Les Douze Tribus: La communauté messianique de Sus en France by Bernadette Rigal-Cellard. Les Éditions l'Harmattan, 2019. 126pp., Pb. 13.5€, ISBN-13: 9782806636737; ePDF 9.99€, ISBN-13: 9782806651495.

Reviewed by Susan J. Palmer, McGill University, susan.palmer@mcgill.ca

Academic studies of new religious movements are rare in France, due to a pervasive hostile and suspicious stance towards “*les sectes*”—a stance which is maintained and promoted by the government-sponsored cult awareness organization, UNADFI, by the media, and by MIVILUDES, the interministeriel mission ensconced in the National Assembly that was formed in the wake of the Solar Temple’s shocking series of mass suicides, and is dedicated to the *lutte* (fight) against *derives sectaires* (cultic harm).

Thus, to find an objective social-scientific study of an NRM in France is a welcome addition to the still nascent field of new religious studies in the French language. It is interesting to note that its author, Bernadette Rigal-Cellard, professor of North American Studies at the University of Bordeaux Montaigne, found it impossible to interest publishers in France in her manuscript, due to its “controversial” subject matter (a “*secte*” often featured in the French *medias*), and thus she finally approached the Belgian publishing house, Les Éditions l'Harmattan.

Her study focuses on a spiritual community in Sus in the Bearn region of France, close to the Pyrenees mountain range. This community, called the Tribe of Reuben, belongs to the Twelve Tribes of Israel, an international communal, messianic movement that began in Chattanooga, Tennessee in the mid-1970s. This work might be described as an ethnography, based on a longitudinal study involving field research and interviews at the Twelve Tribes’ eighteenth-century chateau in Sus (known as “Tabitha’s Place”), and focuses mainly on France’s branch of this NRM. However, it also offers a useful account of the origins and history of the group in the USA, and describes the characteristics of the much larger international movement.

Chapter II describes a theology firmly based on the Bible, the beliefs behind their communal way of life and the eschatology that fuels the group’s fervent messianic, millenarian worldview. Rigal-Cellard gained access to the internal literature of the group, rarely cited by academics or journalists; notably *The Black Box* and the *Foundational Teachings of the Twelve Tribes*, based on the wisdom of Yoneq, the Apostle (Elbert Spriggs) who with his wife, Ha-Emeq (Martha Spriggs) co-founded this NRM.

Keywords Messianism, Tribe of Reuben, New Religious Movements, Twelve Tribes

Addressing the issue (often raised in court proceedings in France and Germany) of whether or not this organization might qualify as a *bona fide* “religion,” Rigal-Cellard points to the Twelve Tribes’ self-identification with the early Jews who followed Jesus, and “shared all things in common” (Acts 2:44) and the groups’ affinities with Judaism, Mennonites, and Mormonism. She also categorizes this NRM as essentially Protestant, influenced by the Sabbatarian and Sacred Name movements.

The ritual life of the Tribes is explained; their daily worship of prayers, sacred songs and dances, their festivals and rites of passage—in particular the children’s initiations (the bar/bat mitzvahs). The marriages of the Tribes and the strikingly didactic quality of their public weddings, which might be analyzed as “millennium-in-miniature,” are described. Chapter III reveals the social organization and authority structure of the group, their gender roles, economic and agrarian activities, and the process of exiting for discontented members.

Rigal-Cellard notes that while she interviewed many devout members, she did not interview any hostile apostates, and it is interesting to find that in her account of the history of the Tribe of Reuben in Sus, she avoids mentioning the fierce opposition of France’s powerful “anticult” group, UNADFI, who stirred up controversy and influenced local journalists in the local newspaper *Sud Ouest* to write negative media reports about *la secte de Sus*. This was no doubt a wise decision, since in his 2002 ethnography of a Hindu-based NRM, *Un ethnologue au Mandarom: Enquête à l’intérieur d’une secte*, French anthropologist Maurice Duval expressed some criticism regarding UNADFI’s draconian “anticult” assault on the reputation of Mandarom’s messianic leader—and was consequently sued for libel.

Rigal-Cellard’s book offers a useful account of the Tribes’ conflicts with its host societies in the USA, France, and Germany, and outlines the legal issues and court processes in the different countries, citing legal documents. This chapter provides important insights into how different governments respond to this unusual communal, millenarian religion and how it “fits in”—or not—to secular society.

Les Douze Tribes is based on meticulous research and offers sociological and historical insights into this NRM’s unique communitarian way of life, fueled by their millennial vision. It would be a useful addition to university courses on new religions, communalism, utopian studies, or law and society. It will provide a valuable source of information for lawyers and judges who handle custody disputes or legal problems that may beset the Twelve Tribes in the future.