

Introduction

The Children of God (COG) emerged from the radical fringe of the Jesus People Movement in the late 1960s to establish a new religious movement with a presence in more than ninety countries and a transnational culture guided by prophetic revelation. Characterized by its unconventional version of Christianity, countercultural practices, and high degree of tension with society, the movement's worldview was constructed as a "radically Christian response to culture" (Niebuhr 1951: 65–76), centered in its vision of first-century Christian communalism and rejection of contemporary society. From its beginnings in California to its evolution into an international new religious movement with 10,000 members, the COG's evangelical purpose galvanized its members to missionize around the globe with its unique presentation of the Gospel message. The movement produced a vibrant subculture and was prolific in the creation of original musical and multimedia productions, artwork, and in-house publications for evangelism, community engagement, and charitable works in thirty languages.

The Children of God (later known as the Family and currently the Family International) developed a communal society that endured for forty-two years despite daunting challenges and financial scarcity, sustained by a common belief system, lifestyle, and shared rituals. The Family demonstrated a considerable degree of resourcefulness and resilience in responding to emergent issues, delayed millennial expectations, and evolving contexts within the movement, as well as changes to the surrounding sociocultural environment. Members proved adept at acclimating to a diversity of local customs and languages and recruiting new members from nearly 100 nationalities while sustaining the movement's social structure and culture. The cohesion and organizational stability of the COG's communal model was instrumental for the movement's longevity and sustainability, and the development of a coherent way of life despite continuous controversy and opposition.

The Family's history has been punctuated by periodic reorganizations and redirections, referred to internally as "revolutions," documented in nearly 4,000 writings published by the movement's leadership from 1968 to 2010. Recurrent trends of experimentation, accommodation, adaptation, and reorganization resulted in a continuous remapping of its organizational structure and the creation of a milieu of change and innovation, as Melton noted:

If there has been any persistent truth about the Family during its several decades of existence, it has been its almost annual ability to introduce novelty and change into the routine into which its members would otherwise fall. This novelty makes the Family interesting to scholars, confounds its critics, and prevents even the most careful observers from predicting its future. (Melton 1997: 61–62)

In 2010, an unprecedented organizational restructuring, dubbed “the Reboot,” introduced radical transformation to virtually every aspect of the movement’s belief system and communal lifestyle, and ultimately redefined the course of its history. In the aftermath of the Reboot’s disassembling of the movement’s organizational structure and dismantling of the communal homes, the Family International (TFI) organically evolved into an amorphous virtual community with little formal structure beyond its online presence. The revisionism introduced at the Reboot, in particular the distancing from controversial doctrines and practices, resulted in unforeseen post-Reboot renegotiations of the movement’s worldview and identity. In the absence of TFI’s communal society model, previously pivotal to the maintenance of a unified subculture and shared identity, the post-Reboot TFI has faced challenges in reconstructing community cohesion and recapturing the sense of collective purpose and belonging that previously characterized the movement.

Considering that TFI has embarked on what arguably may be the final chapter of its lifecycle in its current reconfiguration as an online religion, this Element will explore the movement’s history, culture, doctrinal innovations, heterodox practices, controversies, and post-Reboot digital transformation. The complexity of TFI’s history as a constantly evolving movement with three generations, coupled with the vast diversity in members’ experiences and the shroud of controversy that continues to surround it, render it a challenging task to construct a narrative that will provide an adequate depiction of the movement and its members. The Family International’s journey from the social construction of a unique microcosmic religious society to its metamorphosis as a virtual networked community offers insights into the innovative and dynamic nature of new religions and their ability to strategically adapt their beliefs and practices to accommodate changing cultural contexts. Its history also highlights the novel challenges new religions may face in mainstreaming religious belief and practice and attempting to attain legitimacy within the increasingly globalized context of digital information technologies and virtual spaces.

1 From the Children of God to the Family International: A Historical Overview

Born in the historical moment of the “cultural collision of the holiness movement and the psychedelic movement” of the late 1960s (Bainbridge 2002: 170), the Children of God emerged as a millenarian, antiestablishment communal movement. Initially an integral part of the Jesus People, the movement’s adoption of unconventional beliefs and counterculture ideologies placed it on the margins of the larger movement early on. The COG’s denunciation of the

socioeconomic, cultural, and religious mainstream, and its communal lifestyle, unconventional doctrines, and heterodox sexual practices gave rise to opposition from hostile media, anticult organizations, mainstream Christianity, and law enforcement. An evolving array of new factors and issues required innovation and accommodation – notably the birth of a second (and later a third) generation of children, opposition and government interventions, the aging of the first generation, and the ongoing challenges of a complex communal lifestyle and financial precarity. The movement proved creative in overcoming adversity and responding adaptively to emergent internal and external exigencies, demonstrating what Bainbridge referred to as “a remarkable capacity for constant revolution” (Bainbridge 2002: 172). This section describes the early history of the COG, the evolution of its organizational framework, the movement’s global dispersion, and the oppositional forces it has faced as a religious movement in high tension with the social milieu.

Early History

The Children of God had its genesis amid the turmoil of the 1960s in the United States, from which emerged a diverse array of new religious and social movements, characterized by the commitment of their largely youthful adherents, eclectic belief systems, and controversy. Tipton proposed that the turn from the psychedelic hip culture of the 1960s to alternative religions toward the end of the decade was precipitated to some extent by the “atmosphere of disappointment and depression” the counterculture youth experienced as the hippie movement waned and failed to deliver (Tipton 1982: 30). Alternative religions offered a means to synthesize cherished elements of the counterculture and its expressive and experiential ideals with purpose, direction, and authority. The most significant religious manifestation of the period arguably was the Jesus People Movement, which despite its relatively short lifespan (late 1960s to late 1970s) had a lasting impact on evangelical worship, music, and outreach, and profoundly reshaped evangelical culture (Eskridge 2013: 266–84; MacDonald & Stetzer 2020). The Jesus People Movement, described by Drakeford as “a strange shotgun marriage of conservative religion and a rebellious counterculture,” gave rise to numerous communal groups in the late 1960s, the largest, and conceivably most controversial, of which was the COG (Drakeford 1972: 36; Miller 1999: 96). Founded by David Berg (1919–94), his wife Jane, and their four adult children in Huntington Beach, California, the COG was deemed the fastest growing movement to emerge from the Jesus People, with the greatest stability and organizational rationality (Enroth et al. 1972: 22; Davis & Richardson 1976: 338–39). The COG was also one of the few offshoots of the

Jesus People Movement that evolved into a new religious movement rather than being absorbed into denominational evangelicalism, and would outlive most of its counterparts by decades (Eskridge 2013: 5, 208).

David Berg hailed from an evangelical background as the son of Hjalmer Berg (1884–1964), an evangelist and later professor at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, and Virginia Brandt Berg (1886–1968), an evangelist and revivalist for the Christian and Missionary Church Alliance. Virginia’s father, John Lincoln Brandt (1860–1946), was an itinerant preacher and author in the Alexander Campbell Restoration Movement of the Disciples of Christ. Virginia was a prominent radio evangelist and hosted a popular radio program, *Meditation Moments*, which aired for fifteen years in the 1930s and 1940s. Berg accompanied his mother in her ministry as a traveling evangelist throughout his early years, until he assumed a pastorate with the Christian and Missionary Alliance in 1948 at a small church in Arizona. According to Berg, the church’s board deemed his teachings to be too radical, resulting in an acrimonious parting in 1951, to which Berg attributed the genesis of his disenchantment with institutional Christianity (Berg 1972c). He subsequently attended college briefly, where he was exposed to socialism and communism, which, according to his memoirs, he rejected as political systems while embracing the concept of a Christian version of socialism (Berg 1972c). After a short period of employment as a schoolteacher, Berg worked thirteen years for Fred Jordan, a fundamentalist Southern evangelist who produced *Church in the Home*, a radio and television program. Berg left Jordan’s employ in 1967 to engage in itinerant evangelism with his wife and four children. In 1968, in response to an appeal from his elderly mother to evangelize the hippies congregating in Southern California, Berg and his family relocated to Huntington Beach, California.

By March 1968, Berg and the Teens for Christ, as they were initially known, had taken over the Light Club coffeehouse previously run by Pentecostal preacher Dave Wilkerson’s Teen Challenge ministry. Early accounts portray the Teens for Christ as conservative young people ill-equipped to relate to the counterculture hippie youth (Wallis 1981: 99; Eskridge 2013: 64–65). They subsequently adopted the long hair, beards, and informal clothing of the unchurched counterculture youth they sought to reach, and their evangelization on the beaches and the streets, coupled with the offer of free food and music at the Light Club, began to attract youths. Berg’s teachings at the Light Club became radical and anti-establishment early on with his “declaration of revolution” in September 1968, in which he excoriated the social, political, and economic mainstream, collectively referred to as the “System,” and institutional Christianity, and deemed education “the greatest enemy of civilisation” (Berg 1968). Jesus was cast as the true

revolutionary of all time and the Bible as the handbook for spiritual revolution, and revolutionary language was subsequently integrated into the movement's writings (Cowan & Bromley 2008: 123). Berg effectively capitalized on the antiestablishment message that resonated among the alienated hippie youth he sought to influence with the Gospel message, whom he referred to as the "lost generation," reminiscent of H. Richard Niebuhr's descriptions of the "religion of the disinherited" of other revivalist periods (Niebuhr 1929: 30–33; Berg 1973b).

While a degree of diversity and fragmentation has been identified among the revivalist movements loosely classified as the Jesus People Movement, the many commonalities these shared are readily identifiable in the COG (Hunt 2008: 1–2). The COG's early beginnings as a coffee shop ministry, and its beach baptisms, street evangelism, and emphasis on the Holy Spirit, prophecy, and the proclamation of an imminent biblical apocalypse were common characteristics of the Jesus People (MacDonald & Stetzer 2020). The belief in a soon-to-unfold fulfilment of the biblical apocalypse, core to the COG's belief system, proved attractive to the counterculture youth of the day in that it "layered neatly upon the counterculture's pervading pessimism about society" (MacDonald & Stetzer 2020). The emotionalism and experientialism of the Jesus People were likewise central to the COG (Richardson & Davis 1983: 400–1), as well as a "Jesus-centric" approach and focus on love (Drakeford 1972: 34–36; Ellwood 1973: 81). The Jesus People's "fundamentalistic insistence on the simple gospel," and an "essentially anti-intellectual, anti-historical, and anti-cultural view of the world" were woven throughout Berg's writings (Enroth et al. 1972: 16). These cultural and theological Jesus People roots served as foundational underpinnings of the religious world of the COG, which would remain constants throughout its history until the Reboot in 2010. The COG's suspicion and rejection of political and educational institutions, materialistic capitalism, secular employment, and institutional Christianity were likewise important to the movement's worldview formation and identity as a "world-rejecting movement" (Wallis 1984: 20–23).

By 1971, a division had arisen between the COG and the Jesus People, due in part to the Children's tendency to proselytize at evangelical universities, which gave rise to accusations of "sheep-stealing" (Eskridge 2013: 184–86). Berg's animosity toward institutional Christianity was extended to the Jesus People, which he dismissed as a superficial movement that had not "dropped out" of the System and would not have a lasting impact (Berg 1971b). In 1972, however, Berg reversed this position and announced that the previously anathematized Jesus People should be cultivated and welcomed, and doctrinal arguments avoided (Berg 1972b; Wallis 1979: 60). Drawn by the COG's high-commitment model and organizational stability, several Jesus People groups joined the movement in

1972, notably Linda Meissner's Jesus Army and David Hoyt's House of Judah and his network of Jesus People houses (Van Zandt 1991: 39; Trott 1995). Hoyt's membership would be short-lived; he departed in 1972 after acrimonious exchanges with Berg (Eskridge 2013: 186–99). Little information is available regarding Meissner's departure from the COG and return to the United States. Her social media page states that she started up a "Jesus People Coffee House" in 2012, and in 2016 she features in a YouTube video calling for a Jesus People revival (Meissner 2015, 2016).

The division between the COG and the Jesus People Movement was further cemented by Berg's introduction of heretical teachings and exploration of New Age spiritualities. Berg embraced astrology in his early writings and envisioned himself as the "water bearer" for the Age of Aquarius commissioned to pour forth "strange new truths" (Berg 1971a). He subsequently claimed to channel spirit guides and interact with mythical gods and goddesses, and later briefly expressed some form of belief in reincarnation (Berg 1973d, 1975a, 1977b). Berg's adoption of cultural themes of the hippie movement and New Age spiritualities, coupled with his subjective interpretations of current events in view of an imminent apocalypse, produced a high degree of theological experimentation that served to untether the movement from its fundamentalist Christian roots. Elements of Berg's eclectic borrowing from other religions or spiritualities were visible in the writings of the movement until the Reboot in 2010, at which point all such writings were removed from circulation.

Despite the evolution of the COG in directions that vastly departed from aspects of its evangelical roots, core characteristics that defined the Jesus Movement were paramount throughout its history. The preaching of a simple Gospel focused on salvation, the belief in an imminent apocalypse, communalism, a love-centric message, the use of prophecy, and the emphasis on being Spirit-led remained virtually unaltered. The COG's adherence to its core ideology of reaching the world with the universal Gospel message for the salvation of souls was pivotal to anchoring the membership in a common purpose in the face of constant change and theological innovations (Van Zandt 1995: 127). (For in-depth readings on the COG's early history, see Enroth et al. 1972: 21–54; Davis & Richardson, 1976: 321–39; Wallis 1979: 51–90; Van Zandt 1991: 30–55; Chancellor 2000: 1–33.)

Controversy and Global Dispersion

The Children of God was no stranger to controversy from its earliest days in response to its signature sackcloth vigils and doomsday message of "Woe to America," which engendered much of the early press coverage of the Jesus Movement (Ellwood 1973: 101–9; Eskridge 2013: 66–67). Berg intentionally

leveraged controversy in his writings to etch boundaries of separation from denominational Christianity and mainstream society and rationalized that negative publicity and opposition would ultimately serve to disseminate the movement's message and attract new converts (Berg 1985). While this arguably proved to be the case in the movement's early history, opposition and controversy would become a trademark of the COG and eventually threaten its ability to expand and flourish. Members understood that their high-commitment style of biblical discipleship and their antiestablishment worldview would inherently generate controversy, in conjunction with their vocal denunciations of the perceived corruption of secular society and the accommodation of mainstream churches to secularization. In addition, public activism in the form of protests, sit-ins, public prayer vigils, and en masse visits to churches, known as "church invasions," further engendered oppositional responses (Enroth et al. 1972: 30–34). Members were arrested for proselytizing on university campuses and for public demonstrations, garnering front-page headlines; the group was the subject of criticism from mainstream churches, parents of members, and sensationalistic journalism alike (Van Zandt 1995: 131).

The negative publicity and growing opposition the early Teens for Christ experienced, in conjunction with prophecies proclaimed by some members that



Figure 1 An early street demonstration of the Children of God, highlighting their call to a “revolution for Jesus.” Photo courtesy of the Family International.

California would suffer an earthquake and sink into the Pacific, led the small group to relocate to Tucson in a move called “the Exodus” (Van Zandt 1991: 34). Members subsequently traveled in small teams throughout the United States and eventually seventy-five members gathered in Laurentide, Canada. By that time, Berg had come to the realization that a formal organizational model was needed, which he introduced in 1970 by establishing communal households – referred to as colonies, and later homes – as the foundation for the group’s organizational structure (Berg 1970a). During their stay at Laurentide, Berg adopted the name Moses David, or Mo, which per his account was received in prophecy by some of the followers, and his writings subsequently became known as “Mo Letters” (Berg 1972c). Prophecies received by the followers in this early period were occasionally published and considered prophetic direction, a practice largely abandoned once Berg fully asserted his prophetic authority.

After departing from Laurentide, the Children reassembled in Washington, DC, dressed in sackcloth and ashes, wearing yokes and bearing staves, for a public vigil to mourn the death of Senator Everett Dirksen, who was an advocate for Bible reading in public schools (Wallis 1979: 56). From there, the Children traveled to Philadelphia, and subsequently to Times Square and the UN building in New York City, to symbolically mourn the death of freedom and the prophesied impending demise of the nation. This doomsday message of the fall of America would be a continuous thread throughout Berg’s writings and prophetic predictions. It was during this period of public protest that the group was dubbed the Children of God by a local reporter in New Jersey, who found them camped in a junkyard behind a truck stop (Berg 1972c).

Following these travels, Berg leveraged his relationship with Fred Jordan to assemble a colony on Jordan’s property, the Texas Soul Clinic (TSC), as well as a second colony on skid row in Los Angeles. The Texas commune adopted a self-supporting model whereby members could be largely independent from society and attract followers through their exuberant example of Christian discipleship. The TSC colony was the subject of an NBC *First Tuesday* two-hour documentary, “The Ultimate Trip,” which aired in 1971. The nationwide coverage this documentary generated resulted in a significant influx of new members to the COG, as well as national attention to the Jesus Movement (Eskridge 2013: 129, 180). By March 1971, one year after settling at TSC, the COG’s ranks had grown to more than 500 full-time disciples. The TSC experiment was short-lived, however, as the group had a falling out with Jordan that same year, at which time he evicted them from his properties.

The fledgling movement expanded rapidly throughout the United States and Canada from 1969 to 1972, and as it grew in numbers, countermovement

opposition likewise intensified. A group of concerned parents whose children had dropped out of university or left home to join the COG coalesced in San Diego in 1972 to form FREECOG (Free the Children of God), which has been identified as the first anticult movement (Shupe & Bromley 1994: 5–8). Parents accused the movement of kidnapping, hypnotizing, and brainwashing members, and advocated for government intervention. As opposition to the movement mounted, Berg departed from the United States in December 1970 with his wife and ultimate successor, Karen Zerby (known in the movement as Maria Fontaine), first to Israel and subsequently to Europe (Van Zandt 1991: 37–38). This early opposition would have a profound effect on the movement’s organizational development and identity as a persecuted church. The theme of persecution on the grounds of religious belief became integrally woven into the writings, music, ideology, and expectations of members as the biblically ordained outcome of their Christian testimony and a precursor to the impending period of apocalyptic tribulation.

While in Europe, Berg announced his retirement from public life and went into seclusion; the vast majority of the approximately 35,000 people who joined the movement at some point in its history would never meet Berg (or Maria) in person. From 1971 onward, Berg directed the movement solely through the published Mo Letters, which he rationalized would provide uniform guidance to the rapidly expanding movement (Berg 1970c). After Berg’s relocation, he published a revelation that the descent of the United States into chaos was imminent and consequently members needed to “escape” to other lands in a “massive exodus of the Children of God from North America” (Berg 1972e). This expansion outside of North America, initially to Western Europe, Latin America, and Asia, produced vigorous growth and innovation – by 1973, the membership had expanded to 2,200 members in forty countries on six continents (Van Zandt 1991: 43). It did not, however, usher in a surcease from the controversy that surrounded the movement, as will be further explored in Section 3.

Organization and Reorganization

The longevity and global expansion of the Children of God in comparison to other Jesus People groups has been attributed in large part to the movement’s organizational stability (Enroth et al. 1972: 22). Berg developed a leadership hierarchy in 1970, featuring himself as the movement’s leader and prophet presiding over a framework of ordained leaders on international, national, and regional levels, which would remain in place in various iterations for most of the movement’s history. After Berg’s retirement into seclusion, he exercised his



Figure 2 Children of God performing street evangelism in Hyde Park, London, 1972. Photo courtesy of the Family International.

authority primarily through his writings and appointed leadership, who were charged with the oversight of the communes and implementation of the organizational initiatives introduced in his writings. In 1975, Berg formalized the movement's upper-end administrative infrastructure, known as World Services (WS), initially as a communications center "to merely collect, analyze and disseminate information" regarding worldwide operations and the COG's constituency (Berg 1975b). However, as the membership grew from 4,598 members in 1975 to nearly 10,000 members (including children) by 1985, WS continuously expanded its services and authority. Its operations were cloaked in secrecy, and information regarding locations of its residences, known as units, and personnel were safeguarded from the membership and public alike, which Berg rationalized as imperative to the protection of his personal security as a "fugitive in exile, a religious refugee in hiding" (Berg 1970b). Heightened government scrutiny and alarmist media coverage of new religions in the aftermath of the Jonestown mass murder–suicides in 1978 further intensified the COG's separation from and suspicion of the System, deepening the divide between its internal religious world and public persona, as well as reinforcing boundaries of separation between WS and rank-and-file members.