



## THE MORAL CAREER OF A NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

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*Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd*

Some academic colleagues might have concluded that the setting and circumstances of our good humor were a little odd. There we sat, a trio of seemingly staid college professors from Michigan and Arkansas, in a noisy Annapolis, Maryland restaurant, feasting on steak sandwiches and French-fries with three attractive women and Peter of Amsterdam. Lanky, 44 years of age, with dark, gray-streaked hair and benevolent features, Peter was co-leader (along with his newly married wife, Maria) of The Family, a much-maligned religious “cult” whose world headquarters location was a closely guarded secret. We had spent the afternoon in a lengthy interview with Peter in a rented condominium two blocks from the harbor area of old downtown Annapolis. But eventually it was time for a dinner break at a nearby Fuddruckers, and all of us, especially Peter, were convulsed with laughter in reaction to Larry’s outrageous, deadpan jokes as we ate.

Our hosts were unusually committed religious individuals. Their lives were organized communally around the belief that they and other Family members were in constant, personal communion with Jesus Christ, entrusted to witness to the world in leadership roles as His End-time Messengers. In spite of these convictions they were very far from being stern or puritanical in attitude or demeanor. Sitting around the dining table with Peter were his 22 year old daughter Bethany, his

traveling assistant Joy, local Washington D.C. Family Member Cindy, who expertly “provisioned” our gratis meal from the Fuddrucker’s management, and the three of us: Gary and Gordon Shepherd, both academic sociologists on the faculties of Oakland University and the University of Central Arkansas respectively, and Lawrence Lilliston, professor of psychology at Oakland University.

We had been invited by Peter several months earlier to meet with him and his small traveling entourage in Annapolis. He was coming to the U.S., after residing many years abroad, to visit his parents and celebrate with them their 50th wedding anniversary. It also would be a good time, he thought, to visit with various academics who had developed research interests in the study of The Family as a new religious movement for a candid discussion of recent, transitional changes in the group’s practices and structure of governance. Several years previously Larry and Gary had visited Family homes in Southern California to observe their communal life and assess the physical, mental and emotional well being of Family children. (Subsequently they were asked to testify as expert witnesses in several court cases in which the abuse of children in Family homes had been alleged by some of the group’s detractors. The results of their study, in fact, showed that Family children were normal and healthy, with no evidence of abuse.)

The initial live-in assessment visits in California—the first ever carried out by academic researchers in Family Homes—were outgrowths of an intense escalation of general, public hysteria over the perceived threat of dangerous “cults” in our society. The time period during which the visits occurred followed immediately upon the abrupt, fiery, and tragic conclusion of conflict between the Texas Branch Davidians and the FBI in the spring of 1993. News media and cultural pundits around the world revived intense, wide-spread discussion of “cults” and “brainwashing”—somewhat hoary notions that by then had almost lapsed into dormancy with the fading away of a previous spurt of similar anxieties surrounding the 1978 People’s Temple murders and mass suicide in Jonestown,

Guyana. Now, with the smoke still ascending from the pathetic wreckage of Mt. Carmel, ordinary people everywhere wondered anew: Who are the kinds of people who would become mortally committed to such a seemingly alien and threatening system? Are there many other such groups? Where are they? What alarming business are they up to? What should be done about them? Several groups were quickly singled out by self-proclaimed “cult experts” as likely suspects, including, prominently, Peter and Maria’s group, The Family. This was not the first time in its relatively young history that The Family had been the subject of investigation and condemnation.

The history of The Family began in the late 1960s through the evangelizing efforts of a Christian Missionary Alliance preacher by the name of David Berg. Over the years Berg increasingly had become estranged from the strictures of denominational Christianity and, at mid-life, was faced with a lack-luster career in the ministry and an uncertain future. On a visit to his mother in Huntington Beach, California, he and his four teen-aged children initiated an improvisational ministry directed at counter-culture youth who congregated in the area. A number of erstwhile hippies and disillusioned young people were attracted to the Berg children’s energetic coffee-house and street corner performances that featured Christian-oriented pop music, soul winning, witnessing based on a message of immediate, personal salvation through passionate faith in Jesus (unencumbered by the formal pieties and inhibiting practices of establishment religion) and Berg’s Bible based, apocalyptic preaching on the gathering forces of the Anti-Christ and the imminent end of human civilization. A small nucleus of these young people, whose idealism and yearning for direction were stimulated by the warmth of Christian fellowship and communal sharing, became attached to David Berg. They began referring to Berg as “Moses” David (for leading them out of the lost wilderness of modern, secular life). But, as time passed, more commonly they called him Father David, or simply “Dad.”

Over the next decade, Father David’s young flock of dis-

iples called themselves The Children of God (COG). Both through new recruits and natural increase (the excess of births over deaths and defections in a group), membership in COG went from a few dozen to approximately 5,000 by 1978. The Children of God spread out in numerous colonies located both in the U.S. and abroad, where they lived communally in large homes with as many as 80 residents per unit. They did not hold secular jobs, but dedicated themselves full-time to witnessing and missionary work to win souls for Jesus and proclaim their end-time message. For material sustenance they came to depend on financial contributions from sympathetic outsiders, publication and sale of group literature, religious posters, and musical tapes, and the practice of “provisioning.” Provisioning means soliciting donations of foodstuff, clothing materials, and other household needs and supplies from local merchants, both wholesalers and retailers, who often are quite willing to dispose of perishable goods, damaged stock, or obsolete merchandise to a Christian ministry group.

In addition to religious expression through pop music, rejection of establishment institutions, and experimentation with communal living arrangements, COG (with the enthusiastic urging of Father David) also embraced the relaxed sexual mores of the 1960s counter-culture. Theological justification for sexual freedom outside the boundaries of matrimony was offered as the Christian Law of Love, expounded by Father David to include sexual as well as spiritual forms of love. The practice of “sexual sharing” became a distinctive group norm in which COG members, including married couples, were encouraged to discard selfish, possessive motives and strengthen their communal network ties to one another through consensual sexual relations. The communal life style, involving withdrawal from participation in conventional secular and religious organizations, and especially sexual sharing in the name of a higher religious law, provoked a potent reaction. Mainstream Christians were scandalized. Angry, fearful parents, whose children had joined COG, mobilized in oppo-

sition. Police and legislative authorities were notified. “Deprogrammers” were hired to kidnap members of COG communes in order to forcibly eradicate the ostensibly pernicious effects of COG “brainwashing.” And the first, nationally organized anticult movement in 20th Century North America was formed, whose goal was the public exposure and suppression of deviant new religions.

Father David went into seclusion but continued to counsel and direct the affairs of an expanding network of COG colonies through his prolific writing. For the rest of his life he lived incognito with his second wife Maria (a young convert whose own father was a Nazarene preacher, and who later united with Peter as Berg’s successors) and a small retinue of aides, who periodically moved from one secret location to another. In the meantime, COG homes throughout the world regularly received communiqués from Dad through the mail, which came to be called “The Mo Letters.” (“Mo” was an abbreviated reference to Moses, reflecting the casual language style preferred by Berg’s young disciples.) By the time of his death in 1994, only a handful of his followers had personally seen or talked with David Berg, but all felt they knew him well through the accumulation of over 3,000 Mo Letters in which he had uninhibitedly proclaimed prophecies and instruction on doctrine, the group’s organization and mission, and behavioral guidelines for daily life.

Father David’s reclusiveness combined with the global dispersion of COG colonies in the 1970s led to the imposition of an elaborate, hierarchical structure of supervision over the group’s communal life and evangelical activities. Subsequently factions formed, inequities emerged, internal bickering and complaints of oppression surfaced. Shocked to learn of the discord and problems common to groups whose size and organizational complexity had dramatically increased, Father David responded precipitously by “firing” the entire leadership of his organization and dismantling the hierarchical system of administering COG communal homes. Out of the organizational rubble emerged the reincarnation of The

Children of God under a new name: The Family of Love, soon shortened to The Family, the name by which Berg's adherents are known today.

Representing a new start for Father David's remaining loyal followers, The Family quickly became burdened with a sensational new controversy by implementing the practice of "Flirty Fishing." Flirty Fishing (or FFing) dramatized The Family's radial fusion of unrepressed sexuality with Christian evangelizing to win souls for Jesus. FFing meant that Family members (especially women) were not only permitted but actually encouraged to offer themselves sexually to potential listeners as a way of converting their souls to Christ. FFing, after all, was seen simply as an extension of The Law of Love and sexual sharing, which the group had embraced shortly after its inception. It was justified as a sacrificial form of love in which Family members could reach lonely souls who might otherwise remain impervious to the saving message of Jesus Christ.

Once publicized, the practice of FFing stirred an avalanche of renewed outrage against The Family and David Berg's apparently perverted heresies. *What*, outsiders began asking, was happening to young children growing up in Family communal homes while their parents were out FFing for Jesus? Rumors circulated that Family children were neglected and physically and sexually abused. The Cult Awareness Network, an anticult organization with roots going back to the original anti-COG campaigns of the early 1970s, prompted government officials to take action against The Family in Australia, Brazil, Argentina, France, and England. Police raided family homes, adults were arrested and put in prison, and Family children were placed in the custody of social services. In all cases, charges were eventually dismissed and Family members were released from jail to be reunited with their children. But the group was under siege, and some changes would have to be made if it expected to survive, let alone flourish as an end-time missionary organization. And, in spite of their expectations about the imminent end of the world, the former Children of God were now increasingly confronted with the

tasks of caring for and socializing a second and even third generation of their own children in Family homes. By 1993, close to 70 percent of the total family membership around the world were minors under the age of eighteen.

Sociologists of religion have long focused attention on the emergence and subsequent careers of innovative religious groups like The Family. The term “sect” is usually applied to groups that deliberately split off from an already established parent organization, typically over doctrinal disputes and/or a desire to return to a former purity of faith and practice that disgruntled reformers perceive to have become diluted over time. Thousands of such schisms have, of course, occurred in the history of Christianity alone. The term “cult” is more often applied to groups that markedly deviate, doctrinally and otherwise, from existing faiths; they are typically founded *de novo* by prophetic figures who attract followers on the basis of charismatic claims to transcendent insight and instruction, or even a divinely appointed mission. The origins of Christianity itself might serve as an example of this sort of religious innovation. The Family’s emphasis on the Bible and its attempt to reinstate such early Christian practices as “sharing all things in common” and full-time dedication to evangelize the world for Jesus “without purse or script,” taking “no thought for the morrow,” are sectarian Christian themes. At the same time, its radical sexual teachings and practices, its origins in the prophetic claims of David Berg, and its continuing dependency on direct revelatory guidance from Jesus (as well as Dad’s departed spirit) clearly mark The Family as a new religious “cult movement” in the sociological sense.

Unfortunately, the sociological concept of a cult, as a certain type of new religious movement, has not retained its morally neutral meaning in the arena of public discourse. Interview a hundred people at random about what the term “cult” conjures up for them, and you are likely to hear 98 or 99 allusions to frighteningly bizarre and menacing organizations that are consciously and fanatically engaged in fraudulent, criminal activities under the quasi-hypnotic control of a

maniacally disturbed leader. Groups approximating such a caricature do, from time to time, emerge. Perhaps the best recent example would be the murderous Aum Shinrikyo movement in Japan, with its poison gas attacks in large city subway systems. But the vast majority of new religious movements are non-violent and sincere, however strange their beliefs may seem to unsympathetic outsiders. To the degree that they are able to attract and maintain even a small following for a brief period of time (relatively rare, actually), a major obstacle to their mere survival, let alone growth in membership, is the concerted public opposition against them that is almost always aroused by discovery of their presence and perceived deviant practices in host communities. How do a few such groups in fact survive, at least through a second generation of adherents, and even eventually prosper in the truly unusual case?

Like individuals, groups may be thought of as having careers. A career entails passage through certain typical stages in one's history. A *moral* career involves patterned transitions in the way individuals or groups justify themselves and are correspondingly judged by others over time. The typical career pattern for new religious movements which attempt to live among and convert others is to gradually find ways to modify those beliefs and practices that outsiders find most offensive. One thinks, for example, of late nineteenth century Mormonism abandoning polygamy as a requisite for its acceptance into American society. This process of shifting patterns of group conduct and corresponding moral justifications is fraught with risk. The group must achieve a compromise that does not mortally wound the integrity of its central tenets, causing permanent disillusionment and disintegration of the faithful; at the same time it must sufficiently mute the active condemnation of external critics determined to destroy what they have been attacking as a threat to society.

These were the kinds of considerations on our minds as we prepared to interview Peter in Annapolis. Compounding our interest in The Family's contemporary struggle to resist the worldly forces of dissolution was the fact that David Berg—

founder and patriarchal Father of The Family—had recently died at the age of 75. The passing of a charismatic founder typically represents a crucial turning point moment in the moral career of a new religious movement. How and by whom is a prophetic figure to be succeeded? Will factions and a fresh power struggle develop? Will the rank and file members preserve their faith and follow the directives of new leadership?

Peter had joined The Family in California in 1971. He quickly was thrust into leadership roles in Family communes and was an exemplary loyalist to Father David throughout the tumultuous decades of the 1970s and 80s. In addition to his devotion to Berg and the Family's end-time message, Peter possessed cool-headed, practical intelligence. He eventually ascended to a ranking position in World Services (WS), The Family's administrative staff organization, where he assumed primary responsibility for the group's financial decision making. He had daily contact with Dad and also with Maria, with whom he fell in love. We learned from Peter that, as Father David aged, both Maria and Peter were conceded greater and greater control of the daily operations and Family programs sponsored by World Services. By the time of his death, Father David virtually had withdrawn from active leadership of his flock except to be consulted by Maria and Peter for approval of their plans and projects, and to write an occasional Mo Letter for distribution to Family Homes.

What emerged was a very unusual, interactive, teamwork form of leadership based on Peter and Maria's intimate relationship and the input of World Services. Without Dad's reassuring presence and instant counsel, Peter and Maria (especially Maria) felt the need to turn to God in constant prayer for guidance in leading The Family organization, which, over the years, had become very program oriented. According to Peter, he and Maria pray daily together, sometimes for hours, for wisdom and revelation. Maria takes the lead in prayer, especially in raising *questions* for The Lord. (Peter informed us that Maria has a "zillion questions" about every conceivable topic; that she feels personally inadequate to lead and is "des-

perate in prayer,” but is also full of faith that all queries will be answered by the Lord.) Peter simultaneously prays “lightly” in tongues, asking God to help him channel answers to Maria’s prayers. The answers given through *Peter* are what The Family now considers to be prophecies. Peter says that he doesn’t hear audible words spoken in the process, that it’s more like an internal conversation. He says that the first line or preface sentence to prophecy is “dictated,” but then he never knows exactly what will follow. He simply must be willing to commence speaking and exercise great faith in order to utter Jesus’ exact words. (Sometimes Dad’s departed spirit also speaks through Peter, using casual rather than Biblical sounding rhetoric.) Peter confesses that he’s often surprised at what comes out. Once a prophecy is given and recorded it must be judged and validated (to avoid the potential of “run-away” prophecies which reflect the speaker’s own personal feelings rather than the mind of the Lord). This is a teamwork task, but Maria has the final say. (When asked who now was the most prominent person in The Family, Peter immediately responded, “Maria, by light years. I’m glad. I hope it stays that way.”) Maria will not publish anything she does not think is right. This takes pressure off of Peter, who believes that official prophecies disseminated on a monthly basis to Family homes are now clearer, more understandable and provide better direction than in the past.

Peter conceded that their publications often get them in trouble with the outside world, but they also are an extremely important mechanism for keeping The Family together. Through them Maria is affectionately known to Family members as “Mama,” a living exemplar of sweet sincerity and obedient humility in serving the Lord and carrying out his instructions. Extending the teamwork approach to modern revelation, World Services staff writers submit all their work to committee reviews before publication. Peter and Maria themselves submit official statements to committee review (Peter had previous, lengthy experience as a WS staff writer). And even some of Dad’s MO Letters in later years were edited and

modified through the review process. There have thus evolved some stabilizing procedures for tempering and controlling charismatic impulses, with an eye to anticipating their practical consequences for the contemporary Family and its continued commitment to end-time proselytizing.

A short time after Father David's death, World Services issued a lengthy document called *The Love Charter*. After months of preparation and committee revisions, *The Charter* was disseminated globally to all Family homes as a formal codification of governance procedures. It contained a detailed specification of Family members' rights and responsibilities and was legitimated with liberal quotations from many of Father David's old MO Letters. Among other things, *The Charter* reaffirmed The Family's commitment to The Law of Love and the principle of sexual sharing, but also laid down elaborate rules and penalties for sex with minors and having sexual relations with non-members (no more FFing, which actually had been proscribed since the late 1980s). But first and foremost *The Charter* was intended to streamline the bureaucratic regulation of Family homes by giving them more autonomy to make their own decisions about how best to organize their domestic lives, raise their children, and carry out their numerous evangelical ministries and humanitarian outreach programs. Greater organizational independence, it is hoped, will lead homes to be more prayerful and reliant on God's direct, personal guidance for dealing with their local problems rather than relying exclusively on supervision from World Services.

Decentralizing control within the Family is a reflection of both the need to assuage certain fears of suspicious outsiders and the reciprocal perception that the world at large is, in fact, apparently becoming less hostile to the Family's existence. Family homes and members' lives are becoming more stable due to a dramatic drop in the threat of serious run-ins with authorities, which yields more permanent residencies for members. Ironically, this very peace and normalcy stir up other problems. Persecution, flight from arrest, and other hard tests for God's spiritual elite are supposed to escalate as

the forces of the Anti-Christ begin to gather and history winds down. Old time members who have sacrificed the better part of their adult years faithfully proclaiming an imminent end-time message must find ways to rationalize the unexpectedly tardy arrival of those apocalyptic events that have been at the heart of Family's *raison d'être*—events that, with members' own increasing sense of accommodation to the world, actually seem to be receding in immediacy rather than looming ever closer.

Teenagers and young adults born into The Family are also susceptible to millennial doubts as the years go more peacefully by. They have acquired a taken-for-granted interpretation of their lives as unfolded to them by elders and peers, but their motives for choosing to remain Family members are likely to be quite different from the conversion convictions of their parents. The Family has conferred responsibility and even significant authority on their young in the operation and governance of homes. But as the constant round of home-chores, childcare, and witnessing eats up the days, life becomes routinized. Challenge, even danger—the sort of tests foretold by numerous end-time prophecies with projections of heroic opportunities that always seem thrilling to many youth—are not typically present in their actual experience. Boredom, fascination with the forbidden, rebelliousness—the normal Western teen-age maladies—spread easier and more widely when not countered by actual activities and events that approximate the excitement of youthful fantasies.

Other, earlier groups have weathered similar delays in millennial expectations and continue to flourish. Jews still await a messianic coming, Christians a messianic return. Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses all were founded on the primary assumption of a swift, apocalyptic end, to name but a few historical examples. It is by no means farfetched to suppose that The Family too will be able to work out its own way of accommodating this core Christian dilemma. They have certainly proven themselves resourceful and resilient in overcoming a staggering assortment of other

obstacles throughout their controversial thirty-year career. These are nevertheless tricky theological waters to navigate, all the more so during a critical time of organizational transition. And while the overwhelming thrust of Maria and Peter's interactive revelations is towards conciliation and pragmatic problem solving, charismatic promptings always run the risk of unexpectedly injecting radical directions that can overturn more carefully constructed plans and arouse new uncertainties and discord.

Five years after Father David's death and the institution of *The Charter*, The Family has over 10,000 members living in more than 800 Charter Homes distributed in 88 countries throughout the world. In addition to the theological difficulties and problems of morale faced by all end-time groups when the end does not materialize as anticipated, The Family is beset with many additional concerns: reduced but still continued negative press and legal opposition; member defections; an increasingly imbalanced female to male sex ratio; and an aging first generation whose children are sexually more *conservative* than their parents (and who often balk at the Family's emphasis on procreation and proscription of birth control). Obviously problems are nothing new for The Family. More changes must and will come. What these will be and what The Family will become in the next century should offer a fascinating case study of the patterns of dissent, innovation, rejection, stigmatization, conflict, and accommodation that are common to the moral careers of new religious movements. One very distinct possibility is that The Family will continue to court a fair amount of tension and opposition to the outside world, even as it becomes more stabilized in its domestic life and outreach ministries. In the process it is likely that The Family will become an "established cult," resisting conventional integration in the Christian mainstream and maintaining morally sharp contrasts between conceptions of its own Godly community and divinely appointed mission and the Babylonian corruption of modern society.

The last day of our visit in Annapolis, Peter played a

home video for us featuring Father David not too many years before his death. On the tape Dad talked extemporaneously and sang old, standard church hymns from his boyhood and young manhood days. (In his youth he had sung with his mother as a Christian soloist on the evangelical circuit, and in old age he still had good pitch and a resonant voice.) He was nostalgic and sentimental. He quoted Bible scriptures from memory, reminisced, and made teary-eyed apologies to any Family members whom he might have offended, treated harshly, or spoken crossly to. His performance was warmly affecting for Cindy as she watched the video with us. Peter then discussed with us a new revelation on prayer language that he had received in response to one of Maria's many question about how to love the Lord more fervently. Through Peter the Lord's answer was that, in private prayer, Family members should use the same language they use when speaking with a *lover*. The Lord revealed to Peter that He was a lonely man, that He desired intimacy with his followers. The Family is his bride, from whom he desires a longing, craving relationship. When we asked Peter what he thought might be the reaction to publishing a revelation on the use of sexual language in prayer, he responded: "Conventional church people will say it's blasphemy, that The Family is getting weird again."