FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History

Philip Jenkins
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Cults, sects and esoteric truth-propounders are a constant in American history. While communal groups such as Puritans, Quakers, Shakers and others have earned general approval, prophet-led cults such as the Jonestown host, the Branch Dravidians and the Gate of Heaven suicides have shocked government and the public. Over the last three centuries hundreds of home-grown cults have announced extravagant beliefs and renounced many of society's norms. People know of many only through their excesses and exaggerated media reportage. Most have had a short high noon in the public eye followed by a long evening of neglect. Getting a balanced picture of the extent and activities of cults is surprisingly difficult; though in-depth research exists for many American mystics, messiahs and religious groups, the material seldom enjoys a long shelf-life.

In Mystics and Messiahs, Philip Jenkins, Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn State University, provides a compact history of cult activity, its effects on public opinion and legal and social responses to it. Jenkins' book is a valuable tool rather than a seamless text. Cults in America have been (and are) too numerous, too diverse, too secretive to make for easy treatment. Jenkins is concise and factual, but he has a near-overwhelming amount of material to manage. He addresses not only the origins and growth of numerous cults, but also the scandals that have led to public and legal condemnation. Frequently involving the sexual abuse of young women, the takeover of members' assets and quasi-military discipline, cult scandals continue to capture public imagination.

Among the many valuable analytical elements in Jenkins' fully documented text is a clear account of the judicial view of cult activity. He emphasizes that despite public outrage occasioned by news-making cult excesses, Americans have generally retained an untrammeled freedom to believe what they will, with relatively few restraints on how they practice those beliefs. The use of peyote and the practice of animal sacrifice are permitted; the sequestration of minors (raising health and safety concerns) is likely to draw legal attention. Rescue-and-deprogramming efforts, particularly those aimed at young adult or adult cultists, can lead initiators into legal quagmires. As Jenkins makes clear, public and legal opinion is not

invariably consistent or evenhanded.

This book, with its extensive bibliography, is a fine resource and starting point for further exploration of a fascinating element of national life.

Peter Skinner