all-knowing, and they could disagree with his teachings and still devote themselves to the movement and the man. Sociologist Marion S. Goldman writes that “free choice was the essence of Bhagwan’s philosophy.”⁵¹⁶ Although neo-sannyasins were expected to emotionally surrender

⁵¹¹ Goldman, *Passionate Journeys*, 25.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵¹³ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 130.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.* Stork does not elaborate on who or what will bring about the Armageddon or what the event would look like. It is possible that, having dismissed this talk as “science fiction,” she either does not recall the details or does see the importance of sharing them.

⁵¹⁶ Goldman, *Passionate Journeys*, 25.

to the guru, “there was considerable latitude for individuals to construct their own meanings of surrender,” Goldman explains.⁵¹⁷ For Jane Stork, the disbelief in an Armageddon that would usher in a new age was not a problem for her, as devotees could “choose to accept or reject any part of his philosophical discourses,” according to Goldman.⁵¹⁸

One of the most conspicuous beliefs of Bhagwan Rajneesh was the assertion that women were as important, if not more so, than men to the organization.⁵¹⁹ This sentiment is not always expressed in orthodox religions, which often keep men at the top of the institution’s hierarchy in positions of leadership and visibility. Women in Rajneeshpuram and associated ashrams were valued not just as rank and file members who increased the group’s membership numbers but were appreciated as vital contributors as laborers and in other capacities, or so Bhagwan Rajneesh attested. This could be said of other religions, new and mainstream, where women have served in submissive roles dictated by God, the guru, or others. The Rajneesh movement differed, as women did have leadership positions, particularly the powerful Ma Anand Sheela and other members of Bhagwan Rajneesh’s inner circle.

Although women often were the ones to lead different aspects of the movement, particularly in Rajneeshpuram, the organization differed from many counterculture groups of the postwar era. Historian Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo’s assessment of women in 1960s counterculture movements reveals that the roles of hippie men and women were often strictly divided, with men holding the position of hunters and women as nurturers.⁵²⁰ In Rajneeshpuram, rank and file women and men often performed work similar to one another, such as the physical

⁵¹⁷ Ibid, 26.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid, 25.

⁵¹⁹ Rajneesh, *The Rajneesh Bible Volume 1*, 135.

⁵²⁰ Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Daughters of Aquarius: Women of the Sixties Counterculture* (Lawrence, University of Kansas, 2009), 59.

construction of the commune. In this way, the Rajneesh movement distinguished itself from its contemporaries. Positions of power in Rajneeshpuram were most often held by women, save for the position of the commune's mayor, which was held by Krishna Deva (David Knapp).⁵²¹

The type of meditations performed, which were meant to bring about a feeling of liberation and spiritual enlightenment, also distinguished the group from other religions and movements. Although perhaps unusual practices to outsiders, dynamic meditation, therapy groups, and encounter groups, or aggression groups, were daily occurrences and an essential part of the Rajneesh movement. Disciples of the movement were required to participate in meditative exercises at least once per day.⁵²² Bhagwan Rajneesh would prescribe these types of therapies and meditations to his disciples, who were expected to attend certain classes at his instruction.⁵²³ The goal of these meditations was to nurture one's spiritual growth, and perhaps to eventually attain enlightenment, as the founder of the movement had done. For those who became enlightened, the guru would bestow upon them a new title: Bodhisattva.⁵²⁴ In Rajneeshpuram, Bhagwan Rajneesh appointed twenty-one Bodhisattvas to an inner circle, with the intention that they would take over the Oregon commune after his death.⁵²⁵

The various types of meditation could be intense, but that was their purpose. American neo-sannyasin Jack Allanach described his experience with dynamic meditation as a "liberating,

⁵²¹ Krishna Deva would later tell authorities in the press and through testimonials that Ma Anand Sheela had "made him" commit crimes, including "testing biological warfare" in Rajneeshpuram and in the larger community outside of the commune, which meant poisoning food and water supplies. Carter, *Charisma and Control*, 226.

⁵²² Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, 20.

⁵²³ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 78-79.

⁵²⁴ Sandhu, *Nothing to Lose*, 252.

⁵²⁵ Bhagwan Rajneesh made predictions about when his death would occur, claiming it would be on the Master's Day (July 6) of an unspecified year. Sandhu, *Nothing to Lose*, 252. Bhagwan Rajneesh began to make demands of his people, which he said would postpone his death, including ordering more luxury cars. Lewis F. Carter calls this "spiritual blackmail." Carter, *Charisma and Control*, 144.

life-changing practice,” although he also called the exercise “crazy” and “absurd.”⁵²⁶ The purpose of this meditative practice was to “free the human mind from years of social repressive conditioning by shocking it out of its habitual patterns of thinking and behaving through complete and total catharsis,” according to Sandhu.⁵²⁷ “Encounter groups,” or “aggression groups,” were perhaps even more extreme and demanding than dynamic meditation sessions. The purpose of these therapeutic groups was to look deep into one’s subconscious and to “peel off the layered masks of acquired personality” by exposing one’s deepest emotions, which might include aggression, fear, or insecurity.⁵²⁸ In these groups, participants were blindfolded and encouraged to cry, scream, shout obscenities—anything necessary to release deep, subconscious feelings and to expel negative energy.⁵²⁹ These therapy sessions sometimes included “violence and sexual encounters in groups”; however, Sheela writes that participation in these sessions was “always...absolutely voluntary.”⁵³⁰ These encounters could be potentially traumatic for those for whom catharsis did not happen, yet many neo-sannyasins were willing to give up some of their comfort to seek what they believed to be an elevated spiritual plane.

In addition to advocating the pursuit of enlightenment, Bhagwan Rajneesh was an unabashed proponent of capitalism and materialism, and was unafraid to impart these values to his disciples. This ideology caused much confusion for those who did not understand why a religious authority would charge money for his lectures, as it was an unusual practice for a spiritual leader.⁵³¹ However, Bhagwan Rajneesh justified the blend of capitalism and materialism

⁵²⁶ Urban, *Zorba the Buddha*, 61.

⁵²⁷ Sandhu, *Nothing to Lose*, 90.

⁵²⁸ Ibid, 91.

⁵²⁹ Ibid, 92.

⁵³⁰ Sheela, *Don't Kill Him!*, 155.

⁵³¹ Ibid, 180-181. As noted earlier in the chapter, many of Bhagwan Rajneesh’s assets were placed into trusts and other organizations to keep them free from taxation.

with religion. According to Sheela, the guru said: “*I am not against materialism, because I know that only at the highest peak of materialism does religion happen*” [emphasis in original text].⁵³² She argues that Bhagwan Rajneesh’s lavish lifestyle drew jealousy and “drove many traditional religious people crazy,” but that this materialism was just a part of the Rajneesh movement, which the guru used to his advantage, as controversy and more media coverage drew more adherents, and with them, more cash.⁵³³

Sheela also became increasingly materialistic in Rajneeshpuram. Former neo-sannyasin Susan Harfouche describes her as “a small, attractive Indian woman [whose] hair was done, and you could tell she wore only the best! (She also drives a Rolls-Royce!)” [emphasis Harfouche’s].⁵³⁴ Harfouche also recalls that Sheela sat in a “special-looking chair” on a stage and ate separately from the rest of the group,⁵³⁵ indicating that Sheela had higher status than other neo-sannyasins and indulged in the materialism and conspicuous consumption endorsed by Bhagwan Rajneesh.

These spending habits would prove to be costly, and the group turned to more entrepreneurial methods to increase their revenue. Merchandise, or, as Sandhu calls it, “Bhagwan memorabilia,”⁵³⁶ was sold in Rajneeshpuram, particularly during the group’s annual festivals. The festivals were meant to raise more money for not only the cost of sustaining the movement, but for Bhagwan Rajneesh’s and Ma Anand Sheela’s personal accounts as well. Items sold

⁵³² Ibid, 181. Sheela does not elaborate on what she or Bhagwan Rajneesh mean by this statement, but it aligns with the guru’s practice of making outrageous statements to garner attention from the media, potential donors, and other curious would-be neo-sannyasins.

⁵³³ Ibid.

⁵³⁴ Harfouche, “Death of a Dream,” in McCormack, *The Rajneesh Chronicles*, 102.

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

⁵³⁶ Sandhu, *Nothing to Lose*, 219.

included the infamous bumper sticker bearing the motto, “Jesus Saves, Bhagwan Spends,”⁵³⁷ a nod to the guru’s pro-capitalist philosophy. These memorabilia were displayed in souvenir stalls and included glasses, cups, stickers, key chains, tee shirts, and other items bearing Bhagwan Rajneesh’s face or a picture of him in one of his signature Rolls-Royces.⁵³⁸ This new-found consumerism in Rajneeshpuram indicates a shift in doctrine, for although Bhagwan Rajneesh had always espoused capitalism, even in the ashrams in India, these trinkets and apparel glorified him as an individual. This trend of legendary worship would continue throughout the rest of the guru’s lifetime, as he became a larger than life figure in the media and in the eyes of his people, one from whom they could draw inspiration.

During later years in Rajneeshpuram, Bhagwan Rajneesh shed the modest lengthy white robes for which he was known for wearing in India. He began to dress in flashy colored designer robes and hats, adorning himself with diamond jewelry. Expensive diamond-encrusted watches were a favorite of his, and he had a large collection of the timepieces. The guru sat upon a throne, flanked by attractive women, during his discourses to show off his ample personal wealth, power, and attractiveness.⁵³⁹ Jane Stork writes that his wardrobe, which consisted of flamboyant robes and matching embellishments, “would have been the envy of the French kings,” and that like his many automobiles, he “did not like to use the same once twice.”⁵⁴⁰ Because of the guru’s conspicuous consumption and lavish appearances, such as driving one of his dozens of luxurious, and sometimes bulletproofed, Rolls-Royces through the streets of Rajneeshpuram to the delight of adoring disciples, Bhagwan Rajneesh drew an increasing

⁵³⁷ Tim Guest, *My Life in Orange*, 191.

⁵³⁸ Sandhu, *Nothing to Lose*, 219-220.

⁵³⁹ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 144; Sandhu, *Nothing to Lose*, 258.

⁵⁴⁰ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 114.

amount of attention from the media. Due to this newly acquired glamorous presentation in Rajneeshpuram, I argue that Bhagwan Rajneesh became a self-made spectacle, perhaps to draw attention to wealthy donors and to increase the numbers in the movement, as he had done in the past. He became a religious leader who attracted considerable news media coverage as a celebrity guru in the United States, even finding his way into a comic strip called *Bloom County*, where his celebrity status was mocked.⁵⁴¹ However, I argue that although Bhagwan Rajneesh was the face of the movement in the media and within the communes, it was the women of the movement who kept Rajneeshpuram functioning. Bhagwan Rajneesh remained at the head as the supposed benevolent leader while his secretaries, Ma Anand Sheela in particular, performed the dirty work and took responsibility for the state of the commune, both its successes and failures.⁵⁴²

4.4 Women leaders of the Rajneesh movement

For the most part, women ran Rajneeshpuram and its connected ashrams around the world. Tim Guest, a neo-sannyasin in his youth, writes in his memoir, “Because they were less likely to abuse their power,⁵⁴³ and because they had been suffering for centuries and he wanted to compensate, Bhagwan put women in charge of his communes. The big-shot sannyasins were all women: the Big Mammias.”⁵⁴⁴ The former neo-sannyasin recalls that these “matriarchs” were

⁵⁴¹ Urban, *Zorba the Buddha*, 113.

⁵⁴² This is not an unusual occurrence in the secular and nonsecular world, as women often take upon themselves the “dirty work” while men are free to explore other pursuits. For example, the men of the Branch Davidians in Waco worked outside of the Mount Carmel complex while the women stayed behind, cooking, cleaning, and providing childcare for the community.

⁵⁴³ Tim Guest does not explicitly explain why women were “less likely to abuse their power,” except to note that the women “were more down to Earth than Bhagwan.” Guest, *My Life in Orange*, 182.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

in charge of administrative, spiritual, moral, and emotional issues pertaining to the operation of the movement.⁵⁴⁵ These women were “absolutely dedicated” to Bhagwan Rajneesh, and they began to capitalize the “H” in “Him” when referring to the guru and imitated his mannerisms and body language.⁵⁴⁶ In this way, one of the goals of the people in the Rajneesh movement was to become like Bhagwan Rajneesh himself: enlightened, wise, and spiritually advanced, as the guru was highly revered as an example of what a neo-sannyasin could achieve within the community under his teachings. However, according to Ma Anand Sheela, the guru “hated it when people behaved like Him,” for he did not like to see neo-sannyasins worshipping other neo-sannyasins, such as by “touching each other’s feet.”⁵⁴⁷ While some neo-sannyasins may have had their own goals of attaining “Bhagwan status,” their goals did not always align with the desires of Bhagwan Rajneesh himself for his disciples. Still, many neo-sannyasins aspired to be like Bhagwan Rajneesh, from whom they drew inspiration during their personal paths to enlightenment.

Ma Yoga Laxmi, Bhagwan Rajneesh’s personal assistant and secretary prior to Ma Anand Sheela, wielded much power in the ashrams of India. Former neo-sannyasin Hugh Milne (also known as Swami Shivamurti) writes in his memoir that in 1968 upon meeting the Bhagwan Rajneesh, Laxmi had immediately “fallen in love with” the guru.⁵⁴⁸ She continued to serve in a secretarial position for many years after her first meeting with Bhagwan Rajneesh, from Poona, India, to Rajneeshpuram, Oregon.⁵⁴⁹ She was fired as the guru’s personal secretary after failing to secure land for a new ashram outside of India. Sheela was appointed to the position by

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid, 182-183.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ Sheela, *Don’t Kill Him!*, 265.

⁵⁴⁸ Hugh Milne, *Bhagwan: The God That Failed* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 45.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid.

Bhagwan Rajneesh, a position which was one of great honor and would yield much power for Sheela as she would have closer proximity to the guru, both physically and spiritually.⁵⁵⁰

Bhagwan Rajneesh's health issues may have prompted his vow of silence and subsequently, contributed to the power shift to Ma Anand Sheela and other women in Rajneeshpuram. In India, the guru suffered from diabetes, allergies, and asthma,⁵⁵¹ and his health did not improve in the United States.⁵⁵² Bhagwan Rajneesh began to take dangerous amounts of drugs in Rajneeshpuram, including valium, meprobamate, and laughing gas twice daily, for two-hour sessions on each occasion, according to Sandhu.⁵⁵³ His declining physical and mental health, much like Jim Jones's poor condition in Jonestown, afforded space and opportunities for women to step into greater positions of power and influence in the commune. However, this shifting of power was made under Bhagwan Rajneesh's orders, as he decided to stop speaking to his disciples. As the guru became more reclusive, Sheela became the official face of the movement⁵⁵⁴ and the High Priestess and head of the Red Church in Rajneeshpuram.⁵⁵⁵ She spoke to news media as a public relations spokesperson, acting as an intermediary between Bhagwan Rajneesh and the outside world. She also relayed messages to the neo-sannyasins during the guru's 1,315-day vow of silence, which began in 1981,⁵⁵⁶ yet her actions were not without controversy both inside the cocoon of the movement and in the outside world.

In the later years in Rajneeshpuram, Bhagwan Rajneesh began to use Sheela as a "puppet," according to her memoir. She claims that she was "meticulously choreographed" and

⁵⁵⁰ Sheela, *Don't Kill Him!*, 193.

⁵⁵¹ Sandhu, *Nothing to Lose*, 96.

⁵⁵² *Ibid*, 167.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid*, 262-263.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 214.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 236.

⁵⁵⁶ Rajneesh, *The Rajneesh Bible Volume 1*, introduction.

told what to say in interviews,⁵⁵⁷ despite Bhagwan Rajneesh's later claim that Sheela acted of her own accord and that he was offended by her media appearances.⁵⁵⁸ "Our media strategy was completely controversy-driven," Sheela writes, explaining that Bhagwan Rajneesh wanted to give the media what they desired: scandals and sensations.⁵⁵⁹ By having Sheela relay incendiary and controversial statements on television, the guru hoped to raise curiosity about the group and to attract more neo-sannyasins. Hopefully, these new members would also be wealthy donors for the commune's needs as well as for the guru's personal desire for material objects.⁵⁶⁰ Sheela laments that her family, friends, and others were shocked by the way in which she presented herself during these interviews, as she came across as "unduly nasty and obnoxious" and was "not portraying a very flattering image" of herself.⁵⁶¹ Whether a puppet or not, Sheela became the face of the movement and spokesperson when Bhagwan Rajneesh either could not or chose not to be.

Ma Anand Sheela and her closest advisors departed from Rajneeshpuram in September 1985 after evidence mounted of their involvement in crimes in the commune and nearby Oregon towns. These crimes included "arson, wiretapping within the community, conspiracy to commit murder, and the planting of salmonella bacteria in the salad bars of several restaurants in The Dalles, the county seat for Wasco County, sickening 750 people."⁵⁶² After Sheela and her entourage left the commune, Bhagwan Rajneesh publicly blamed his former secretary for all the problems in Rajneeshpuram. Sheela writes that she was a "prime target for negativity and anger,"

⁵⁵⁷ Sheela, *Don't Kill Him*, 268.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶² Carl Abbott, "Revisiting Rajneeshpuram."

and that by assigning responsibility for all the problems in Rajneeshpuram to her, Bhagwan Rajneesh could keep playing the “gentle and loving role.”⁵⁶³ Meanwhile, Sheela writes that she was “the perfect garbage dump where everyone was able to unload their negativity. I had to play the bad [expletive].”⁵⁶⁴ Despite all of this tension between the two, Ma Anand Sheela has maintained the name given to her by the guru, and still writes and speaks of her love for him.

Sheela remained at the top of the operation, but other women had essential leadership roles in the movement. Ma Durga, a nurse and the head of the health department in Rajneeshpuram, “took her work seriously and was very reliable,” according to Ma Anand Sheela.⁵⁶⁵ Ma Homa, who was known to be “very candid and direct,” was the head of the legal department and the first formally elected judge of the city of Rajneeshpuram.⁵⁶⁶ While Sheela was away from the ashram, Savita took over the former’s responsibilities. A trained and professional accountant and the leader of the accounting department, Savita handled the financial needs of the entire commune and those of Bhagwan Rajneesh personally.⁵⁶⁷ Without these women, I contend that the movement would not have functioned as smoothly as it did. Lacking the direction of Bhagwan Rajneesh, who was occupied with other priorities at times, the organization needed the women neo-sannyasins to intervene and obtain leadership positions.

4.5 Devotion and labor in Rajneeshpuram

Rajneeshpuram was a thriving community that required much of its residents. As in India, women were appointed by women leaders in the commune to basic tasks such as cleaning,

⁵⁶³ Sheela, *Don't Kill Him!*, 265-266.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

much to Jane Stork's disappointment. The former neo-sannyasin writes, "Had I come all this way [to Rajneeshpuram] to clean toilets?"⁵⁶⁸ The work was unpaid, as "working for Bhagwan and his cause was considered a privilege," Stork recalls.⁵⁶⁹ In this way, the disciples showed their immense devotion to the movement, for although they might have been disappointed by the specific tasks which they had been given, they recognized that they were working to build a community for themselves, the movement, and Bhagwan Rajneesh.

The commune relied on the neo-sannyasins for cash to pay for the guru's personal effects, as well as the cost of operating the commune. According to journalist Win McCormack, the monthly fee to reside in Rajneeshpuram was \$500 to \$1500 per month, with an initial entrance fee of \$5,000 to \$150,000, "depending on the person's financial resources and work skills."⁵⁷⁰ Bhagwan Rajneesh asked Jane Stork for money, which she recalls giving him without question.⁵⁷¹ This included her family's savings, about \$30,000, and Stork reports that she was "well pleased with [herself]."⁵⁷² She writes that Bhagwan Rajneesh was "an expensive guru," but that "his people loved him and kept coming up with the money for as long as they could."⁵⁷³ Bhagwan Rajneesh had expensive tastes, and neo-sannyasis were encouraged to donate money or to give him trinkets of affection. Former neo-sannyasin Jane Stork recalls that Bhagwan Rajneesh asked her to return with costly gifts from her travels, or, as she conveys in her memoir, she was given a shopping list: a large feather pillow, a gold watch for his girlfriend,⁵⁷⁴ an electric

⁵⁶⁸ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 87.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁷⁰ McCormack, *The Rajneesh Chronicles*, 166.

⁵⁷¹ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 106.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁵⁷⁴ Stork is most likely referring to Ma Yoga Vivek (Christine Woolf), the guru's longtime companion.

typewriter, and medical supplies, among other items. Stork was not reimbursed for these items, but claims she was “happy to pay for everything.”⁵⁷⁵

Despite the guru’s sometimes incredible demands, women of the movement were often glad to do their part to give to the community and Bhagwan Rajneesh’s personal desires in the pursuit of spiritual growth. I maintain that these women saw these requests as a type of worship. As exploitative as the pressure to contribute financially might have seemed to outsiders, the women neo-sannyasins recall that they freely chose to donate to the various causes of the movement, and in many cases, were more than willing to make those sacrifices to keep their teacher, Bhagwan Rajneesh, satisfied. Whether this type of worship is the same as agency is debatable, for although women such as Stork remember “choosing” to make these sacrifices, at times the decisions perhaps were coerced. The consequences for not acquiescing to these expectations could be negative; for example, Bhagwan Rajneesh threatened to “leave his body,” i.e., die, if his financial needs and desire for luxury goods were not met.⁵⁷⁶

Women were valued in Rajneeshpuram as leaders, rank and file members, creators, builders, and spiritual seekers, and they showed their devotion to the guru and the collective interest through the construction of Rajneeshpuram. In the first volume of *The Rajneesh Bible*, Bhagwan Rajneesh declares, “In my commune there are more women than men, they work as hard as men, perhaps more lovingly than men. They have the capacity of love, more than man has. They have not destroyed, they have created the commune.”⁵⁷⁷ While it is unclear whether Bhagwan Rajneesh refers to the literal or metaphorical creation of the commune in this passage,

⁵⁷⁵ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 103.

⁵⁷⁶ Carter, *Charisma and Control in Rajneeshpuram*, 144.

⁵⁷⁷ Rajneesh, *The Rajneesh Bible Volume 1*, 135.

both types of worship were performed by women to prove their dedication to their teacher, the movement, and the community in Rajneeshpuram.

Women in Rajneeshpuram were often encouraged to pursue the professional careers that they had in the outside world, such as practicing law or medicine, but were introduced to demanding and hazardous manual labor as well.⁵⁷⁸ Labor performed by the neo-sannyasins in all capacities, whether as construction workers, cleaners, or therapists, and so on, was unpaid, although they were granted nourishment and a place to sleep in Rajneeshpuram and in the other ashrams.⁵⁷⁹ Some of the neo-sannyasins of the Rajneesh movement were sent to Pahelgam, Kashmir, to perform labor-intensive tasks in the middle of winter, when food was scarce and the weather was bitterly cold. Ma Anand Sheela explains that this was a test from Bhagwan Rajneesh, which his disciples willingly accepted because they “trusted [the guru]... without the slightest doubt.”⁵⁸⁰ However, in his memoir, former neo-sannyasin Hugh Milne likens the work in Rajneeshpuram and other locations to slavery “under the guise of spiritual surrender.”⁵⁸¹ The neo-sannyasins carried out Bhagwan Rajneesh’s wishes, no matter how extreme they might have seemed, because of this spiritual surrender and relationship between master and disciple. Sheela recalls that “love and surrender were the basis for our work.”⁵⁸² This dynamic between love and surrender calls into question notions of agency, for again, the guru tested his neo-sannyasins to see how devoted they were to him. However, neo-sannyasins report that these responsibilities, including the physical labor, were a type of worship.⁵⁸³ Therefore, I argue that the duties

⁵⁷⁸ Goldman, *Passionate Journeys*, 27.

⁵⁷⁹ Sandhu, *Nothing to Lose*, 105.

⁵⁸⁰ Sheela, *Don’t Kill Him!*, 127.

⁵⁸¹ Milne, *Bhagwan*, 201.

⁵⁸² Sheela, *Don’t Kill Him!*, 180.

⁵⁸³ Sandhu, *Nothing to Lose*, 105.

provided meaning and purpose for many adherents of the Rajneesh movement as contributors to the physical and spiritual building of the commune, regardless of the reasons for enduring these arduous tasks.

In their memoirs, men and women discuss different perspectives regarding devotional labor. Former neo-sannyasin Hugh Milne⁵⁸⁴ writes that the labor was exploitative, dishonest, and akin to slavery,⁵⁸⁵ while psychiatrist James S. Gordon relays that Pramod, a British diplomat in Rajneeshpuram, described the work “unremitting.”⁵⁸⁶ Meanwhile, the women of the ashrams whom I have studied appear to have been happy and perhaps even eager to offer their bodies to the physical labor requested by Bhagwan Rajneesh, for they saw the work as a gift and a type of worship. To account for this difference in attitudes is difficult. It would be simple to argue that women had a closer spiritual bond with Bhagwan Rajneesh than men did, as many women describe falling in love with the guru during their first meeting. However, as their memoirs indicate, many men were equally as devoted. Certainly, Milne’s negative assessment could be an anomaly, as he was one of the few neo-sannyasins whom I studied who did not regard physical labor as an offering to Bhagwan Rajneesh as many others did.

4.6 Sex and the neo-sannyasins

Free love, open love, and experimental polyamorous relationships were encouraged in the Rajneesh movement,⁵⁸⁷ and might have attracted more followers interested in the utopian

⁵⁸⁴ Hugh Milne, Bhagwan Rajneesh’s personal bodyguard in Rajneeshpuram, was then known as Swami Shivamurti. Since his defection from the movement, Milne has reverted to his former name, intentionally distancing himself from his tenure as a neo-sannyasin.

⁵⁸⁵ Milne, *Bhagwan*, 201.

⁵⁸⁶ James S. Gordon, *Golden Guru: The Strange Journey of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh* (Lexington: The Stephen Greene Press, 1987), 156.

⁵⁸⁷ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 91-92.

experiment. As a result of these unconventional practices, Bhagwan Rajneesh was often called the “sex guru” by the news media in both India and the United States.⁵⁸⁸ Monogamy was the “coffin of love,” Bhagwan Rajneesh proclaimed.⁵⁸⁹ Sexuality, according to Puttick’s interpretation of this aspect of the Rajneesh movement, was the “most powerful natural energy, a mystery to be enjoyed, celebrated, and explored,” or to be used as a “tool for enlightenment.”⁵⁹⁰ Freedom from “[sexual] repression and sexual perversion” were the goals of the open sexuality doctrine of the Rajneesh movement, and so if one could liberate oneself from these aspects of sexuality, spiritual growth could be achieved.⁵⁹¹ The disciples were taught that monogamy was the root of many sufferings; therefore, Bhagwan Rajneesh and the neo-sannyasins focused on open sexuality, such as detaching from “jealousy and possessiveness.”⁵⁹² There were no moral judgments about sexuality in the Rajneesh movement, as everyone was free to explore without guilt imposed upon them.⁵⁹³ However, polyamory was not for everyone, as resentment created by these open relationships undoubtedly existed in some cases.⁵⁹⁴ Still, the ideology was promoted by Bhagwan Rajneesh, and most neo-sannyasins experimented with their new-found and socially acceptable (within the community) open sexuality in Rajneeshpuram.⁵⁹⁵

Like fellow charismatic male leaders David Koresh of the Branch Davidians and Reverend Jim Jones of Peoples Temple, Bhagwan Rajneesh encouraged specific pairings and splitting of neo-sannyasin romantic couples. Jane Stork writes in her memoir, “In 1983 I was

⁵⁸⁸ Sandhu, *Nothing to Lose*, 119.

⁵⁸⁹ Palmer, *Moon Sisters*, xvii.

⁵⁹⁰ Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, 113.

⁵⁹¹ Sheela, *Don’t Kill Him!*, 155.

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁵ Homosexuality was discouraged, not because it was a sin, but because it was considered a “cowardly cop out” that would hinder spiritual growth and enlightenment. Palmer, *Moon Sisters*, 55.

advised that Roger and I should divorce and find American partners to marry... A young man was suggested to me as a good candidate for a husband... He agreed to marry me. We were both clear that it was to help me out and that neither of us was in any way interested in a relationship.”⁵⁹⁶ This indicates the influence that Bhagwan Rajneesh had over his disciples, which many of them readily accepted. Despite the guru’s teachings, which emphasized free will, the autonomy of neo-sannyasin women was restricted if they wanted to please Bhagwan Rajneesh by acting upon his “suggestions” to prove their devotion to him and to the principles of his teachings.

This incredible devotion to Bhagwan Rajneesh was not without friction between neo-sannyasins in committed relationships. Puttick writes, “Some women sannyasins experienced conflict between their commitments to their partner and their master.”⁵⁹⁷ Several of these women ultimately left Rajneeshpuram or the other ashrams with their partners because of this tension. However, writes Puttick, “Most [neo-]sannyasins believed that their commitment to spiritual growth, including their relationship with [Bhagwan Rajneesh], should come before their personal relationships.”⁵⁹⁸ In this way, Bhagwan Rajneesh and his movement were highly considered when neo-sannyasins made major life decisions.

4.7 Family and community in Rajneeshpuram

At times, Rajneeshpuram resembled a feudal society with “a king, aristocrats, and serfs,”⁵⁹⁹ according to sociologist Marion S. Goldman. I argue that the feeling of community that

⁵⁹⁶ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 121.

⁵⁹⁷ Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, 124.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 124-125.

⁵⁹⁹ Goldman, *Passionate Journeys*, 36.

the Rajneesh movement provided was comforting and stabilizing for many women. Stork writes in her memoir, “One advantage of being in the ashram was that I did not have to do the work of convincing people of the rightness of what I was doing. Everyone was already convinced. This brought with it a welcoming feeling of security, of belonging.”⁶⁰⁰ According to Goldman, the women found “solidarity and emotional support” in their shared idealization of Bhagwan Rajneesh and the movement,⁶⁰¹ which is supported by testimonials from neo-sannyasin women.

In her study of women of the counterculture in the 1960s, Lemke-Santangelo writes that women who joined movements are often thought of by “parents, a host of adult experts, and the mainstream media” as lost souls or subject to the overwhelming influence of the charismatic leader.⁶⁰² Lemke-Santangelo argues that men or boys are often seen as going through an adolescent phase during their time spent with counterculture movements, but that women’s reasons for joining the counterculture are perceived as more complicated. “Uncomfortable with the notion of female agency, straight adults characterized some hippie women as wayward or deviant and others – the majority – as unwitting victims. The media, in particular, played up the victim angle, portraying young women as naïve, trusting innocents who were either lured into the counterculture by predatory males or ignorant of its dangers,” Lemke-Santangelo explains.⁶⁰³ According to Lemke-Santangelo, the media upholds patriarchal societal values by portraying women and girls as victims without agency who are easily influenced by “dangerous” men.

⁶⁰⁰ While it is not clear about who exactly was convinced of what, I speculate that Stork is referring to the movement itself—members were already believers, and so she was able to freely explore the teachings of Bhagwan Rajneesh within this space. Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 78.

⁶⁰¹ Goldman, *Passionate Journeys*, 247.

⁶⁰² Lemke-Santangelo, *Daughters of Aquarius*, 11.

⁶⁰³ *Ibid.*

I argue that this assessment is unfitting for most women of the Rajneesh movement. I consider the group to be primarily a counterculture movement prior to the proclamation of religious status by Bhagwan Rajneesh in 1984, and even after this title was bestowed. For most of its existence, the Rajneesh movement emphasized meditation and spiritual guidance over adherence to the strict formalities of a religion. The movement became a hybrid of counterculture and religion, particularly in Rajneeshpuram. Neo-sannyasins lived an alternative lifestyle congruent with the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, yet the movement was also “religious” in nature in its later years after the creation of Rajneeshism. The reasons for declaring the movement to be a religion are suspect, for the claim to be a religious leader secured a visa in the United States for the guru. Bhagwan Rajneesh spoke out against religious leadership in his texts, the volumes of which are called *The Rajneesh Bible*. While the Rajneesh movement did include aspects of religion until 1985, I argue that the ever-evolving organization included traits of a counterculture movement as well, and therefore, it is imperative to study the group and women’s roles in it as such.

Contrary to the popular perception of the demographics of other counterculture movements as being comprised of rebellious teenagers or troubled runaways (which sometimes could be the case), most of the believers of the Rajneesh movement did not fit this mold. The majority of the population was in their mid-30s, middle-to-upper class, white, and well-educated,⁶⁰⁴ perhaps owing to the fact that these wealthy disciples had the luxury of exploring this utopian experiment. Goldman reports that the average age of a neo-sannyasin was about thirty-five years old, nearly 70 per cent held college degrees, and that slightly more than half of

⁶⁰⁴ Palmer, *Moon Sisters*, 60-61.

the college graduates also held advanced or professional degrees.⁶⁰⁵ She contends that the high level of education of the people of the Rajneesh movement was unusual compared to women of most other religious movements.⁶⁰⁶ Most of the neo-sannyasins were white, and by the 1980s, less than five percent of the members of the group were people of color.⁶⁰⁷ Goldman found that approximately 54% of the residents of Rajneeshpuram were women, whom Bhagwan Rajneesh called “the stars of the movement.”⁶⁰⁸

Adherents of the Rajneesh movement distinguished themselves from “outsiders” through their physical appearance and new names, which were given to them by Bhagwan Rajneesh when they took sannyas.⁶⁰⁹ Men were given the title of “Swami,” or “lord or master,” and women were given the name “Ma,” or “mother.” Participants in the movement were expected to wear malas—necklaces with 108 beads strung together to represent the 108 paths to enlightenment⁶¹⁰ and lockets with their sacred guru’s face on them.⁶¹¹ Neo-sannyasins could be spotted by their matching monochrome clothing, which they wore in solidarity and to distinguish themselves from outsiders. In the early years of the movement in Poona, India, the group dressed all in shades of orange, the color of the garb of holy men.⁶¹² Variants of red and purple were added to their wardrobes to reflect the colors of the sunrise.⁶¹³ After the rejection of the religion Rajneeshism by Bhagwan Rajneesh in late 1985, malas were discarded, and the neo-sannyasins were free to wear any colors they pleased.⁶¹⁴

⁶⁰⁵ Goldman, *Passionate Journeys*, 1-2.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid, 11.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid, 12.

⁶⁰⁹ Milne, *Bhagwan*, 49.

⁶¹⁰ Goldman, *Passionate Journeys*, 25.

⁶¹¹ Goldman, *Passionate Journeys*, 20; Sandhu, *Nothing to Lose*, 41, 43.

⁶¹² Goldman, *Passionate Journeys*, 23.

⁶¹³ Sheela, *Don’t Kill Him!*, 123.

⁶¹⁴ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 162.

Roles typical for women as wives and mothers in mainstream society were rejected in the Rajneesh movement, as biological families were not prioritized in Rajneeshpuram. However, Bhagwan Rajneesh did endorse the creation of spiritual families. The title of “Ma,” which was given to women neo-sannyasins, seems antithetical to the tenets of the movement, but Bhagwan Rajneesh did occasionally promote motherhood. Puttick writes, “[Bhagwan Rajneesh] would sometimes describe motherhood as potentially the peak of female creativity and responsibility: ‘becoming the mother of a Buddha.’” However, Puttick continues, “His main emphasis was firmly on self-realization for women.”⁶¹⁵ She cites Bhagwan Rajneesh in his book, *A New Vision of Women’s Liberation* (1987): “A woman is not only capable of giving birth to children, [but] she is also capable of giving birth to herself as a seeker of truth.”⁶¹⁶

Traditional marriage in the Rajneesh movement was discouraged. In the first volume of his Bible, Bhagwan Rajneesh proclaims, “The whole institution of marriage is nothing but the legalization of prostitution,” in which men and women who do not love each other remain together because of what he calls “plastic” love, for they are bound together by law.⁶¹⁷ Puttick conveys Bhagwan Rajneesh’s claim that “only 1 per cent of families [are] beneficial...[and] should therefore be abolished in favour of a spiritual family.”⁶¹⁸ The guru also claimed that most people were “incapable of positive parenting,” which would distract from the goal of spiritual growth in the movement anyhow.⁶¹⁹ Bhagwan Rajneesh writes in one of his introductory books,

The most outdated thing is the family. It has done its work, it is no more needed. In fact, now it is the most hindering phenomenon for human progress... The family is the root cause of all our neurosis...

⁶¹⁵ Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, 135.

⁶¹⁶ Osho, *A New Vision of Women’s Liberation* (Cologne: Rebel Press, 1987), 18, quoted in Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, 135.

⁶¹⁷ Rajneesh, *The Rajneesh Bible Volume 1*, 95.

⁶¹⁸ Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, 135.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid*, 136.

The real family is not your father, your mother, your brothers, your sisters, your children; they are just accidental. Your real family is the family of a Buddha. If you are fortunate enough to feel joyful in the company of a Buddha, then dissolve into that company – you have found your family.⁶²⁰

Women in Rajneeshpuram were sometimes put into difficult positions in which they had to choose between the movement and family. Members of the Rajneesh movement were discouraged from having children. Women and men alike were urged to undergo sterilization procedures, and many did, as they were “keen to do their part for the commune.”⁶²¹ Tim Guest, a neo-sannyasin during his youth, writes, “The general advice at the Ashram [sic] was that sterilization would keep the flow of sexual energy unimpeded; it would also free up the women’s energy from caring for children.”⁶²² Women were pressured to have abortions, but because of their widely-held belief in reincarnation, many believed that their unborn fetus would “simply [choose] another womb.”⁶²³ Puttick points out that women in other, more mainstream religions, have been discouraged or even barred from “biological motherhood,” such as nuns.⁶²⁴ These women nonetheless are often addressed as “Mother,” but this title is a show of devotion to the movement itself as a spiritual “mother,” rather than a literal one.

Although these women exercised control over their own bodies, the pressure and expectations put on them by the group’s philosophy was at times heartbreaking, as families were

⁶²⁰ Osho, *The Book: An Introduction to the Teachings of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh* (Rajneesh Foundation International, 1984), 505-508, quoted in Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, 135.

⁶²¹ Guest, *My Life in Orange*, 32.

⁶²² Ibid, 27.

⁶²³ Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, 136. In the Rajneesh movement, reincarnation was at times promoted and other times rejected. I maintain that Bhagwan Rajneesh’s contradictory messages suited his needs and desires at the time. Children were not welcomed to the community, so I contend that the guru’s teachings about reincarnation was used to assuage the guilt of women who had abortions in Rajneeshpuram.

⁶²⁴ Ibid, 193.

divided.⁶²⁵ Mothers often chose “Bhagwan over their babies,” as they might be turned away from the community if they attempted to enter with their children,⁶²⁶ and pregnant women were not admitted.⁶²⁷ Sheela recalls that “Bhagwan argued that the world was already heavily burdened with unwanted children and to produce more of them was criminal.”⁶²⁸ Bhagwan Rajneesh and the neo-sannyasins boasted that not a single child was born in the commune, and no birth records were found in Rajneeshpuram’s hospital.⁶²⁹

4.8 The children of the Rajneesh movement

Children were not a part of the grand plan for Rajneeshpuram or its satellite ashrams. In agreement with Stork’s recollections, I argue that the young were often treated as burdensome and not as valuable members of the community. Sheela attributes practical reasoning for discouraging children to come to Rajneeshpuram: space was limited.⁶³⁰ More likely, as Stork writes, “Although Bhagwan spoke eloquently about the innocence and beauty of children, he wanted no new additions to the number of children in the ashram. Children were a nuisance and a distraction to their parents. They were not, and could not, be committed as their parents were, and Bhagwan Rajneesh wanted only committed disciples.”⁶³¹

Life was not ideal for the children who were permitted to live in the communes, for they were desperately seeking structure and family. Reports emerged that the children of the Rajneesh movement were abused and abandoned; however, Puttick writes that there is no evidence of

⁶²⁵ Ibid, 138.

⁶²⁶ Guest, *My Life in Orange*, 32.

⁶²⁷ Sheela, *Don’t Kill Him!*, 173.

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ McCormack, *The Rajneesh Chronicles*, 186; Guest, *My Life in Orange*, 32.

⁶³⁰ Sheela, *Don’t Kill Him!*, 173.

⁶³¹ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 99-100.

child abuse in the movement based on interviews she conducted with former neo-sannyasins and their children.⁶³² Still, children were often separated from their parents and raised in special communal areas, or kids' huts, meant only for minors. Gordon, who visited Rajneeshpuram while studying the group, reports, "The children are housed in quarters apart from their parents, with minimal adult supervision. Though this will later be justified as a strategy for breaking down the bonds and bondage of the nuclear family, as a way of making the children more the commune's, it seems at this time simply a matter of convenience."⁶³³ I argue that youth were treated as burdensome and as taking up valuable space that could be reserved for more dedicated neo-sannyasins who had come to Rajneeshpuram and the other ashrams by choice, not because of family ties.

While adults were free to worship or meditate or become involved in other aspects of the Rajneesh movement, children were often left behind, much to their great disappointment. Stork writes that her family was torn apart, and that the move to the commune was "devastating for the children," who were often kept away from their parents in separate living quarters.⁶³⁴ Stork's children later told their mother that they felt as if their "world fell apart" in the commune.⁶³⁵ Stork laments, "With no home base anymore, their security was shattered and they felt cast adrift. The freedom they had so enjoyed became a threatening burden."⁶³⁶ The segregated kids' hut was a "nightmare" for her son, Peter, as there was no privacy and "nothing was sacred."⁶³⁷ Stork recalls, "Peter did not cry easily, but he cried many bitter tears in the kids' hut."⁶³⁸ Often,

⁶³² Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, 142-143.

⁶³³ Gordon, *Golden Guru*, 105.

⁶³⁴ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 98.

⁶³⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*

there is a lack of privacy in communal settings, so this is not uncommon. However, the youth of the Rajneesh movement, or rather, those tangentially attached to the Rajneesh movement, did not choose this life—they were drawn into it by their parents, who often prioritized Bhagwan Rajneesh over the needs of their families.

The unsupervised children often acted out in violent or sexually inappropriate ways. Children as young as eight years old engaged in sexual acts, sometimes with one another, and sometimes with much older neo-sannyasins, according to Tim Guest.⁶³⁹ He writes that the “wilder” kids stole cigarettes and burned each other with lighters or pressured the younger children to “inhale the gas from whipped cream cans,” which were also stolen.⁶⁴⁰ Puttick argues that acts such as these are typical of adolescents,⁶⁴¹ which may be the case, but is still indicative of unattended children living with little to no guidance from adults or authority figures. Furthermore, sexual congress between young and considerably older neo-sannyasins is especially troubling and, in some cases, was statutory rape. Guest, who lived in the Medina commune in England and later, in Rajneeshpuram, writes of the extreme loneliness⁶⁴² and sadness felt by the children of the movement:

In [Bhagwan Rajneesh’s] communes around the world, sannyasins gathered together to abandon weight, to surrender themselves to levity. Or rather, that’s what the adults were hoping for. The children of Bhagwan’s communes needed other things. We needed comfort... We needed our home. Shorter as we were, closer to the earth, we couldn’t, or wouldn’t, escape gravity. We felt things we weren’t supposed to feel. We never seemed to make it off the ground.⁶⁴³

⁶³⁹ Guest, *My Life in Orange*, 198.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁴¹ Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, 137.

⁶⁴² Guest uses the word “loneliness” to describe his experience three times on this page. Guest, *My Life in Orange*, 221.

⁶⁴³ It is unclear from this quotation whether Guest is attributing his own expectations or Bhagwan Rajneesh’s, or others, when he writes “we felt things we weren’t supposed to feel.” From the context of the quotation, I would argue that Guest is referring to feelings that children should not feel, according to Guest, such as loneliness and estrangement from family. Ibid, 59.

Children were expected to find their own way in life. Tim Guest recalls, “Bhagwan always insisted that sannyasin children should not be taught anything about his or his sannyasins’ beliefs. We were to discover the world for ourselves.”⁶⁴⁴ Therefore, in some ways, the children of the Rajneesh movement exercised a great deal of autonomy and freedom, as they were able [or forced] to choose their own paths from an incredibly young age. Children were not recruited and were free to reject the movement even if their parents had given them sannyas.⁶⁴⁵ Puttick argues that this socialization and indoctrination process, or lack thereof, is a major difference between the Rajneesh movement and a religion such as Christianity.⁶⁴⁶ Children had some freedom to choose their path in life, which could have been a positive aspect of the movement and one that differentiated it from mainstream religions. However, I argue that the children who were admitted into Rajneeshpuram and other affiliated ashrams across the world were cast aside from the movement, as they were often left to fend for themselves as outsiders of the community and were at times shunned even by their parents.⁶⁴⁷ This created an intense longing for stability in a familial structure for some of the youngest members of the movement, for, according to Tim Guest, children were not afforded substitute families in the community, despite the “kids’ hut” in which the children of the Rajneesh movement were most often placed. While Puttick and Guest are often at odds with their interpretations of the lives of the children in Medina, Rajneeshpuram, and other communes tied to the movement, it is vital to take inventory of all accounts, whether remembered from childhood or adulthood, and as an insider or outsider.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid, 35.

⁶⁴⁵ Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, 146.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁷ Guest, *My Life in Orange*.

It is difficult to determine how much Stork rejected the teachings of Bhagwan Rajneesh regarding family at the time of her residency in Rajneeshpuram. Her memoir suggests that upon reflection, her attitude toward the guru's teachings changed, as she initially thought of the group as "one big family, like a tribe."⁶⁴⁸ This suggests that during her tenure in the commune, Stork did not object to the arrangements for children, for she felt they were being cared for by the community. She writes that she "did not allow herself to consider that [her] actions might have a profound impact on the children."⁶⁴⁹ The title of her book expresses a similar sentiment: that during her time as a "Rajneeshee," Stork did not feel negatively about her life, but after she left the commune, she "broke the spell" that Bhagwan Rajneesh had over her.⁶⁵⁰ In this way, the freedom of women could be limited by the guru and the top leaders in Rajneeshpuram, as disciples were pressured into actions, such as splitting families apart, which they may not have agreed with—whether at the time of implementation or upon reflection years later.

4.9 Crimes and punishments: the end of Rajneeshpuram

The group had been a purely spiritual movement before moving to the United States. In Oregon, the movement acquired new status as the religion of Rajneeshism for a few possible reasons: to keep the guru in the United States under religious leader status and to keep the Immigration and Naturalization Service at bay, for tax exemptions, and possibly to distance the movement from what the public termed "cults" such as Peoples Temple and the Manson Family.⁶⁵¹ Hugh B. Urban writes that some neo-sannyasins felt betrayed by this sudden switch

⁶⁴⁸ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 97.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁵¹ Urban, *Zorba the Buddha*, 120-123.

from a spiritual movement to a religious one. “After all,” Urban writes, “Rajneesh had long inveighed against the hypocrisy and superficiality of organized religion, and many followers had been drawn to him precisely *because* of his bold and often hilarious iconoclasm [emphasis Urban’s].”⁶⁵²

Bhagwan Rajneesh would ultimately fault Ma Anand Sheela for creating and exploiting Rajneeshism, despite having published books of his discourses and writings about the religious status of the group. The guru argued that Sheela had “seized the opportunity of his long period of silence to turn the community into a full-blown religious organization, complete with its own ‘fascistic’ hierarchies and bureaucracy” by using his own words.⁶⁵³ Urban writes that this argument seems “a bit disingenuous,” for after Bhagwan Rajneesh broke his vow of silence in 1984, the first series of discourses he gave were compiled into *The Rajneesh Bible*, in which he spoke of the movement as a religion.⁶⁵⁴ He even claimed the following of Rajneeshism on October 30, 1984: “Hence I say this is the first and the last religion. There will be no need for any other religion.”⁶⁵⁵

The concept of the movement as the religion known as Rajneeshism was rejected by Bhagwan Rajneesh shortly before the fall of Rajneeshpuram in late 1985 to early 1986. Clothes, texts, and religious paraphernalia, including Sheela’s robes and 5,000 copies of the guru’s book, were ceremoniously burned in Rajneeshpuram under the orders of Bhagwan Rajneesh⁶⁵⁶ while neo-sannyasins watched, sang, and rejoiced.⁶⁵⁷ With the marked end of Rajneeshism after a

⁶⁵² Ibid, 122.

⁶⁵³ Urban, *Zorba the Buddha*, 121.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁵ Rajneesh, *The Rajneesh Bible Volume 1*, 22.

⁶⁵⁶ Urban, *Zorba the Buddha*, 130.

⁶⁵⁷ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 162.

series of press conferences held by the guru during which he renounced both Sheela and the religion, Bhagwan Rajneesh had invalidated his visa,⁶⁵⁸ which would lead him to be arrested for immigration fraud. He also was charged with arranging sham marriages and lying to immigration officials.⁶⁵⁹ Other members of the movement were investigated for various crimes as well, including wiretapping, immigration conspiracy, harboring a fugitive, burglary, racketeering, arson, assault, attempted murder, and an array of other charges.⁶⁶⁰

Ma Anand Sheela and other women were accused of and convicted of crimes committed at the ranch and nearby towns in central Oregon. These offenses included orchestrating the poisoning of residents of The Dalles with salmonella by contaminating restaurant salad bars with salmonella, wiretapping, and conspiracy to murder Portland Attorney General Charles Turner. All of these crimes were committed due to their desire to win Wasco County seats in upcoming elections through intimidation and by incapacitating potential anti-Bhagwan Rajneesh voters. Sheela and five other neo-sannyasins had obtained false identity papers in New York, then traveled to Texas to purchase handguns, “thus ensuring that the murder weapons would be virtually impossible to trace.”⁶⁶¹ Near the end of the life of the commune, Rajneeshpuram had changed. Gordon writes that during Sheela’s takeover of the Rajneesh movement, the intimacy between Bhagwan Rajneesh and his disciples had been lost, for the guru had given his power to Sheela.⁶⁶² Gordon contends that Sheela was “unwilling to listen to alternate points of view [and] became increasingly authoritarian toward and demanding of those below her in the hierarchy.”⁶⁶³

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁹ Milne, *Bhagwan*, 298.

⁶⁶⁰ Urban, *Zorba the Buddha*, 130-131.

⁶⁶¹ Milne, *Bhagwan*, 295.

⁶⁶² Gordon, *Golden Guru*, 152.

⁶⁶³ Ibid.

4.10 Conclusion

Over three decades after the passing of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (or Osho, as he had been known before his death) on January 19, 1990, in India, the movement carries on. The Rajneesh movement is now the Osho movement, or Friends of Osho, and is comprised of many affluent and influential members and donors.⁶⁶⁴ In accordance with the revered founder's love of capitalism and consumerism, the Osho International Online website offers items for sale, such as Zen tarot cards, books, music, online courses, and phone apps, and encourages neo-sannyasins to attend meditative retreats in India, for a hefty price.⁶⁶⁵ Social media coordinators provide updates about the movement through various platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.⁶⁶⁶ The rules are much less restrictive since the days of Rajneeshpuram: no longer are the neo-sannyasins expected to dress in shades of orange, red, or purple, for example,⁶⁶⁷ and the students of Osho's teachings do not live in communal ashrams.

Marion S. Goldman interviewed women neo-sannyasins of the Rajneesh movement in the early 1980s in the commune and continued to converse with them throughout the following decades. She found that the women, despite being exposed to second-wave feminism, did not always take this route to the newly imagined idea of womanhood in mainstream society.⁶⁶⁸ Goldman writes that "the women of Rajneeshpuram lived on the edge, burning with a passion to find themselves. Their intricate quests offer greater understanding of both the short-lived

⁶⁶⁴ Goldman, *Passionate Journeys*, 267.

⁶⁶⁵ OSHO International Online, <https://osho.com>, accessed May 7, 2021. Ma Anand Sheela reports that 200,000 visitors attend these retreats in Pune annually. Sheela, *Don't Kill Him!*, 7.

⁶⁶⁶ OSHO International Online.

⁶⁶⁷ Stork, *Breaking the Spell*, 162.

⁶⁶⁸ Goldman, *Passionate Journeys*, 248.

communal city and... seemingly timeless contradictions of femininity.”⁶⁶⁹ Decades later, many of the women whom Goldman had interviewed still professed love for Bhagwan Rajneesh (Osho), or at the very least, still had positive memories of their time in Rajneeshpuram in the early and mid-1980s.⁶⁷⁰

For the women of Rajneeshpuram and the smaller ashrams of the movement, I argue that they lived under a new set of guidelines separate from outside society, but sometimes just as restrictive. Traditional or mainstream patriarchal structures were generally not to be found, as nuclear families were discouraged and at times even dissolved. Children were often treated as outsiders, as they were left on their own and separated from their parents both physically and emotionally. The family structure in the Rajneesh movement was in some ways anti-patriarchal, as the traditional family unit itself was dismantled, removing men (and women, for that matter) from the top of the family hierarchy. However, those who joined the movement, that is, adult women, often knew the teachings of Bhagwan Rajneesh beforehand and were free to choose between the “mainstream” and an alternative lifestyle, giving women agency and control over their destiny, except in cases when the guru coerced them into making certain decisions about relationships, families, and money.

While scholars argue over whether new religions and counterculture movements empower women or recreate patriarchal systems, I argue that Rajneeshpuram, Oregon, its satellite ashrams across the globe, and the Rajneesh movement itself existed in a state in between the two schools of thought. Neo-sannyasin women, Ma Anand Sheela in particular, had a formidable amount of power within the Rajneesh movement in professional and instrumental

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid, 256.

capacities. However, their lives were constricted or altered in other ways, especially through reproductive rights and the freedom to choose intimate partnerships. Bhagwan Rajneesh's tight control over the family structure of his disciples was another form of patriarchy, despite the assertion that his strong influence in these matters was merely advice or suggestions. Still, many women knew of the guru's philosophies and teachings through friends, family, news media, Bhagwan Rajneesh's books, or his taped discourses before entering the ashrams. Women chose to take sannyas and live this experimental, alternative life outside of the mainstream, and, unlike Peoples Temple members in Jonestown, I found no evidence that any neo-sannyasins were held against their will in Rajneeshpuram.

Many of the women of the movement gained personal meaning and community from their time spent in Rajneeshpuram, as confirmed by their personal testimonies and memoirs. Some women, including Ma Anand Sheela, retained the names that were given to them by Bhagwan Rajneesh decades earlier, in an enduring display of dedication to their guru and the movement. Their reasons for coming to the Oregon commune varied, ranging from curiosity about Bhagwan Rajneesh's celebrity and scandals to experimentation with sex and drugs to the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. All of these motivations for joining the Rajneesh movement are valid, and all are worthy of study. The neo-sannyasins of the Rajneesh movement worked together to create paradise in the here and now rather than a heavenly alternative, and even though their paradise on Earth was but for a short while, Bhagwan Rajneesh had a lasting influence over his devotees. He continues to inspire a new generation of disciples in the present day through the worldwide Osho movement, even after his death in 1990. As neo-sannyasin Ma Satya Bharti muses,

There's no ending really. The process of being around a Master is just that: a process. It goes on and on, with no end in sight. Not even enlightenment, Bhagwan tells us, is an ending. It's a new beginning, the opening of a thousand-petalled lotus that goes on opening and opening, an endless blossoming, an endless fragrance.

Some people try to run away of course. They escape for a while, then come back; it's inevitable. It may take years, it may take many lifetimes, but they come back; they renew their progress along the path that will lead them finally, one day, to the ultimate flowering of who they were meant to be.⁶⁷¹

This is Bhagwan Rajneesh's gift to his devotees: a lifetime of spiritual growth and personal development. While during the group's short time in Rajneeshpuram Bhagwan Rajneesh's celebrity status attracted many students, it is his teachings that have endured the test of time through his texts, meditative practices, and transformative philosophies for individuals. The neo-sannyasins' utopian dream of heaven on Earth died decades ago, but the tenets of the Rajneesh movement remain.

⁶⁷¹ Ma Satya Bharti, *Drunk on the Divine: An Account of Life in the Ashram of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1980), 214.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Why should we care?

On April 19, 1995, a young Army veteran detonated a bomb in a truck outside of the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Timothy McVeigh, the domestic terrorist behind the attack, claimed that he was seeking revenge for the deadly events at Waco on the two-year anniversary of the siege at the Mount Carmel complex.⁶⁷² Meanwhile, the phrase “drinking the Kool-Aid,” in reference to the deaths of the Peoples Temple members by drinking cyanide-laced Flavor-Aid upon orders from Reverend Jim Jones, has entered popular lexicon. The phrase has become synonymous with anyone easily influenced, particularly by a group or person who is “cultish” or perceived as dangerous or a bad influence. Many secretive or private new religious movements are met with suspicion from the public, the media, and the government, for fear that another “Jonestown” is possible; that is, that mass violence created by new religions, directed either inwards or outwards, could ensue. The Rajneesh/Osho movement, stemming from the teachings of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (known as Osho beginning in 1989), still exists worldwide, even after the guru’s death in 1990. The tenets of the movement are taught through online educational materials, meditative retreats, and other methods of dispersing information, such as through phone applications. We should care because these groups, whether we call them “cults” or otherwise, have entered mainstream culture and are no longer relegated to the fringes of society.

⁶⁷² Kenneth G.C. Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), vii.

Women constituted the largest demographic of the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and Rajneeshpuram, and their influence was monumental. Therefore, their roles and contributions should be studied by scholars in more depth and not just relegated to a single chapter or section of a text. An analysis of three aspects of these groups—women in power as leaders, the agency of women, and women’s devotion to the movement and to the charismatic male leader—will be addressed further in this conclusion. I will assess the groups’ similarities, their differences, and any deductions that can be made through these three case studies. Next, I will discuss the present state of new religious movements in the Information Age and propose topics for further study. Finally, I offer my final thoughts on the subject, including a synthesis of the material presented in this dissertation and a return to the “True Crime Stories: Cults” issue of *People* magazine.

5.2 Argument restated

While formulating this dissertation, I had many questions about the positions of women in new religious movements. I knew that women took upon important, unrecognized, and often thankless tasks for the benefit of the movement. I also knew that women were essential to keeping the movement together through social networks and kinship ties. As I progressed in my work, I realized that not only were women valuable contributors to the new religions that I had chosen to study but were also striving to gain personal fulfillment—religious, spiritual, or otherwise—from their participation in these groups. In all three case studies, there were defectors, some of whom challenged their movement publicly and were consequently disowned by their respective community. Save for Peoples Temple’s time in Jonestown, Guyana, during

which members were kept isolated from the United States,⁶⁷³ the members of these movements, by most accounts, have been free to come and go as they pleased. This shows that the women were not simply brainwashed by charismatic male leaders, but that they measured the benefits of the movement itself and made decisions about their membership in ways that would be life-affirming and fulfilling.

The aspects of women's lives in the communities that I have explored in this dissertation explain why women were not only attracted to these groups, but why they stayed. While the influence of the male leaders should not be completely discounted, for they were closely tied to the group's ideology, he did not account for the total loyalty that women presented in these new religious movements. Instead, a continuum of devotion exists, with some women devoted to the movement, some devoted to the charismatic leader, and with most standing somewhere along the spectrum between the two extremes. I argue that for most of the Branch Davidians, the primary object of devotion was the movement itself, as the women believed they were serving God through David Koresh's interpretation of scripture. In Peoples Temple, there was a more equal balance between dedication to Reverend Jim Jones and the ideology of the group itself, with some women drawn to Jones' religious message and some to the social and political messages. The neo-sannyasin women of the Rajneesh movement were frequently found on the opposite end of the continuum from the Branch Davidian women: instead of total dedication to the message of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, the women often devoted themselves to the man himself. They were drawn to his celebrity, and many idolized his enlightened status, hoping to achieve the same

⁶⁷³ This time when members in Peoples Temple were not permitted to leave (approximately 1977-1978), while imperative to the study of the group, is an anomaly in most new religious movements.

spiritual plane themselves, or have an adventure in the utopian Rajneeshpuram commune trying to do so.

5.3 The power of Women in Waco, Jonestown, and Rajneeshpuram

Before David Koresh assumed control over the Branch Davidians in Mount Carmel in the mid-1980s, women held powerful positions within the church throughout its long and evolving history as prophets, leaders, and guides. Ellen G. White, a Seventh-day Adventist and prolific writer, was a vital leader in the church for many decades. Florence Houteff made apocalyptic predictions, which, while proven inaccurate, attracted and retained many followers. Lois Roden, the Branch Davidian leader who preceded David Koresh, emphasized the femininity of the Holy Spirit, and advocated for women's ordination in the church. Although under Koresh women did not hold prominent leadership positions, this was somewhat unusual in the Davidian religious tradition. However, women in Koresh's Branch Davidians contributed to the group in other meaningful ways as devoted wives, mothers, and community members serving God.

In Peoples Temple, several women had positions of leadership throughout the group's existence. Carolyn Moore Layton, Maria Katsaris, Harriet Tropp (all of whom were white, well-educated, and relatively young), and others had important roles as assistants to the pastor, the overseers of finances and overseas banking accounts, were knowledgeable insiders and decision-makers on the Planning Commission, and were Jones' confidantes and advisors. Women of color were mostly left out of leadership positions, with a few exceptions, such as Rhonda Fortson, a Black woman who served on the Planning Commission. Despite voices of dissent from the apostate group called the Gang of Eight (the Eight Revolutionaries), and individuals, including Deborah Layton, almost all the Peoples Temple women remained loyal—including critics such

as Harriet Tropp and Christine Miller. Most women (and men) died in Jonestown, including Tropp and Miller, with Reverend Jones on November 18, 1978.

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh also placed his trust in women leaders, particularly when he was unable or unwilling to lead. Ma Anand Sheela was the top secretary in the Rajneesh movement, acting as a public relations spokesperson, a negotiator, and an advisor to the guru. Other neo-sannyasin women had important positions in Rajneeshpuram and took jobs much like those that they would have had in the outside world, such as head nurses, judges, or lawyers for the community. Unlike the leadership in the Branch Davidian tradition under David Koresh or Jim Jones' administration of Peoples Temple, Bhagwan Rajneesh welcomed women of color from India into his inner circle. In all three cases, women were not just behind the scenes—they were running the operation.

5.4 The agency of women in Waco, Jonestown, and Rajneeshpuram

The women of the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and the Rajneesh movement exercised agency within the groups, from joining the movement to remaining in the movement to leaving the movement, except in the case of the residents of Jonestown. Generally, women practiced individual and collective agency, as they made decisions for themselves and for the community. Furthermore, women (particularly white women) often had more opportunities for upward mobility in these groups that they may not have been afforded in the world outside of the commune.

Not all aspects of women's lives in these movements were of their own doing. Romantic pairings were often strongly suggested by the male leaders. In Waco, David Koresh tore marriages and families apart, taking young women and girls as his spiritual brides and to be the

mothers of his children. Branch Davidians were instructed to remain married even though these women were considered by the community to be Koresh's wives.⁶⁷⁴ For the Branch Davidian women who were chosen to be one of his wives, doing so was an act of worship of God, whose word came through the prophet Koresh. For the pre-teen and teenage girls of the Branch Davidians, choice is a more difficult concept to measure. These children were not true agents of the decision to enter sexual relationships with Koresh, for they were subject to the pressures of the young student/adult teacher dynamic. Jim Jones also dismantled some of the existing marriages and took extramarital lovers.⁶⁷⁵ In Rajneeshpuram, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh offered potential romantic matches between his neo-sannyasins, who were then encouraged to live together intimately. Bhagwan Rajneesh, for the most part, enjoyed short couplings with the neo-sannyasins of the Rajneesh movement during special darshans (private meetings), although the guru also had a long-term companion, Ma Yoga Vivek (Englishwoman Christine Woolfe).

The bodies, minds, and souls of women have been fought over for centuries in both secular and non-secular arenas. The extent to which women specifically in new religious movements, including the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and the Rajneesh movement, had agency has been debated by scholars, journalists, and others. I argue that women were not brainwashed or tricked into joining these movements. Women had strong convictions about their chosen group's theology or ideology, whether they believed that they were serving God,

⁶⁷⁴ Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000). 63.

⁶⁷⁵ Some former Peoples Temple members recall men being propositioned by Jones for sex, although there does not appear to be evidence of long-term same-sex relationships involving Reverend Jones. Stanley Nelson, dir., *American Experience: Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple* (PBS, 2006), program transcript, https://www-tc.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/media/pdf/transcript/Jonestown_transcript.pdf, accessed March 22, 2021.

listening to the message of a self-proclaimed revolutionary leader, or training under a spiritual guide. Whether these women had lives that were “better” or “worse” than they would have had outside of the movement is not a conclusion that can be drawn easily. To do this, one would have to make a subjective judgment based on one’s own experiences, beliefs, and values. Each of these three groups offered an alternative way of life for the women who chose them, one which the women believed would be rewarding.

5.5 The devotion of women in Waco, Jonestown, and Rajneeshpuram

The forms which devotion and worship took varied by group in character and intensity. The Branch Davidian movement was the most recognizably traditional religious organization, for it descended from the teachings of mainstream Christianity. A long line of prophets and leaders led the Seventh-day Adventists, Davidians, and Branch Davidians, and under David Koresh, and the theology of the group mostly remained consistent. Devotion to the Bible as interpreted by the prophet, particularly the teachings of the Book of Revelation, endured. The members considered themselves students of the Bible, not worshippers of Koresh, although Koresh’s prophecies, particularly about the end times, are pivotal to understanding the beliefs of the Branch Davidians and their motivations.

Peoples Temple and the Rajneesh movement underwent ideological changes during their tenure. Peoples Temple began as a Christian-based religion, in which God and Jesus were revered. There were Pentecostal hallmarks, such as glossolalia and faith healings, and social gospel commitments as Peoples Temple members fought for civil rights in Indianapolis and California. This blend of worship in the church and action in the community is not unusual for religious groups. However, Peoples Temple eventually dropped the first half of its mission. As

the group evolved, it moved towards socialism and liberal politics and rejected God and biblical teachings. In the last years of Peoples Temple, Reverend Jones claimed to be God, yet showed disdain and even disgust at times for the Bible and Christianity. The women of Peoples Temple devoted themselves to the pursuit of racial harmony and social justice, religious and spiritual fulfillment, and, in some cases, Jim Jones himself.

The opposite trajectory was true for the neo-sannyasins of the Rajneesh movement. The group began as a more secular organization that focused on meditation and self-help. Its students listened to Bhagwan Rajneesh's musings on life and spirituality. A new religion, Rajneeshism, was created in the early to mid-1980s, but was rejected by the guru himself only years later. The guru faulted his former secretary and de facto leader of the movement, Ma Anand Sheela, with transforming the group from a spiritual movement to a religion. Bhagwan Rajneesh's denunciation of Rajneeshism came in 1985, after Sheela's departure from the commune and subsequent arrest. Whether a secular or non-secular movement (or both), the neo-sannyasins remained loyal to not only Bhagwan Rajneesh, but the organization in Rajneeshpuram and its satellite communities worldwide and continue to do so into the twenty-first century, seeking enlightenment and personal growth.

Rank and file members frequently have gone unrecognized or unacknowledged in positions of power, as they are often invisible to the public, the media, and in popular narratives. However, these behind-the-scenes women contributed in meaningful, sacrificial, and essential ways. Branch Davidian women under David Koresh were not given what most would consider leadership positions, as they held more traditionally feminine jobs. These tasks included cooking, cleaning, and childcare for the community, although women in earlier versions of the group held much power as prophets and leaders. In Peoples Temple, many women, particularly women of

color, performed the drudgery of work such as stuffing envelopes, setting up chairs for meetings, and building the commune in Jonestown. The neo-sannyasin women of the Rajneesh movement also created their commune from uninhabited land, much like Peoples Temple did in Guyana. Women outnumbered men in these groups, and they shared in the responsibilities of creating and caring for the community. In this way, women worshipped and showed their devotion to their respective movement and the charismatic leader.

The roles of children in the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and the Rajneesh movement also reveals much about parents' devotion to the movement and to the charismatic leader. Branch Davidian children, particularly David Koresh's children, were said to be special and a vital part of the apocalyptic prophecies. In Jonestown, children were also welcomed into the fold, although they did not have the same divinely appointed positions as the children of Waco. The children of Rajneeshpuram were not highly valued, and often they were cast aside and left to fend for themselves. This was because the leaders of Rajneeshpuram argued that the children of the Rajneesh movement took up too much physical space and hindered their parents' spiritual journeys; therefore, they were seen as burdensome and treated as such. A wide range of behaviors towards the children and expectations for their actions existed across these three groups, and no definitive conclusions can be drawn about the role of children in new religious movements. Through children's interactions with their parents as dictated by the rules of the group can one assess the dedication of the women to the movement.

5.6 Feminism and its effects on new religious movements

The influence of feminism on the women of the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and the Rajneesh movement is difficult to measure. In some ways, women acted in accordance with

feminist thought, for they took on positions of leadership in their respective groups that may have been unable to in the outside society. For example, the women of Peoples Temple were entrusted with banking and other tasks traditionally given to men. They advanced in positions of responsibility far beyond what the wider society allowed in the 1970s. Ma Anand Sheela essentially ran Rajneeshpuram, particularly after Bhagwan Rajneesh's health issues and vow of silence. It was rare for a woman to hold this high position during the 1970s and early 1980s, and even in present times is unusual. In Waco, the women of the Branch Davidians do not appear to have been influenced much by feminist thought under David Koresh, for they performed traditional "women's work" such as cooking and cleaning for the community. However, Branch Davidian leader Lois Roden could be considered a feminist (despite her claim to the contrary during an interview with Paul Bryan in 1980), for she supported women's ordination in the church.⁶⁷⁶

Many women of Peoples Temple and the Rajneesh movement anticipated that they would be free from a patriarchal society in their respective movements. For most, however, the reality often was newly imposed rules or expectations that simply replaced those in mainstream society. These women believed that by joining these religious and counterculture movements they would have more access to higher positions of power, perhaps even greater than those in the world outside of the commune. Instead, most women had the same type of jobs and roles inside the group as they would have outside of it, although a few were able to advance their positions. These chosen few were generally well-educated, young, and in the case of Peoples Temple, white. Ma Anand Sheela of the Rajneesh movement assumed more power than she might have

⁶⁷⁶ "An Interview with Lois Roden," *The Paul Bryan Talk Show*, 4 November 1980, reprinted in *SHEkinah* vol. 1, no. 1 (December 1980), 9.

had she remained a Fine Arts student living in New Jersey in the late 1970s. Most Branch Davidian women under David Koresh did not appear to have had the same dreams of upward mobility as motivation for joining the Branch Davidian movement, nor were they concerned about matching their male counterparts in top authoritarian roles. For these women, their meaning in life was to follow God's word as interpreted by Koresh.

5.7 Proposed topics for further study

The question of religious freedom has pulled at the consciousness of Americans since before the founding of the United States. Issues such as separation of church and state, control over women's bodies and reproductive rights, and others have raised countless debates in this nation. If a group identifies itself as a religion, does it have the right to operate however it sees fit, in accordance with its own philosophies, even if it means breaking government law? Should the government allow a fragile religious group that threatens to bring about the end times, perhaps through mass suicide, to do so? At what point is a religion a religion and not a cult, and is there a difference between the two? These are lingering questions not just for scholars or members of the media, but for those living in a society in which these groups exist. Perhaps these subjects are meant for another historian or religious studies scholar to explore, as the topic of religious freedom and definitions lend themselves to much further study. I have begun the work, but because my focus is on the women of these movements and their priorities and allegiances, I would hope for more scholarly works to emerge about these ideas of religious freedom.⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷⁷ Finbarr Curtis and Tisa Wenger have written about religious freedom in America, but have not focused on new religions, one area where the scholarship is much needed.

I have also addressed the children of these movements. However, a study about the children as the primary actors is another direction this scholarship could take. There are very few narratives about these essential members of the communities, yet they should be accounted for as valuable contributors. I have relied on memoirs written decades after the events, such as Tim Guest's account of his life in the Rajneesh movement, or on other members' recollections about the children of the communes. This task will prove to be more challenging, as many of the children of Waco and Jonestown perished and are only written about by survivors, but by piecing together their stories, a more thorough and intricate picture of the group can emerge.

5.8 New religious movements in the Information Age

New religious movements continue to exist in communal settings,⁶⁷⁸ although the onset of the Information Age in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries has altered the ways in which people can interact with the groups. As more people across the world become connected through the Internet, adherents of new religious movements do not necessarily need to be in the same physical space as one another. For the most part, people can access information about the religion from the privacy of their own homes, giving them the ability to choose how much time is spent interacting with the teachings of the group or with the community. Followers, or potential followers, can choose which messages to listen to by clicking on a hyperlink. Conversely, one can neglect or reject certain messages by ignoring the information presented or closing a browser window. People can also leave the group as they please without the same fears of being cast out, labeled a defector, or seen as a likely danger to the group. This ostracism

⁶⁷⁸ There are few new religious communes left in the United States. Many communalists, such as those in Dancing Rabbit or Twin Oaks, refer to their communes as "ecovillages," and have non-religious aims.

would most likely would have happened in past versions of membership in these organizations but severing ties with a new religion in the twenty-first century can be done by turning off a computer. In communal new religious movements of the past, one had to sometimes escape literally, such as from Peoples Temple in Jonestown.

New religious movements can be less demanding of one's time in the twenty-first century. One can become a follower of a group in relative privacy, unlike in previous times. This is especially true for groups that once settled communally, such as the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and the neo-sannyasins of the Rajneesh movement. Religion encompassed one's entire life in these organizations, as members often lived together and were constantly immersed in the messages of the group. No longer are the Rajneesh/Osho movement devotees required to wear maroon-colored clothes in public to signify membership. Former Branch Davidians and Peoples Temple members are not subject to the constant sermons of the prophet David Koresh and Reverend Jim Jones, respectively. This missing piece is in large part, of course, due to deaths of Koresh and Jones. However, I argue that the nature of these religions would most likely have significantly changed during the Information Age if the groups were still active.⁶⁷⁹ For example, the Osho movement exemplifies the evolution and present state of new religious movements not just in the United States, but globally.

New religions are moving toward individualized experiences for members from the comfort of one's home and from anywhere in the world. Many groups are not all-consuming, nor do they require attending sermons or meetings regularly. Therefore, followers can choose to be as involved with the group as they wish. Even traditional religions such as Christianity have also

⁶⁷⁹ Former Peoples Temple members meet on occasion, although they do not refer to themselves as current members of the late Jim Jones' group. The Branch Davidians still have a small active sector who await David Koresh's return.

moved in this direction, for churches often work with social media to create larger and more variable experiences for devotees. Much like other worldwide organizations, religious or not, the present state of non-communal new religious movements is more flexible, private, and less intrusive than in previous decades. These trends will likely continue with the expansion of and reliance on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other means to reach large audiences.

Heaven's Gate, founded by Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles in 1974, is one such example of an Information Age new religious movement. In the beginning of its existence, the group relied on word of mouth to spread its message of the coming ascension. As the influence of the Internet expanded throughout the subsequent decades, those interested in Heaven's Gate found access to the group more readily available online and built a community of believers. Whereas groups such as the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and the Rajneesh movement relied on kinship ties and in-person recruitment, individuals could (and still can) research or be a part of Heaven's Gate from around the world without ever having to attend services in-person. Texts and videos created by Heaven's Gate leaders Applewhite and Nettles are available online to those interested in the UFO cult.⁶⁸⁰ One can scroll through written portions or skip through videotaped messages easily, focusing on the parts which appeal most to the individual, and discarding the rest. With the Internet setting, there is also anonymity of leadership as well as membership, for one does not always know for certain who is operating the websites. This could be an actual leader or member of the group, an unrelated financially motivated site manager, or anyone else. After the deaths of Nettles and Applewhite, no new

⁶⁸⁰ "Heaven's Gate," www.heavensgate.com, accessed September 14, 2022.

leader has publicly been named to Heaven's Gate on their website, and so it is unclear who is distributing the informational materials. In this way, anonymity exists for both leaders and followers of many religions in the Information Age.

5.9 Revisiting "cult" women in popular media and final thoughts

While reconsidering the special issue of *People* on "cults" described in the introduction, the reasons for studying new religious movements in the United States become clear.

Misinformation, exaggeration, and sensationalism exist in these popular narratives. These narratives need to be revisited, reassessed, and revised. Women, when they *are* included in the literature, are often infantilized, diminished, victimized,⁶⁸¹ or otherwise overlooked in the histories of the group. The adult women members of the Manson Family became "the Manson girls," who were "seduced by a monster," the infamous Charles Manson, and devotee Dianne Lake was said to have "worshiped [Manson] as a lover and father figure."⁶⁸² Examples such as these indicate that the charismatic male leader was the sole source of devotion for young women. However, I have found this sentiment to be untrue in many cases, as the pull of the movement itself rivaled and sometimes even surpassed the dedication to men.

After reading the articles about cults in this issue of *People*, I wanted to rewrite the narrative. I wanted to explore more deeply the lives of the women, putting *their* pictures on the cover rather than the charismatic male leaders. Women would be at the forefront, with their forgotten or neglected stories brought to light. No longer would the women be simple dupes or

⁶⁸¹ In some instances, "victimization" is an accurate word, particularly in the case of several minors of the Branch Davidians in Waco.

⁶⁸² *People, True Crime Stories: Cults* (November 9, 2018), 14, 15.

without agency—they would be treated with respect and as complex and powerful individuals, not as immature girls completely under the influence of manipulative male masterminds.

The stories of women in new religious movements should not be restricted to the extraordinary women who managed to gain power and influence within the group. While the studies of Ellen G. White, Florence Houteff, and Lois Roden of the Seventh-day Adventist/Davidian/Branch Davidian tradition, Carolyn Moore Layton, Maria Katsaris, and Harriet Tropp of Peoples Temple, and Ma Anand Sheela and Ma Yogi Laxmi of the Rajneesh movement, to name a handful, are vital and should be studied, *all* women of these movements were essential contributors to the whole. Rank and file women members of these new religions tied the group together through kinship networks, both biological and created, and were essential in recruiting new disciples. Women performed arduous manual labor to build the communes and performed the drudgeries for the greater good of their respective microcosm of society. In short, they created communities of believers.

Women joined the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and the Rajneesh movement for a wide array of reasons, which I have explored. Not all women expected the same life from their respective new religious movement, but in each case, women were fulfilled by their roles within the movement, or they left. Whether leaders or rank and file members and whether serving a charismatic leader or God, the women of these movements gained personal and spiritual meaning from their contributions, creating family and community as well. Questions of agency, patriarchy, and religious freedom complicate our perception about how women could subject themselves to these restrictions, as they often traded one set of societal rules and expectations for another. However, no judgments can be or should be made about an individual woman's decision to join a new religious movement.

Charismatic leadership, a relational concept, according to Max Weber, would not exist without these believers. Through their devotion to the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and the Rajneesh movement, women made possible the ideas of the charismatic male leader. Without the dedication of these women, David Koresh, Jim Jones, and Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh might never have been heard, might never have become media sensations, their ideas might never have come to fruition, and their faces might never have been immortalized on the covers of popular magazines. Women in these new religious movements and others, as invisible as they often are in media and in scholarship, made themselves essential to the success of their community. Women put in motion the ideas of the male leader of the movement, influencing the ideology of the group in new, profound, and lasting ways.

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