



## Gender and Contemporary Millennial Movements

**Author:** Sarah Harvey

**Author:** Suzanne Newcombe

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### Introduction

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Themes of gender have not been a major feature in the academic study of millennial movements. However, the diversity and potential disruptive significance of contemporary millennial movements suggest that this scholarly oversight may be worth reconsidering, particularly in light of the contemporary emphasis on critical theory and intersectionality. Therefore, this article will first broadly survey reflections on the dynamics of gender and religion in the study of contemporary religiosity before detailing a few examples of literature that deals explicitly with gender and millenarian movements.

The authors of this study have worked at Inform. At the time of writing, about 12 percent of millennial groups on the Inform database have been tagged as having some element of significant female leadership. (At the time of writing 213 of approximately 5,000 groups have been tagged as having significant millennial aspects. For more detail on the Inform database and its limitations, please see the separate article on Inform.) The basic generalization that can be drawn from these statistics is that the gender ratios of leadership in millennial movements are likely to parallel those of leadership positions in most of global society, where there are a few notable exceptions to generally patriarchal governance. This suggests female leadership in millennial groups might be a point worth considering more systematically in future scholarship. Even if female leadership is a minority, some new insights might be drawn from more sustained study of this subject.

All religious movements must deal with gender roles in some way as part of their doctrines and practice. Therefore, the larger part of this article highlights a few categories of contemporary millennial groups that demonstrate identifiable themes, doctrines, and practices relating to gender. For this purpose, we have subdivided our exploration of contemporary millennial groups and gender into four major, but potentially overlapping, categories:

- those that take a 'traditional', normative stance towards gender, sexuality, and child-rearing practices, holding that more flexibility regarding gender roles is a distinctive sign of the end times (e.g. the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), Jehovah's Witnesses, and Twelve Tribes);

- those whose theology includes a distinctive belief or innovative practice around gender and sexuality (e.g. Branch Davidians, The Family International, and the Unification Church)—while most of these groups generally adhere to patriarchal structures with male leadership, they have introduced some novel beliefs and practices relating to gender and sexuality that aim to usher in an expected new world;
- examples of millennial movements that have female leaders (e.g. the Brahma Kumaris, the Church Universal and Triumphant, the DK Foundation, and Ramtha's School of Enlightenment);
- examples of movements that have a conception of the divine as feminine (e.g. the Church of Almighty God and the Goddess Temple in Glastonbury).

This arrangement allows us to highlight some of the breadth as well as a bit of depth to the variety of approaches to gender in contemporary millennial groups.

## Gender and Religion

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It is generally accepted that while the majority of religions worldwide have been founded (and led) by men, women are more 'religious'. Data collected from eighty-four countries spanning 2008–15 show that 'globally, women are more devout than men by several standard measures of religious commitment ... including religious affiliation, frequency of worship service attendance, frequency of prayer, and whether religion plays an important role in a person's life' (Pew Research Centre 2016). An estimated 83.4 percent of women around the world identify with a faith group, compared with 79.9 percent of men. However, the data do show that this varies by religious tradition, with the 'gender gap' more marked in Christianity, where women are more religious than men, than in Islam, where men and women display similar levels of religiosity. Muslim men attend worship services more than Muslim women, and the same is true in Orthodox Judaism.

The majority of the denominations of the Abrahamic religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) either exclude women from leadership positions altogether or have only recently admitted them. Even within denominations, the acceptance of women in formal leadership roles is often mixed: the Church of England first ordained women priests in 1994, for example, but the greater Anglican Communion has a variety of positions. In some areas of the Anglican Communion, women are now allowed to be priests and even bishops, but in other areas they can only be priests or are not allowed to be priests or bishops at all. This has been a controversial issue that has caused some to leave the Anglican Communion to join or create churches with more conservative beliefs and/or practices.

Many South Asian religious traditions (including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism) have evidence of theological strands that provide justification for more gender equality, but the reality is more complex. Most South Asian cultures are patriarchal in terms of cultural, social, and economic power, and this intersects with the expression of religious beliefs and practices.

It is often assumed that new and minority religions offer greater opportunities for women, but, as will be outlined below, this is not always the case. Lorne L. Dawson (2000) has argued that some women join new religions specifically because of their ideals of patriarchal authority, discrete gender roles, and support for

the 'traditional' family—ideals that are believed to be lacking in contemporary Western societies. Meredith McGuire (2003), on the other hand, argues that new religions offer alternative religious roles for women. New religions are more amenable to alternative gender roles as they are based on alternative sources of authority, namely charismatic authority, not the long traditions and scriptures of older, established religions, which are less amenable to change in general. Esoteric, 'new age', Pagan, and holistic spiritualities are the most common examples of new religions that are potentially empowering for women, and indeed these religions have a preponderance of women and female leadership.

Susan Palmer's *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers* (1994) remains a seminal text that explores women's roles in new religions. Palmer suggests that the concept of empowerment is 'slippery' (1994, 8). Instead, she provides a typology of three categories, each with different man/woman and body/soul conceptions:

- Sex polarity movements see the sexes as separate and irrelevant to each other's spiritual progression, although not necessarily equal as different levels of salvation can be offered to each sex.
- Sex complementarity movements see the sexes as having distinct qualities that are enhanced when joined together in a whole, as in through marriage.
- Sex unity movements see the body and gender as a superficial layer over the sexless spiritual self.

Coming from a more explicitly feminist analytical framework, Elizabeth Puttick (1997) concludes that most new religious movements have continued a social subordination of women, despite some examples of doctrinal gender equality and 'radical experimentation around sexuality and family structures' (1997, 152).

In a later article, Palmer (1997) explicitly considers the 'feminization of the millennium', suggesting that in many new religious movements, women have an important role to play in ushering in the new millennium. She states that 'for many new religions, reconstructing relations between the sexes in correct alignment to the divine cosmos is an essential step in preparing for the millennium' (1997, 162). She goes on to give examples of movements that have women as saviours (such as some forms of Paganism); that have a balance of the sexes through the charismatic leadership of a husband and wife team (such as The Family International); and that have a female leader preoccupied with 'masculine' themes of war (the Church Universal and Triumphant).

In a volume titled *Gender and Apocalyptic Desire* (2006), editors Brenda Brasher and Lee Quinby highlight gendered analysis that emerged in one of a series of meetings at the Center for Millennial Studies at Boston University. While a primary aim of their volume was to promote a more complex understanding of the historically varied phenomena of millennialism, it also aimed to 'provide a feminist elucidation of the ways in which apocalyptic belief reflects gendered perceptions and, moreover, actually produces categories of gender and sexual difference' (Brasher and Quinby 2006, xii). In this latter aim, there is a significant analytical overlap with Palmer's earlier work, which emphasized the variety of ways gender roles are reified and expressed in new religious movements. Brasher and Quinby provide an engaging snapshot of many of the millennial narratives current in the United States at the turn of the second millennium: apocalyptic themes in how gender was presented in Christian fundamentalism and anti-abortion narratives, as well as in Marian devotion within Catholic communities and views of gender and the body in Heaven's Gate.

Also of significance is Melissa Wilcox's chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism* (2011). Wilcox gives examples of the beliefs and practices around gender and sexuality of different movements within three categories of millennialism: catastrophic (which she argues incorporates 'avertive millennialism'), progressive, and nativist (based on Wessinger 2000a, 2000b). She argues that 'while catastrophic millennial movements promote understandings of gender, sexuality, and family that prepare their members for an abrupt and radical end to the world, progressive millennial movements seek to live out in the present the roles they believe to await all humankind in the future' (2011, 2). The latter, she suggests, tend to engage in greater experimentation with sex and gender roles (Wilcox 2011, 176-85; see also Ashcraft 2011). Nativist millennial movements, on the other hand, 'often promote strictly patriarchal models of gender, sexuality, and family, but the impact of those values differs depending on the social context of followers'. Wilcox highlights two examples of nationalistic nativist millennial movements in the United States—White supremacy and the Nation of Islam—which both promote complementary gender roles (2011, 2, 185-87).

In considering the interplay of gender and contemporary millennial groups, we propose a different analytical framework based on more pragmatic divisions, emphasizing a spectrum of social and doctrinal distinctions in relation to gender. In this, we follow Palmer in looking primarily at the social characteristics of gender in a category of religious groups (in this case, contemporary millenarian groups) rather than Wilcox's analytical typology of taking different kinds of millennial expression as primary. In the following sections, we divide millennial movements into those with (1) normative gender roles, (2) distinctive beliefs and practices around sexuality, (3) female leadership, and (4) a conception of a feminine divine. Of course, these distinctions are not necessarily exclusive—for example, you could doctrinally have a feminine divine with normative gender roles (arguably the case in Catholicism) as well as groups with both distinctive practices around sexuality and female leadership. However, we argue that these frames can help to highlight some specific elements that might be useful in analysing the role gender plays in any specific group as well as the dynamic way gender can relate to millennial religiosity more generally.

## Millennial Movements with Gender-Normative Beliefs and Practices

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For some contemporary millennial movements, particularly those with a basis in Christianity, a conception of the end times is inherently tied to normative views of gender roles, the relationship between the sexes, child-rearing practices, and the relationships between generations. A 'traditional' or 'conservative' view of these roles and relationships is believed to be necessary for ushering in the Millennium, as well as providing an ideal of how roles and relationships will play out in the next life, in paradise on earth. Deviance from these established norms in this life is understood as the detrimental effect of 'secularization', which in itself is both a sign of the imminent end times and potentially, if engaged with, a reason to be excluded from the paradise of the next life.

The groups discussed in this section—Jehovah's Witnesses, the LDS, and the Twelve Tribes—uphold traditional gender roles in both this life and the next. They are movements that promote gender complementarity rather than gender equality. Men and women are believed to have different and distinct qualities that should be brought together in union, through the marriage of a man and a woman. Gay relationships are formally prohibited within these movements. Within marriage, a wife is subservient to her

husband, who is the head of the household, and children are subservient to their parents and other elders. Women are excluded from leadership positions within the movements as they cannot be in positions of authority over men: they can only lead women's groups and children's groups. Within all the movements, great importance is placed on married life, marital fidelity, and family values. Deviance from these values can lead to expulsion.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that we are currently living in the end times. The end times began in 1914, the date of Christ's 'second presence', when he began to rule the Kingdom of God in heaven. Witnesses are currently awaiting the Battle of Armageddon, the date of which is unknown, when Jesus will return to defeat Satan and to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth. Despite men's spiritual authority over women in this life, men and women have equal opportunities for salvation. All—Witnesses and non-Witnesses alike—will be judged by God on Judgment Day and can be saved through accepting Jehovah. Those judged adversely will experience oblivion, while those who are saved will form the 'great crowd' of people from all nations. It is these people who will experience paradise on earth—as opposed to the 144,000, the 'anointed class', who will rule with Jesus in heaven. Both men and women can be part of the anointed class.

The physical bodies of the 'great crowd' will be restored to perfection, to their optimum health, while the 'anointed class' will inhabit spiritual bodies. Hence, while these spiritual bodies might be sexless ('flesh and blood cannot inherit God's Kingdom': 1 Corinthians 15:50, *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*), the perfected physical bodies will remain sexed and, presumably, gendered. Furthermore, where all family members are saved, the family unit will remain together in the paradise on earth. Happy and healthy traditional—predominantly nuclear—family units are frequently depicted in the illustrations of paradise to be found in Jehovah's Witness publications such as *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* As George Chryssides (2019, 239) notes, this raises many questions, not least what will happen with 'reconstituted' or 'blended' families.

Witnesses can believe that they will have children in paradise, although the specifics of where these children come from remain unclear—will they be born in paradise or will they be saved children from unsaved families in need of a family in the next life? It does not seem likely that they will be conceived in paradise as, despite the potential retention of the family unit, Jehovah's Witnesses believe that there will not be sexual relations in the paradise on earth (Chryssides 2019, 256). However, it is clear that traditional gender roles and the primary importance of the family unit, and the values this entails, will remain in the earthly paradise.

The family is also of fundamental importance in the LDS. The LDS, like Jehovah's Witnesses, anticipates the imminent, physical second coming of Jesus Christ, although no dates have been suggested for his return. Believing that we are living in the 'latter days' of human history, members see themselves as the 'Latter-day Saints', who will be saved in the Kingdom of Jesus on earth. They believe that the kingdom will be centred in the state of Utah, where the church has its headquarters, and, from there, Jesus will reign in a literal gathering of Israel. Church members seek to prepare for and create the Kingdom of Jesus Christ on earth through following scripture (including *The Book of Mormon*), spreading this scripture worldwide through evangelism, and following the example of Christ in their daily lives.

The church has some distinctive beliefs around the role of the family unit in this life and the next. Family is

central to the church because members see God's plan as working through the family. Family life continues beyond mortal life, as members are sealed to each other for eternity, which stretches out before birth and after death in the spirit world.

Members believe in three worlds, or realms, of existence: the premortal, mortal, and spirit worlds. Souls move from the premortal world, through mortal existence, and into the spirit world. Then there are three Kingdoms of Glory in the spirit world: Celestial, Terrestrial, and Telestial. Exaltation, or eternal life, is salvation in the Celestial Kingdom. This is a doctrine of human theosis; humans can become as God, if they choose to fulfil God's plan.

Despite its name, the spirit world is believed to have a physical existence. Families live together forever there, so long as their relationships were sealed in the temple. Temple marriage is a ritual that 'seals' in heaven relationships formed on earth, principally those between a man and a woman in marriage, between them and all their children born and unborn, and between them and any children they adopt, for eternity. Women are encouraged to have many children because this means more spirits are drawn from premortal existence into mortal existence, giving them the chance of exaltation. This is also a means for women to gain salvation, and, in the early church, plural marriage was seen as a way for men to help more women get into the highest kingdom. Routes to salvation in the LDS are thus gendered, with men and women having different paths to follow. For members, marriage and the family are sacrosanct; they cannot reach the Celestial Kingdom if they remain unmarried. The church also has a focus on genealogy so that members can baptize their dead ancestors, in 'proxy ordinances' in the temple, thus offering them the chance of salvation and the opportunity to be sealed in the family unit in the spirit world. Like Witnesses, LDS members hope that their family units will remain together in the coming Kingdom of God on earth.

The Twelve Tribes, also known as the Messianic Communities, is another millennial movement that has normative beliefs around sex and gender. In this example, the stress is not so much on the continuation of the family unit in the next life but on living traditional family values in this life. Members of the Twelve Tribes consider themselves to be the restoration of the Messianic Jewish community of the first century. All members live communally and share a distinctive lifestyle—a physical and artistic culture that is an interpretation of Messianic Judaism for the contemporary age, termed 'a brand new culture' (Twelve Tribes 'A Brand New Culture'). This culture encompasses every aspect of embodied living, including diet, dress, family relationships, work, music, dance, and more. Members stress that through their communal lifestyle, they are living as true disciples of the Son of God, Yahshua, and it is their distinctive lifestyle that will allow Yahshua to recognize them on his return. Torang Asadi writes that the Tribes' distinctive culture 'serves the theological position that Yahshua will be able to tell [Twelve Tribes] members apart from others in the End of Days' (2013, 153). Furthermore, Palmer suggests, Yahshua will return 'after they [the Twelve Tribes] have demonstrated to all the nations of the earth the life of Yahshua, as a foretaste of the age to come' (2010, 68).

According to the Twelve Tribes, one sign of the imminent end times is the moral degeneration of society, including the breakdown of the nuclear family, women entering the workforce, and the pursuit of individual and selfish goals. A major source of the current moral decline of society is believed to be the rise of parents' lenience towards their children, particularly the rise of so-called permissive parenting from the 1960s onwards (Twelve Tribes 2014). Twelve Tribe members live in opposition to these characteristics of modern society, stressing the importance of marriage and the submission of wives to husbands and

children to their parents. Women wear headscarves for worship to signify submission to their husbands, who in turn submit to Yahshua (God). Children must submit to the authority of their parents and other elders.

Children have a special place within the Twelve Tribes community due to a belief that those born into the community, and who do not sin, will be sanctified within a number of generations. The children will also have a special place in the end times, being among the 144,000 who will usher in the Millennium. This means, however, that they must be raised in a particular way. Children are home schooled within the movement with a focus on practical education, and they assist the adults in cottage industries when they are old enough. They are not excluded from worship, socializing, or work and take an equal place in the communities—although along traditional gender lines. However, they are also subject to physical discipline by their parents and sometimes other adults until the age of around thirteen, by which time it is believed that they have the requisite logic and reasoning to abide by the community's teachings. Physical chastisement is part of the Twelve Tribes' distinctive lifestyle and is a non-negotiable practice. It is believed that only by raising children in 'loving discipline' will they be prepared for their roles in this life and in the end times.

## Millennial Movements with Distinctive Beliefs and Practices Around Gender and Sexuality

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There are other contemporary millennial movements that hold some distinctive beliefs and practices around sex, sexuality, and gender. This is not a new phenomenon: a great deal has been written about the distinctive sexual practices and sexual experimentation of some of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century communes, such as the Shakers (who practised celibacy) and the Oneida Perfectionists (who practised 'complex marriage', essentially 'free love' among the adults of the community). In her analysis, Wilcox (2011, 176–77) confines groups that have novel teachings on gender and sexuality with the category of 'progressive millenarians' with a focus on a 'future utopia' and hence greater sexual experimentation than those groups awaiting a catastrophic end of the world. However, contrary to what Wilcox implies, experimentation with gender norms and sexuality is not limited to progressive millennial groups. Conversely, many 'progressive' millennial groups still reflect patriarchal gender norms with male leadership.

The Unification Church, founded by Reverend Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012) in Korea in the 1950s, is a millennial movement with distinctive beliefs and practices around sexuality and a novel theological justification for traditional gender roles. Moon's teachings are outlined in the *Divine Principle* (1973), which offers an interpretation of the Old and New Testaments as well as further revelations from Moon. The explicit aim of the Unification Church is to restore God's kingdom of heaven on earth. The *Divine Principle* teaches that God created Adam and Eve so that they could produce a God-centred family. However, before they were sufficiently mature to be married, the Archangel Lucifer seduced Eve into a spiritual sexual relationship. Eve then had an illicit physical relationship with Adam. The children born of this union were contaminated by 'fallen nature', a concept similar to Original Sin. This has meant that human relationships, particularly sexual and familial relationships, have been Lucifer-centred rather than God-centred. Jesus was meant to restore the world to God's original plan but was killed before he was able to marry and

establish the ideal God-centred family. He was, thus, able to offer the world only spiritual salvation; physical salvation would have to be the work of another messiah. Unificationists believed that Moon was this messiah and that he and his second wife, Hak Ja Han (b. 1943), were the 'True Parents' who laid the foundation for establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. Through a process of 'indemnity', deeds that are good and sacrificial are believed to cancel out the 'bad debts' accumulated by individuals, their ancestors, and humanity as a whole. Thus, followers believe they can make a practical contribution to the restoration of the kingdom through their actions and by following the messiah (Moon). This is especially the case with regard to marriage and sexual practices.

The Blessing is arguably the most important ritual of the Unification Church because it is so central to the theology of the movement. The Blessing ceremony is often considered a mass wedding in popular culture due to its thousands of participants, even though the ceremony is not a legal marriage and also includes already married couples who want to rededicate themselves to one another. Reverend Moon traditionally 'matched' the future spouses (who occasionally had never met each other and were frequently from different nationalities, ethnicities, and languages) through photographs alone. Originally, those 'blessed' had to be committed members who had fulfilled certain tasks within the church. 'Blessings' have also been performed between Unification Church members and individuals 'in the spirit world', including historical persons. The living member of the union, usually female, agrees to be celibate until united with their 'spouse' after death.

An important ritual associated with the Blessing is the Holy Wine Ceremony, which, it is believed, cleanses a couple's blood lineage so their children will be born without fallen nature. This involves the couple sharing wine, which, in the early days of the movement was rumoured to contain Moon's sperm. Reverend Moon is also believed to have engaged in *pikareun* (sometimes known as *pikareum* or *pigarum*) rituals in the early days of the movement in which he purified women's wombs through sexual intercourse with them (Nevalainen 2011). Ritualized sex can thus have a theological role of restoration if engaged in either with Moon or, later, following his dictates.

In the early days of the movement, couples remained sexually abstinent for forty days after the Blessing and then consummated the marriage, when they were reborn as a true husband and wife, able to bear children free from fallen nature. The consummation also involved further rituals that eradicated Eve's sin. Children born of Blessed couples are considered 'Blessed children' and are an important first step towards restoring the kingdom. The aim of the movement is to populate the world with ideal families and Blessed children in preparation for the coming kingdom.

The Family International (previously called the Children of God) is another contemporary millennial movement with distinctive beliefs and practices around sexuality. It was founded by David Berg (1919–94) in California in the late 1960s and had much in common with the Jesus People movement of that era. It was an evangelical movement that reached out to young, middle-class 'hippies', who quickly moved in with Berg and his family and, after a brief period of living in a commune in Texas, began touring the United States (and later other countries) in buses and camper vans. The movement was millennial from the outset: Berg preached that members were living in the Endtime and that Christ's return was imminent. This message was spread in the belief that failure to reach enough people could delay Christ's return. While no specific dates were set for this return (although Berg did suggest 1993, which was subsequently reinterpreted), people joining the movement in their early twenties in the 1970s did not expect to see their



fortieth birthdays (May 2013). Berg was the Prophet of the Last Days, able to interpret current events as signs of the Endtime, and members were Endtime Disciples, who would be part of Jesus's army in the battle with the Antichrist when he returned.

Alongside its Endtime focus, The Family International's beliefs and practices were governed by theological doctrines known as 'One Wife' and the 'Law of Love'. The 'One Wife' doctrine held that the entire 'body of believers' of the family of God was considered to be the bride of Christ. The primary bond between members as one united 'bride' to Christ was further extended with the 'Law of Love' in 1975 (Borowik 2013, 164). This superseded all other laws. While it led to a desire to evangelize and to engage in charitable projects, it also included some specific teachings on sexuality. A belief that the 'system' (the derogatory term for the 'outside' world) hated sex led Berg and his followers to see sex as something to be celebrated, something God-given and natural. Sex was used to create an intimate personal relationship with Jesus and there was sexual sharing within the group between consenting adults. In the 1970s, this led to the practice of 'flirty fishing', in which sex was also used as a form of witnessing—reaching out to the fish (most often men) through sex.

The sexual experimentation—and flirty fishing in particular—actually served to reinforce gender roles in many ways. It was mostly women who were encouraged to reach out to men with sex and the women engaged in this practice were still expected to fulfil the sexual needs of their husbands. Female-female sexual contact (at times in the presence of men) was sometimes encouraged, but male-male homosexual activity was strictly forbidden. This, combined with the movement's general disapproval of birth control methods, led to a much higher than average birth rate in the communities. It also created a situation in which the female members of the group were particularly sexualized. Young women who left the movement have described pressure to engage in sexual relations with older men, and new female recruits to the movement in the 1980s described how they were encouraged into sexual relations almost immediately (see, for example, Jones, Jones and Buhring 2008). Flirty fishing ended in 1987, but sexual sharing among adult members continued, with new members permitted to participate after six months and a clear HIV test. The movement became characterized, in popular culture, by its teachings around sexuality, although many of the teachings were revoked in the early 1990s prior to Berg's death in 1994.

Since Berg's death, the movement has been led by his partner, Maria, and her new husband, Peter Amsterdam. They promoted the empowerment of both women and young people in positions of responsibility and leadership. However, the movement reduced drastically following a direction known as the 'Reboot' of 2009–10 and there are now only a few hundred members spread across the world. The Reboot was partly the result of the realization that the Endtime had not happened as imminently as expected and the movement now had both unanticipated elderly members and adult second- and third-generation members who had not had to fulfil their expected roles as 'Junior Endtime Teens'.

The Branch Davidians, most widely known for the 1993 siege at their headquarters near Waco, Texas, which resulted in the deaths of seventy-six members, a third of them children, also fit into the category of a millennial movement with distinctive beliefs and practices around sexuality. The Branch Davidians are a splinter group of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA), which was founded by a woman, Ellen G. White (1827–1915). Members believe in the imminent return of Jesus and that living prophets can interpret God's word in the Bible. The Branch Davidians trace their roots to the work of Victor Houteff (1885–1955), who claimed unique insights into the Book of Revelation in line with the Davidians' belief that prophetic

guidance did not end with the Apostles but is available as 'Present Truth' or 'New Light' in each generation (Gallagher 2013, 115). David Koresh (born Vernon Howell) (1959–93), who led the group from 1987 until the siege, interpreted Revelation to claim that he was the Son of God, the Christ for the Last Days, and the Lamb of Revelation. He did not claim to be the second coming of Jesus, or a reincarnation of Jesus; rather, he taught that God had chosen to manifest in flesh at various points in history, including both in Jesus and in himself (Doyle with Wessinger and Wittmer 2012).

In line with the SDA tradition, Davidian theology focuses on seeking to understand biblical messages about the imminent Last Days and the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Koresh claimed that he could interpret the Seven Seals of Revelation, which recount the events leading up to the Battle of Armageddon, and he attempted to record his interpretation during the siege. He interpreted the Fifth Seal to suggest that he and the Davidians would be attacked by government forces. This event was believed to be imminent and the initial raid on the community in February 1993 confirmed this for members. Members also held to the teaching of a former Davidian leader, Lois Roden (1916–86), that members living at Mount Carmel would experience a baptism of fire 'by full immersion' as a gateway into the kingdom (Wessinger 2016). (Lois Roden is a fascinating figure in her own right as a female leader and visionary of the Davidians who taught that the Holy Spirit is feminine and published her prophetic visions in a magazine called *SHEkinah*.) The Branch Davidians were, then, a catastrophic millennial group, expecting a fiery end to this world—and yet, as Wessinger (2009, 2016, 2017) has argued, theirs was a fluid understanding of the end times, looking to current events for confirmation, and the dramatic ending of the siege was by no means a foregone conclusion. Instead, numerous beliefs and events interacted to produce the tragic end of the siege in 1993.

One of the purported reasons for the initial raid on the community in February 1993 was allegations of child abuse, alongside a suspicion of ownership of illegal firearms and explosives. While an investigation by Texas Child Protective Services found no evidence of physical abuse, Koresh did have sexual relations with at least two minors. In 1986, Koresh claimed a divine mandate to take other spiritual wives from within the community. He had married his wife, Rachel Jones, in 1984, when she was fourteen, which was a legal in Texas at the time with parental consent (which her parents, as longstanding members, gave). From 1986, he began to teach that all women in the community, including those married to others, were his wives; all the men, other than himself, were to be celibate. The purpose of his sexual relationships was to produce children, who would have a special role to play in the end times. Koresh claimed that the divine mandate ordered him to father twenty-four children. These children would be raised within the community and would 'eventually serve as the twenty-four elders spoken of in the Book of Revelation who would rule during the Millennium' (Wright and Palmer 2016, 104). They would be resurrected in the end times to play a role in judging the world. Many of the women believed that it was an honour to have a child with Koresh, and parents consented to their teenage daughters entering the extra-legal marriages. By 1993, Koresh had fathered seventeen children by eight different women.

While the gender-normative movements discussed in the previous section of this article place an emphasis on the role of the eternal family in the next life, the movements with distinctive beliefs and practices around sexuality often emphasize the special role that the children born within their movements will have in the end times and in establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. In these movements, the distinctive sexual practices are largely for the purpose of procreation but, more than that, for producing children with a special status, e.g. free from Original Sin, and thus able to usher in the Millennium.

## Millennial Movements with Female Leaders

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As noted at the outset of this article, the majority of religious movements worldwide are founded and led by men. However, there is a significant number of millennial movements that have either been founded by a woman or where women have succeeded the male founder and continued to lead the movement. Women represent only a minority of founders of millennial groups; however, there are at least several dozens of these groups that offer interesting case studies. While there are clear examples from historical Christian traditions founded by women—not least those founded by Joanna Southcott (1750–1814, Panacea Society), Ann Lee (1736–84, Shakers), Jemima Wilkinson (1752–1819, Publick Universal Friends), Ellen White (1827–1915, Seventh-day Adventism), and Mabel Barltrop (1866–1934, Panacea Society)—there are more contemporary examples including the New Testament Church in Taiwan, founded by Sister Kong Duen-Yee (b. 1923), and the Church of Almighty God, founded in China by Zhao Weishan (b. 1951). (See Bårdsen Tøllefsen and Giudice (2017) for an edited collection, each chapter focusing on the biography of a female founder or leader of a contemporary new religious movement.) Additionally there are a variety of feminist groups with female leadership, many of them Pagan, that have a progressive, humanistic millenarian vision of ushering in a new era free from the oppressions of patriarchy; these groups are often associated with beliefs and practices emphasizing goddess(es), and Gaia (a personified ‘mother’ earth).

A significant number of contemporary movements with female leadership fall into the traditions of Western Esotericism, Theosophy, Spiritualism, ‘New Age’, or Paganism, some of which are more millennial than others. The origins of Theosophy and Spiritualism overlap with the first-wave feminism of the nineteenth century, while New Age and Pagan groups are more influenced by the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s (while also being influenced by feminist antecedents). Each of these traditions is unique, yet they also share some similarities, not least in the area of practices. They favour practices such as channelling, astrology, mediumship, divination, and healing, which have been considered predominantly ‘feminine’ pursuits in the contemporary Western world.

There are numerous New Age channelling movements that have been led by women. One of the most famous is Ramtha’s School of Enlightenment, led by J. Z. Knight (b.1946). Since the late 1970s, Knight has been channelling Ramtha, purportedly a thirty-five-thousand-year-old Lemurian warrior, who gives spiritual messages and guidance to attendees at the school in Washington State, but ultimately to humankind. These messages centre on the internalization of divinity, the recognition of the god within, and the belief that one creates one’s own reality, phrased as ‘Become a Remarkable Life’. Ramtha also makes predictions and prophecies of ‘the Days to Come’, which are ‘already here’ (Ramtha’s School ‘Ramatha’s Predictions’). These include millennial predictions around environmental changes to the earth and the need to be prepared, for example relocating to higher ground to avoid flooding following the melting of the ice caps, stockpiling food, and investing in gold. Palmer (1997, 165) notes both that Ramtha espouses female empowerment and that many of those most dedicated to the movement are women.

The idea of natural disasters preceding a movement to a new and different age is a common theme among New Age movements. As the very name ‘New Age’ suggests, these are disparate movements united in their belief that humanity is on a path of spiritual progression and that, at some point in the future, we will ascend into the next level of consciousness or spirituality. This is encapsulated in the astrological idea of the movement from the Age of Pisces (Christianity) into the Age of Aquarius (Mayer 2013, 263). A number

of dates have been suggested for the dawning of this New Age, some based on interpretations of the Mayan Long Count Calendar; according to New Age authors including Tony Shearer (1971), José Argüelles (1987), and Terence McKenna (1975), 1987 marked the start of a 'Harmonic Convergence', a planetary transformation that would culminate in 2012. Some believed that December 2012 would see a catastrophic event, such as a natural disaster, while others believed it would mark the more gradual start of a rise in planetary consciousness.

Among those envisioning a catastrophic transition to the New Age in 2012 was a movement called the DK Foundation, founded and led by a British female channeller and astrologer called Suzanne Rough. The theology of the DK Foundation was always, and continues to be, 'esoteric astrology', a blend of astrology and channelled insight in the tradition of Alice Bailey (1880–1949, Lucas Trust/Arcane School). Rough, like many others within these traditions, channels (male) Ascended Masters, including Djwal Khul (the DK of the foundation's name) and Master Kuthumi. It was from this latter spiritual master that Rough received the vivid eschatology of 2012. Rough taught that a planetary transformation would occur on 17–18 December 2012. This would involve massive flooding in which the planet's 'most polluted parts [would] be immersed', akin to a baptism, and the earth's axis would change, like 'a bent person straightening up', changing the orbit of the moon (Rough 2013, 255). This group had a plan to relocate to Finnish Lapland and was attempting to establish an 'educational community' there between 2006 and 2012. In October 2012, however, Rough published a letter suggesting that the dream of a residential community in Lapland was not sustainable, but that the 'Safe Locations' report she had channelled was still a guide to safe locations with better vibrations for surviving in the new, unstable earth environment. This baptism by immersion, Rough taught, would allow the earth to rid itself of some of the weight of humanity and thus transfer energy to the next level of consciousness. In 2020, the foundation still teaches the idea of spiritual and planetary progression, albeit without the catastrophic end point of a particular date in time. It does not appear to have any specific teachings related to gender and sexuality.

Another millennial movement with its roots in the female-led Theosophy and Esoteric channelling traditions is the Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT). CUT was founded as Summit Lighthouse in 1958 by Mark Prophet (1918-1973), but leadership was assumed by his wife, Elizabeth Clare Prophet (1939-2009), on his death. She became the sole authority within the movement until the onset of Alzheimer's in the 1990s; even then she was the official head of the movement until her death in 2009. CUT falls within the 'I Am' esoteric tradition begun by Guy (1875-1939) and Edna (1886-1971) Ballard in the 1930s, which focuses on connecting with the divine within and communication with Ascended Masters or the Great White Brotherhood begun in Theosophy. The group developed a millennial focus in the 1980s and 1990s when Elizabeth Clare Prophet—by now the sole channel of communication with the Ascended Masters within this group—began to interpret current events as evidence of the work of the Luciferians (evil, fallen entities who seek to hinder the work of the Ascended Masters). She took the Cold War and the perceived spread of communism as evidence of this. She began to receive messages from Saint Germain, an Ascended Master, about the possibility of a nuclear attack in the year 1990, possibly on 23 April. In preparation for this catastrophic event, the group began to dig underground bomb shelters at its headquarters in Montana and to stockpile food and weapons. Around two thousand members sold their possessions and moved to Montana to rent bomb shelters at the ranch. When the date came and went, some members left, including some of the second-level leaders, and the state of Montana banned the group from using the shelters again. Elizabeth Clare Prophet reinterpreted the date as marking the beginning of a twelve-year cycle of negative karma. In 1995, a male president was appointed to

restructure the movement after the failed prophecies and to improve its public image. It is interesting to consider whether a man was intentionally appointed to do this. Was a rational, organized man seen as necessary to oppose the spiritual woman in contact with the other world who made prophecies that did not come to pass? Since 2016, Reverend Valerie McBride has been president.

CUT teachings around gender and sexuality were traditional, despite Elizabeth Clare Prophet's leadership position and her two remarriages and divorces following Mark Prophet's death. Erin Prophet, their daughter, who left the church and became a scholar, suggests that Elizabeth Clare Prophet simultaneously 'subverted patriarchy, while defining herself as anti-feminist' (2017, 4). Regardless of leadership, in 2020, CUT teaches, like the DK Foundation above, that earth is on a 'downward spiral' but that spiritual practitioners can raise its collective consciousness. At the time of writing, the CUT's website asks readers whether they are 'one of the 144,000' who can assist in this mission (Keepers of the Flame 2020). There does not seem to be any suggestion that men and women currently have different paths towards, or opportunities for, salvation.

The final movement that we will discuss in this section on female leadership was also, like CUT, founded by a man and then passed to female leadership. The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKs) was founded by Lekhraj Kirpalani (1876–1969) (known as Brahma Baba) in 1932 in Hyderabad, Sindh, which was then part of India. Kirpalani received a series of visions as he was approaching the age of sixty and handed over his wealth to a trust consisting of a small group of his female followers. He encouraged women to be celibate and take leadership roles and asked all his students to work for their personal spiritual development and to practise celibacy. These were radical challenges to the traditional positions of women in Sindhi culture, attractive to hundreds of women and rather unpopular with the women's fathers, brothers, and husbands. Women continue to hold most of the senior leadership and administrative positions. This emphasis on women in leadership positions is replicated in branch centres outside India. Feminine leadership is believed to help women overcome culturally acquired timidity while female leadership is believed to be less individualistic than male leadership. This arrangement is conversely believed to help males develop more humility. One male member has reflected that few of the female leaders seem 'timid' and most of the male members still have much to learn about 'humility', but 'we are all definitely moving in the right direction' (Hodgkinson 2013, 52).

According to the BKs' teachings, time is eternal but progresses through cycles (Yuga) related to spiritual purity (Brahma Kumaris 'World Drama Cycle'). There are four such periods: the Gold, Silver, Copper, and Iron ages. The BKs teach that we are now at the cusp between the most spiritually degenerate time—the Iron Age (or Kali Yuga)—and that of a new Golden Age. They call this phase the Confluence Age and believe it is a time in which God will descend to earth and become manifest in the form of Brahma Baba. The BKs teach that the entire cycle is completed every five thousand years and that each soul is destined to replay exactly the same actions in their reincarnations during the next five-thousand-year cycle. On several occasions, the BKs have prophesied exact dates for the 'transition' that will signify the beginning of the next Golden Age, and millenarian beliefs continue to be an important part of the BKs' worldview.

In India, despite some notable widely accepted female incarnations of the divine, female renunciates are a less socially accepted role than their male counterparts (see Bevilacqua 2017) and monastic opportunities for renunciation are more sparse. Therefore, the BKs, although not large in terms of numbers, have provided a welcome alternative vocation to marriage for some women in India, even if this choice is

controversial for some of the families of the women who join. While the group has been criticized for this alternative among upholders of the wider patriarchal culture, it is clear that the BKs provide an alternatively structured society in terms of gender norms.

## Millennial Movements with a Belief in a Divine Feminine

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As well as having female leadership, some contemporary millennial groups have a central belief that the divine manifests as a woman or a female principal. Of course, theological beliefs that the nature of the divine either encompasses both male and female principals or transcends gender distinctions completely have a wider place in the history and contemporary manifestations of religion. Here we will look at two examples—that of (1) the Church of Almighty God, a group that considers itself Christian and believes that Almighty God is currently manifest on earth in the form of a woman, and (2) the Goddess Temple in Glastonbury in the United Kingdom as an example of a wider movement of goddess-oriented Pagan spirituality.

According to the Church of Almighty God, Almighty God is currently manifest on earth in the form of Yang Xiangbin (b. 1973), a woman who was born in northwestern China and currently directs the church from the United States. The theology of the Church of Almighty God is largely drawn from a reinterpretation of the Book of Revelation in which the dragon is believed to be manifest by the Chinese Communist Party; the place where the second coming of Jesus Christ, the 'Eastern Lightning', must manifest is in China. Yang herself is believed to be the incarnated Almighty God, whose testimony to humanity is recorded in *The Word Appears in the Flesh* (1997). The Almighty God began giving testimony in China in 1991, working closely with Zhao Weishan (b. 1951), a man who is now termed the Man Used by the Holy Spirit and the Priest of the Church of Almighty God and who is in charge of the administrative elements of the movement.

The Church of Almighty God has an intense millennial vision that describes our current time as the 'Age of Kingdom' in which the Almighty God speaks 'to make people perfect, to purify that which is dirty within them, and to make them holy, and righteous before God' (Almighty God 1992). After the death of Yang, the female embodiment of Almighty God, the work of purification will end and the disasters foretold in Revelation will be manifest in the form of earthquakes, wars, and famines (Introvigne 2017). The earth, however, will not be destroyed and it will become the home of God's purified followers in a time of peace and prosperity, the Age of the Millennial Kingdom (Introvigne 2017). Continuing imperfection in humanity after accepting Christian salvation is explained by this doctrine of purification, which is believed to occur through ongoing fellowship and adherence to the doctrine of the Almighty God.

The Almighty God's teachings focus on prophecy and encouraging peaceful relationships; the group has been subject to considerable persecution in mainland China and its leaders were granted asylum in the United States in 2001. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that many of the focuses of the church have been on envisioning a peaceful Age of the Millennial Kingdom and helping its members become purified, often with a focus on musical worship. There do not appear to be many specific teachings related to gender and sexuality; however, an emphasis on marriage between a man and a woman, with children as the preferred social structure, is obvious in the church's publicity materials. There does appear to be an

acceptance of divorce and relationship breakdown as not preventing the purification process, however, particularly when one partner has embraced the vision of the Almighty God. Therefore, while marriage appears to be the default position and there are many testimonies of how marriage was 'saved' by the Almighty God, being single and celibate also appears to be an accepted path within the church (Various Testimonies. 2019). It is hard to get an accurate estimate of the size of the Church of Almighty God although Chinese estimates are at approximately 4 million; it is certain that it is rapidly expanding outside China in the twenty-first century (Introvigne 2017, 2020).

Our final example is that of the Goddess Temple, an example of a progressive, humanistic millenarian movement that is attempting to usher in a new idealized utopian society free from patriarchy. The Temple should be understood as part of a wider revival of both feminism and Paganism that occurred alongside the 'New Age' movement of the 1970s. Apocalyptic anxieties among these groups are drawn not from biblical inspiration but from humanity's mismanagement of global resources, environmental damage, and the threat of nuclear warfare. In response, these groups tend to offer a hopeful vision of human renewal and transformation, often guided by transformative feminine images of the divine.

The Goddess Temple is located in Glastonbury, Somerset, an area believed to have special spiritual significance in England by many Pagans and 'New Agers'. A goddess-worshipping community began to take informal shape in the 1980s, but the more direct moment of founding impetus is usually attributed to the 1996 Goddess Conference (Bowman 2007, 26; Whitehead 2018, 219-20). The group acquired a permanent temple location in the town of Glastonbury in 2002 to celebrate the worship of the Goddess in her many forms, but with particular attention to the Goddess of Avalon (the local area). Temple festivals can attract hundreds and are largely made up of women dressed in purple, but supportive men are also welcomed to join in the activities. The Temple itself is run as a small social enterprise, non-profit company. The organization runs training in becoming a priestess of the Goddess, which is largely focused upon empowering creativity, connecting with seasonal cycles and the land, and bringing the lessons learned from these embodied experiences into other areas of life. There are many other associated practices associated with empowering different stages of the lifecycle (e.g. birthing and respecting death); the Temple also practises and teaches the 'ancient arts of Oracling and Embodiment of Goddess' (Jones 2020). Its trainees have set up affiliated temples in various locations outside England (Whitehead 2018, 230).

Currently, the Goddess Temple is guided by 'The MotherWorld Vision', which was first received by Priestess of Avalon Kathy Jones in the millennial year of 2012 and continues to evolve as a communal vision. This vision 'supports all people—women, children, men and all genders everywhere, who are endeavouring to bring Goddess and Feminine values back into our lives and societies, changing our world for the better' (Glastonbury Goddess Temple 2020). Feminine values are expressed in terms of nurturing equality between all peoples, the promotion of peace, ending violence and aggression, and eradicating hunger and economic inequality. The political aspects of this vision were made clear with the establishment of the MotherWorld Political Party, which put up a candidate in the 2019 UK general election (Glastonbury Goddess Temple 2020; see also <https://motherworldparty.com>). Although a relatively small movement, with just over 480 Facebook followers, its vision has a global reach that speaks to current political and environmental movements, as well as to women's spirituality and to healing past abuses; it aims to reestablish a more sensitive relationship between humans, and a female expression of divinity and the natural world.

## Conclusion

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This overview of gender in contemporary millenarian movements emphasizes a general mirroring of more dominant gender roles and understandings but also a space within millennial groups for creativity and social experimentation. While many groups proactively try to reinforce 'traditional' complementary gender dynamics as being God's vision for humanity, other movements have offered a wider variety of roles for women. Some movements have found within the potentialities of millennialism a vision of divine femininity as a gateway to a new millennial period of peace and prosperity.

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