

BOKOMTALE

Lyn Millner, *The Allure of Immortality: An American Cult, a Florida Swamp, and a Renegade Prophet*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015, 338 pp.

In the present volume, Lyn Millner (a professor at the Department of Communication and Philosophy at Florida Gulf Coast University in Fort Myers), offers a biographical history of the nineteenth-century self-proclaimed American prophet Cyrus Teed (1839–1908). The outline of the book is mainly chronological and follows Teed's life from his childhood in New York, through becoming a practitioner of eclectic medicine, his inaugural vision of "God in female form" (p. 21), gathering his first few followers and his attempts at constructing a religious community, the Koreshan Unity (the name drawing upon his self-identification with the Persian king Cyrus II, or Cyrus the Great, [r. 559–530 BCE], the biblical Koresh). While Millner describes Teed as "spectacularly unsuccessful" (p. 2) in his prophetic calling, it is, however, clear from her work that he did indeed manage to gather a somewhat substantial following, setting up camp in Chicago in the 1880s and eventually leading his followers to Estero on the southwestern coast of Florida where he aimed to establish a New Jerusalem. After Teed passed away, the community in Estero would live a slowly dwindling existence into the latter half of the twentieth century. Though not explicitly explored in Millner's book, the story itself could very well be read in light of the perpetual problem of routinizing charisma following the death of the purported link to the divine.

"Koreshanity", Teed's religious system, is described by Millner as a "religio-science" and "a mix of millennialism, mesmerism, the beliefs of Swedenborg, Theosophy, Spiritualism, mind healing, Buddhism, the primitive Christian church, Egyptian myth, Gnosticism, electromagnetism, and more" (p. 22). Rarely, however, does the book offer any substantial or in-depth analysis of these purported ties. They are instead relegated to the peripheries of the story. A case in point is Millner's characterization of Theosophy and the Theosophical Society as "a mix of mysticism and Buddhism and a fad of the time" (p. 176), which would have to be described as highly rudimentary at best and perhaps better as overly simplistic. More effort is put into comparing the Koreshans with other contemporary utopian communal experiments, such as the Shakers. Here, Millner

describes efforts made by Teed and the Koreshans to team up with the Shakers—both groups practiced celibacy and held notions of gender equality. From a Koreshan perspective, the path of celibacy was ultimately a path towards immortality, and Teed envisioned himself overcoming death and being transformed together with a select female follower into what Millner describes as “a biune, mother-father god” (p. 56).

The fascinating ninth chapter of the book, entitled “Our Cosmic Egg”, deals specifically with Koreshan cosmology. The Koreshans conceptualized the world as a hollow sphere—and in this chapter, Millner describes the purportedly scientific experiment that Teed, together with his then-follower Ulysses Grant Morrow (1864–1950), undertook to prove that the Earth’s curvature is indeed concave and not convex.

The strengths of Millner’s work are best seen in how she, through drawing upon numerous archival sources, crafts a book that is a highly enjoyable read and manages to let us get a glimpse not only of the life of Cyrus Teed, but also of the lives of some of his followers. Part of these glimpses, however, are drawn from autobiographical treatises sometimes written well after the events that they purport to describe. Millner is, on the other hand, clear regarding the nature of her sources throughout her text. A very human moment is found in the description of Teed lying in state for five days in the warm Floridian climate, his followers trying to interpret the changes in his bloated, decomposing body as they looked for signs that he, having achieved the sought-after state of immortality, indeed was about to rise from the dead. As with the unexplored question of the routinization of charisma, we could here tie Millner’s work to the corpus of studies on failed prophecies and disappointments.

A further interesting aspect of the book is the focus given to the, often vitriolic, relationship between Teed and the Koreshans on the one hand and the media and surrounding society on the other. Here, Millner’s work offers an intriguing example of the relationship between minority religions and majority culture in nineteenth-century America, in this case a relationship strained by accusations of unsavory sexual behaviors and Teed’s insistence that, in the words of Millner, “marriage enslaved women” (p. 8). Recurrently in the book, we meet women leaving home to join the Koreshans and the embittered men they left behind.

At the same time, the book is somewhat troubled by anachronisms. On more than one occasion, Millner discusses the Koreshans as a cult (as can also be seen in the book’s subtitle), and in one instance describes a husband that “might have feared [his wife] would be brainwashed” (p. 74) by Teed and the Koreshans. That such a phrasing would have come naturally in the 1800s is dubious. It is of course the case that any study of a different cultural context (here separated in time by over a century) would necessarily include some form of translation, since language constantly changes in terms of syntax and semantics, and while it could be the case that Millner’s choice of words captures sentiments similar to what was being expressed, this strikes me as a missed opportunity

to expand upon the contemporary language used to describe the purported transfixing abilities of alternative prophets and their religious creations.

Similarly, Millner on a few occasions ventures out into the territory of psychological speculations regarding the mental state of Cyrus Teed, arguing that “[h]e was probably insane, certainly narcissistic—many charismatic religious leaders are—but his followers don’t seem to have been crazy” (p. 8). She also surmises, by drawing upon an interview with a Fort Myers psychiatrist (see note 9, p. 310), that “[a]nother possibility is that Teed was bipolar and that he experienced periods of depression in addition to his mania” (p. 224). While I would not argue that a mental health diagnosis is culturally locked in time, I cannot see how such haphazard speculations contribute to helping us understand the issue in question. That being said, all in all, Millner has composed an intriguing study on a fascinating subject in the history of religious innovations in America.

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