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1 Researching Children in New Religious Movements

In November 2019, a total of six minors were removed from the Qahal Yahweh Assembly of St. James, Jamaica after a raid by law-enforcement authorities warranted by allegations of child abuse, child marriage, sexual assault, abduction, and human trafficking. Prompting the raid were allegations from the leader Omar Thompson's former wife and mother of his three children, who were among those taken into custody. Four years later, in June 2023, the group's communal living quarters were again raided, and this time twenty-one children were taken into custody, with charges of neglect due to not vaccinating the children. All twenty-one children were released in November 2023; however, thirteen members of the congregation will stand trial accused of violation of the Child Care and Protection Act in February 2024. Media reports include child protection advocates stating that deeper knowledge into the group's beliefs and practices are needed.

Similar cases of reported child abuse in what is to the public known as "religious cults" has become a recurring theme in the news. The interest in religious groups that deviate from the mainstream paired with an increasing focus on children's rights has become an important part of popular culture. Through documentaries and podcasts portraying life in the group, most often through the eyes of defectors: the public is sometimes with those who spent their childhoods in such a group. Rarely do we hear from children while they are children, and rarer still, while they are in the congregation of their parents' choice. The controversies surrounding the new religions, or cults, have shifted focus from claims of brainwashed adult members in the 1970s to the current focus on indoctrination (and sometimes abuse) of children in said groups. This Element explores the current academic field of research relating to children in new religions and regards various aspects of socialization, education, healthcare, and relations to surrounding society. Additionally, it considers issues of physical and emotional abuse, state interventions, and the impact of second- and third-generations of children in new religions.

The academic study of children growing up in new religions is a fairly young and unexplored research field. Scholars involved in the study come from different disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, child and youth studies, and social work. Within the sociology of religion, childhood in these groups has generally been studied as a part of one particular group presented as a section in a monograph as, for instance, in Kenneth Wooden's book *The Children of Jonestown* (1981), James Chancellor's book *Life in the Family* on The Family International, formerly Children of God (2000), and E. Burke Rochford's *Hare Krishna Transformed* on ISKCON (2007). Although comprehensive studies on

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childhood in new religious movements are still rare, there is the excellent contemporary work of Susan Palmer and Charlotte Hardman in their anthology *Children in New Religions* (1999), Amanda van Eck Duymaer van Twist's *Perfect Children* (2015), and Janja Lalich and Karla McLaren's *Escaping Utopia* (2018). Together with prominent new religion scholars Liselotte Frisk and Peter Åkerbäck, I cowrote the anthology *Children in Minority Religions* (2018), which covers some of the new religions' history regarding children and childhood in Sweden. My book *Kids of Knutby: Living in and Leaving the Swedish Filadelfia Congregation* (2023) analyzed the situation for children and youth growing up in the congregation of the charismatic Christian new religion Knutby Filadelfia in Sweden 2014–2018. Jessica Pratezina's dissertation "New Religion Kids" (2019) also provides a unique insight into the lives of children in new religions. There are a few older works worth mentioning in relation to the field. John Rothchild and Susan Wolf's book *The Children of the Counterculture* (1976) provides valuable general knowledge on the upbringing of children in the counterculture communities of the 1960s and 1970s. Additionally, Daniel Greenberg's survey of 219 intentional communities (including nonreligious) presented in the thesis "Growing Up in Community" (1993) provides interesting comparative data on childhoods in communities in the United States. Furthermore, *Prophet's Daughter: My Life with Elizabeth Claire Prophet inside the Church Universal and Triumphant* (2008) by Erin Prophet is a valuable source of knowledge. Prophet has since published several interesting academic articles on new religions. Of course, there are many important nonacademic biographical contributions that will enhance the researcher's knowledge of the various aspects of experiences of childhoods in new religious movements.

In studies of new religions, the concept of what constitutes a new religion has a history of being debated. As we shall see, the terms *cult* and *sect* have been rejected by large parts of the academic community, as the understanding of the terms has switched from being used as a purely sociological term to connoting "bad," "false," or "dangerous" religion in the public use of the words, not least by sensationalistic media. Due to this development, the term new religious movements came to be employed (Lewis & Petersen, 2005). Additionally, some scholars differentiate between *old* and *new* new religious movements. Four prominent and still active old new religions from the nineteenth century are the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Church of Christ, Scientist, the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, and the Jehovah's Witnesses (Lewis & Tøllefsen, 2016). Newer new religions are typically categorized as groups that came into existence after World War II, such as the Church of Scientology, Hare Krishna (ISKCON), Trancendental Meditation,

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The Family International (because the group is known both as the Children of God and The Family International, henceforward it will be identified as COG/TFI), and many more. Additionally, scholars of new religions normally differentiate between the *organized* new religious *movements* and the less organized New Age *milieu* (see, e.g., Løøv, 2024). The latter is harder to demarcate and because of the sometimes-derogatory connotation of the concept of New Age, scholars also use New Spirituality or New Religion. An interesting development pertaining to this milieu regarding children and childhoods is the emergence of spiritually based ideas about the so-called Indigo and Crystal Children. In this Element, I will use the term new religious movements. The debate over the use of cults or new religions is centered on the notion that a cult may be totalitarian or sectarian. However, the term new religious movements allows a broader understanding and aims at avoiding the connotations of violence that the word cult has. My position is that a new religious movement exhibits different levels of sectarianism and totalitarianism, and is subject to change, which is why the term new religious movement is preferable as a starting point. However, when referring specifically to other scholars' work, I will simply use the term that the author uses.

Contemporary studies of children in new religions can be traced to the onset of so-called anticult movements of the 1960s and 1970s. When young adults, some merely teenagers, started joining the new movements emerging from the counterculture scene, such as various Jesus People groups and eastern-inspired meditation movements, the older generation, including their parents, were taken aback. These new groups seemed, to them, to devour their young, as they saw their children get swept away in new beliefs and lifestyles, leaving the old ones behind. While confusing to many, some parents were downright upset, scared, and angry. They blamed the groups for their children dropping out of society, deviating from the path staked out by their parents when they were abandoning education and employment in favor of an uncertain communal life with the group of their choice. One group in particular, COG/TFI, caused great anger and concern. Some of the parents of converts to that group founded the first anticult group FREECOG – Free Our Children from the Children of God (Melton, 2002, p. 268). Accusations of mind control and brainwashing followed and eventually former members, who had left other similar groups, joined the ranks of parents and concerned social workers, politicians, therapists, and others opposing the new religious groups.

The controversies surrounding the groups' ways of living, proselytizing, and ideologies, as well as the issue of freedom of religion and cults in general, have been described by Eileen Barker (1984), James A. Beckford (1985), James T. Richardson (2004), Susan Palmer (2011), and several other prominent

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scholars within the sociology of religion. However, some scholars of psychology adopted what is called brainwashing theory (Singer & Lalich, 1995; Lalich & McLaren, 2018). They argued that sectarian new religious movements manipulated people, converting them against their better judgment. Those who did not adhere to the brainwashing claims still maintained a skeptical and more balanced view of the field, acknowledging that the position of adults and children differed in terms of agency and autonomy. Siskind, for example, argues that

> many social scientists have largely ignored the presence of children in new religious movements, treating these groups as simple voluntary aggregations of consenting adults. Others have recognized the presence of children in these groups but have argued that groups that oppose or retreat from mainstream society are often unfairly persecuted merely because they deviate from the unwritten norms of child-rearing in our society. (Siskind, 2001, p. 434)

Even if most of the converts stayed less than two years in their groups (Barker, 1984), some did, and eventually they had children born into the movements. During the 1980s and 1990s, the focus of cultural opponents and others taking an interest in the groups shifted from brainwashing claims to charges of abuse of children and youth – mostly, but not solely, sexual abuse. Sometimes, physical disciplining of children and youth has provoked criticism from cultural opponents. What constitutes physical abuse against children varies between countries, sometimes resulting in a specific practice prohibited in one country while being legal in another. A recent example of this is the relocation of The Twelve Tribes community in Germany to the Czech Republic. Within the theology of the community, physical discipline of children is imperative to their upbringing, so the practice of spanking children with a short, plastic rod is not negotiable for most parents. Since this constitutes physical abuse in Germany, the German authorities raided the commune in 2013 and placed all the children in state custody.

Custody cases involving children in new religious movements have generally been closely connected to claims of child abuse. One form of cases is those in which one parent left the group and wanted to take the child(ren) with them while the remaining parent opposed this, both arguing that their decision is in the child's best interest in regard to child-rearing practices. It could also involve grandparents seeking legal custody of their grandchildren, claiming that parents' choice to belong to a certain group and adhere to their lifestyle had a negative influence on the child's development or even that it may pose a direct threat to the child's life. In a few cases, the groups tried to separate the children from the nonmember parent, relatives, and

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authorities, resulting in frequent relocation of the child and accusations of kidnapping. Most often, the decision to hide a child led outsiders to conclude that the parents had given all parental rights to the group, arguably as a result of "brainwashing."

The occurrence of the Jonestown mass murders–suicides in 1978 seemed to support the view that these new religions were dangerous places for children to grow up in. Media's impact on the view of the groups as dangerous cannot be underestimated (Bromley & Shupe, 1987). While there are indeed some groups within which sexual and physical abuse of children did (and does) occur, this was hardly true for all the various groups that kept popping up. However, as some noticeable cases of neglect and abuse came to public knowledge, the situation for the children became the focal point of the criticism against the new religions (Richardson, 1999; Saliba, 2003).

A few of the defectors of the movements left and pursued careers as counselors and therapists, often aiming to help others leaving cope with managing the defection. Coinciding with the Satanic Panic scares of the 1990s (see, for instance, Richardson et al., 1991), the public view of child-rearing in new religions was reduced to a belief in abuse and neglect, and, in the worst case of all, mass murder. To counterbalance this one-sided and erroneous view, sociologists of religion put their research efforts into showing that popular opinion did not necessarily reflect reality. There were indeed large numbers of children who did not suffer neglect or abuse, although they grew up in a very different manner than their peers at school. Because some groups were targeted by cultural opponents more than others, and because of the fact that there was indeed abuse going on in some of the groups, studies of children have tended to focus less on everyday life and more on whether there was abuse or not. Cruelty and mistreatment are naturally imperative to stop, but we also need more research into the everyday lives of the children and youth who grow up in these norm-criticizing environments.

Furthermore, since negative views of the movements have dominated for at least forty years, members of several groups feel stigmatized and falsely accused, simply because they have different views on faith and an unusual lifestyle. Those in a considerable number of groups are painfully aware of the risks of stigma and fear that letting any outsider into their group might cause accusations and lead to negative consequences. This is the main reason that it is difficult to study children in these groups while they are still children. Parents are afraid, and, generally, researching children's religion is beset with rigorous ethical requirements and restrictions, with human subject permits to be obtained. It can take a scholar years to access children within a group. Therefore, most data consist of retrospective life story narratives given by

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adults who were born and raised in new religious movements. While these are valuable, the current life of the children and youth needs more research.

2 Situating the Concept of Childhood

In order to discuss the terms and conditions for children growing up in new religious movements and milieus, we need to start off with the concept of child and childhood itself. This Element presupposes a Western definition of the concept *child* as stated in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of The Child:

> **Article 1** (Definition of the child): The Convention defines a "child" as a person below the age of 18, unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, the monitoring body for the Convention, has encouraged States to review the age of majority if it is set below 18 and to increase the level of protection for all children under 18. (UNICEF Guiding Principles, 2022)

Childhood is actually a fairly recent invention. French historian Philippe Ariès's widely read book *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1962) is understood by many as the first work in modern times in the field of childhood studies (Cunningham, 2005, p. 5). Ariès argues that the concept of childhood did not come into existence until the seventeenth century, as there was no such idea present in the history of medieval Europe. According to Ariès, childhood, as we now understand it, first surfaced in the realm of nuclear family life and in the emergence of the public school system. Prior to that, children were simply understood to be "small adults," a conclusion he draws by studying, among other artifacts of the time, art which shows that there was no difference in children's and adults' clothing (Ariès, 1962, p. 50). As we shall see, the understanding of children as adults in small bodies, or rather, old souls in new bodies, is part of the theology of some of the new religious movements, for example, within the Church of Scientology.

Ariès's work has been severely criticized for being one-sided; nevertheless, it served as a starting point for childhood studies and is still considered a classic within the field. It prompted several books on the subject, for example, Edward Shorter's *The Making of the Modern Family* (1976), Lloyd deMause's *The History of Childhood* (1974), and Lawrence Stone's *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (1990). The view that childhood could be studied in its own right was further developed by several historians. Scholars such as Shorter, deMause, and Stone promoted Ariès's argument that there was no separation of children and adults in medieval Europe. Shorter further links the emergence of love-based marriages, as opposed to prearranged, with parental affection. He goes as far as to argue that parents' affection for their children

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