WOMEN IN NEW RELIGIONS

An interview with Dr. Laura Vance

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Women play diverse roles in alternative, marginal, or new religious movements. It is not unusual for women to be founding figures or otherwise leaders in new religious movements, but frequently women are marginalized from leadership roles as the new religion institutionalizes within a patriarchal society. In these cases, the hierarchy of the institutionalized religion may write history in a manner that forgets or denies that women ever exercised religious leadership in earlier periods. Some alternative religious movements promote patriarchal gender roles, while others promote egalitarian gender roles and develop worldviews and rituals that affirm girls and women. Dr. Laura Vance has explored the histories of selected new religious movements, their worldviews, views of gender, and sociological dynamics in her book, *Women in New Religions* (2015). *Women in New Religions* contains chapters on women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church or Mormon Church), the Seventh-day Adventist Church, The Family International, and Wicca.

Dr. Vance, welcome to the WRSP Forum!

WRSP: What drew your interest to the study of women and gender in new religions*?*

Vance: I am a fifth-generation Mormon who grew up hearing about a great-great-grandmother whose father attempted to have her killed when she converted, a great-grandfather who walked across the Great Plains to the Salt Lake Valley, and a great-great-grandfather who survived the winter of 1846-47 at Winter Quarters in Nebraska. I was the fourth of seven children in a devout LDS family in which we read the Book of Mormon daily, always attended religious meetings, and followed the Word of Wisdom. From an early age I noticed gender categories, especially when they prevented me from doing things that I wanted to do. I also came of age during the national debate over the proposed Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s and early 1980s, in which the Church was an important national player. (Martha Sonntag Bradley's *Pedestals and Podiums* provides a fascinating discussion of the role of the LDS Church in fighting ratification of the ERA.) When the LDS Church came out in opposition to the ERA I was nine, and watching the anti-ERA campaign unfold in my ward (congregation) reframed my thinking about gender, and fostered in me, perhaps unwittingly, an abiding interest in gender and religion.

WRSP: Why is it important to study women in new religions?

Vance: To fail to study women is to ignore important aspects of any religion. As scholars we seek validity in our work, and on a very basic level to overlook women undermines our ability to understand religion.

More specifically, religions present ideas about gender, even if implicitly. I am especially interested in the ways in which gendered religious ideas and practices can be influenced by a religion's social and historical context, as well as by its developmental characteristics, leadership, structures of bureaucracy, and the like. I am fascinated by the ways in which religion, gender, and religious belief and practice connect to individual and group identity, and to a religious group's sense of boundary and its relationship with the wider society. These factors are complex and dynamic, and new religions, because they are especially well suited to examination of the emergence and formalization of leadership, belief, ritual, worship, curricula, shared history, texts, and so on, allow insights into ways in which gender, religious identity, and a religious group's relationship with its sociohistorical context interact.

WRSP: When teaching about women and gender in new religions, how do you move students beyond the "cult" stereotype prevalent in popular culture?

Vance: This has been an interesting challenge, both in rural Georgia, where many of my students expressed skepticism about beliefs and practices of religions outside of a relatively narrow range of Protestant traditions, and at Warren Wilson College in Asheville, North Carolina, where I find students to be generally open to a wide variety of traditions. In both contexts I have found it useful to examine processes and patterns of religious emergence and development. I use as examples both religions that are today well-established and considered mainstream, and religions that students identify as "cults." To explore a new religion that became an established religion in order to illustrate patterns of religious change, for example, can normalize new religions. It also helps to frame the conversation sociologically, introducing important concepts and research in a way that illustrates that religious "deviance" varies over time, culture, and geography. It is also helpful to explore new religions with which students are familiar and consider the extent to which that familiarity is grounded in media attention—attention which focuses on the bizarre, often at moments of crisis—and note that most new religions are far more mundane than these media representations suggest.

WRSP: How is the social construction of charisma (belief that someone has access to an unseen source of authority) relevant to the study of women in new religions?

Vance: It is critical. Where truth emerges through charisma there is often a radical break with dominant cultural traditions, including those pertaining to gender, and sometimes sexuality. As charisma unfolds, especially as leaders and followers participate together in introducing/accepting *new* truths, gender experimentation and construction of gender in ways that are at variance with dominant social patterns is likely.

WRSP: How and why may women's roles and gender roles change in a new religious movement over time?

Vance: The development of formalized structures and processes, and other common patterns of change in religions that outlast the initial formative period (such as participation of generations over time in higher levels of [especially secular] education, efforts to retain those born into the movement, or the need to appeal to potential converts) tend to discourage distinction from dominant social norms. As this emerging-to-established development occurs, if then-dominant social ideals and norms restrict opportunities for women and girls, the religion is likely to do so as well. What I find interesting is that because these changes often roughly coincide—institutionalization and increased accommodation on the one hand, and limitations on opportunities for girls and women on the other, a religion's newer, more restrictive gender ideals are likely to be embedded in formal literature, curricula, history, systems of authority, and so on. These newer gender norms and ideals may come to be seen, therefore, as foundational and necessary, and the formal structures and processes may facilitate the erasure of earlier iterations of gender.

WRSP: The first chapter in your book discusses Mormon women. What do you make of the polygamy of Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805-1844) and the opposition of his wife, Emma Hale Smith (1804-1879)?

Vance: By the second half of the twentieth century, LDS leaders, official history, and curricular materials downplayed Joseph Smith's polygamy by, for example, attending only to some of his wives, emphasizing practical explanations for polygamy, and downplaying sexual relationships with plural wives. Still, historians Fawn M. Brodie and Todd Compton document Smith's marriages to dozens of women, that some wives were teenagers at the time of their marriages to Smith, and that at least some of the marriages included sex.

I am not surprised by Emma's reaction to Joseph's polygamy, especially given that some historical evidence points to relationships with girls many years younger than Smith and living in the Smiths' household. What I do find intriguing is that the doctrines and rituals that unfolded with polygamy—that families may be bound together eternally through temple rituals, and that these are necessary to attain the highest level of salvation—were adaptable following the eventual abandonment of polygamy after the 1890 Manifesto issued by Wilford Woodruff (1807-1898), who as a President of the LDS Church is considered to be a prophet in the line of Joseph Smith.

WRSP: In the LDS Church what is the historical evidence that Joseph Smith intended for Mormon women who were members of the Relief Society to practice priesthood functions similar to Mormon

men who were priesthood holders? Did early Mormon women perform priesthood ordinances, sacred acts performed in the name of Jesus Christ?

Vance: When female members presented bylaws for a women's organization to Joseph Smith, he praised them but instead instituted the Relief Society, which continues today as the women's auxiliary organization of the LDS Church. In establishing the Relief Society, Smith is recorded in the group's minutes as saying, in part, "I now turn the key to you in the name of God." These words have provided fodder for debate over women's ordination in the contemporary LDS Church, as some historians (such as D. Michael Quinn) see in them evidence that Joseph turned the key of the priesthood *to women*, and that they held the priesthood with men, whereas others, notably Richard Bushman, assert that early Mormon women, like their modern counterparts, only accessed priesthood power through men, who exclusively held the priesthood. The historian Linda King Newell documents early Mormon women's participation in gifts of the spirit—washing, anointing, and healing by the laying on of hands, for example—that are today reserved for male priesthood holders, and the *Woman's Exponent*, an independent women's periodical published by and for Mormon women from 1872-1914, openly discussed and defended women's participation in ordinances that are today reserved for male priesthood holders.

It should be noted that in the LDS Church, all boys in good standing are ordained into the Aaronic priesthood at age 12, and all young men of good standing are ordained into the Melchizedek priesthood at age 18. All girls and women are excluded from the Mormon priesthood.

WRSP: What were the ways that Mormon women in the Utah Territory had greater equality and opportunities in the nineteenth century than other American women? What were the social, political, and religious factors that supported this status of Mormon women in Utah?

Vance: In the Utah Territory Brigham Young (1801-1877) saw that work of building Utah was best served by the contributions of the most talented and dedicated members of the LDS Church. I find it interesting that Young did not dichotomize women's familial and extra-familial responsibilities, in the same way as modern Church leaders. He called for women to engage in education and professional work in a way that was, at the time, antithetical to dominant cultural expectations. (After all, in its 1873 Bradwell decision, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed with the state of Illinois that women were "unfit" to engage in "many of the occupations of civil life," and could be prevented from working as lawyers by denying their admission to the Illinois State Bar.) Young asserted that if family resources were sufficient only to educate some children, priority should be placed on educating girls because their education served families and society. Mormon women were encouraged to be doctors, lawyers, politicians, and to pursue other professions *as women*. Training and work in professions was not presented as contradicting women's roles in the family. Of course, polygyny (the correct term for a man having multiple wives) in some cases allowed for plural wives to divide and share domestic work, so that some cared for household and children while others could work outside the home.

Mormon women in the Utah Territory led a Relief Society that was independent, and more analogous to the priesthood than its modern version, allowing not only women's participation in priesthood activities now reserved for men, but control over an independent budget, curriculum, and other organizational functions. Women in Utah published and controlled an independent periodical in tandem with the LDS Church, the *Woman's Exponent*, though it was never an official LDS Church publication. Women's suffrage was celebrated in the *Woman's Exponent*, as were female politicians, women in professions, and women's achievements both within and outside the domestic sphere.

WRSP: What caused the changes in gender roles for women taught by the LDS Church in the twentieth century?

Vance: Brigham Young, Joseph Smith's successor, was incredibly successful in implementing the foundation of LDS Church bureaucracy. The uncertainty that he stepped into following Smith's assassination was reduced as he routinized leadership, making a critical transition from the charisma of Joseph Smith, with its sharp connection to the divine, to a much more sedate but ongoing connection to the divine through living prophets. The leadership model, in practice, became a gerontocracy, in which the longest-serving member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles assumes the "mantle of leadership" with a pro forma confirmation on the death of the current prophet/President. Development of bureaucracy, accompanied by movement away from those aspects of belief and practice most antithetical to the wider society, as in the 1890 Manifesto, together contributed to a religion increasingly, though never perfectly, aligned with the larger social context in America.

Mormon bureaucracy matured in the middle of the twentieth century—in the same decades in which there was widespread secular media, educational, and other emphasis on women's domestic roles. Mormon rhetoric and religious guidance about gender became almost indistinguishable from these widespread and prominent definitions of gender not only for women, but also for men. Coupled with burgeoning bureaucratic control, including organizational structures that advanced white heterosexual men to advanced positions in leadership as they aged, LDS accommodation—though, again, never complete alignment with the world—embraced, and perhaps even exaggerated, a domestic ideal for women.

WRSP: Why was the backlash of LDS Church leaders so strong against the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s? What forms did it take?

Vance: When second-wave feminism emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, Mormon Priesthood leaders had so fully adopted binary oppositional gender ideals that they perceived feminism as threatening the complementary, necessary, and eternal roles of men and women, which they had by then identified as the foundation of marriage and the family, and as the bedrock of society. LDS Church leaders and members had so embedded gender duality in official history and theology that it was difficult for Church leaders and for many members to embrace a more equitable place for women. Latter-day Saint leaders responded to second-wave feminism by more often and more explicitly defending what were by then perceived to be the Church's "traditional" gender roles. Leaders also assumed a public and vigorous role opposing ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment by 1976.

Despite this, contemporary feminism deeply affected Mormons and Mormonism. Mormon feminists—Mormon feminist is not an oxymoron—in and around Boston were especially active, helping to publish the Pink Issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* in 1971, for example. Mormon leaders' reaction was to distinguish criticism that was somehow too public, and reject that as unacceptable, and more public dissenters were increasingly subject to sanction. Sonia Johnson (b. 1936) was excommunicated in 1979 after delivering an address at the American Psychological Association meeting in the same year in which she criticized Mormon patriarchy. Excommunications can draw attention to dissenters, their ideas, and what they oppose, and in the 1980s excommunications targeting feminists were not as common. But in September 1993, six scholars and writers, including Mormon feminists D. Michael Quinn (b. 1944), Lavina Fielding Anderson (b. 1944), and Maxine Hanks—dubbed the "September Six" by the press—were excommunicated. Several of these had recently edited and/or authored works pointing to women's more expansive participation in Mormonism's early

decades, such as performing rituals now reserved for ordained men. Since that time there have been excommunications that attracted media notice—witness the recent excommunication of Kate Kelly (b. 1980)—while others have not. No one knows how many feminists and feminist scholars have been excommunicated. In the early 2000s, just days after returning from collecting primary source data on LDS women from the Brigham Young University archives (something that could not be done anonymously), I was informed of charges pertaining to my sexuality, and then was excommunicated. In my case, Church leaders had known for more than a decade that I lived with my partner, Jennifer, and had done nothing in response until I undertook research for a piece on Mormonism that was later published in *Sociology of Religion* (2002). In instances in which charges are framed around something that can be presented as a moral failing, excommunication generally does not attract wide attention.

WRSP: How has the backlash against feminism and feminists continued in the LDS Church? What do you think will happen in relation to the appeal of Kate Kelly of Ordain Women of her 2014 excommunication by an LDS Church bishop and priests (all men)?

Vance: The Internet fundamentally shifts the balance of power in religious debates, even more so where authority is concentrated. Mormon feminists are not as easily dismissed, contained, or discredited in a world in which they may easily and widely share information, and attempt to shape ideas. The Mormon blogosphere—sometimes dubbed the Bloggernacle—makes it impossible to contain conversations about problematic and controversial topics. Excommunication serves both to mark the boundary of acceptable dissent and to warn the faithful not to approach that boundary. Kate Kelly's excommunication, a clear example of that, was upheld on appeal by the First Presidency (the President, the First Counselor and Second Counselor of the LDS Church) in February 2015. Some LDS ward and stake leaders in more conservative areas have incorporated specific reference to the ordination of women into their temple worthiness interviews (see http://mormonstories.org/responses-from-bishops-and-stake-presidents-about-public-support-of-ordain-women-and-same-sex-marriage/). This means that in some areas, those who acknowledge their support for women's ordination to their local church leaders are at risk of losing their temple recommends, which are necessary to be permitted to enter a Mormon temple where ordinances are performed, and Latter-Day Saints believe that temple ordinances are necessary to attain the highest level of salvation.

WRSP: Do you think that the LDS feminist movement agitating for women's ordination to the LDS Church priesthood will succeed ultimately?

Vance: When I was an undergraduate one of my professors insisted that the Mormon Church would "have to ordain women" within two decades. I asked him to put money on his position. He still owes me twenty dollars.

John Dehlin's recent excommunication (in February 2015) demonstrates that LDS Church leaders continue to take a stand against social movement toward gender and LGBT religious equality. The gerontocratic LDS Church leadership structure will slow fundamental changes in LDS gender roles in theology, temple ordinances, and ordination to the extent that those will require generational replacement of leadership.

WRSP: What are the implications of the Mormon teaching that gender is eternal for Mormons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, or intersex?

Vance: The LDS Church came out in support of statewide nondiscrimination protections in Utah, and at least 20 Utah counties and cities have passed nondiscrimination legislation. However, LDS theology maintains that heterosexual temple marriage is necessary to achieve the highest level of salvation, and the Church has not changed its position on same-sex marriage. Moreover, the Proclamation (The Family: A Proclamation to the World, 1995) states clearly that gender is eternal, making it more difficult to equitably include trans people. The LDS Church Handbook still takes a stance against allowing trans people to undergo sex reassignment surgery. Fundamental shift toward *religious* equality for LGBT people remains unlikely in the near term. The substantive position of the Church as moving toward a public acceptance of LGBT nondiscrimination allows Church leaders to split the baby, so to speak. Overt discrimination is becoming increasingly untenable with the exceptional attitudinal shift that we see in the direction of supporting LGBT rights, especially among young people. Church leaders fold religious exemption into their public support for nondiscrimination, which would permit those with religious objections to refuse to serve LGBT people even in the face of, say, a Supreme Court ruling in Summer 2015 that extends marriage equality to every state.

WRSP: The second chapter in *Women in New Religions* discusses the Seventh-day Adventist Church. What is the significance of Ellen Harmon White (1827-1915) for the SDA Church? What role did she play in the founding and growth of the SDA Church?

Vance: On 23 October 1844, when the sun rose on William Miller (1782-1849) and his followers with no sign of the promised second advent of Jesus Christ, the disappointment was so profound that it led to a splintering of the Millerite movement. A seventeen-year-old Millerite at the time, Ellen was bitterly disappointed but continued to pray and hope for some explanation. In December of that year, praying with a small group of women, Ellen had her first vision. She saw that Christ had commenced cleansing the heavenly sanctuary on 22 October, and that he would return to earth as soon as that work was completed. She also saw that former Millerites who continued to believe in the soon-coming *parousia* were the 144,000 of the book of Revelation. She continued to have visions—at first more ecstatic waking visions, and later, sedate visions in dreams—that provided guidance to an emerging movement. She was an incredibly prolific writer, publishing more than 40 books during her lifetime, and leaving unpublished writings that resulted in numerous additional posthumous publications. She called herself the "lesser light" relative to the Bible, but her writings contain those aspects of Seventh-day Adventism that distinguish it—vegetarianism, observing the seventh-day Sabbath, the Adventist health message, and Seventh-day Adventist institution building and others. Many of her visions—such as on the timing of the Sabbath—settled disputes between male leaders of the movement, and others—such as her health message—incorporated ideas from her historical context. As a prophet, Ellen combined all of these into something unique and powerful.

WRSP: In addition to Ellen White as prophet, did other women have leadership or ministerial roles in the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

Vance: Yes. White called for women to be involved in all aspects of the work, and she became more insistent about this over time. She wrote that women should be set apart by the laying on of hands, be

educated, especially as doctors, and serve in Adventist institutions. Bertha Dasher has demonstrated that a significant number of Adventist women filled offices of institutional leadership during White's lifetime, and Josephine Benton points to evidence in *SDA Yearbooks* that at least 28 women were licensed as ministers by the time of White's death in 1915.

WRSP: How did gender roles promoted by the SDA Church change over time?

Vance: By the middle of the twentieth century, Seventh-Day Adventism was not only highly institutionalized (Ellen's husband, James S. White [1821-1881], played a role in some regards similar to that of Brigham Young in developing the foundations of organization), but also working to position itself as less distinct from mainline Protestantism and beginning to reap the more rapid growth that such a position facilitated. As in Mormonism, Adventist leaders increasingly reserved leadership for men. Women were licensed as ministers during Ellen White's lifetime, but the practice declined over the course of the twentieth century, and was halted altogether in response to public debate over women's ordination in the late 1970s.

WRSP: How has Seventh-day Adventism dealt with the question of women's ordination since Ellen White's death?

Vance: Ellen White never issued a clear statement of support for women to be ordained as pastors, though she clearly called for women to be set apart by laying on of hands. A motion allowing women to be ordained was presented at the 1881 General Conference meeting and Ellen White, mourning the recent death of her husband, was not in attendance. The motion was never voted on.

The question was raised periodically over the decades, including in a 1950 General Conference Officers' meeting, and in 1973 the General Conference convened a "Council on the Role of Women" at Camp Mohaven in Ohio to consider the issue. The resulting document found "no significant theological objection to the ordination of women to Church ministries."

Subsequently, both ensuing conservative reaction and burgeoning support for women's ordination have become more clearly defined, vocal, and active. Adventist leaders attempt to strike a middle ground by perpetually studying the issue. Seventh-day Adventists have been studying women's ordination for more than 40 years. In 1972, the Potomac Conference ordained Josephine Benton, and in the 1970s and 1980s other congregations began to allow women to baptize converts. After General Conference delegates voted in 1995 to reject women's ordination, the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church in Takoma Park, Maryland ordained three women in violation of SDA Church rules. Some General Conference leaders resisted these efforts, but growing support over the decades led to concessions, and so women today may hold "commissioned" credentials and perform many of the same functions as an ordained pastor. Without ordination, though, they still may not be elected to high-level administrative positions. In 2013 the Southeastern California Conference elected Sandra Roberts as president. Still, the General Conference does not recognize her election, her name is omitted from the official listing of administrators, and she has been disallowed from voting at annual council meetings.

WRSP: You write that you think that women's ordination to ministerial office will take place in the Seventh-day Adventist Church before the LDS Church. What factors prompt your assessment?

Vance: Seventh-day Adventism adopted a form of decision-making similar to Presbyterian polity rather

than attempting to institutionalize the prophetic role, as we see in Mormon Church development. Seventh-day Adventist General Conference leaders lack the centralized decision-making and enforcement power that Mormon prophets and apostles enjoy, and so General Conference leaders must make a biblical and historical case in support of their positions on women's roles, and, of course, Adventists at all levels may make arguments in support of their own positions as well. Consequently, we see more open expression of differing positions among Adventists, and even congregations and conferences acting in opposition to leaders' directives. The major split in women's roles in Seventh-day Adventism generally follows lines of global development and urban/rural divides, with most areas of the developed world supporting ordination, and, within those, stronger support in urban areas.

WRSP: What is the current status of the debate over women's ordination in Seventh-day Adventism?

Vance: The ordination question is coming to a head in Summer 2015 when the General Conference meets in San Antonio, Texas. Almost 100 years to the day after Ellen White's death, General Conference delegates will vote on whether to allow divisions *to decide the question of women's ordination for themselves*. After studying women's ordination for more than four decades, Adventists on both sides of the issue are tiring of the debate, though it is especially contentious as we approach this summer's vote.

WRSP: Your book, *Women in New Religions*, next treats women in The Family International. Why were women's roles in the Children of God, later known as The Family, and later The Family International so controversial?

Vance: Women's roles in The Family International (TFI, formerly the Children of God) were criticized by those outside of the movement and by former members, and the movement was increasingly under fire as David Berg (1919-1994, frequently known as Moses David) more openly shared his revelations on sex. By 1969 Berg introduced his "Old Church, New Church" vision which, in addition to claiming that God had abandoned established churches in favor of his emerging movement, allowed him to have a sexual relationship with a young convert, Karen Zerby (b. 1946, known as Maria), and leave his marriage of 25 years. In 1974 he introduced Flirty Fishing (FFing), asking (mostly) female members to use sex to attract converts. The Law of Love, introduced in a Mo Letter in the same year, allowed sexual sharing, making all movement women and men potential sexual partners. Though the Law of Love included the idea of consent, Berg also discouraged women from refusing to have sex with men. Originally FFing, the Law of Love, and other sexual innovations were closely guarded by Berg and shared only with a small group of trusted followers. Later, as revelations on sex were openly shared, and even advocated within the movement, many members left, and those outside of the movement, especially those in the anticult movement, were more antipathetic.

WRSP: What impact did FFing and the Law of Love have on the members of The Children of God?

Vance: There were many effects. Since birth control was proscribed at the time that Flirty Fishing was promoted, many members of The Family contracted sexually transmitted infections, which eventually was part of the reason the practice was abandoned. Women also became pregnant and gave birth to children, called Jesus babies, whose fathers were not affiliated with the movement. David and Maria, raising Maria's son, a Jesus baby conceived through Flirty Fishing, allowed publication of *The Story of Davidito* in 1982. The book included explicit depictions of adult-child sexual contact, and was distributed

to members as the largest wave of converts entered their parenting years. Some sexual abuse of children followed, as did allegations of pedophilia, provoking significant controversy. In many countries, children were taken away from parents for long periods of time even though criminal charges of sexual abuse of children have never been substantiated.

WRSP: David Berg died in 1994. What steps did Maria (Karen Zerby) and Peter Amsterdam (Steven Douglas Kelly, b. 1951) take to stop the inclusion of children in sexual activities of adults? What were the motivations to make these changes?

Vance: Family leaders were compelled to renounce child sexual abuse as part of a child custody case involving a Family member, and Peter wrote a letter that did so in 1995. The Charter, which outlined members' rights and responsibilities, was distributed to Family homes in the same year. It forbids any abuse of children and calls for excommunication in cases of abuse. With the Reboot of 2009, a number of significant changes were implemented in The Family International, as sociologists Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd have discussed in *Nova Religio*. They note that currently sexual sharing is uncommon in the movement.

WRSP: Lastly, your book, *Women in New Religions*, treats Wicca. Many contemporary Wiccans trace their religious lineage back to Gerald B. Gardner (1884-1964) in England. What is his significance to the Wiccan movement?

Vance: Gardener claimed to have been initiated into a Wiccan coven by a high priestess he called "Old Dorothy," but historian Ronald Hutton dispels that claim, and demonstrates that Gardener drew from a variety of sources to formulate contemporary Wicca. Still, Gardner is the key figure in the emergence of contemporary Wicca. He published *Witchcraft Today* (1954), and Gardener's writings established patterns of belief and practice that serve broadly as a template for many modern practitioners. It is interesting to me that scholars generally refrain from challenging religions' truth claims, but have sometimes subjected origin stories of Wiccans to academic scrutiny.

WRSP: Was Gardner a feminist?

Vance: Gardner died only a year after *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan was published, and so it is probably unfair to evaluate his thinking by the yardstick of modern feminism. He promoted duotheism, specifically a gender-dualistic notion of divinity. The feminine divine, the Goddess, associated with the moon, exists in concert with the masculine aspect of the divine, the Horned God, who is associated with the sun. In Gardnerian Wicca there is a polarity of sexuality and energy that is rooted in a dichotomized understanding of gender in the divine and in nature. There is debate about the degree to which Gardner personally incorporated feminist elements into Wicca, but the constellation of belief and practice that he initiated allowed feminist interpretation and practice.

WRSP: Why was Wicca adopted by radical feminists in the 1970s? How did radical feminists transform Wicca? How did Wicca transform these feminists?

Vance: Wicca not only incorporates the divine feminine, it lends itself well, even encourages,

individualized belief and expression. In Wicca radical feminists—such as Z Budapest (b. 1940), who formulated Dianic Wicca, a woman-only, woman-centered form of Wicca—found a nature-based religion which, on elimination of masculine elements, could easily be made female-centered, in which, for example, rites of passage could celebrate the divine in aspects of femininity that were culturally devalued, such as menarche, aging, and menopause. This allows Wiccans to sacralize the feminine—inside themselves, within others, in nature, and in the cosmos.

WRSP: What gender roles are promoted in feminist Wicca?

Vance: Wicca is diverse by design. It encourages individualized and innovative expression and practice. Some Wiccans emphasize the sexual polarity of feminine and masculine divine, energy, rituals, and so on, seeing the opposition between the two as necessary. Even here though, many groups and practitioners allow that men have, and may develop and express the feminine, and women, the masculine, within. Some Wiccans tend toward essentialized notions of masculine and feminine, men and women, while others see those as incredibly fluid.

WRSP: The 2003 Pagan Census of Wiccans and Pagans in the United States by sociologist Helen A. Berger and colleagues reports that 51 percent of Wiccans are solitary practitioners. Are the solitary practitioners feminists? Why are they attracted to Wicca?

Vance: Helen A. Berger, Evan A. Leach, and Leigh S. Shaffer conducted the first national survey of Neopagans, and provide invaluable data. Tanice G. Foltz—in *Witchcraft and Magic* (2005), edited by Berger—argues that media representations of witches, which have proliferated in books, films, and so on, are unlike older and more pejorative stereotypes in their emphasis on witches' personal power, youth, and physical attractiveness. These images have contributed to increased interest in Wicca, as Berger has noted, and the Internet makes it easy to study Wicca. Anyone interested can find information and resources online and learn, for example, how to create a personal altar or use magic. The association between feminism and Wicca is less pronounced, according to Berger, Leach, and Shaffer, in part because solitary practitioners are less likely to be trained by older Wiccans. Older Wiccans more often came of age in the same period as second-wave feminism, and more explicitly connect their feminism to Wicca.

WRSP: What is the significance of Goddess(es) in Wicca?

Vance: The Goddess—commonly understood as the Triple Goddess, who incorporates the maiden, mother, and crone—is the divine expression of the feminine. For some she is a literal deity, for others she is a symbol that centers and values women's bodies, women's experiences, and the feminine. Many women are drawn to the movement because it values the feminine, including in themselves, which can be especially empowering to women in a culture that continues to sexualize and objectify women, in which people are uncomfortable with natural processes of menstruation and menopause, and that devalues women as they age.

WRSP: What are the roles of men and God(s) in Wicca? Is Wicca inclusive of lesbians, gay men, trans people, bisexuals, and intersex people?

Vance: Most Wiccans are gender inclusive, with the exception of women-only groups or some male-only groups that draw primarily gay men. Women-only groups, particularly Dianic groups, celebrate the feminine in a way that admits only "women-born-women." These groups are criticized online by some non-Dianic Wiccans for excluding trans women, men, or anyone other than women-born-women. Most varieties of Wicca value sexual polarity and admit men, women, trans people, and people who self-identify in other ways, such as outside of the gender binary, as gender queer, and so on. At most Wiccan gatherings outside of Dianic Wicca, such as festivals or celebrations, everyone is encouraged to participate in things ranging from ecstatic dancing to serving food, and there is usually great latitude regarding sexuality, and gender identity and expression.

WRSP: From academic feminist perspectives, are there any problematic features of the predominant Wiccan view of gender?

Vance: To the degree that sexual polarity is used to essentialize and reify sex or gender, especially in a strictly dichotomous way, some feminists find that problematic. Other feminists, especially some second-wave radical feminists, are quite comfortable centering women and the feminine over men and the masculine in Wicca.

WRSP: What does the comparison of the trajectory of women's roles in these four new religions—Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventist Church, The Family International, and Wicca—reveal concerning women in religions?

Vance: New religions are incredibly numerous and diverse. Even in just these four movements there is marked variation. That said, the thing that I find fascinating is that each of these religions uses gender to help construct individual and collective identity in a way that is connected to religious posture vis-à-vis the surrounding sociocultural context. In each of these movements, construction and expression of gender has played a key role in establishing distinction from, or accommodation to, the wider sociohistorical milieu.

Each of these new religions was most distinct from its sociohistorical context as it emerged, and each became generally less distinct from and more accommodated to its sociohistorical context over time, especially with institutionalization (for example, via the development of systems by Maria and Peter Amsterdam, after David Berg's death, for replacing leaders or standardized rules and enforcement). In the face of the modern feminist movement, we see some reaction against changing norms of gender and sexuality in Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism, and The Family. Ideas about gender are framed and incorporated in each movement's response to its sociohistorical context, even as that context changes and the response therefore evolves over time.

Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism, The Family International, and Wicca not only connect ideas about gender to the sacred, in each, religious socialization seeks to facilitate individual internalization of gender, and corporate worship serves to reinforce ideas about gender. Moreover, gendered constructs in each religion not only inform individuals and the group, but religious groups also seek influence beyond strictly religious parameters, often in a way that reflects the group's dominant understanding of gender—attempting to influence the secular realm in debates regarding same-sex marriage, religious exemption, abortion, equal pay legislation, and so on.

WRSP: What does the study of women and gender in the LDS Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Children of God/The Family, and Wicca indicate for the general analysis of women in diverse new religious movements?

Vance: The study of women in these four religions suggests that without serious attention to gender we cannot understand individual or collective identity in new religions, and that we cannot understand a new religion's history or evolution.

WRSP: What implications drawn from the study of women in new religions are relevant to the analysis of women in dominant religious traditions?

Vance: Gender overlays so many aspects of life. It touches things in life that seem so mundane that we usually take them for granted, such as how we transform our bodies (by removing or not removing hair from various parts of the body, cutting or styling hair, modifying fingernails, piercing the body, stretching the neck—examples are innumerable cross-culturally); what we put on our bodies (from clothing to scents to colors to cosmetics) or into our bodies (what, how much); how we stand, sit, or interact; who does the dishes or holds the remote control; and so on. Gender touches each of us in many everyday ways.

Moreover, gender is a fundamental aspect of lifelong socialization, and people are sanctioned to various degrees and in innumerable ways based on compliance with gender norms, as well as the extent to which those norms are deemed transgressable. These everyday aspects of gender are informed by, and are done, not done, or done differently, so as to act back upon larger symbolic categories and ideas about gender.

Every culture constructs ideas about gender, though these are greatly varied and change over time. Religion is critical in this process. That gender both varies from place to place or over history—and that it can be, and in pluralistic societies often is, contested—point to the social construction and, therefore, the malleability of gender.

As the institution most invested in linking beliefs and practices to the cosmos, religion is especially well suited not just to developing ideas about gender, and rules and practices associated with those, but to sacralizing gender in ways that mask its very construction. To the degree that ideas about gender are projected onto the cosmos, are sacralized, those ideas are more difficult to deconstruct. Gender attributed to a divine source can be more easily essentialized, reified, and seen as unchangeable, even necessary—for salvation, family, sexuality, and in other ways.

That modern pluralism introduces variation complicates this, but does not render it less significant. Religious people come into contact with alternative ideas about gender, and draw from the rich histories and texts of their own traditions to find and create alternative narratives, ideas, ideals, and practices, and to resist, challenge, and change their traditions. Religious people also use all of these to resist change pertaining to gender. Gender and sexuality are critical sites of literal reproduction, of resource distribution, of ideology, and so gender remains a critical site for social construction and contestation of religious categories, origin stories, texts, liturgy, authority, and on and on.

Dr. Vance, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

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