

Queer, Not Gay: Limits of Acceptable Sexual Transgressions in NRM Discourse

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New religious movements (or NRMs) are by definition queer—they introduce unfamiliar doctrines, unconventional practices, offer unsolicited criticism of more established modes of religiosity. Religious innovation is often unwelcome and usually closely scrutinized. While established religious traditions, the media, and family and friends often question NRM converts' fiscal decisions and psychological stability, the most titillating (and potentially damning) recurrent allegations are of sexual misconduct and “perversions.”

In his 1995 *St. Foucault*, David Halperin suggests that “queer” encompasses “anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices.”¹ By this definition, many U.S. converts to new religious movements have been queer: that is, NRM converts were (and are) marginalized—whether by family and friends, more firmly established religious institutions, or the media—because of unconventional sexual practices. Such practices include the Oneida community's complex marriages and policy of male continence, the Shakers' insistence on sexual segregation and celibacy, Jim Jones' allegations of near-universal homosexuality, David Koresh's strategy of “winning in the bedroom,” and the Raelians' public endorsement of masturbation. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the popular press has made much of cults and sex scandals.

New religious movement scholarship, by contrast, has offered limited hypotheses as to the intentionality behind religiously motivated sexual deviance—though again, attention to transgressive sexual practices is quite prevalent.² In her *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's*

1. David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.

2. On this point, see Lorne Dawson's “Why Are New Religious Movements So Often Accused of Sexual Deviance?” in *Comprehending Cults: the Sociology of New Religious Movements*

Roles in New Religions, Susan Jean Palmer suggests that conversion to new religious movements “simplified” the triple burden of the “modern” woman—that is, wife/mother/worker.³ In reducing a female NRM convert’s role to lover, as with the Rajneesh movement, or to mother, as with ISKCON, new religious movements were (Palmer argued) a welcome relief to the stresses of modern life (that was, the 1980s). Similarly, Elizabeth Puttick argues in *Women in New Religions: In Search of Community, Sexuality, and Spiritual Power* that new religious movements provide women with a degree of spiritual authority and autonomy denied to them by more traditional modes of religiosity.⁴ Both studies are limited in scope and, more significantly, by a failure to engage with even rudimentary sex and/or gender theory; however, these forays suggest broader scholarly concern with the sexual practices of new religious movement converts.

Few scholars of religious alterity have focused upon the ways in which these allegedly deviant movements define and defend their sexual practices against those of homosexuality. I argue that the scholarship of new religious movements has largely omitted discourses of queerness. This is not to say that members of the movements in question (here: the Unification Church, the Rajneesh Movement, and the Children of God, among others) would identify as queer or even sexually transgressive, though their sexual practices are confessedly unconventional. Rather I suggest that queerness—specifically homosexuality—serves as a consistent rhetorical counterpoint in discourses of religious innovation and sexuality. Homosexual practices and identities instantiate “that which we are not” for a considerable number of new religious movements. I hope to demonstrate the following: that queer discourse is evident and consistent throughout the reflexive discursive

(Toronto: Oxford University Press Canada, 1998). Dawson notes that there is as yet no published systematic analysis of NRM members’ sexual orientations and deviations; he suggests that allegations of sexual deviance often indicate deeper cultural anxieties about the subversive potentiality of new religious movements. While Dawson correctly argues that NRMs are as likely to be censored for asceticism as for libertinism, his over-reliance on Palmer’s work in *Moon Sisters* reflects both her essentialized notions of gender and her blindness to the operations of heteronormativity in public constructions of religious innovation.

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

4. Elizabeth Puttick and Jo Campling, *Women in New Religions: in Search of Community, Sexuality, and Spiritual Power* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 226.

construction of many western new religious movements; that the scholarship of new religious movements has broadly occluded these queer discourses, to its detriment; and that both attention to concerns of sexual transgression and, more importantly, to the scholarly contributions of queer theory can and should make significant contributions to the study of new religious movements, religious innovation, and religious alterity.

To this end, I demonstrate the rhetorical functionality of homosexuality in the reflexive discursive construction of many new religious movements in the United States. I examine the ways in which sexually transgressive movements—specifically the Unification Church, the Rajneesh movement, and the Children of God—have rhetorically positioned themselves against homosexuality. I then look at several, less sexually contentious NRMs—the Seventh Day Adventists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and the Nation of Islam—that also rhetorically position themselves against homosexuality.⁵ I suggest that this reflexive discursive construction occurs for several reasons, among them concerns for purity (that is, resistance against accommodating to American/secular practices), nationalism (concern for assimilating to American sexual values, including procreative monogamous heterosexual behaviors), and the family (as an imaginary construct, related mutually reinforcing normative attitudes about nationalism, heterosexuality, and global capitalism).

Next, I briefly address the broad occlusion of queer discourse in new religious movements scholarship, which I suggest demonstrates an unacknowledged heteronormative bias in the field. I critique two well-reviewed inquiries into the role of gender/sex/sexuality in new religious movements: Palmer's *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions* and Puttick's *Women in New Religions: In Search of Community, Sexuality, and Spiritual Power*. While many surveys of NRMs acknowledge sexual transgression as a common trait of religious innovation, work that focuses explicitly on the role of sex,

5. I realize that positioning LDS as a non-sexually contentious NRM is somewhat problematic. However, as Vance argues and I shall show, LDS anti-homosexual rhetoric dramatically increased concurrently with attempts by the Church to “normalize” according to American sexual mores. Cf. “Converging on the Heterosexual Dyad: Changing Mormon and Adventist Sexual Norms and Implications for Gay and Lesbian Adherents,” *Nova Religio* 11 (2008): 56–76.

gender, and/or sexuality is rare. That both books occlude concerns of heteronormativity might owe something to their publication date; however, both were published while third-wave feminism and queer theory were gaining scholarly momentum. I suggest therefore that Palmer and Puttick might indicate a broader heteronormative bias in scholarship of American religious alterity.

Finally, I consider the contributions queer theory might make to the study of new religious movements. I argue for a closer examination of methodological assumptions and the epistemic construction of the field. I am particularly concerned with the function of NRM scholarship to serve as what Sean McCloud calls heresiography, the analysis of movements based upon normalcy and deviance.⁶ I conclude by suggesting that queer theory in conversation with studies of religious innovation might both generate more theoretically rigorous work and expand the boundaries of the field in productive ways.

For the purposes of this essay, I employ *Nova Religio's* definition of new religious movements: that is, “both as entirely new religions and as new movements within established traditions and organizations.”⁷ I find the inclusion of religious innovation within well-established institutionalized religions both problematic and potentially useful; I return to this point in my conclusion. Queer theory should be understood as part of a broader theoretical conversation about the culturally constructed nature of bodies, behaviors, inclinations, and conventions. In this context, *queer* refers not only to homosexuality or even to non-normative sexual object choices, but rather to any organizational system that challenges heteronormative assumptions—including but not limited to assumptions regarding spaces, time, and bodies.⁸

6. Sean McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955–1993* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 195.

7. David W. Machacek and Melissa M. Wilcox, “Queering the Study of New Religious Movements” *Nova Religio* 11 (2008), 3.

8. cf. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

Anti-homosexual Rhetoric in NRM Discourse

A number of new religious movements have employed homosexuality as rhetorical device in their discursive self-constructions. It is important to note that anti-homosexual rhetoric is neither the defining characteristic of any of the movements in question, nor is homophobic discourse unique to new religious movements. Indeed, as Cobb suggests in his 2006 *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence*: “this expression of God’s hate, this expression of rancor toward those participating in unlawful sexual practices, comes not only from the [religious] fringe . . . This hatred is mainstream.”⁹ More, none of the movements with which I engage demonstrate vituperative condemnation of homosexuality or queerness comparable to that of Cobb’s interlocutor, Fred Phelps. (Though when statements comparing queers to dung-eating dogs qualify as “not that bad,” something has gone drastically awry.) Finally, as Cobb illustrates, *rhetoric* is not the whole—or even the most significant aspect—of religious homophobia. Rhetoric is not simply discourse. Rhetoric is linguistically performative: these words *do* things, among them inspiring violence and insult.¹⁰

Thus I suggest that the anti-homosexual rhetoric evident in the discursive self-construction of the NRMs in question is (at least) of scholarly import. Here, I examine the ways in which certain new religious movements have used homosexuality as a foil: that which the movement is not. In all cases, anti-homosexual rhetoric functions as a minor but significant element in the discursive self-construction of the movements. Reasons for the use of queer-bashing rhetoric vary: I shall suggest doctrinal and practical purity, nationalism, and the fetishization of the heterosexual nuclear family among these reasons. However, the rhetorical device is consistent and deserving of critical analysis, a point to which I shall return in my next section.

I begin by considering queer—here implying sexually transgressive—new religious movements that position themselves and/or their sexual behaviors against homosexuality and same-sex sexual object choice. I focus on three movements: the Unification Church; the Rajneesh movement; and

9. Michael L. Cobb, *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 3.

10. On this point, see Judith Butler’s *Excitable Speech* (among other writings), as well as Didier Eribon’s *Insult: And the Making of the Gay Self*.

the Children of God. Each of these movements engages or has engaged in transgressive sexual practices; and in each case, the movement in question has established a firm anti-homosexual position regarding its sexual tenets. In discursively positioning themselves against homosexuality, these NRMs negotiate their sexual identities in terms of compromise: they might be queer, but they are not—god forbid!—gay.

The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity

The Unification Church, or the “Moonies,” are perhaps most visible for their large-scale mass weddings. Heterosexuality is not merely a moral mandate for the Reverend Sun Myung Moon; it is a salvific imperative. The Unification Church’s progressive millennialism requires that each of its members achieve hir¹¹ proper place according to the four point doctrine: each member must be in a subordinate relationship to god; an equal relationship with hir partner; and a superior position with hir child(ren). Unification Church members undergo prolonged periods of celibacy both before and after marriage, rely on Rev. Moon to choose their spouses, and may only engage in potentially procreative sexual intercourse. In these ways, the sexual practices of “Moonies” might be considered queer.

The Reverend Moon has spoken against homosexuality in at least two speeches: “Ocean Church and America,” given in Provincetown, MA (a Cape Cod town with a thriving and visible queer community) on 28 August 1982; and “World Era of Blessed Families” given in Tarrytown, NY on 4 May 1997. In “Ocean Church,” Moon expressed concern that homosexuals might come into political power.

Look at Provincetown where so many youth come to use drugs and gay people gather together. *They might become the people who lead America.* Their lifestyle goes against universal law. Why was man or woman born? Man was born for woman and woman was born for man. Man was not born for man and woman was not born for woman.¹²

11. Editor’s note: The term “hir” has been used by the author to indicate a gender-neutral objective and possessive third-person pronoun.

12. Unification Church, “Ocean Church and America,” <http://www.unification.net/gwo/820828.html>; emphasis added.

Moon insists that families, specifically heterosexual procreative families, are required to achieve the proper relationship with the divine, and thus build the Kingdom of God. Homosexuals, we are to understand, do not have children or families and are “shameful for America.”¹³ Same-sex relationships, Moon suggests, violate the natural order of polar relationships: “the flow of energy can only occur in polar relationships, between positive and negative. Plus and plus, minus and minus is completely out of line. From that, all kinds of problems arise, even resentment and sickness. This is a state of confusion and chaos, men looking at men and falling in love, kissing and making love.”¹⁴ “Ocean Church,” then, demonstrates both Moon’s confirmation of the Unification Church’s sexual practices and his condemnation of homosexuality as both anti-family and anti-American.

“World Era of Blessed Families” shows a similar concern for the familial imperative, though less emphasis on perfecting America and more on maintaining doctrinal and practical purity. Correct relationships with God and among humans are “prerequisite[s] to establishing our blessed family in order to build the Kingdom of God.”¹⁵ Thus Moon explains “the meaning of lesbians and homosexuals”—“That is the place where all different kinds of dung collect. We have to end that behavior. When this kind of dirty relationship is taking place between human beings, God cannot be happy. That is what the secular world is like.”¹⁶ America, Moon suggests, is tainted by these “dung eating dogs.”¹⁷ Through heterosexual coupling, Moon insists, “everything becomes yours; American land is yours, everything.”¹⁸ “Blessed Families,” then, demonstrates Moon’s waning emphasis on American assimilation and growing concern for the movement’s purity. His anti-homosexual rhetoric only intensified in the fifteen years between the two speeches.

The Rajneesh Movement

13. Unification Church, “Ocean Church and America,” <http://www.unification.net/gwo/820828.html>.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Unification Church, “World Era of Blessed Families,” <http://www.tparents.org/Moon-Talks/sunmyungmoon97/SM970504.htm>.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

The teachings of Mohan Chandra Rajneesh, formerly known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, currently known as Osho, became popular in the United States in the late 1970s. Rajneesh's emphasis on the vital role of sex in achieving "superconsciousness" caused the Indian press to bestow the nickname "love guru."¹⁹ Converts to the movement eschewed both marriage and procreation, rather engaging in short-term, non-monogamous, heterosexual relationships—practices that by American heteronormative standards may be considered queer.²⁰

Though Rajneesh's teachings are not as vehemently homophobic as Moon's, anti-homosexual rhetoric is nevertheless evident in the guru's writings. His *Book of Wisdom*, particularly the chapter "The Soul is a Question," demonstrates both a sanctification of carnality and a suspicion of sexual renunciation. Homosexuality, Rajneesh suggests, is the product of organized religion's sex negativity—monasticism "created many perversions in the world ... The first idea of homosexuality arose in the monasteries, because men were kept together, away and aloof from women, and women were kept together, aloof and away from men."²¹

Homosexuality, according to Rajneesh, was the natural consequence of institutionalized religion's renunciation of sacred sex. "Homosexuality is really very religious, it is a by-product of religion. Religion has given many things to the world; homosexuality is one of them. All kinds of perversions."²² Though Rajneesh's denunciation of homosexuality is not as vehement as Moon's, he still understands homosexuality as a perversion and a danger to the purity of doctrinal belief and practice.

The Children of God / The Family

David Brandt Berg (also known as Father David, or Mo—short for Moses) encouraged his followers to *show* potential converts Jesus's love. The Children of God's "flirty fishing," or evangelizing through sexual

19. Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers*, 46.

20. Cf. Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* on the queerness of sex for pleasure rather than for procreation, non-monogamy, and short-term relationships. Halberstam might well consider also communitarian residences "queer spaces."

21. "The Soul is a Question," <http://www.iosho.com/oBook/The%20Book%20Of%20Wisdom/chapter27.html>.

22. *Ibid.*

intercourse, was highly controversial. The movement's combination of a form of fundamentalist Christianity and free love (requiring members to remain non-monogamous) was also contentious, and ultimately led to allegations of incest, child molestation, and sexual coercion. If marginalization for sexual practices denotes queerness, the Children of God were incontrovertibly queer—at least until 1987, when the Family officially discontinued its contentious sexual practices.

The Family International, CoG's current incarnation, maintains an understated position on homosexuality: "We believe that God created human sexuality, and we consider it a natural emotional and physical need . . . Thus, it is our belief that heterosexual relations, when practiced as God ordained, designed, and intended between consenting adults of legal age, is a pure and natural wonder of God's creation, and permissible according to Scripture."²³ The group's founder, however, opined on homosexuality at length. Three "Mo Letters," Berg's missives to his followers, are worth consideration in this matter: #292, "Women in Love," published 20 December 1973; #719, "HOMOS! A Question of Sodomy?" published 9 June 1978; and #1110, "A Warning to All Sodomites!" published 22 October 1981. The third was written by a disciple named Peter, but Berg and his wife echoed Peter's sentiments at the end of the letter.

"Women in Love," the earliest of these "Mo Letters," addresses at length—13 single-spaced pages—female same-sex sexual object choice. Berg did not condone lesbianism: "It is certainly not normal or natural as God intended, therefore such Lesbianism is a perversion."²⁴ However, Berg suggested,

LESBIANISM SO-CALLED COULD POSSIBLY NECESSARILY BE A STOPGAP, A TEMPORARY INTERIM SOLUTION to a sexual need. But two girls can be very dear close friends without having to necessarily express it that way, although why not? I mean if they feel like it and they need it, why couldn't they sleep with each other? If they get horny, why can't they masturbate each other, love each other, comfort and caress each other, kiss each other and make each other feel good?²⁵

23. The Family International, "The Family's Statement of Faith," <http://www.thefamily.org/dossier/statements/faith.htm>.

24. The Family, "Women in Love," <http://www.exfamily.org/pubs/ml/b4/ml0292.shtml>.

25. Ibid.

The sexually explicit nature of this letter is consistent with Berg's other writings; and Berg explained at length that scripture did not forbid female-female sexual behaviors. However, female homosexuality should be understood as temporary, as the ultimate goal was (non-monogamous) marriage and producing more children. "Women in Love" also condemns male-male sexual object choice in no uncertain terms.

SODOMY DOESN'T APPEAL TO ME in any way, shape or form and never has! It just disgusts me and sickens me to even think about it! I'm not blaming the poor boys who have some kind of satanic perversion or demonic impulse that tries to drive them into that kind of a relationship. It's really sad! I feel sorry for them and they've got to pray and ask God to get them out of it and deliver them from that kind of a spirit—it's anti-Christ, anti-God, anti-Bible, anti-Nature!"²⁶

Five years later, however, Berg reconsidered the issue of male homosexuality in "HOMOS! A Question of Sodomy?" Berg decried anal sex as "very harmful, dangerous destructive, perverted and damaging to the body, whether with men or women;" but "MERELY MASTURBATING EACH OTHER and sucking each other off, this doesn't really seem any different than having women do it for you."²⁷ Berg admitted that he was uneasy with the idea of permitting male homosexual behaviors, but that "there's a possibility that it could be within the limits of the love of God, that two men could love each other that much as long as they did not do anything to each other which was damaging or harmful, either physically, morally, mentally or spiritually."²⁸ Homosexual identity, whether male or female, should be understood as "anti-God, anti-nature;" but (at this stage of the movement's development) homosexual behaviors short of anal intercourse were permissible.

In "A Warning to All Sodomites!" the Children of God had eschewed all such ambivalence. Homosexual behaviors led to incest and pedophilia—"THERE'S NOTHING MORE DISGUSTING TO GOD OR US."²⁹ The Children of God were no longer willing to tolerate male same-sex sexual

26. The Family, "Women in Love," <http://www.exfamily.org/pubs/ml/b4/ml0292.shtml>.

27. The Family, "HOMOS! A Question of Sodomy?" <http://www.exfamily.org/pubs/ml/ml719.shtml>.

28. Ibid.

29. The Family, "A Warning to All Sodomites!" <http://www.exfamily.org/pubs/ml/b5/ml1110.shtml>.

object choice; the matter of female homosexuality was not discussed in this letter. Throughout all three letters, Berg displayed a consistent concern for scriptural precedent and doctrinal purity, as well as the primacy of heterosexual coupling and procreative sex.

Neither Queer Nor Gay

The Unification Church, the Rajneesh Movement, and the Children of God all positioned themselves against homosexuality in justifying their own transgressive sexual behaviors. However, anti-homosexual rhetoric is not unique to queer NRMs. As Laura Vance discusses in her article, “Converging on the Heterosexual Dyad,” both the Seventh Day Adventists and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints exhibited increased anti-homosexual discourse as their attempts to “Americanize” themselves intensified.³⁰ Both movements positioned homosexuality as contrary to American sexual norms, and thus contrary to their faith agendas.

Contrariwise, the Nation of Islam understands homosexuality as the result of white American culture’s emasculation of the black man: “when white society denies the black man the possibilities of being a real man, he runs the risk of degrading into a homosexual.”³¹ The Seventh Day Adventists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and the Nation of Islam all demonstrate comparable anti-homosexual rhetorics (though only LDS used electro-shock aversion therapy to “cure” homosexuality); however, within the context of this discussion, none of these movements could be considered queer.

So why the queer bashing? Cobb suggests that the centrality of the family to religious conservatism contributes to anti-homosexual rhetoric: “the family grounds the conservative traditions that the right holds dearly—traditions it perceives to be viciously under attack by the presence and increasing acceptance of homosexuality.”³² Though Cobb does not employ the term, this suggests a fetishization of “the family,” by which we infer the heterosexual nuclear family that arguably exists nowhere except the national imagination. By emphasizing the importance of *the family* (read as

30. Vance, “Converging on the Heterosexual Dyad,” (2008, 56).

31. Mattias Gardell, *In the name of Elijah Muhammad : Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 336.

32. Cobb, *God Hates Fags*, 4.

mutually exclusive with homosexuality),³³ many of these NRMs play on a theme dear to Americans' hearts, simultaneously reifying heteronormativity and national identity. As Cobb suggests, "strong religious words about . . . queer sexuality not only unite sexually conservative people across economic classes, ethnicities, and races, but are part of a tradition of collective rhetorical expressions about what it means to be an 'American.'"³⁴ Thus anti-homosexual rhetoric legitimizes, authorizes, and neutralizes NRM discourse to an extent in nationalistic context.

Those movements less concerned with American assimilation present concerns for the movement's doctrinal purity, which is also often linked to a concern with "the family." What I find interesting, however, is that none of these movements refuse to evaluate themselves according to standards of normative sexuality. This echoes McCloud's point in *Making the American Religious Fringe*: marginalized religious movements do not usually challenge the categories by which they are evaluated. They merely lobby for a superior ranking in the [odd ↔ acceptable] hierarchy for modes of religiosity.³⁵

That heteronormative standards of sexual behaviors and choices are operative in American new religious movements is certainly noteworthy, but perhaps not surprising. That the *scholarship* of such movements exemplifies comparable complicity with heteronormativity, however, is worth further scrutiny.

Heteronormativity in NRM Scholarship

In the context of NRM scholarship, heteronormativity should not be understood as explicit homophobia. Heteronormativity rather refers to a naturalized, performative assumption of heterosexuality—a system by which gender is "constructed through relations of power and, specifically, normative constraints . . . through a ritualized repetition of norms."³⁶ In Butlerian terms, gender is a "practice of improvisation within a scene of

33. Contra D'Emilio on the implication of new homosexual kinship ties for concerns of global capital, as well as Foucault's theorizations on "friendship as a way of life."

34. Cobb, *God Hates Fags*, 6.

35. McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe*, 5.

36. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), x.

constraint,” “a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing.”³⁷ Heteronormativity, then, implies essentialized heterosexual gender roles.

There is, to my knowledge, no single book that addresses heteronormativity or concerns of queerness (either as an identity or as a rhetorical device) in the study of new religious movements. However, both Susan Jean Palmer’s *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers* and Elizabeth Puttick’s *Women in New Religions* exhibit marked heteronormative biases in their essentialization of femininity.

Palmer and Puttick both address a decided lacuna in the study of new religious movements: that is, concerns of gender, or more specifically, the roles of women in NRMs. Palmer surveys ISKCON, Rajneesh/Osho, Unification Church, Applied Metaphysics (IAM), Messianic Community, Raelians, and the Harmonious Human Beings in order to illustrate varieties of sexual practices and moralities; Puttick highlights British Neopaganism and especially the Osho movement but does not limit herself to NRMs (see, for example, her discussion of Buddhism and Bhakti Yoga). Both inquiries are both nominally sociological, though each author gestures toward (or, in Puttick’s case, definitively claims) a *verstehen*-informed approach to their interlocutors. Both propose typologies of NRMs. Both approach analysis of new religious movements primarily in terms of the female converts’ intentionality. And, to be frank, both authors have produced deeply problematic works on their chosen subject.

With regard to their methodologies: Eileen Barker has made a compelling argument for the humanization of sociology, the contextualization of survey data within a more ethnographic presentation of the researcher’s interlocutors. The use of interviews as source material to supplement data is, of course, key here. Barker, like Puttick, did refer to this humanization as *verstehen*. However, whereas Barker presents both a nuanced argument for and a responsible instantiation of *verstehen*-informed sociological analysis, neither Palmer nor Puttick does so. Both Puttick’s *verstehen* and Palmer’s attempt to “stand in the shoes” of the women she interviewed lead to unsubstantiated claims about their interlocutors; these texts often read more

37. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 1.

like irresponsible ethnography—the authors speaking *for*, rather than *with*, their interlocutors (contra Spivak)—than ground-breaking sociology.³⁸

Informed by their *verstehen*, both authors claim a phenomenological approach to their subject matter.³⁹ Both position their phenomenological analyses within conversations about religious experience. However, neither defines what she means by phenomenology nor contextualizes the concept in theoretical terms. The reader is left to wonder whether “phenomenological” refers merely to affect, or more specifically to, for example, Palmer’s unsubstantiated claims to taking her interlocutors’ (or, as she refers to them, her “informants”) experiences and attempts at meaning-making “seriously.”⁴⁰

The manner in which both authors position their work is problematic as well. Palmer begins—indeed, in her first sentence—by positioning the movements she studies in a discourse of North American “heresy,” raising immediate concerns about claims to an unspecified orthodoxy as well as blindness toward power dynamics active in a multi-religious society.⁴¹ Aligning new religious movements with heresies—presumably Christian?—moreover undermines her claim to taking her interlocutors at their words. Puttick, on the other hand, merely displays an inflated and ahistorical sense of the role of women in late 20th century new religious movements. To illustrate: Puttick claims that this—again, presumably the late 20th century—is the “first time in human history that women have taken such an active, public part in this quest and in the creative search for spiritual meaning.”⁴² Her failure to define the historical period she’s addressing or what she means by “public,” as well as her discounting of the roles women have historically played in, for example, North American religions or in early Christianities, negates this hyperbolic claim.

Neither author concretely delineates the historical, cultural, or even geographic location of her work, displaying a lack of critical specificity as well as an absence of historical awareness. Palmer focuses primarily on a

38. Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers*, xii.

39. Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers*, xii; Puttick *Women in New Religions*, 25.

40. Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers*, xii.

41. Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers*, 1, 102.

42. Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, ix.

range of female sexual practices and sexual identities in North American NRMs; Puttick's interlocutors seem to be primarily British (though her heavy reliance on Starhawk as primary source material regarding Neopaganism complicates this location). That neither author focuses her study in these key ways limits the efficacy of their findings and leads to unfortunate attempts toward universalization of their theoretical claims as well as essentializations of gender.

Both authors demonstrate what can only be described as a willful ignorance of contemporary conversations regarding gender theory. I must highlight in particular Palmer's emphasis on essentialized "feminine" gender roles, her lamentations about "the devaluation of traditional women's roles."⁴³ Likewise, Puttick's claims that "in being more 'natural,' women are also more spiritual"⁴⁴ or her exploration of "feminine spirituality" as singular and essentialized.⁴⁵ Their failure to engage with even the most rudimentary of gender theories pushes much of Palmer and Puttick's works beyond specious and into the realm of offensive.

Both authors likewise universalize their theories, failing to attend to concerns of geography, ethnicity, race, or capitalism. The implicit assumption that North American or British NRM scholarship is universally applicable, that race and heteronormativity don't need to be addressed, is extremely problematic.⁴⁶ Specifically with regard to Puttick, her work would have been a much better in-depth account of her own experiences in Rajneesh movement. Attempts at theoretical universalization drastically reduce its utility.

As I mentioned briefly, both authors are sociologists, but make more or less solid claims for expanding their inquiries beyond traditional sociology. While I applaud the attempts humanizing sociology past charts and surveys, for the most part both works read more like sloppy and at times unethical ethnography, with some irresponsible and theoretically vacant armchair psychoanalysis on the side. Puttick's attempts to include psychoanalytical analysis do not extend beyond brief citations of Jung;

43. Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers*, xiii.

44. Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, 226.

45. Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, 74.

46. Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, 24.

Palmer does psychoanalyze her interlocutors, but does so without reference to theory at all.

This attempt to explore the intentionality of their interlocutors is perhaps the most crucial failing of both books. Palmer particularly—“naturally”—focuses on “why these women have chose to live in these emotionally intense communities on the margins of American religious life, and what they learn by embarking on these spiritual adventures.”⁴⁷ David Halperin’s 2007 essay, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, lends insight into the deeply problematic nature of exploring “deviant” or “unnatural” sexual practices. His work on queer sexualities has some bearing on the popular pathologization of marginal sexual practices. Heteronormativity plays heavily in here, including pursuant normative assumptions about monogamy, marriage, procreation, and particularly the gendered limits of agency. All these narrative assumptions are evident in the first sentence of Palmer’s book.⁴⁸

Contributions of Queer Theory to NRM Scholarship

I suggest that beginning with *why* an interlocutor might choose to defy cultural norms is not, in the study of marginal practices (religious or sexual) the best or even an appropriate place to begin critical analysis or scholarly observation.⁴⁹ To paraphrase Halperin, Palmer assumes that no “normal” woman would ever be drawn to plural marriage, celibacy, sex for pleasure rather than procreation, or a life without marriage, thus setting her

47. Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers*, xi.

48. Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers*, xi.

49. It’s worth noting that Eileen Barker also begins her analysis of the Unification Church with the question “Why should—*how could*—anyone become a Moonie?” (1984, 1). However, Barker’s analysis predates Palmer’s (and queer theory, if we date its inception to the publication of Butler’s *Gender Trouble* in 1990) by a decade. Her work, unlike Palmer’s, employs sociological analysis to denaturalize the pathologization of religious innovation so prevalent in media portrayals of NRMs (see, for example, the UC’s unsuccessful libel suit regarding brainwashing allegations). Barker suggests that “any single explanation” to the question of NRM conversion “would be *wrong*” (1984, 232). She moreover demonstrates that while conversion is often deliberate, the convert’s motives are not entirely transparent to hir. This is a far more nuanced (and ultimately more useful) foray into considering intentionalities underlying non-normative religious performance than the one Palmer offers.

interlocutors impossible goal of “explaining behavior that has already been defined as deeply irrational or incomprehensible.”⁵⁰

In *Making the American Religious Fringe*, Sean McCloud suggests that print media often marginalize religious movements, such as the ones discussed in this paper, which demonstrate “high levels of religious zeal, dogma, and emotion.”⁵¹ In this way, McCloud suggests, journalists in effect acted as “heresiographers”—a role in which Palmer has incontrovertibly placed herself.⁵² As McCloud demonstrates, journalists’ portrayals of religious “enthusiasm” positioned “emotional” religions that demonstrated “abnormal” levels of piety, or “fringe” religions, against “rational” religions with “normal” piety levels (mainstream).⁵³ I would suggest that we, as scholars of religious innovation, have often served a similar function. Palmer explicitly analyzes the Rajneesh movement, ISKCON, and the Unification Church in terms of a presumed religious orthodoxy; this, I argue, is only an explicit vocalization of broader and more pernicious assumptions about religious normalcy⁵⁴ in the United States.

As I have shown, sexually transgressive new religious movements have not broadly challenged the prerogative of scholars, journalists, and politicians to evaluate their religious beliefs and practices according to standards of sexual normalcy. Neither, I suggest, have many NRM scholars moved beyond analyses of movements in terms of compliance with or resistance to heteronormativity. It would be interesting to apply McCloud’s theorization of discursive habitus to the scholars of new religious movements, examining the doxa of these scholars as their “unconscious actions and presuppositions” apply to sexual identities and object choice.

Attention to sexually normative biases is only one of a number of contributions queer theory might make to the study of new religious movements. In the May 2008 issue of *Nova Religio*, dedicated to queerness

50. David M. Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?: An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 11.

51. McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe*, 22.

52. McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe*, 4.

53. This recalls Orsi’s discussions of “good” v. “bad” religion in *Between Heaven and Hell*. See also Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions* re: the suspicion with which bodily manifestations of religious enthusiasm has been met.

54. On this point, see Winnifred Sullivan, Tracy Fessenden, and Jakobsen and Pellegrini on protestant constructions of secularism and religiosity in American context.

and queer theory in NRMs, Melissa Wilcox and David Machacek suggested that:

Because of their location on the margins of the normative institutional order, new religious movements frequently provide social space for alternative gender and sexual performances—in some cases, more open or even positively ‘queer’ and in others, more strict than prevail in the surrounding culture and society—and for critiquing prevailing gender and sexual norms.⁵⁵

The application of queer theory to these movements, then, might provide a useful analytical framework for thinking about non-normative sexual and gender performances. Indeed, this issue of *Nova Religio* makes significant strides toward problematizing epistemic constructions of sexual normalcy in NRM scholarship. Lynne Gerber in particular makes deft use of Butlerian theories in analyzing “queerish” performances in ex-gay movements. Gerber’s article⁵⁶ does exhibit some slippage between instances of queer performance and queer performativity, if we understand the latter to imply ongoing and often unsuccessful improvisations of essentialized gender/sex roles.⁵⁷ Regardless, Gerber demonstrates—with far greater facility than Tanya Erzen in *Straight to Jesus*—the extent to which it might be interesting and useful to consider “ex-gay” an alternative sex/gender positionality in explicitly religious contexts.⁵⁸ More, both Erzen and Gerber challenge the implicit liberative agenda of queer theory. While this challenge might not encourage queer theorists, it is an interesting discursive turn and one worth further scrutiny.

Consideration of queer performativity, such as Gerber documents within ex-gay movements, in the context of religious innovation might benefit both NRM scholarship and the study of American evangelicalism. Gerber’s use of critical theory, like Sean McCloud’s, both deepens her analysis of particular religious innovations and expands the field of NRM research. Likewise—though she does not explicitly reference Butler—Linda Vance’s work illustrates the additional religious/sexual performative constraints operative upon members insular NRMs such as the Seventh

55. Machacek and Wilcox, “Queering the Study of New Religious Movements,” 3.

56. Lynne Gerber, “The Opposite of Gay: Nature, Creation, and Queerish Ex-Gay Experiments,” *Nova Religio* 11 (2008): 8–30.

57. cf. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

58. Gerber, “The Opposite of Gay: Nature, Creation, and Queerish Ex-Gay Experiments,” 24.

Day Adventists and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Vance and Gerber exemplify the extent to which conversations with gender/sex performativities might benefit studies of religious innovation.

I wonder, however, at *Nova Religio's* positioning of queer Catholicism and Protestantism as new religious movements.⁵⁹ While organizations like Dignity and the Metropolitan Community Church are relatively recent phenomena, these religious fellowships have imagined themselves as important, if unconventional, parts of well established traditions.⁶⁰ This tension deserves further scrutiny, as both White⁶¹ and Gross⁶² illustrate their interlocutors' desires to be legitimate parts of their respective traditions. The degree to which such movements are successful at their attempts to integrate non-normative sexual identities into these established denominations and churches is open to analysis.⁶³ Nevertheless, I feel the intentionality behind these movements should be addressed at some length rather than simply assumed.

If we do incorporate innovation in established churches and traditions under the auspices of NRM scholarship, we are free to consider the contributions of queer, bodily, and liberation theologies, as well as theologies of multiplicity. While many thea/ologians might contribute to this conversation, I shall limit myself to mentioning only one: Marcella Althaus-Reid's work toward queering the Christian god, specifically in *Indecent Theology* and *The Queer God*, represents a significant contribution to the integration of religious innovation and queer theory. Taken as a whole, queer/liberation theology represents more theoretically sophisticated work on gender/sex theory—as well as on concerns of race, class, and global capital—than is commonly found in US scholarship of NRMs. These inclusions, I suggest, would greatly benefit the study of new religious movements.

59. Machacek and Wilcox, "Queering the Study of New Religious Movements," 6.

60. There is no article in the May 2008 *Nova Religio* on this topic, but considering the efforts of Fred Phelps et al. as a new religious movement within established American evangelical traditions might also be of scholarly import (cf. Cobb's *God Hates Fags*).

61. Heather White, "The Historical Roots of LGBT Religious Organizing, 1946–1976," *Nova Religio* 11 (2008): 102–119.

62. Martine Gross, "To Be Christian and Homosexual: From Shame to Identity-Based Claims," *Nova Religio* 11 (2008): 77–101.

63. Machacek and Wilcox, "Queering the Study of New Religious Movements," 6.

Queer theory might further caution the scholarship of new religious movements against the ascription of agency to sex. Many of the movements I have discussed employ homosexuality as a rhetorical device—which is to say that, at least in discursive terms, these NRMs are far more concerned about *homosexuality* than they are about homosexuals. Discursive repulsion of homosexuality, as well as broader concerns with controlling and regulating sexual practices, convey the extent to which these movements think about sex as an entity that acts. Often, to bastardize Foucault, these NRMs seem to think that by saying “no” to sex (or particular kinds of sexual behaviors and object choices), they are saying “yes” to power. And as Cobb illustrates, saying “no” to homosexuality does confer a degree of power within particular religious contexts: the “the kinds of public, doctrinal, financial, and political gains opposition to ‘homosexuality’ has provided for powerful Christian organizations, not to mention the Republican party, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.”⁶⁴ Using Foucault—I refer explicitly but not exclusively to his work in *The Will to Knowledge*—to think about the rhetorical weight of anti-homosexual discourse, and the extent which it relies on granting agency to sex, might lend analytical insight to the role of sexuality within NRM scholarship.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, queer theory emphasizes the significance of anti-homosexual rhetoric. As I stated in my first section, hate speech is not just words. Homophobic rhetoric is performative for the speakers and their audiences, queer or otherwise. It not only marginalizes—it inspires harmful and sometimes violent action against queers.⁶⁵ In the simplest terms, queer theory insists that speech about and against queer people *matters*—and should matter to scholars across the academy.

Conclusion

As I have shown, concerns regarding queerness have played a crucial role in the reflexive discursive construction of American new religious movements. I suggested that anti-homosexual rhetoric has served to bolster NRMs’ attempts at purity, nationalism, and/or fetishization of the heterosexual nuclear family. However, the scholarship of new religious

64. Cobb, *God Hates Fags*, 3.

65. See also Butler’s *Undoing Gender* on this point.

movements has largely occluded queer discourse, as I demonstrated in my analysis of Palmer and Puttick's work. The methodologies and epistemologies of queer theory, I have suggested, would benefit NRM scholarship, both in its understanding of sex/gender/sexuality and in defining the category of new religious movements itself.