

# Generational Revolt by the Adult Children of First-Generation Members of the Children of God/The Family

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## Abstract

This study identifies a widespread rejection of the Family's/Children of God's teachings by young adults who, as children, grew up in the group. Beginning in the 1970s, policies that the group's founder, David Berg, initiated and imposed upon his members laid the groundwork for this rejection and revolt. These policies, and the practices that resulted from them, made many of the group's younger members feel abused, exploited, and hostile toward various adults.

In 1977, the Children of God's leader, David Berg, supposedly received a prophecy that his 2-year old stepson, Davidito, was "THE FUTURE FATHER OF THE FAMILY OF LOVE" (Berg, 1977b:4765 [capitals and underline in original]). "So guard him well," Berg told his followers, "and teach him well the words of his father David, that he may know what is truth, that he may feed My people" (Berg, 1977b:4758). The way in which Berg, his partner and Davidito's mother Maria, and their nanny Sara reared Davidito was to have been a model for raising children in the faith.

How wrong Berg was. In June 2002, Davidito—now using his secular name, Ricky—wrote a scathing indictment about what life was like in the Berg household, especially for Berg's granddaughter Merry (called Mene in the group). After documenting countless instances of sexual abuse, assaults, Berg's alcoholic behaviour and racism, and the adult leaders' relentless monitoring of all the children's actions, Ricky concluded an Internet essay with the hope "that one day

Berg and Maria's evil legacy wi[ll] die with the Family, and it will be only a distant, or better yet, forgotten bad memory" (Ricky, 2002:10). He posted this essay on a Website, MovingOn.org, founded by another adult child of the first generation, Julia McNeil (McNeil, 2003). As of late February 2004, over 5,500 hits had occurred on this message, many of them from other adult children of the first generation, and probably some from current Family teens and adults.

Ricky's denunciation of the Berg household environment is the latest in a history of revolts by adult children who grew up in either the Family's elite World Services leadership facilities or in Family homes and compounds around the world. Once touted by Berg and others as the hope for the organization's survival and expansion around the world (see Berg, 1985; Van Zandt, 1991:172), the adult children of first-generation members have become the organization's most articulate and precise critics. Having lived through the Family's social experimentation on their generation, these adult children are a cohort that interacts on the Internet and whose members have formed loose networks as friends. As with any age-based cohort, individual members experienced the social experiments of their parents' generation somewhat differently. Nevertheless, all members of this generation—born in and around the decade of the 1970s—grew up in a highly mobile, eroticized environment whose adults were hostile to the wider culture. Moreover, these first-generation adults used corporal punishment, which sometimes crossed over into torture and physical abuse, against them in an attempt to elicit compliance among their children to the teachings of David Berg, Maria, and other leaders.

I will present an overview of the relationship of the first wave of children and teens—now adults—to their parents' generation in the Children of God/the Family, making extensive use of the group's own publications. I argue that the seeds for the generational revolt that began in the 1990s and continues to this day lie in early policies and decisions that the group leaders and adult members made early in their organization's history. These policies and decisions created a social climate in which many of the group's younger members felt abused, exploited, and hostile toward various adults.

## The Doctrinal Seeds That Eventually Contributed to the Teens' Revolt

At least seven basic doctrinal positions and policies appear to be central to both the Children of God and its more recent variant, the Family, and these doctrines and policies contributed to the generational revolt that began in the early 1990s. Adult members internalized these policies and acted upon them in ways that frequently had dire consequences for their children. First and foremost, David Berg claimed, and adult group members accepted, that he was God's End Time prophet—a vehicle for conveying God's word to the world before the final judgment day arrives (and which, according to Berg's own calculations, was supposed to occur in 1993 [Berg, 1972b]). The group, therefore, did not tolerate challenges to Berg's missives, and even quiet expressions of doubts about them—what the group called murmurings—were punishable offences.

Second, God's fundamental message was supposed to involve the importance of love, and, through Berg's prophecies and teachings, the form of love that the group emphasized heavily involved sex. Rebelling, in part, from his own restrictive and sexually punitive childhood (Kent, 1994), Berg instituted what he called the Law of Love, which he posited as the central teaching of Jesus and which, to the spiritually pure such as himself and his followers, knew no boundaries according to age. Especially during the late 1970s and the 1980s, therefore, the social environment of the Children of God/the Family households and compounds was highly eroticized (see World Services, 1979). In locations around the world, teenagers and even some children became involved in various degrees of sexual behaviour with their peers and often with adults (see World Services, 1979).

Third, the propagation supposedly of God's word, as prophesied by Berg, was to be the top priority for all members—ranking in importance above family obligations or ties. Childcare, therefore, was supposed to be a collective responsibility, so that family obligations and emotional ties did not interfere with doing (what members believed was) God's work. As Berg's partner Maria wrote to parents in 1990, "You may have been able to commit the care of your children to other teachers, helpers & overseers, & in many

cases, you've virtually had to do that in order to fulfil [sic] the different ministries to which the Lord has called you" (Maria, 1990:615 [underline in original]). Likewise, the religiously "sanctified" sexual ethics among adult members led to frequent pregnancies whose paternity was uncertain. Consequently, women routinely gave birth to numerous children, and these children frequently had uneven, if not non-existent, amounts of paternal support (see Berg, 1981a). Often, emotional bonds between children and parents were severely strained, and many children did not know their biological fathers.

Fourth, the wider society was evil—the realm of the devil—and members were to avoid it as much as possible. Consequently, the group avoided calling in secular authorities—police, social workers, and so on—if and when they discovered probable malfeasance or criminality committed by members. For the most part, members were to have limited contact with society, contact involving only efforts to gain resources from it in the form of donations, material contributions (such as clothes and food), and converts. The group's unstable financial base, however, required that many members spend long hours fund-raising; and, at an early stage, adult fund-raisers learned the appeal of children and teens to potential resource providers. Consequently, many children and teens spent countless hours at fund-raising activities, which often involved singing and performing.

Fifth, the reputed lure of the devil was strong, especially toward secular society and away from the group. Members of the group, therefore, felt justified in using harsh measures, including corporal punishment on children and teens, against anyone who appeared to be deviating from Berg's reputed interpretations of God's word (see Berg, 1975b).

Sixth, the beliefs and lifestyle of the group had a dramatic, and negative, impact on children's educational programs. Generally speaking, the group's adults believed that secular educational institutions, and the reputedly permissive atmosphere that they cultivated, were particularly lairs of the devil. Consequently, the group initiated its own educational programs and held inconsistent policies about sending children to outside schools (see Berg, 1972a: 1184; 1975a;

Home Services, 1988). Teachers, however, usually lacked professional instructional training, and they were notoriously weak in subjects such as science and advanced math. Moreover, the group's social studies programs were infused with its own ideological positions (Berg, 1977a). Besides, different family facilities placed different emphases on education, with some locations allowing youth fund-raising and other work assignments to take precedence over studying and instruction.

Seventh, group members remained highly mobile, in part as a response to what these persons felt was the constant likelihood of persecution by local authorities. For this reason and others, many children and teens lived in numerous places around the world and within various countries. In doing so, they developed extensive, informal, social-network ties with peers. In essence, teens developed some ability to communicate outside of the group's existing, formal communication lines. Educationally, however, this mobility greatly disrupted children's learning.

Taken together, these doctrines and policies had real consequences for the group's children and teenagers. Growing up under their regime had profound, and largely negative, implications for the second generation's attitudes toward the group's leaders and their own parents, who, the offspring feel, allowed them to suffer unnecessarily under their yoke.

### **Policies and Publications**

#### **A. Corporal Punishment**

By the mid-1970s, members of the Children of God were practicing heterosexual "sharing" within the group and "flirty-fishing" —a form of religiously sanctified prostitution designed to bring in resources and recruits—toward outsiders (see Berg, 1978b; Davis with Davis, 1984:118-120, 122-124). Eschewing birth control, the group experienced an explosion of births, and so much doubt existed about the identities of the children's fathers that, in 1978, Berg referred to these children as "Jesus Babies" (Berg, 1978a). According to Berg, the analogy was appropriate because these children, like Jesus, were born to mothers whose fathers were unknown (except, Berg clarified, Jesus' father actually was God [Berg,

1978a:5757]). Within the group itself, among the best-known Jesus Babies were two of Maria's children—Davidito (born in 1975 [see Berg and Maria, 1975]) and his half-sister Techí (born in 1979). Both of these children became the subject of leadership-produced books (Davidito, 1982; Techí, 1982), and Berg and his inner circle documented their child-rearing practices as models for their members' own families. Throughout the mid-1970s and into the 1980s, the Children of God published information about pregnancies and child-rearing, some of which Berg's eldest daughter Deborah wrote (see, for example, Family Care Services, 1981).

With the large number of children growing up in the group, problems constantly emerged, as often-overworked mothers living in communal dwellings tried to cope with their own offspring as well as the offspring of others. Some of the children had birth defects and/or behavioural problems, and Berg's response to parents attempting to cope with these conditions and other children had profound implications as the children matured into their teenage years.

Children's behavioural and physical/developmental problems, Berg concluded, usually reflected the problems of the parents, and these problems likely were chastenings by God. When, for example, Berg discussed children's problems, he concluded, "DON'T BLAME IT ON THE POOR LITTLE KID! HE'S JUST THE PRODUCT OF [THE PARENTS'] LACK OF DISCIPLINE & THEIR LACK OF OBEDIENCE, THAT'S ALL!" (Berg, 1983a:217 [capitals in original]). Berg felt that, in a social atmosphere of disobedience and poor discipline, the children were susceptible to evil spirits or demonic possession, and their resultant foolishness required spankings and beatings to drive out the evil. These kids were "rotten apples" whose behaviours had to be corrected before they hurt or corrupted others. Berg quoted approvingly the passage from Proverbs (Pr. 22:15) that says, "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him" (quoted in Berg, 1981b: 7875). This doctrine of spanking, if not beating, supposedly disobedient children and teens brought untold pain and suffering upon the children of the first generation, and many of the victims harbor lasting anger toward perpetrators who often used rods, wire, or other implements to punish them. Some of these perpetrators were their own parents.

### **B. Defection of Berg's Eldest Daughter Deborah**

Parental blame, however, was not an explanation that Berg and other leaders could apply to all instances of rebellion, since Berg experienced explosive rebellions among members of his immediate family. Most dramatically, Berg's eldest daughter Deborah left the organization in 1978 and within a few years of leaving became a damaging critic of her father and his group. For either Berg or his group to insist that parents were responsible for disruptive or rebellious teens was to indict Berg himself for his daughter's defection. And only in desperate circumstances—when a court forced them to—has Family leadership ever criticized Berg's teachings or practices directly (Amsterdam, 1995; Maria, 1995a). In a 1983 publication, which advocated using a stick or rod when spanking children, for example, Berg stated, "I certainly don't think I was a failure as a parent with Deborah . . ." (Berg, 1983b:222).

Even before Deborah's denunciation of her father and his movement, however, another Berg child may have rebelled against his father. In 1973, hikers in Switzerland found the body of Berg's son, Aaron, at the base of a high cliff. According to Deborah, Aaron had been questioning his father's claim to be God's End Time prophet, and finally the son concluded that the claim was not true. She is convinced, since she "lived through the same hell he did," that Aaron took his own life over their father's religious claims (Davis with Davis, 1984:129). Several years after his death, Aaron's daughter, Merry Berg, would cause the group no end of trouble, but at a high cost to herself.

Deborah's 1984 book was a scathing denunciation of her father and his spin on Christianity, and this denunciation included allegations that Berg had tried to commit incest with her (Davis with Davis, 1984:9, 204). She documented what she claimed to be his carnality, anti-Semitism, antinomianism, egomania, and his obsessive need to control; and through various Christian and secular media outlets, she denounced her father and his mission. Berg struck back by publishing negative accounts against his daughter and her new partner, which included allegations of physical violence and pedophilia against him (Berg, 1984:283). The damage, however, against Berg and his group was substantial. Within a few years of her book's

publication, Deborah would play an important role in the life of another rebellious relative—her niece and Berg's grandchild, Merry Berg.

### **C. Merry Berg**

Born in 1972, Merry grew up in the Children of God, even traveling with members who visited Libya's Moammar Gadhafi in 1975 (Kent interview with Merry Berg, 1992:4-5; see Davis with Davis, 1984:120). As a 9-year-old, Merry and a girlfriend allegedly suffered sexual assaults by adult men who were involved with the group's "Music with Meaning" program, including, she claims, one of the group's more famous converts, former Fleetwood Mac guitarist Jeremy Spenser (Kent interview with Merry Berg, 1992:41-43; Ward, 1995:91). In late December 1983, Merry arrived at her grandfather's household (Kent interview with Merry Berg, 1992:19), and soon she allegedly was involved in a wide range of sexual activities with Berg and other males, often having adult women facilitating the sexual encounters (Kent interview with Merry Berg, 1992:31-37). She remained in the Berg household for three and one half years (Kent interview with Merry Berg, 1992:34), but over time her inflated image of Berg collapsed as she repeatedly saw him drunk, depressed, unable to eat properly (because of throat and stomach damage from his alcohol consumption), contradicting himself and making unfulfilled prophecies, all the while assaulting her (Kent interview with Merry Berg, 1992:60-62).

After Merry expressed doubts about her grandfather, Berg and other adults around him initiated six months of intense and forceful efforts to dissuade these doubts, which included exorcisms, lengthy prayer sessions, spankings, head-shakings, threats of severe beatings, and various humiliations (see Davidito, 1987; Maria, 1992:9-10). A British judge later concluded that what Merry Berg "went through was a form of torture" (Ward, 1995:152). Berg finally shipped off his rebellious granddaughter to her uncle's house in Macau. This location developed rapidly into a forced labour and re-indoctrination program—the group called it a Detention Teen Camp—designed to break the wills of the rebellious teen children of the Family's adult leaders (see Kent and Hall, 2000). For another three and one half years, Merry endured sexual and physical assaults, hard labour,

constant humiliations, and obligatory study of her grandfather's teachings until a nervous breakdown landed her in a mental institution. Eventually, she left Macau and went to recuperate in the United States, and she soon ended up living with her aunt—the Children of God critic and daughter of Berg, Deborah.

Even though, in 1982, Berg himself had written about his alcoholism and its dire consequences on his ability to eat (Berg, 1982b), he and other Family leaders continued to deny that Merry's doubts about her grandfather's elevated spiritual status might have been warranted. Instead, as it had with other rebels against Berg, the group wrote off Merry as having been possessed by a devil. The Family leadership repeatedly followed this pattern—disdain the critiques by teens and others, and attribute them to an evil force. In a particularly telling comment in 1992, Berg wrote that one morning he received a scripture (reputedly from God) along with "a rather horrible picture":

And I got the most gruesome picture of Mene [i.e., Merry] with her mouth all red & dripping, drooling with blood like a vampire! Of course, she's just a little ignorant nobody, but it shows you how the Devil is using her. Even Deborah is just being used (Berg, 1992:3 [underline in original]).

This identification of teen critic Merry as a blood-dripping vampire is an image that Family leadership would use again against its critics, this time to demean the criticisms by adult children of first-generation members whom Family leaders have labeled as demons called Vandari (Roselle, 2003).

#### **D. Teen Training Camps and Victor Programs**

Merry became only one of hundreds of teens whom Family adults placed in various kinds of teen training camps or delinquent teen/"Victor" programs where they were supposed to gain "victory" over their doubts and accept or reaffirm Berg as God's End Time prophet. During the mid- to late-1980s, pre-teens and teens around the world entered these programs in countries such as Brazil, Denmark, England, Italy, Japan, Macau, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, Scotland, Switzerland, and Thailand (Kent and Hall, 2000:57). Certainly, variations existed among different

camps, and generally the camps were less assaultive than the Victor or Delinquent Teens programs. Nevertheless, some the leaders of these camps still committed egregious, and probably criminal, abuses against teens. Often, children as young as 11 or 12 years old attended these camps, subsequently living in countries far away from their parents or step-parents (Van Zandt, 1991:171).

#### **E. The Cover-Up and Its Impact upon the Teens**

By the early 1990s, the Family had dissolved the Victor programs, and probably the severe pressure and scrutiny under which governments, the media, and a British court had placed the group help to explain the programs' demise. Government apprehensions about the Children of God/the Family kids took place as early as 1983 near Vancouver, Canada (Mulgrew and Budgen, 1983); but a series of raids in the late 1980s (in Argentina) and early 1990s (Spain, Australia, France, and again in Argentina) indicated to leaders that secular authorities had learned of the group's sexual and physical abuses and were willing to act upon them. Moreover, in January 1994, a child custody case in England pitted a grandmother against her daughter over the daughter's fitness to rear her child within the Family.

The Family, in response, burned controversial documents, published public denials of sexual impropriety between children and adults, and created media homes containing carefully selected teens who rehearsed probable questions and appropriate answers before reporters or academics arrived (Kent and Krebs, 1998:38). While no researcher has published an extensive analysis of the impact that these events had upon teens within the Family, many of those teens observed serious discrepancies between the group's public posture and their own private experiences. Externally, to government officials, to the court, and to the media, Family leaders—often with the assistance of some teens themselves—were denying abuses that they had either suffered or witnessed. Internally; however, the Family cautiously acknowledged that at least adult/teen sex had occurred.

A 1990 publication, for example, reported what members already knew, and in the process managed to eroticize, the group's teenage girls:

accountability. Family leaders, however, responded in much the same way as did their founder (David Berg) when his granddaughter Merry challenged him. They published a letter in which their younger critics turned into blood-dripping, grotesque demons named Vandari (Maria and Peter, 2002:para. 135-146). In essence, the leaders of the older generation quite literally had demonized the leaders of another, and in doing so disregarded their cries for justice.

Even though the Family's charter ostensibly gave most teens limited degrees of freedom (The Family, 1995), the older leaders continue their attempts to intrude into the private lives of youth with publications such as the *Loving Jesus!* series. This series instructed males and females to imagine, while masturbating, that they were making love to Jesus (Maria, 1995b; 1995c). Then, in 1996, leadership seriously considered a program called the "marriage of the generations," which presumably would have strongly encouraged sex between first- and second-generation members (Maria and Peter, 2000:sec. 174-181).

Leadership's consideration of fostering sex between the generations actually may reflect a growing fear on the part of first-generation members. As those members approach old age, most of them lack any long-term financial or medical planning for their declining years. This aging generation will face a fundamental crisis in the next decade or two, and leadership's serious consideration of attempting to bond the two generations very well may be looking to the future.

Outside of the group, it is very unlikely, however, that the adult children of the first generation will respond kindly when their parents begin requesting support from them. They feel that their parents made bad mistakes by joining, blinded themselves to the abuses against their children (and often contributed to those abuses), and continue to delude themselves by remaining attached to the group and sending it money. Having felt exploited as children and youth, this cohort is unlikely to let the first generation exploit its members again. In the Family and other controversial groups that burst onto the scene during the early 1970s, a crisis of the elderly looms over the horizon, and many adult children of that greying generation firmly believe that their parents deserve whatever hardships befall them.

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\*David Berg used several pseudonyms over the years. All publications that came from Berg list him as the first author. Second names, in brackets (e.g., [Mo]) are the pseudonyms under which Berg published that particular piece.

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## New Summaries

### Ananda

#### Strong Psychological Pressure to Gain Followers' Property

Nine people heading the **Ananda**, an international religious association based in Nocera Umbra [sic], Italy, near Perugia, have been arrested and accused of inducing followers, "under strong psychological pressure," to turn over their possessions to the organization. The charges include coercion into slavery and swindling the mentally incompetent. (Perugia, Internet, 3/2/04)

### Apostles and Prophets Church of Jesus

#### Government Ban

Uganda police have moved to shut down the **Apostles and Prophets Church of Jesus**, a group in the Kanungu District, fearing a mass suicide like the one involving The Restoration of the Ten Commandments movement. The Apostles, based in Kampala, Uganda, and with a branch in Kanungu, have reportedly sold off their property and are waiting for a dramatic event that will take them to heaven. (Catholic World News, Internet, 2/20/04)

### Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph

#### Death Sentence

**Aum Shinrikyo** chemist Masami Tsuchiya has been sentenced to death for leading the effort to create the nerve gas used in the group's 1995 attack on the Tokyo subway that killed 12 and injured thousands. Prosecutors said Tsuchiya, the eleventh Aum member to be sentenced to death, was second in responsibility for the attack only to Aum leader Shoko Asahara. (AP, Internet, 1/30/04)

### Guru Allegedly Influenced Followers in Prison

Prosecutor's say that **Aum Shinrikyo** leader **Shoko Asahara**, now awaiting sentencing for the 1995 Tokyo subway poison gassing, wrote letters to followers — while they were in custody and he himself had not yet been arrested — successfully urging them not to renounce him and not to cooperate with authorities. "The effect of the