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# Review Of "Women In New Religions: In Search Of Community, Sexuality, And Spiritual Power" By E. Puttick

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Review: Women in New Religions: In Search of Community, Sexuality, and Spiritual Power

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who sometimes behave like Asian Buddhists (ritually speaking, that is)” (p. 64). To illustrate this diversification among adherents, Numrich provides useful biographies of the head monks, leading Asian members, and select non-Asian converts (some of whom take special lay ordination). The attempt to educate the children of Asian immigrants in Buddhism and Asian cultures sometimes backfires; young Asian-Americans have commented that “Thai kids are boring . . . They seem more dependent on their parents . . . They all stay home until they’re married” (p. 104). Such comments indicate the cultural and generational stresses encountered in the process of Americanization.

In general, Numrich’s study is more descriptive than analytical. It would have been useful to include more discussion of how each center adheres to or diverges from the practical realities of Buddhism in its home country. Also, while he suggests that Americanized Buddhism will evolve into a distinct form, Numrich does not speculate on its content or appearance. Nonetheless, this book contains valuable material and merits inclusion in libraries with collections on American and Asian-American religion.

Christopher Key Chapple, Loyola Marymount University

*Women in New Religions: In Search of Community, Sexuality, and Spiritual Power.* By Elizabeth Puttick. St. Martins Press, 1997. 282 pages. \$18.95 paper.

Sociologist Elizabeth Puttick has written a fascinating account of the role of women and gender in new religious movements (NRMs). Puttick was for five years a member of the Osho movement led by the controversial Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. Guided by her own experiences and by the Osho movement’s prominent place among post-war NRMs, she decided to focus on this group in her book. The author also incorporates information and examples from other NRMs based on Eastern traditions including Elan Vital, Tibetan Buddhist groups, Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). In one chapter Puttick explores various forms of Goddess Spirituality practiced by adherents of Feminist Witchcraft, traditional Wicca, ecofeminism, and Native American spirituality. In general, Puttick provides important background information to help her readers sort out the various NRMs, their leaders, and movement histories.

Puttick approaches her study of women’s role in the new religions from the standpoint of a psychological investigation. She explores the complexity of intra-group relationships and power dynamics, paths to

spirituality, work roles, and leadership. While there are separate chapters on such topics as the master-disciple relationship, the abuse of power, sexuality and the spirit, and feminine spirituality, Puttick examines all these issues throughout the book. For example, in the chapter on female spiritual leadership, Puttick weaves all these topics into explaining why few women have ever become leaders in NRMs.

While we learn something about men's lives in these various groups, Puttick is particularly adept at teasing out the ways women shape their religious communities and are themselves shaped by their experiences in NRMs. One of Puttick's stated goals is to "throw some light on why women are drawn into these movements and what they get out of them" (p. 232). Puttick presents us with a complicated answer that centers on spirituality, then radiates out to include respect of women's potential as religious beings and working members of their communities. An understated subtext in the book is the author's attempt to explain why women (and in some instances men as well) join religious groups that seem unfamiliar at best, or fanatical and sexist at worst to Western audiences. By exploring the intricate picture of women's place in NRMs, Puttick is successful in making these women's choices seem comprehensible, rational, and, in some cases, liberating.

Perhaps a more appropriate title for this work would have been *Gender in New Religions*. Except for a chapter on women spiritual leaders in NRMs, we learn little about the whole experience of individual women. The reader does not always learn the identity of NRM members whose words are quoted in the text. Rather than focus on individual women, Puttick instead examines the genderized meanings of power, spirituality, and work within NRMs. She displays a feminist sensibility in exploring these themes. For example, Puttick spends a significant portion of the book examining the master-disciple relationship. She considers the many strands of this complex issue, exploring how both women and men react to this hierarchical and male-dominant relationship model. She points out the potential for abuse within this traditional relationship, and how some women have found themselves in vulnerable positions.

However, it is also clear that women have frequently gained positions of respect and status within some NRMs. Over the last thirty years the roles women play in many groups have changed just as women's expectations in outside society have changed. Surprisingly, we learn that many women who join Eastern-based NRMs have been actively involved in the women's movement. Puttick speculates that these women have taken their ideas of female strength and equality into their religious communities. Feminism is integral to the newer forms of Paganism, Wicca, and Goddess Spirituality.

The least satisfying chapter of the book is the last one, titled "A New Model of Spiritual Needs and Values." Puttick gives an overview of older models that have typologized religion. She chooses to describe in detail

Abraham Maslow's theories of human motivation, adapting them to NRMs and adding a gender component. The chapter also includes a brief overview of spiritual trends in Western society and some speculation about the future of religion. Except for the section revamping Maslow there is little here that might be called a "new model."

By placing an examination of gender and women's roles at the center of her study, Puttick has given us new insights into the complex dynamics at work in NRMs. This book thus not only uncovers multiple layers of information about NRMs, it also provides a valuable framework within which to examine women's experiences in other religious settings. It is hoped that this work will inspire more studies of women and gender in NRMs.

Wendy E. Chmielewski, Swarthmore College Peace Collection

*Modern African Spirituality: The Independent Holy Spirit Churches in East Africa, 1902-1976.* By Ane Marie Bak Rasmussen. British Academic Press, 1996. \$59.50 cloth.

This book presents the reader with a detailed history of the emergence of four independent "Holy Spirit" churches in East Africa. Rasmussen has done painstaking research in the field in order to produce this comprehensive history, and her text is so rich in raw data that it plunges the reader into the joy and exhilaration as well as the pain and confusion of church members. This feat of the author (to make the life-world of church members come alive) does not detract from her scholarly task to analyze, compare, and theorize on the phenomena in question.

Rasmussen traces the beginnings and growth of the independent churches from their roots in the Friends Africa Mission during the 1920s and provides a plausible explanation for the highly unlikely event of a Pentecostal-type church arising from a Quaker Mission. She further describes the early years of the Holy Spirit movement when it exhibited many millenarian characteristics and indicates how some beliefs and a number of practices were modified over time. The descriptions of beliefs and practices such as worship, prayer, purification, and initiation are dense and reflect the author's thorough knowledge of her subject. The churches' establishment of organizational structures and achievement of official recognition also receives attention.

Throughout the book, Rasmussen compares the practices of the Holy Spirit churches with those of the Friends Mission and traditional religions in order to show how these churches established their own traditions but did not escape the imprint of earlier influences. One aspect of Rasmussen's findings which I found surprising is the apparently slight influence which the traditional religions of the region exerted on the