Introduction

**Why Study Women in New Religions?**

Media and other popular depictions of new religions often highlight the bizarre: the mass suicide/murders of members of Peoples Temple at Jonestown, Guyana, polygamous marriages among Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints, the group suicide of Nike-clad followers of Heaven's Gate, or collective weddings featuring hundreds of followers of Sun Myung Moon simultaneously repeating wedding vows. New religions, however, are more varied—and often more mundane—than these images suggest. Indeed, because of the almost exclusive media focus on the more surprising aspects of atypical new religions, in the popular imagination new religions are strange and dangerous, their leaders are treacherous or deceitful, and their followers are brainwashed dupes. This image emerges from a particularly narrow focus on extreme practices, actions, and beliefs of a few new religions or sometimes an extreme reaction of the surrounding culture to the religion, as in the case of the aftermath of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms raid on David Koresh's Branch Davidians on 28 February 1993.

This focus on the bizarre is misleading. Most religions began as new religions—by breaking away from an existing religion, through new insights of charismatic leaders, by being imported from another context, or by some combination of these. Christianity emerged from Judaism as followers coalesced around a charismatic leader who eventually came to be called Jesus Christ. Early Christians formed a number of groups that promoted and accepted diverse interpretations of Jesus’s teachings, including varied explanations of the resurrection, the nature of God, and the role of women in the movement.¹ Two main streams of Christianity dominated until the Protestant Reformations of the sixteenth century. Catholic Christianity in the West used Latin in its worship, recognized the primacy of the bishop of Rome (the pope) and emphasized Jesus’s
role in atoning for human sin. Orthodox Christianity in the East, in contrast, used Greek or national languages in its worship, recognized the independence of autonomous state or national churches, and emphasized Jesus’s role as the incarnation of God. Martin Luther (1483–1546) posted the *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517, which criticized Roman Catholic practices such as the sale of indulgences; in 1536 John Calvin (1509–1564) first published *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, his influential exposition of Protestant theology, and other interpretations and innovations followed.

More recently, a plethora of religious movements have been birthed in the United States. The United States has an especially varied history of new religions, at least in part due to the country’s cultural and religious pluralism, constitutional protections of religion, geographic expansion, lack of governmental control of religion, historical-social emphasis on religion, including religious dissent, and the “built-in tendency for cycles of renewal, reform, and schism” in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Ann Lee (1736–1784), an English immigrant, was accepted by her American followers as the female incarnation of Jesus Christ; Jemima Wilkinson (1752–1819) proclaimed herself the “Publick Universal Friend” and led followers in upstate New York; William Miller (1782–1849) preached that the world would end in 1843 (and later 1844); the Perfectionists of John Humphrey Noyes (1811–1886) helped to create the Oneida community; and Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910) taught a system of spiritual healing and founded the First Church of Christ, Scientist. Such a plethora of religions were, and continue to be, born in the United States that the sociologist and historian of religions Douglas E. Cowan and the sociologist David G. Bromley cite approximately 2,500 different religions in the nation, making it one of the “most religiously diverse countries both in the world and throughout history.”

Only a scant few new religions ever garner media attention. These are the most unusual, and media attend to them at moments of conflict or crisis—a failed prediction of the end of the world, mass suicide, or sexual abuse. Though scandals can occur in established religions—witness accusations of sexual abuse in Catholicism, for example—the details may seem more salacious, more novel, in the context of an unfamiliar religion, which also holds potential promise of peculiar beliefs and strange practices.
That most religions begin as new religions renders them indispensable for understanding patterns of religious development, belief, or practice. Although gender, when examined, is almost always considered as an addendum to studies of religion, including studies of new religions—in a section, a chapter, or one book in a series, for example—it is a central and often contested site of cultural meaning. As the historian of religions Ann Braude notes, “Women constitute the majority of participants in religious activities and institutions,” including in new religions. Gender is not fixed by biology, though differences such as those of genitalia, chromosomes, or sexual dimorphism may serve as starting points from which cultures build and seek to legitimate concepts and implications of gender—often around notions of gender difference or opposition, a gender binary. Some cultures generally recognize and accept more than two genders, such as two-spirit people among some indigenous North American groups, hijras of South Asia, and others. When gender is constructed as binary, those who are perceived as gender-nonconforming often face pressures to comply with extant gender categories. Cultures create ideas about gender that pervade virtually every aspect of life—from clothing and hairstyles to speech and nonverbal communication; to appropriate work and play; to how one is expected to sit, stand, move, or occupy space. Gender shapes human interactions, relationships, work, remuneration, and family roles and obligations—everything from the trivial to the profound, from the personal to the public.

The sociologists Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman build on the work of the sociologist Erving Goffman to theorize that gender is a “routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction,” something that we do in social interactions when we play sports, talk with colleagues, have sex, or engage with others in various other contexts. Aspects of interaction such as how we present ourselves and perceive others, whether and how we touch others, our tone of voice and word choice, topics and types of conversation, and so on are influenced by gender. Francine M. Deutsch emphasizes that people may also “undo” or transgress gender by doing gender in a way that disrupts social patterns and expectations. The philosopher Judith Butler asserts that although gender may appear to be natural, or even biologically based, it is better conceptualized as emerging from stylized acts. The repetition of these stylized acts—what she calls performance—Butler argues, is not freely
chosen, but is structured inside regulative “discourses,” such as systems of meaning provided by religions, schools, and media, that organize and define possibilities for the individual. The sociologist Lynn Weber provides a conceptual framework for making sense of the ways macro- and mezzo-level social systems, structures, and institutions work in conjunction with micro-level interactional processes to create patterns of gender, economic, racial and ethnic, and sexual inequalities. Her approach indicates that these patterns are at once systematic and complex; that they are historically patterned, but may change over time; and that they vary regionally and in other ways. These and other contemporary feminist theorists assert that gender is not biologically determined, but socially constructed, evidenced especially by variation in gender categories and definitions of appropriate gender norms over time and between cultures. Though biological patterns may provide a starting point, and biological and physiological factors interact with cultural forces in complex ways, feminist theorists note that cultures develop varied gender distinctions, as well as meanings and rules associated with those. Patterns of gender emerge and, as with other social norms, are taught and reinforced, even as they may be contested.

Religion, as the social institution in which meaning is connected to ultimate, often divine, explanations, plays a central role in informing and perpetuating cultural notions of gender, as well as of sexuality. Sex, reproduction, and socialization are essential components of social control, and all cultures inform and seek to influence human reproduction and socialization, largely through ideas about gender, and concomitant behavioral prescriptions and proscriptions: “All religions have addressed the theme of human sexuality and gender roles because sexuality is a potent force in human life and because gender is, in most societies, a major factor in social stratification.”

Religion does this within the larger social context, in a manner that is influenced by that context, even if just in response to it. Patriarchal distribution of power in a society generally—in politics and government, media, law, education, work, and family— influences distribution of power in religion. Social scientists point out that there is a complex and dynamic relationship between institutions and individuals, in which each influences the other. Individuals are educated, fed, cared for, and otherwise socialized within institutions such as the family and schools.
We learn about ourselves, about our place in the world, about how to act, about gender categories, about what it means to be male or female, in and from these social institutions. Yet social institutions are made up of individuals, all of whom are capable of not only acting according to social rules and norms, but also acting in opposition to them. Pressures to conform are great, and there are punishments if one violates social rules, as well as rewards if one follows them, but actors can reinterpret, challenge, and resist social patterns. Religion, as a site of ultimate meaning, plays an important role in legitimating social ideas. Religions may generally reflect societal arrangements and reinforce dominant ideas about everything from the distribution of wealth in the society to ideas about gender roles, or they may challenge them.

Individuals not only shape ideas through social institutions, but also—often concomitantly—seek to influence allocation of resources. Leaders of political parties, corporations, unions, interest groups, or religions, for example, do not only promote ideas, they also endeavor to justify certain ways of distributing resources valued in the society. In modern societies, ideas are promoted to attempt to shape allocation of wealth through such things as wage or tax policies, regulations, or allocation of funding for programs in childcare, education, health care, or corporate subsidies.

Influencing ideas is generally easier to do with more resources (by purchasing more and better advertising, for example). Any advantage in shaping ideas, in turn, can allow still better control of resources. This is not to say that those who have more resources exclusively control ideas, but that greater control of resources often provides an advantage in attempting to shape them. This is not predetermined; resources and ideas are contested. Still, greater access to resources may improve ability to sway ideas, including in patriarchy, where men share some advantages, though access to these varies significantly by race, sexual orientation, and in other ways.

The specific content of gender—whether gender is constructed as a binary; how clothing, colors, or objects are gendered; how one should sit, stand, interact, and speak; what activities are appropriate to each gender—varies across culture, history, and geography. Gender expectations and normative performance also often vary by class, sexual orientation, and ethnicity or race. These variations all demonstrate the
malleability of gender. The social construction this malleability points to is potentially dangerous. If recognized as social creations, phenomena can be intentionally and more easily re-created, done differently. Given this, sociologists point out that social constructs are not presented or generally understood as such, but seek to be taken for granted, and are imbued with stability via their connection to larger systems of meaning and morality, including—in the case of questions of meaning with widespread cultural implications, as is the case with gender—cultural cosmology. Those in power in society may use religion, media, political discourse, formal educational curricula, and other avenues to promote some ideas over others, and to attempt to establish those ideas as truth.

Because religion is the institution most responsible for answering questions of ultimate meaning, notions of gender intersect with virtually every aspect of religion—including images and characteristics of the divine, access to the divine, accounts of creation, sacred texts and stories, moral norms, access to religious authority, roles in ritual, and religious history. Moreover, religion intersects with gender in the secular realm, informing social discourse and rules regarding sex, whether and when people should marry, reproduction and reproductive control, divorce, gendered violence, proper participation in education and work, reasonable remuneration, work in the family, and participation in politics, among many other aspects of social life. Religion is therefore an important site for legitimating and for challenging ideas about gender in any society, including in patriarchal societies.

Religious socialization, which has as its goal the individual's internalization of religion—its rituals, beliefs, and practices—so as to locate social control internally, is intimately connected to internalization of gender. The child is taught primarily by parents and teachers what to do, what to believe, how to act, what is right, what is forbidden, what is evil; in short, the social order and her and others’ place within it. Her psychological and physical dependence on primary agents of socialization, particularly parents or caretakers, heightens the individual’s motivation to internalize religion and other components of socialization. Additionally, religious socialization connects ideas about good and bad, right and wrong, to the cosmos. Behavior and belief are not just encouraged or discouraged, they are often linked to notions of eternal meaning, death, and what happens following death. Gender in religious socialization is
Introduction

not only connected to how one should believe and act in this life, but is also often connected to notions of the divine, of ultimate meaning, and of eternity.

Despite all of this, socialization is neither ever completed nor absolute, and the individual, capable of resistance and agency, can respond to agents of socialization. Additionally, as social actors negotiate meaning, they sometimes participate together in structuring meaning in new ways. In religions we sometimes see social actors debating and reinterpreting sacred texts, challenging restrictions on religious authority, imbuing stories of creation with new meaning, and reshaping religion in other ways. Contestation of gender occurs in these interactions, as in deliberations, conversations, and debates about whether to ordain women or trans people, whether wives should be submissive to husbands, whether women should teach in seminaries, or whether men should be active fathers.

Figure 1.1. Congregants of the Glendale City Seventh-day Adventist Church, in Glendale, California, watch as Cherise Gardner is ordained on 27 April 2013. Religion, which helps people to answer questions of ultimate meaning, can play an important part in legitimizing social ideas and rules, including those about gender. Photograph by Gerry Chudleigh.
These complex phenomena are on display in all religions, but new religions are especially well suited for their examination as they allow us to explore developmental processes through which religions pass. Certainly the sociohistorical context in which a particular religious movement emerges is unique, as are each movement’s leaders and its circumstances of birth or schism (breaking away from an established religion, usually in order to return to truths perceived to have been lost by the tradition). Nonetheless, new religions provide us our best opportunity to study processes of religious emergence. Moreover, a growing body of scholarship suggests that ideas about gender are central to the process of religious emergence, and that if we wish to understand gender and religion, we must consider new religions, especially their leadership and their relationships with the larger sociocultural context.14 This is in large part because new religious movements often afford women access to possibilities not available in more established religious traditions and in the wider social context. New religions provide a break from tradition, defining themselves in opposition to established patterns, and so they may allow women positions of authority and other opportunities generally denied them. New religions—which often form around a charismatic leader or leaders, as a schism movement breaking away from an established religion, and/or when a religion is imported that is radically different in its new cultural setting—define themselves through their difference.

Part of this difference emerges from a new religion’s leader(s). The sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) defines charisma as a “certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with . . . specifically exceptional powers or qualities . . . [which] are not accessible to the ordinary person.”15 The charismatic leader is extraordinary, and breaks with tradition.16 She says, in effect, “you have heard . . . but I say to you”; she introduces new truth.17 Weber suggests that charismatic leaders claim, and are recognized by adherents as possessing, unique access to the divine, and are able to accrue and motivate followers. Charismatic leaders are perceived by followers as divinely appointed, and they are consequently able to inspire adherents, who not only accept the leader’s message but also “carry out the normative pattern or order proclaimed by the leader.”18 The historian of religions Catherine Wessinger indicates that charisma is rooted in followers’ belief that their leader has “access to and is imbued
with the qualities of an unseen source of authority,” and only “when a person claiming charisma gains followers [can] she or he . . . be said to be a charismatic leader.”19 As the sociologist of religion Bryan Wilson notes, charisma is defined more by the relationship between leader and follower than as a personal attribute.20

All of the religions examined in this volume—Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism, The Family International, and Wicca—emerged as religions largely through some combination of divine insights, innovations, and leadership. Most important, each of these new religions emerged, at least in part, by introducing—and asking adherents to embrace—beliefs that were heretical, that is, “severely at variance with the authority of established orthodoxies.”21 As the charismatic leader introduces a new truth, she represents a break from tradition. Religious movements that form as schism movements breaking away from or reviving truths perceived to be lost by an established religion, and/or religions that are imported that are radically different in their new cultural settings also define themselves through their difference.22 The differences between these—new religions formed de novo around a charismatic leader or leaders (termed new religious movements [NRMs] by new religions scholars); schism movements (termed sects, in the English language); and imported religions (also called new religious movements)—are based in the primary component of their formation, but many new religions have elements of more than one.23 New religions are to some degree at odds with the social context into which they emerge.

The term “new religions” is used here to denote religions that emerge and exist in tension with their social context, not to indicate age per se. Indeed, many new religions assert a connection to earlier religious traditions, claiming to provide a corrective to a tradition that has gone astray, and thus define themselves as part of a longer religious tradition. Sociologists do not dispute truth claims, but attempt to understand religions in part via examination of their evolving relationship with the world. The sociologist Benton Johnson asserts that an essential point of analysis of new religions is their relationship—specifically, the degree of tension they maintain—with the surrounding society, or the degree to which a new religion accepts or rejects its surrounding sociocultural context.24 The sociologists William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark contribute to this approach by providing direction for empirical exami-
nation of a religious movement’s tension with its sociocultural context. More recently, David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton have built on these insights to propose a way to conceptualize the immense religious diversity that we see in new religious traditions based on analysis of a religion’s relationship “to established institutions (including religion)”.

Their framework focuses on the extent to which a religious tradition is aligned with or diverges from the cultural (symbolic) and/or social (behavioral) patterns and norms of dominant institutions. As Bromley and Melton point out, however, religious traditions are dynamic, as are the sociocultural contexts in which they exist, and so are “unlikely to occupy a stable niche.” Instead beliefs, organizational structure, leadership configuration, practices, and other characteristics may change over time and may therefore be variously more or less aligned with dominant institutions. Religious traditions experience more or less cultural and social tension with dominant institutions and with their sociocultural context over time.

Gender—which plays a central role in systems of meaning, perhaps especially in religions—is an important factor in this evolving relationship with the sociocultural context. Gender, particularly construction of women’s place within a movement, allows a religion to define and express itself vis-à-vis its sociohistorical context, to demonstrate its difference or similarity regarding such things as family norms, sexuality, ideas about work, division of labor, politics, and so on. Gender permeates so many aspects of life that in constructing women’s place, a religious movement may convey its identity in things from the mundane to the profound.

The four movements examined here are in no way exhaustive of new religions, nor would it be possible to provide an all-inclusive discussion of women or gender in new religions. Instead, these movements are selected to provide diverse and interesting cases via which to examine women in new religions. Two of the movements—Mormonism and Seventh-day Adventism—grew rapidly and significantly after their founding, while The Family International originally experienced significant growth, but has a declining membership in recent years. The movements’ origins are in the West, but the membership of each is international, and in three—Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism, and The Family International—a majority of members currently reside out-
side the United States. Each of the religious movements examined here has a unique origin. Seventh-day Adventism, for example, emerged in response to millennial expectations that originated with William Miller and spread to become the Millerite movement, found a charismatic leader in Ellen G. White (1827–1915), and incorporated some beliefs and practices of mainstream Protestantism alongside religious innovations into its theology. Mormonism, too, clearly a religious movement founded by a charismatic leader, Joseph Smith Jr. (1805–1844), integrated both novel beliefs and elements of established Christianity. The Family International grew from the prophecies of David Berg (1919–1994), and Wicca was birthed in the writings of Gerald Gardner (1884–1964). All emerged in tension with dominant religious and other institutions, and although each of these movements incorporates a binary definition of gender (though this is more complex in Wicca), tension with the wider social context may have encouraged the movements to define women’s position in a way that was at variance with definitions provided by dominant institutions.

In the space created by the new religion’s break from tradition, Max Weber saw opportunities for women. In an insight he never fully elaborated, Weber noted that “the religion of the disprivileged classes . . . is characterized by a tendency to allot equality to women.”29 The sociologist Meredith B. McGuire explains that new religions “are more amenable to alternative gender roles because they are based on alternative sources of authority. . . . not bound by tradition.”30 Max Weber’s theory of religion of the nonprivileged classes notes allotment of equality to women in a new religion’s early years as an outgrowth of charismatic leadership that is not bound by rules. Charismatic religious leadership generates alternative ideas and fosters new rituals. A new religion most often promotes distinctive beliefs and practices—belief in a living prophet; a claim to access to the divine; unusual teachings, rituals, symbols; unique access to truth—as it emerges. These serve to set the new religion apart from other religions and from the larger society (established religions being seen as less distinct from the wider society by the new religion, and rendered suspicious by their proximity to it). Thus, the distinction of a new religion is defined in reference to its social context and by the religious movement’s perception of that social context, and will change over time.
Analysis of gender in new religions is complicated because as a new religion’s relationship with its social context shifts, so may its definition of appropriate gender roles. No generalization regarding gender will be true for all new religions at all times. Not only do new religions change over time, they are too numerous to enumerate, highly varied in their origins and characteristics, and dynamic. Gender resides, is contested, and evolves in this mix. Some new religions “focus on gender roles but generally reassert traditional rather than new ones. . . . The Jesus People, neo-Pentecostal movements, evangelicalism, Hare Krishna (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), and the Unification Church (of Reverend Moon) define women's roles very conservatively.”

The sociologist Janet Jacobs points to women’s experiences of “attachment, rejection, sexual exploitation, and violence” in her studies of new religions, and men’s experiences “jockeying for positions of power, access to women, and ideological differences with the religious leadership.”

The sociologist Elizabeth Puttick found that in the Osho movement, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (later known as Osho) discouraged feminism, encouraged submissiveness in both male and female followers, and sought sexual submission from female followers. At the same time, he asserted that women’s natural passivity provided them a spiritual advantage, and placed women in positions of leadership within the movement. Thus, even in one new religion at one time, gender is complex. In spite of this complication and variation—perhaps because of these—new religions may illuminate patterns of gender in religion.

A new religion is ordinarily most distinct as it emerges—when the charismatic leader heads the movement or directly following schism or importation. Distinction is sharpened, during this period, in a variety of ways. Not only is the movement differentiated by its unique beliefs or its adherence to the prophecies of the charismatic leader, but practices and rituals emerge from these that further its distinction from the larger society. Most critically, the new religion claims unique access to truth. The larger society, “the world,” and other religions are perceived to some extent as lacking complete truth. The new religion cultivates a sense of peculiarity that grows from the belief that followers have exclusive access to the truth: it is not strange to be distinctive if difference embodies what believers have that others do not. New religions may incorporate a variety of strategies to set themselves apart from the social context, in-
cluding different dress, diet, and vocabulary; rejecting and/or withdrawing from the secular economic system; rejecting political symbols and refusing to participate in the state’s political process; and creating different sexual and marital norms and new family forms. Gender, which pervades ideas about dress, language, work, politics, sexuality, and family, is perhaps the most potent potential symbolic marker of identity for the new religion. And because gender can crosscut every aspect of life, to do gender differently is to potentially do everything differently.

Weber asserted that charismatic authority, which exists in a state of originating, is inherently unstable, and that if a new religion is to survive it must move from charismatic (not bound by rules, breaking from established patterns) to bureaucratic (rule-bound) authority and leadership. To persist, according to sociologists, religions must establish institutions and patterns for doing such things as socializing children, recruiting and training converts, codifying and enforcing rules, expelling dissidents, accumulating and transferring property, and training and credentialing leaders.

The sociologists Thomas F. O’Dea and J. Milton Yinger call this move from the “insights of founders” to establishing bureaucracy the most necessary but most perilous transition for a religion. Moreover, religious movements gain a sense of urgency and identity through distinction, but too great a distinction can make it difficult for a new religion to retain members, especially children born into the movement who have not made the personal sacrifice that their parents made by choosing to join it. If a religion is too different from its sociocultural context it will also face difficulty in attracting and retaining recruits. Religions must avoid distinguishing themselves out of existence by adhering to beliefs and practices so offensive and threatening to outsiders that they render the movement a pariah. Still, via routinization and institutionalization the religion may gain what is necessary to continue, but lose sight of its original message and enthusiasm. Weber asserted that increased opportunities for women only in very rare cases . . . continue beyond the first stage of a religious community’s formation, when the pneumatic manifestations of charisma are valued as hallmarks of a specifically religious exaltation. Thereafter, as routinization and regimentation of community relationships set in, a
reaction takes place against pneumatic manifestations among women, which come to be regarded as dishonorable and morbid.\(^{36}\)

McGuire elaborates, observing that in new religions, as the “emphasis on charisma fades and the movement becomes established,” as new religions become more “formalized and bureaucratic,”\(^{37}\) opportunities allotted to women generally decline. Women’s authority may be increasingly seen as inappropriate, most especially if their authority and leadership are seen as inappropriate in the wider society.\(^{38}\) “Religious movements have historically returned to traditional, hierarchal, or bureaucratic forms of authority as they become settled—and in so doing have reverted to less innovative and more submissive roles for women.”\(^{39}\)

It is important to note that the process of developing bureaucracy, while critical to a religious movement’s long-term survival, does not preclude some level of religious distinction being maintained by the movement. Yinger conceptualized the “established sect” as a new religion, especially a schismatic one, that has developed qualities of established religions, such as a trained ministry, but also has retained distinction from the larger society for several generations.\(^{40}\) Stark and Bainbridge draw from the sociologist Benton Johnson to note that new religions may “disagree” with society about “proper beliefs, norms, and behavior” and thus experience a degree of “tension” with the “surrounding sociocultural [environment].”\(^{41}\) Bryan Wilson asserts that the bureaucracies that new religions create may potentially even be used to maintain distinction to the extent that they promote the group’s unique identity, norms, beliefs, and practices.\(^{42}\) In short, the development of bureaucracy, necessary for new religions to survive over generations, consolidates decision making and thereby may lead the religion to accommodate to and become aligned with the wider society, but it does not portend that end, and may even be used to align the religion with its sociocultural context in some ways while signaling distinction in others. This maintenance of distinction even after routinization occurs may be connected, as we will see, with ideas about appropriate roles for women that are more conservative than those adopted in the religion’s early decades. Though women are allotted greater equality in the movement’s initial form, routinization often sees limitations of opportunities for women, but these are generally perceived, after they are
adopted, as normal, as the way that things have always been for women in the religion.

Jackson Carroll, professor emeritus of religion and society, and his coauthors the sociologists Barbara Hargrove and Adair Lummis note that not all religions seek to maintain distance from the society, that some mature into religions not at odds with their social-historical context. These religions are generally consistent with Bromley and Melton’s “dominant” religious traditions, which they see as “constitutive of, rather than accommodated to, the dominant institutional structure.” Consistent with this notion that these religious traditions may help constitute the dominant institutional structure, Carroll, Hargrove, and Lummis assert that when a religion “no longer must seek respectability, when its boundaries blur into the general social structure,” it may “now tolerate mildly prophetic expressions of social conscience, and attempt to lead rather than adapt to the larger society.” Indeed, Carroll, Hargrove, and Lummis assert that development of the religious movement into a well-established denomination may provide the religion freedom to once again allow women leadership opportunities.

As Weber noted, movement away from dependence on charismatic leadership and toward routinization is often accompanied by a decline in opportunities for women. Carroll, Hargrove, and Lummis explain this initial limitation, noting that to the extent that the children of the movement’s founders become invested in norms of the wider society, they may restrict opportunities for women in a way that is in keeping with social norms: “If adherents of the movement become active participants in the status system of the wider society, organization and respectability become important goals; and the role definitions of the society at large become the natural order to which the group would grant religious legitimacy.” But as a religion continues to develop, it may gain the confidence to challenge social norms from a position of maturity. No longer compelled by the uncertainty of a less mature religious movement, established religions may dispute social restrictions of gender and create conditions that allow women to emerge as visible leaders. Whereas a new religion is likely to allot opportunities to women in an effort to distinguish itself from its social context, however, a mature religion is likely to allot women authority in order to attempt to influence the larger society. Even in a patriarchal society, established religions
may attempt to lead the society toward greater equality—of gender, race, and sexuality—as in the Episcopalian, Unitarian Universalist, and other traditions.

Here again, gender is critical to our understanding of new religions. Audre Lorde (1934–1992) and other feminist theorists note that in binary cultural constructs, as when gender is constructed as a male/female dichotomy, one side of the binary is defined as normative and subsequently valued more, while the other is defined as nonnormative and devalued. Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) wrote that one is not born a woman, but becomes a woman. The processes involved in being made a woman—objectification and sexualization, for example—reinforce social and individual conceptualization of male/man as normative and female/woman as “other.” Religion, which seeks to answer questions of ultimate meaning, imbues doctrine, ritual, and practice with strands of ideas about gender. These may complexly incorporate components of the larger cultural systems of meaning into new combinations, and integrate new ideas or practices. Although masculinity is also socially constructed, because it is so deeply culturally ingrained as normative, valued, and fixed, it is less often a contested category. New religions, whose origins are premised on access to complete truth, use gender, most especially and most consistently definitions of femininity and prescription of women’s roles, to define themselves, to demonstrate their difference, and to display their truth.

Just as new religions change over time, though, so too does the sociocultural context in which they exist. Not only are new religions in flux in regard to their creation of structures for survival and the ways they define and represent themselves to the world, but also “the world”—their sociocultural context—shifts around them. The sociocultural context evolves in regard to its plurality, politics, economy, social mores and norms, and the like. A new religion defines itself vis-à-vis its sociocultural context, and so faces constantly shifting boundaries, both from within and without. Its struggle is to maintain enough distinction to allow members a sense of discrete identity and the rewards that come from participating in a clearly defined religious community—such as heightened commitment, a strong sense of community and belonging, greater certainty regarding questions of ultimate meaning, and enhanced spiritual rewards—without making costs of participation so
great as to deter significant numbers of potential recruits, or to cause members or those born into the movement to fall away. Gender, especially the definition of women and femininity, is crucial to sociocultural context and change, and remains a critical site for definition of difference as well as efforts at alignment with the larger society for new religions as they attempt to negotiate boundaries over time. Furthermore, as McGuire notes, religious histories are full of a variety of diverse raw materials, allowing religious movements to remember and rethink history in a manner in keeping with changed definitions of gender over time—a phenomenon that is imperative for understanding the evolution of gender ideals in Mormonism and Seventh-day Adventism. Though history is cited by official religious sources as evidence of continuity and consistency, like gender, it is contested, and helps a religious movement form a sense of identity and formulate its place as bearer of truth.

Gender is vital both to religious movements as they originate and evolve in defining truth and establishing and maintaining identity, and in social scientists’ attempt to make sense of religions and religious phenomena.