CHAPTER 18

From the Children of God to the Family International

A Story of Radical Christianity and De-radicalising Transformation

Eileen Barker

Introduction

The Family International (TFI), as it has called itself since 2004, has operated under a number of different names throughout its 50-year history. It first became widely known as the Children of God (CoG) after being founded in 1968 as part of the Jesus Movement in California by David Berg (1919–1994), known to his followers as Moses David, Mo, or ‘Dad’. Embracing a literalist brand of revolutionary Christianity, CoG/TFI shares many of its beliefs and practices with other fundamentalist Christian groups. It has, however, differed quite radically from mainstream Christianity in Berg’s interpretation of ‘the Law of Love’, which has encouraged an uncommonly open attitude towards sexual relationships.

From its early beginnings, the movement received notoriety as one of the ‘cults’ or ‘sects’ that were becoming increasingly visible in the West at that time, and, like the other ‘world-rejecting movements’ (Wallis 1984) that were giving rise to public concern, it has been treated with suspicion and distrust throughout most of its existence. Some of these new religions, such as the Unification Church (the Moonies) and The Way International, drew much of their theology from the Christian tradition; others, such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), The Divine Light Mission, Soka Gakkai, and the neo-sannyasins of Bhagwan Rajneesh (later known as Osho), owed their origins to non-Christian beliefs. Characteristically, all were founded by leaders who wielded a charismatic authority over their followers, and all tended to appeal disproportionately to middle-class youth. Frequently they held a dichotomous worldview, drawing sharp distinctions between Godly and Satanic; right and wrong; and ‘them’ and ‘us’ (Barker 2013). Common allegations levelled against the movements have included ‘brainwashing’, the breaking up families and then, with the arrival of a second generation, they have frequently found themselves (as, indeed, have traditional religions) accused of the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of children.
A further characteristic of new religions is that they tend to change far more rapidly and radically than older, more established religions and in this the CoG/TFI is certainly no exception. Most recently, in 2010, with the advent of what it refers to as ‘The Reboot’, the Family International underwent a radical transformation. This chapter will describe the movement’s shifting history, its beliefs, organisation, lifestyle and finances, briefly documenting the ways in which it has changed over the years from a tightly controlled, millenarian, community-based, world-rejecting movement to a more or less virtual community in which individuals and nuclear families are encouraged to accept personal responsibility for their own material and spiritual welfare whilst living within the wider society and associating with mainstream Christianity.

**Early History**

David Berg was born into a family, the maternal side of which had given birth to several pastors and evangelists. David’s mother, Virginia (1886–1968), who became a notable missionising preacher in her own right, had eloped in 1910 with his father, Hjalmer Berg, a Swedish tenor who was to become a minister in the Disciples of Christ. However, after Virginia had experienced a miraculous healing, the couple began working independently as itinerant evangelists, and became ordained ministers in the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA).

Their second son, David, after being discharged from the army for health reasons, devoted himself to evangelical work with his mother. Then, at one of the Bergs’ revivalist meetings in 1944, David met Jane Miller (1922–2011), a young woman from a Baptist background, and they, as his parents had done before them, eloped. During the next few years, Jane (who was later to become known as Mother Eve) gave birth to four children: Linda, known by her Biblical name of Deborah, was born in 1946;¹ Paul, known as Aaron (1948–1973); Jonathan, known as Hosea (1950– ); and Faith (1951– ).

Between 1949 and 1951, David served as a pastor to a CMA church in Arizona, but after being dismissed, he spent some time studying Socialism and Communism at a university in Phoenix and taught in a junior high school. Disaffected with the churches and organised religion, which he termed ‘Churchianity’, he attended a three-month ‘personal witnessing course’ at the American Soul Clinic under the direction of Fred Jordan (1909–1988), then, for

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¹ Deborah was later to leave the movement and accuse her father of committing incest (Davis 1984).