

Book Reviews

Life in The Family: An Oral History of the Children of God. By James D. Chancellor. Syracuse University Press, 2000. xiii + 291 pp. \$29.95 cloth.

Although parts of James D. Chancellor's study of the Children of God/The Family need independent verification for important claims, this book will interest scholars. A theologian, Chancellor's personal faith perspective probably helped him gain unprecedented access to current Family members. He "interacted with over one thousand disciples, formally interviewing at length over two hundred" (p. xix) as he visited homes in North America, Europe, and Asia (p. xviii). "About three thousand [people] remain as full-time disciples" (p. 19), and the author estimated that he interviewed "approximately 15 percent of the adult disciples" (p. 159, n. 2). Moreover, he "immersed" himself in the scholarly literature on the Family, as well as hostile accounts by opponents and former members. (I regret finding myself in the awkward position of having to point out that his listing of scholarly articles failed to include several of my own.) Chancellor had "wide access to their literature," some of which "has been repudiated and withdrawn from all homes" (p. 95). He was careful to lay out for readers his financial independence from the group, and indicated that Family representatives read portions of the manuscript in an effort to attain historical accuracy without having editorial control over the content (p. xix, n. 5). Chancellor fully realized that his methodological decisions meant that he could not tell "the whole story" about the group, and he was cognizant of the difficulties of writing a corporate biography (p. xxii).

Within these boundaries, Chancellor presents his findings by interweaving primary Children of God documents with interviews of current members who lived through particular periods of the group's developments. (As an aside, I always get slightly nervous when I read interviews whose informants talk smoothly in complete sentences. People do not talk that way, yet all of Chancellor's quoted excerpts are neat and tidy.) The presentation of information through the voices of current members has its strengths, even if it often is difficult to ascertain the universality or even accuracy of their claims. All told, the author has produced an important book, even if some may have good reason to criticize parts of it.

The first chapter provides an overview of the Children of God's history, mentioning in passing many of the issues that the book takes up later in greater depth. Necessarily, new religion scholars will recognize

the broad dimensions of the group's history, abuses and all. The second chapter discusses how people converted to the faith, and in doing so the author rejects any "deliberate deception" or "coercive persuasion" to explain why people initially joined (pp. 43–44). Many of the converts, however, had painful life experiences, which may have been factors in their decisions to join (p. 49). As the theology evolved, founder David Berg (a.k.a. Father David or Dad) "clarified his status as God's unique Prophet for the End Time" and "called upon" his followers to "submit fully to his absolute spiritual authority" (p. 65). Alas, some of the historical details provided in this chapter and others are debatable, but more about that later.

Chapter 3 focuses on doctrinal issues, including members' recognition that Berg was "fully human" even as many members fused their love for him with their love for God (p. 71). Rather than seeing members' continued involvement in the context of their feelings toward Berg, "[f]or most disciples, primary devotion and loyalty is to The Family itself, to the community of people with whom they share their lives" (p. 76). Despite apparent failures of Berg's apocalyptic predictions for 1993, belief in the imminence of the End Time remains strong (p. 85). Strong, too, is the presence of Satan (they believe), onto whom the group assigns "[o]pposition and persecution, physical illness, community discord, lack of disciplined behavior on the part of children, and personal failures of all types . . ." (p. 80). At the same time, however, members believe that they receive messages from spiritual entities, including tragically killed teenage members and the deceased Berg himself (pp. 76–79, 175).

Chapter 4 enters into some of the most controversial aspects of the Family's history and theology: "sexual relationships among adult members, the Flirty Fishing ministry, and the sexuality of children." It concludes with a discussion about "sexuality as spiritual metaphor and heavenly reward" (p. 96). Although Chancellor indicated that "[w]ith the exception of extensive interviews with Peter Amsterdam [one of the two current leaders], this study avoids top-level leadership and concentrates on disciples at work in the field" (p. xix), this chapter necessarily mentions Berg's own sexual practices and their impact upon group theology and activities. "By 1971, he was engaging in sexual intercourse with female disciples within his personal household" (p. 97), and around 1978 "Father David's explicit edicts regarding sexual practices became directly available to all disciples" (p. 105). These edicts addressed "the positive value of nudity and frequent sexual sharing," at the same time they "provided the disciples insight into sexual practices in his own home" (p. 105). Through these edicts "[h]e was elevating open sexuality to a near sacramental status" (pp. 105–6). Within the community, adult sexual sharing strained, and often broke, marriages and shattered emotions (p. 107), yet many disciples portrayed it as "the highest expression of the ideal of mutual love and mutual sacrifice for the good of the community" (p. 109). Its

translation, however, into “flirty-fishing”—“a tool of evangelism, recruitment, and [financial/material] support” (p. 112)—caused many people to leave the movement (p. 117) even as some members recalled that era as “the high point of their lives” (p. 115). Prohibitions on birth control led to an explosion of children, and many young persons born out of these unions did not know their fathers (see pp. 117–18, 225, 228). Even current co-leader Peter Amsterdam had to admit to Chancellor that the involvement of some Family women in escort services “was what could be labeled prostitution” (quoted on p. 125).

On the hotly debated issue of child sexual abuse, Chancellor is “confident that child sexual abuse is less frequent in The Family than in society at large,” immediately adding, “[h]owever, this has not always been the case” (p. 133). After pages of discussions about the dates of various publications and sexual activities that stemmed from them, Chancellor was unequivocal that “throughout the late 1970s and the early 1980s, sexual activity between adults and children was an accepted practice in a number of communities” (p. 223). While this conclusion should silence some academics who have attempted to downplay the occurrences of adult/child sex in this group, Chancellor still neglects to discuss the issue of restitution to these victims. Indeed, the sexual assaults experienced by the first wave of children born into the Children of God, combined with the physical, emotional, and sexual abuses that many of them endured in Teen Training Camps and the extremely punitive Victor Programs, almost certainly explains Chancellor’s conclusion that “[r]elatively few of the first wave of children born in the early 1970s have remained” (p. 242). In fact, among the “scores of older teenagers” who left the Family, “some bore the scars of emotional and physical abuse as well as evidence [of] very serious sexual exploitation” (p. 195). This is a remarkable, but accurate, conclusion.

Chapter 5 discusses current aspects of members’ lives: how they worship (pp. 151–53); how and where they witness (pp. 154–64); how they finance their activities (pp. 164–69); and how they educate their young (pp. 170–76). Then, for reasons beyond the author’s own intentions, chapter 6 caught my attention. Amidst discussions about “the cost of discipleship,” the group’s paranoia came through very clearly about its opponents, particularly those it assigns to the anticult movement. Certainly Children of God members were the targets of deprogramming attempts (pp. 180–86) and hostile scrutiny from critics and governments across much of the globe. Together these reactions to the group led Chancellor to conclude about members that, “[t]heir hostility toward the anticult industry appears to be well earned” (p. 186). Yet, in chapter 7 and elsewhere, Chancellor’s own study documented widespread child sexual abuse, prostitution, infections from sexually transmitted diseases (p. 117), illegitimate children, financial abuse of disciples by Family leaders (pp. 91, 164), corporal punishment of children,

often administered with paddles (p. 238, see 233, 239), exorcisms (p. 220), extended “silence restrictions” imposed upon teens (pp. 219, 237, 238–39, 240), and group misrepresentation in order to access and appropriate the resources of society (p. 89). No wonder the group generated so many opponents! No wonder some parents were desperate enough to attempt to kidnap their adult children out of the group, and no wonder state authorities around the world raided Family colonies! For much of its history, as Chancellor presents, the group was violent against its own members (through such actions as heavy corporal punishment, harsh work regimes [pp. 239, 241, see 235], and various forms of sexual assault), yet Chancellor was sufficiently blinded to his own evidence that he wrote, “[v]iolence of any kind on the part of the Children [of God] was not part of God’s plan and would not be countenanced in God’s End Time Army” (p. 177).

Accepting the group’s belief in an anticult conspiracy against it, Chancellor let the Family’s own bias creep into some details when describing a particularly dramatic attack against it—the theft of documents by former members Edward Priebe and Daniel Welsh (pp. 28–29). As Chancellor stated, Priebe and Welsh used deception to gain entry into the Family home in the Philippines and removed trunks of old (and often sensitive and damning) Children of God documents and videos. These documents and videos became the basis of several raids against Family homes around the world, none of which led to criminal child abuse convictions. Chancellor wrote his account of their actions “[a]ccording to Family sources,” and asserted as fact that “Mr. Priebe and Mr. Welsh were aided and financed by anticult groups in the United States and assisted by persons with the Manila office of the evangelical group, Youth With a Mission (YWAM)” (p. 28). This assertion about American and Filipino anticult aide and finance was news to me, so I contacted Priebe and queried him about it. Priebe categorically denied any such sponsorship (while agreeing with some parts of Chancellor’s account and qualifying others). Until I see definitive evidence to support the assertion, therefore, I must conclude that Chancellor’s sole reliance on Family sources served him poorly on this issue.

Details like these will keep many people debating with Chancellor for a long time. Certainly, for example, former members will dispute the conditions under which Family leadership backed away from countenancing adult/child sex. Already on the Internet, for example, one former high-ranking member (who goes by the name James Penn) reported his memories of the “child sex” debate within the Family’s inner circle, and backed them up with quotes from documents (<<http://www.geocities.com/magicgreenshirt/>>, accessed 8 March 2004). Others (including me) would emphasize more the transformative role played by the 1992–1995 British custody case, called the British Isles or simply the BI case.

In his epilogue, Chancellor implies that various Family-sponsored aide and missionary programs around the world seem to be providing young members with inspirational projects that likely will keep most of them as members (pp. 247–48). I am not so sure. Despite a Family charter alleged to have eliminated most abuses and excesses, leadership still pressures teens to fantasize that they are making love to Jesus when they masturbate, a point that extends Chancellor's discussion of the "Loving Jesus Revolution" (pp. 146–49). Moreover, at twenty-one years of age, apparently young adult women now are feeling pressure from group doctrines to share sexually with men of their parents' generation. I predict that these kinds of intrusions will continue to drive away people from the group, as members realize they can perform acts of charity outside of the group's often meddling directives.

And so the debate about the Family will continue. Amidst that debate, Chancellor's significant study sits as the best academic overview of the group to date. Social scientists, feminists, and some former members may tell the same story very differently, and certainly they will provide less kind interpretations of many facts. Likewise, other studies will focus more on the Family's leaders, whom Chancellor chose not to explore, for the most part (p. xix), but who play a crucial role in its overall story. A wave of scholarship is about to begin on the crises faced by the aging baby-boomers of this group and others, as they enter their declining years without "pensions, retirement plans, [or plans about] how or where we will live when we all get old" (quoted on p. 86, see also 164). All things considered, Chancellor's prodigious research efforts have produced a volume that scholars will benefit from reading, and he is to be commended for his achievement.

Stephen A. Kent, University of Alberta

Prostitution, Polygamy, and Power: Salt Lake City, 1847–1918. By Jeffrey Nichols. University of Illinois Press, 2002. 247 pages. \$34.95 cloth.

Nichols investigates "prostitutes and the responses to them in Salt Lake City from its founding to the end of World War I" (p. 4). It is likely that readers of *Nova Religio* will find the "responses" the most instructive: how the Mormons and Gentiles (non-Mormons, both evangelical and pragmatist) played out their struggle for control of the city on the bodies of women. In this struggle against the religious "other," each side makes use of a time honored *ad hominem*: accuse your opponent of sexual immorality. As in Euripides' *Bacchae*, where the Bacchantes are branded as orgiastic—the charge itself luring the palace into disastrous engagement—or as with the Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas, accused of child abuse by federal agents during the 1993 Mount Carmel siege, such accusations prove potent weapons. Such weapons, however, can



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.