38. Most Identity groups reacted to the decreasing acceptance of racial chauvinism in American society over the past twenty years by secreting themselves in "survivalist" hideaways. Identity believers have become more vocal in recent years, and have dug in their ideological heels against social change. Please note that violence is advocated by Identity teachers as a response to their expectations of future events, and rarely as a way of behaving in current society.

Throughout most of its history, the Worldwide Church of God only allowed new converts to attend services after a lengthy screening process. No one was allowed to walk into services off the street and guards were placed at the door to prevent such an occurrence. This policy was changed in 1992, probably because of changes in expectations of the social climate of mainstream America.

Suggestions for Further Reading


THE CHILDREN OF GOD

David E. Van Zandt

The Children of God (now known as the Family or the Family of Love) is probably the most radical of all the major groups to emerge from the Jesus People movement of the late 1960s. David Berg (called Moses David or Father David by members) is the charismatic leader, who claims to be God’s prophet of the end time and has controlled the group’s ideology and organization for most of its history. Despite numerous organizational changes and geographic movements, the Children of God (COG) has consistently adhered to a basic ideological core that requires members to spread God’s word (or at least the COG’s version of it) throughout the world in what the COG believes are the last days. In accomplishing this goal, the COG has experimented with a number of proselytization techniques and living arrangements, many of which are highly controversial and have attracted substantial negative publicity. Its early members were some of the first targets of deprogramming efforts.

History of the COG

The COG began as the Teens for Christ in Huntington Beach, California, in 1967. Berg and his children brought twenty to thirty wayward “hippies” into their home and preached a message of personal salvation and millennial beliefs. Berg, who in his childhood had travelled the South with his evangelical, a short-lived tenure as Christian and Missionary Alliance, his message to the radical millenial day. This small commune quickly grew, and the Berg family and its followers embarked on a series of public demonstrations and “church visitations” that criticized established Christianity and attracted wide attention, some of it negative.

In 1969, Berg led his group on nomadic wanderings through the United States and Canada, gathering new members along the way. The group continued the public demonstrations, this time at “sackcloth vigils,” in which members donned sackcloths, carried staffs, and declared that American society was doomed for turning its back on God. It was during this period that Berg introduced to a small group of select members his unorthodox ideas on sex and marriage. He announced to them that his relationship with his wife Eve was standing in the way of God’s work, and that he had started a new sexual relationship with a young member named Maria. It was not until the mid-1970s, however, that most members of the group became aware of these activities.

By early 1970, the group had grown to 200 members, and Berg arranged for them to live on an abandoned ranch near Thurber, Texas, owned by his former mentor. A small number of members also moved into an old mission building on Skid Row in Los Angeles. At both places, the COG established large communal living
centers that they used as bases for recruiting new members. In August of that year, Berg and Maria left the Texas commune to travel to Israel. That trip began a pattern that persists to this day. Berg and Maria lived and travelled alone or with a small group of household helpers and communicated with the rest of the group via eight-to-ten-page letters known as "Mo letters."

In September 1971, Berg, through Mo letters, directed members to break up the large communes in Texas and Los Angeles and establish smaller communes or "colonies" in cities and towns throughout the United States. In addition, he urged members to form small teams to "pioneer" into Western Europe and South America. By January 1973, Berg claimed that there were over 2,400 "disciples" (full-time members) in 140 colonies in 40 countries. In this different environment, the COG adopted a new proselytization method called "litnessing": members distributed Mo letters in train stations, shopping malls, and other public areas in exchange for donations. Berg, who initiated the innovation, wrote a flood of letters for distribution on topics such as God's love, political affairs, movies, and the end time. Not only did litnessing get the COG message to a much wider audience, but it also proved to be a consistent means of financial support for the individual colonies.

Another side effect of litnessing was a reduction in the flow of new members. Berg sought to counter this by reemphasizing one-on-one witnessing, and in May 1976, he announced another proselytization innovation: Flirty Fishing. For a number of years, Berg and Maria had been experimenting secretly with the practice of sending COG women into bars and nightclubs to meet potential converts. In some cases, the members would take the targets (called "fish") to bed if necessary to obtain a conversion. In the late 1970s, a series of Mo letters described Berg's and Maria's Flirty Fishing adventures and urged members to adopt the technique. By the late 1970s, the press got wind of the practice and made the most of it. In addition, the practice caused a significant number of COG members to leave the group.

To quell rebellion in the ranks and to assert more direct control over the group, Berg ordered a radical reorganization of the COG (now called the Family by members) in late 1977. He removed most of the old leaders of the group from their positions and set individual colonies (now called "Homes") free to do as they pleased subject to the commands of Berg delivered through Mo letters. Berg also directed that the sexual liberalism that Berg, Maria, and the highest leaders had enjoyed for some time should be extended to all members. Members were now free to engage in casual sexual relations with other members if the participants consented (called "sexual sharing"). Because the COG does not believe in birth control, the number of children born from informal liaisons or Flirty Fishing interactions (called Jesus Babies) increased. By April 1981, the COG claimed 2,188 Homes in 76 countries with a total of 8,715 members.

The effect of all these changes was a destruction of the communal organization of COG. A Home often consisted of two or three adults and their many children travelling nomadically in a camper. The Home would stop for a short period outside a town, engage in litnessing and some Flirty Fishing, and then move on. Some members returned to their native homes and took jobs until they could save enough money to head off to a new location. Berg, in May 1980, warned that the world was close to a nuclear war and urged members to move to the relative safety of South America and the Far East. All this movement eliminated the social support that the more centralized organization had provided previously. Moreover, most Homes were surviving hand-to-mouth; even Berg claimed financial straits. Another effect was due to the democratization of sexual practice. While sexual sharing formally required consent, there was social pressure in the Homes to engage in it. Moreover, some members interpreted statements by Berg to condone sexual sharing between adults and children that even included incidents of incest. While disgruntled ex-members of the group most likely exaggerate the fre-
The Children of God

quency of these practices, it is clear that they caused substantial disruption for and discontent among the growing ranks of younger members in the group.

To reassert their control, Berg and Maria in 1985 reestablished a more centralized organization led by a central office called World Services. The new phase emphasized witnessing and the sale of other COG products such as posters and musical cassettes and videos, which improved the financial position of the Homes, and was accompanied by a more defined and authoritarian leadership structure. Berg and Maria appointed a number of Visiting Servants to monitor Homes. Homes became more communal, with the typical Home housing eight to ten adults and as many as twenty-five children. Berg and Maria also clamped down on excessive sexual practices. Maria, in particular, concerned about the treatment of younger members, set up Teen Training Camps (TTCs) to remove pre- and young teens' from the sexual and other pressures of the Homes. Berg, according to the COG, expressly banned incest and child sex in late 1987. At the same time, he also prohibited Flirty Fishing, citing the dangers of AIDS.

Underlying these changes in organization was a more important if subtle change in the focus of the COG. Instead of growing by recruiting adults, the COG has now turned inward to grow by bearing and nurturing its children. By July 1988, the COG claimed to have 12,390 full-time members of which 6,833 were children, most of whom were born into the COG. For Berg and Maria, the COG teenagers are the future and the new leaders of the group. The second function of the TTCs is to prepare these teens for this new role and to secure their allegiance to the group. This can mean separating them from the influence of their parents. In fact, after completing a six-month session at a TTC, the teen is considered a full adult member of the group and is moved to a new Home to begin his or her adult proselytizing career.

These changes have brought renewed and negative press attention to the COG. In both Spain and Australia, local authorities have temporarily taken COG children into custody after allegations of child abuse. Moreover, a number of ex-COG members have attempted to obtain custody of children they left behind with the other parent in the group. They have done this either by invoking legal process or hiring persons to seize their children physically. Despite its longstanding strategy of keeping a low profile and avoiding direct confrontation, the COG has recently not been shy in invoking the legal process itself, to defend its children, citing principles of religious freedom. To date the COG has prevailed in all custody battles.

The COG Ideology

The COG ideology is rooted in the southern Protestant evangelical tradition in which Berg was raised. It is created and controlled by Berg and a small number of high leaders and is laid out in the Mo letters that now number over 2,500. Berg claims and members believe that the Mo letters are valid sources for determining God's will and at times even overrule the Bible and its rules. Berg identifies himself as God's Prophet of the End Time, a human vessel through whom God can speak. Berg admits, however, that while divinely inspired, the Mo letters are fallible and that some of his disconfirmed prophecies were based on his misunderstanding of what God had told him.

The written ideology consists of several strands, the most important of which is the traditional southern Protestant emphasis on personal salvation. In order to be saved from eternal damnation at the coming Judgment, a person has only to accept God's love offered through Jesus. This is a personal decision that, once made, guarantees a place in the Kingdom of God. Subsequent good works will determine the position that the saved person will have in that kingdom. The Mo letters also occasionally refer to the Pentecostal doctrine of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, but that aspect is muted.

A second strand is strident criticism of society and contemporary social relations—
referred to derogatorily by the COG as the System. Berg espouses a type of Christian socialism as an antidote to capitalism. In the COG view, America is the epitome of the degenerate capitalist system, with Western Europe not too far behind. Another target of his criticism is Israel and the Jews. In contrast, Berg sees more merit in third-world, particularly Arab, societies, and has visited and promoted Colonel Moammar Khadafi of Libya. Because of the System's corruptive power, the COG ideology urges members not to become too entangled with it.

This leads to the third strand, the demand for total commitment from group members. The only true and complete way to follow God is through total commitment to his work. In practice, this means that COG members are to forsake all: quit their jobs or schools in the System, surrender almost all possessions to the COG, cut almost all ties with nonmembers, live full-time in a COG commune, and engage in full-time proselytization. While the status of associate member or friend of the COG has been recognized at times, it has always been clear that total commitment is the norm.

The millennial beliefs of the COG are striking if rarely completely understood by members. Initially, Berg laid a fairly precise timetable for the end; when the dates he stated passed, however, he backed off specific predictions, but largely maintained the substance of his predictions. The Great Tribulation will begin with the world's being racked by wars and economic collapse. A great socialist leader will rise out of Egypt, and he will end the wars, take over the world, and establish a benevolent socialist dictatorship. After three and one-half years of this reign, he will show his true face as the Antichrist: he will demand to be worshipped, will exterminate those who refuse (particularly COG members), and will destroy all Bibles and Mo letters. Christ will return after another three and one-half years, lift up all living saved believers, defeat the Antichrist, and subdue Satan. There will be a general resurrection of deceased believers, and Christ will establish a physical millennium on earth and rule over it with the help of COG members.

After the thousand years, Satan will be released for one last rebellion. God will imprison Satan in a lake of fire, and conduct the Judgment in which all who did not accept Jesus during their lives will be sent to live with Satan. God will send New Jerusalem, a city one thousand miles high, long, and wide, to earth, and all those who did accept him will live in this perfection on earth. Children of God members and the saints will have proselytization missions on other worlds.

Finally, the COG ideology refers to an active spirit world, coextensive with the material world and populated by the spirits of deceased figures. These spirits have little impact on the material world. Instead, they usually provide inspiration and information to Berg. In some cases, however, Berg has attributed the disobedience of members to evil spirits and conducted exorcisms to attempt to change their behavior.

The written COG ideology is quite detailed and lengthy, and while all members claim to believe it, most members only vaguely understand the ideology and certainly do not grasp all of its details. This is most pronounced in the area of the end time. Most members simply believe that Jesus is coming soon, despite the numerous pages of Mo letters devoted to explaining the details of the group's eschatology. The one overriding aspect of the ideology that members do consistently understand is the call to full-time proselytization. Not to proselytize is seen by every member as an abdication of responsibility. The rest of the ideology is used pragmatically by members as the circumstances require.

Composition of Membership

Through the early 1970s, the COG recruits were generally middle to upper-middle class whites in their late teens or early twenties. Males greatly outnumbered females, and nonwhites were few and far between. Most recruits had attended a university, but not completed their degrees. A fair number had been involved in drugs and
many considered themselves part of the counterculture. These people tended to have a liberal, nonactive religious background, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish. A large minority were young people from fundamentalist Christian backgrounds who saw Berg and his group as authentic followers of Jesus.

Recruitment patterns shifted once the COG moved to Europe in the middle 1970s. The most likely European recruit was a lower-middle-class teen who was not headed to a university, but instead faced a clerical or similar career. As in America, some had more fundamentalist backgrounds, but most were liberal and nonactive religiously. Drug use among the European converts was lower. With the advent of Flirty Fishing in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the COG actively recruited older, educated professionals. The number of new members from this group, however, was never great. By the late 1980s, aggressive recruitment of outsiders ceased, and the COG focused on growing internally.

**Relationship to Society**

Throughout its history, the COG's relationship to the rest of society has been highly oppositional. Given its beliefs about the System, the COG has always viewed the wider society at best with indifference and more often as a source of persecution. Some of this perception is well founded. From its earliest days, the COG has been the target of criticism from more traditional religions, unhappy parents, and sensation-seeking journalists. The original targets of modern religious deprogramming were COG members. On the other hand, the oppositional stance is one that the COG adopted from the very beginning with its use of public demonstrations such as the sackcloth vigil, its insistence on nonconventional living arrangements, and its later sexual practices. In the past, COG members also tended to ignore laws (such as compulsory education laws and bans on solicitation) that they find make their work more difficult. More recently, because of their growing population of children, more sedentary life, and consequent vulnerability to authorities, members have been much more scrupulous about adhering to local laws and regulations.

Because of these factors, COG members' interactions with the wider society have been largely instrumental and circumscribed. Children of God members do spend large blocks of time interacting with nonmembers, but those interactions are for specific ideological or practical purposes. Most interactions are attempted proselytizations, whether through literature or one-on-one proselytization. Other interactions are motivated by the need to buy supplies or obtain other necessities of life. Even when COG members simply engage outsiders in conversation, it is usually to keep up with current trends and topics to make their proselytization efforts more efficacious.

At times, the COG are forced to confront the wider society more directly, particularly when the press or law enforcement officials intrude. Members have been arrested or challenged at various times on allegations of child abuse, truancy violations, immoral behavior, illegal demonstrations, and illegal solicitation. The basic COG strategy over the years has been to respond to such intrusions by denial and flight. The first example of this occurred in Huntington Beach. After some of the members were arrested for demonstrating on public school grounds, Berg packed up the whole group and moved out of state without facing trial. At one point, the COG did sue a group of disgruntled parents, but dropped the suit once the legal process of discovery began. Since then, whenever challenged by adverse publicity or law enforcement officials, the COG have quickly closed up and moved on. Only recently, in child custody battles with authorities, have the COG mounted any sustained legal efforts.

The result of all this is that the COG remain highly marginal in modern society. They do not expose themselves to the forces that might lead to a denominationalization process. In fact, Berg has expressly recognized this danger in Mo letters and warned against it. The cultivation of the group's children is also based on this recognition. If anything, the COG is becoming more insular.
Now that it does not have to look outside to replenish its membership, the need for contact with the wider society is even less.

The Future of COG

The engine of the COG has been David Berg, who is now well into his seventies. Upon his death, the group may lose its central focus. On the other hand, several factors point to its continued vitality. First, his consort, Maria, is a charismatic figure in her own right, and has day-to-day control of the group. It is conceivable that Maria will be able to continue Berg's charismatic leadership indefinitely.

The second factor is the COG's internal organization. Most of the adult members of the COG joined during the 1970s when they were in their late teens or early twenties, before finishing their educations or acquiring job skills. A great number are Americans who now live in foreign lands. For all their adult lives they have lived as COG members. The COG has provided them with sufficient material and emotional support. In doing so, it has also insulated them from acquiring the skills and social support they would need if they were to return to conventional society. Finally, most adult COG members have as many as five or more children. The thought of leaving the COG and supporting such large families in the System is both frightening and impractical.

Nor will the COG children be the weak link that causes the organization to begin to unravel. Part of the classic denominalization process is the effect of the second generation. In the case of the COG, the second generation is often even more committed than their parents. The COG has carefully cultivated a high degree of commitment among the children. Because of their separation from wider society, COG children do not have more than a glimpse of the conventional life experienced by the parents in their pre-COG lives. The children's primary allegiance is to the group. Moreover, they quickly acquire adult status, often around the age of twelve. Many will have their first children by their mid to late teens. It is unlikely that many of these young members will leave the COG on their own.

While it is difficult to predict the future course of the COG, neither an immediate disintegration or a gradual shift to the status of an established sect is in the cards. Instead, the most likely outcome is that the COG will grow more and more insular and secretive. If Berg is not replaced and the group loses its central organizing force, individual communes will continue but will perhaps drift off in a variety of religious directions. If Berg is replaced, the COG could continue for an extended period as an isolated, cohesive, nonconventional alternative religion. In the latter case, the only limit to its growth will be its ability to retain and train its children as committed members.

Suggestions for Further Reading


In the past decade few religious groups have gained as much attention from the media and the anticult forces as the Boston Church of Christ. Controversial recruiting practices, high commitment expectations of members, use of discipleship partners, and teachings on church authority have brought a barrage of criticism from outsiders and ex-members alike.

Boston Church of Christ is the name given to a religious movement that began with a single congregation in Boston, Massachusetts. This movement has been known by a variety of names (the Crossroads movement, Multiplying Ministries, the Discipling movement, and the International Churches of Christ, among others), but for the purposes of this study, the term "Boston movement" will be used for two reasons. One, for the sake of clarity, it is useful to distinguish between the founding church in Boston and the churches worldwide that affiliate themselves with the Boston Church of Christ. Two, the name is not chosen arbitrarily, for those in the Boston movement both think of and refer to themselves as a movement and, indeed, the term "Boston movement" appears in much of their literature.

**Early History**

Although the Boston Church of Christ officially came into existence in 1979, its roots run much deeper. The Boston movement is born of the traditions of the nineteenth-century Restoration movement in America. Leaders of the Restoration movement such as Thomas Campbell, his son Alexander, and Barton Stone sought a return to first-century Christianity. Their two main objectives were to do away with denominational divisions and to return to the Bible as the sole authority for the faith and practice of the church.

The Restoration movement pledged itself to the axiom “Where the scriptures speak, we speak; and where the scriptures are silent, we are silent,” but applying this interpretive rule was problematic. When some Restorationists began using musical instruments in the worship service and instituting missionary societies, a small conservative faction felt that neither had biblical precedence or authority. This faction, which became the traditional or mainline Churches of Christ, separated itself from the remainder of the Restoration movement. Major doctrinal differences developed among Restorationist leaders as early as the 1860s, and the Churches of Christ officially went their own way in 1906, growing from 160,000 members to 1.2 million in the United States by the 1990s.

In 1967, the 14th Street Church of Christ in Gainesville, Florida (later renamed the Crossroads Church of Christ), borrowing and adapting some techniques learned from Campus Crusade, began a "pilot