

# Who is Afraid of the Plymouth Brethren?

## Brethren Controversies in Historical Perspective

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# A Bunker Becomes a School



- Our story begins in a former Cold War military communication facility in Pascack Valley, New York (left). A religious community known as the Plymouth Brethren converted it, through voluntary work, into a school (right)



## Just Your Usual School

- The school is American and conservative, but not particularly unusual for U.S. standards. It follows the national curriculum – even Darwinism is taught, although presented as «a theory» –, students fare well in national and State tests, and – while almost all pupils are Brethren – the principal is a Roman Catholic lady (left)

# Anti-Cult Criticism in France



- Parents of the Pascack Valley students would be surprised to learn that in France the Brethren have been described as a «cult» in official documents, an association of «victims» of the «cult» has been created, and their schools (left and right) have been accused of «cultic indoctrination» of the children



... and elsewhere



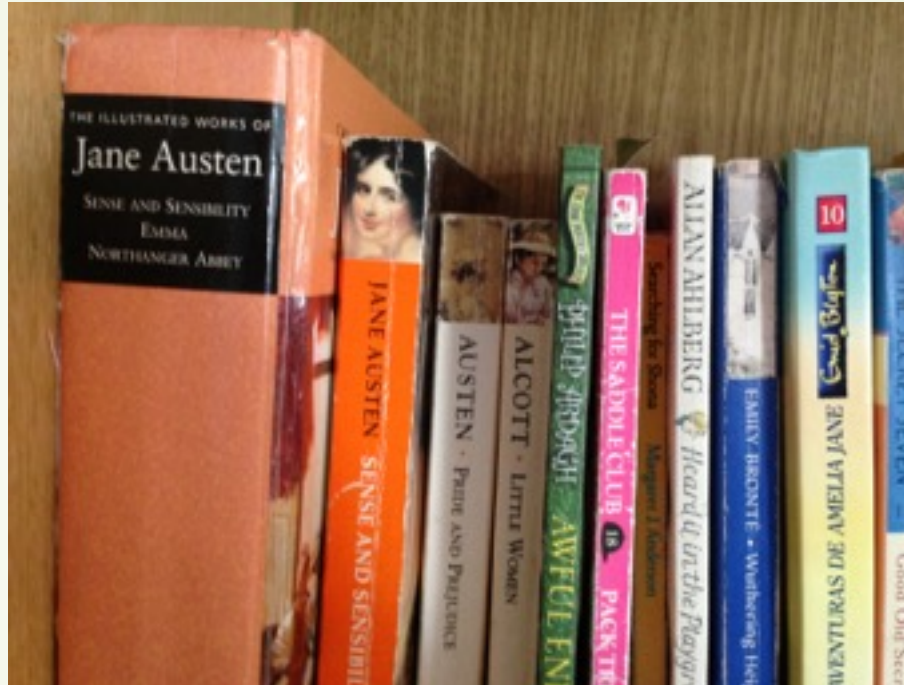
- Although opposition to «cults» in France is particularly strong, accusations against Brethren and their schools have been made in the U.K., Canada, Australia, and elsewhere. In Sweden (above), the fact that Brethren high school students wear a uniform has been seen as a way of perpetuating gender stereotypes

# The Salles Report (2014)

- The anti-cult report introduced in 2014 at the Council Europe by French MP Rudy Salles (right), but ultimately voted down by the Parliamentary Assembly, noted that «in Sweden, the school inspectorate carried out several inspections of a school founded by the Plymouth Brethren, criticized for dispensing education that lacked objectivity»
- The report tried to use the Brethren schools as an example that cults (sectes) were indeed guilty of «psychological abuse» of minors



# Conservative, but not radical



- However, my visit to the Swedish school confirmed that students read books from their library by classic authors quite removed from Christian fundamentalism, including Jane Austen (1775-1817) and Emily Brontë (1818-1848)...

# Technology



- ... they learn about state-of-the-art computer technology...



# Sport

- ... they admire international sport stars, and collect and exhibit their pictures...

# Creativity



- Their creativity is cultivated, starting from primary school (left) and leading to beautiful works produced in high school (right)

# Who Is Afraid of the Plymouth Brethren?



**THE CHURCH THAT KEEPS TO ITSELF IN AN 'EVIL' WORLD**

The Plymouth Brethren is an evangelical Protestant conservative church with 46,000 members worldwide. Members follow a rigid code of conduct based strictly on Biblical teaching, which provides a family-centred way of life and a strict moral framework. As far as possible, they keep themselves separate from other people, including other Christians, because they believe the outside world is full of evil. Brethren shun the distractions of the modern age including television, film, literature and pop music. However, wine is drunk at Brethren meetings. Hymns are traditionally sung during weekly meetings unaccompanied by any musical instrument. The church also discourages traditional symbols such as the cross. Following a passage in the Corinthians book in the Bible, women cover their heads in church and there are no clergy - instead the congregation is led by a group of elders. The group was founded in Ireland in the early 1800s by aristocratic law student John Nelson Darby after he broke away from the Anglican Church. A meeting in Plymouth, Devon, in 1832 gave the movement its name and the Brethren adopted many of the simpler ways of the early Christians, believing it would create a more straightforward relationship with God. Evangelists have taken the Church's beliefs as far afield as India and South America.

A Brethren meeting room in Defford, Worcester



**The Exclusive Brethren**



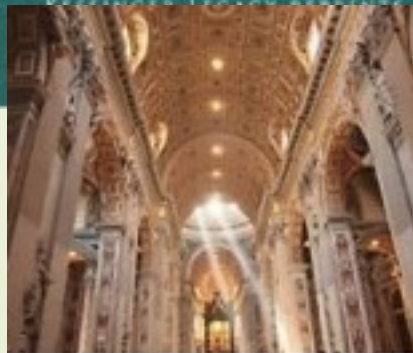
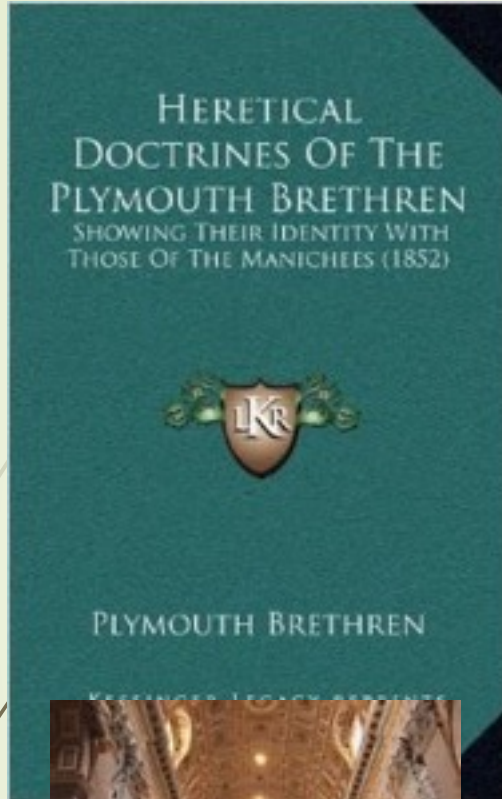
*Just a secretive sect or a dangerous cult?*

- So the question remains: why are the Brethren and their schools singled out by oppositional movements? Who is afraid of the Plymouth Brethren?



# Counter-Cult and Anti-Cult

- The answers are many, and may vary locally, but I would offer as general reasons:
  1. The evolution of counter-cult movements
  2. The crisis of anti-cult movements
- I and Gordon Melton introduced in the early 1990s the distinction, now widely used, between a Christian *counter*-cult movement, which attacks «cults» as heresies for their doctrine, and a secular *anti*-cult movement, which criticizes «cult» because they use harmful techniques of brainwashing or mind control
- Of course, counter-cultists often borrow arguments from anti-cultists. Curiously, even anti-cultists sometimes derive from counter-cultists ideas about which Christian groups are «cults». But the two movements have different roots and agendas



THE PLYMOUTH BRETHREN:  
THEIR HISTORY AND HERESIES

JAMES GRANT

# Counter-Cult Criticism

- The traditional «heretic» targets of Christian counter-cultists are changing. A Mormon was the presidential candidate in 2012 for the American party many Evangelicals sympathize for. Pentecostals are largely recognized as fellow Christians around the world. Christian Science numbers no longer seem to pose a threat. Even Jehovah's Witnesses have tuned down some apocalyptic features
- In order to keep its currency, the counter-cult movement needs to identify new (or new-old) «heretics», and old books against the Brethren's «heresies» are now reprinted

# «Brethren» in Protestant History



- In order to understand the counter-cult position, we need to specify what «Brethren» we are exactly discussing
- In the history of Protestantism, «Brethren» indicates (at least) three different groups:
  1. The Czech Brethren, originating from the pre-Reformation work of Jan Hus (1369-1415)
  2. The German Brethren, arising from a 18<sup>th</sup> century Pietist revival within Lutherans and other German Protestants [above: painting by Adolph Tidemand, 1814-1876]
  3. «Our» Brethren movement, born in the British Isles and Continental Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century



*Lacunza*, painting by the Chilean-Italian artist, Alessandro Ciccarelli Manzoni (1811-1879)

## The British Isles Revival

- At a time of cultural crisis, following the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, a group of English and Irish Protestants of different denominations – most of them readers of the millenarian prophecies of the Chilean Jesuit, Manuel de Lacunza y Diaz (1731-1801) – started meeting in 1821, calling themselves «Brethren» and promoting a radical renewal of Christian life

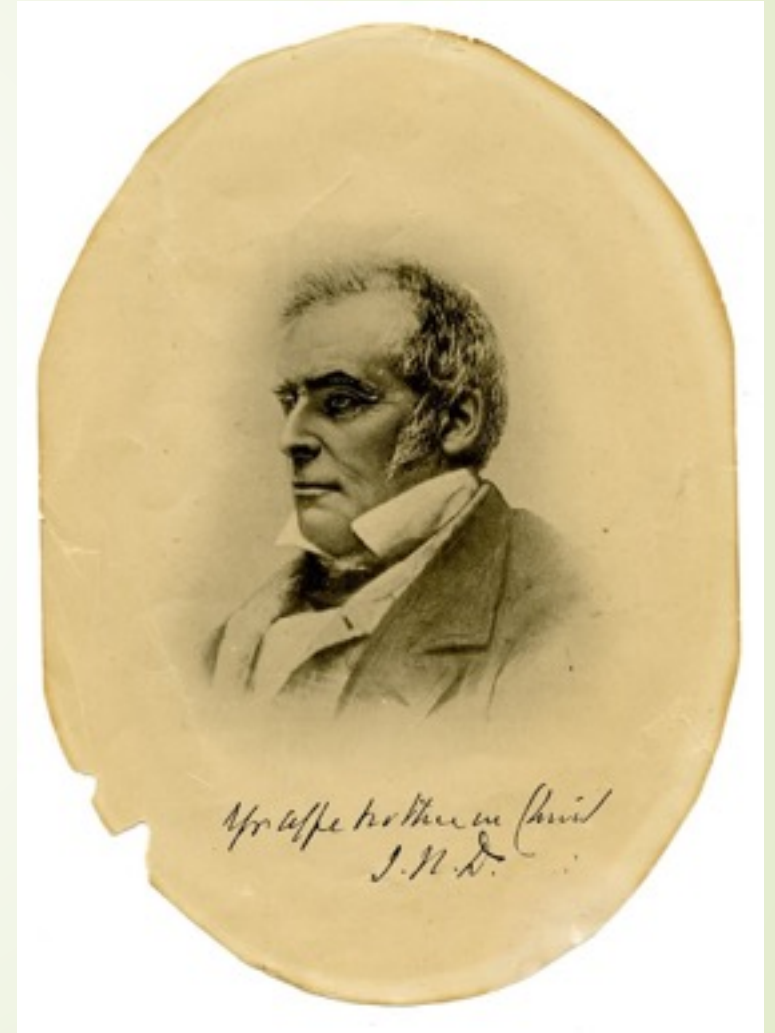
# Centers

- The main centers of the revival were Dublin, Bristol, and Plymouth. Key figures included Benjamin Wills Newton (1807-1899), Francis William Newman (1805-1897), the brother of the future Catholic convert and cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1900), Anthony Norris Groves (1795-1853) and George Müller (1805-1898)

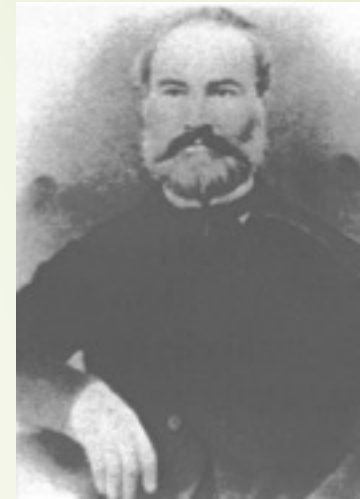


# John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)

- While he was working as a tutor in Ireland for the family of the famous lawyer Edward Pennefather (1774-1847), F.W. Newman met his employer's brother-in-law, John Nelson Darby, a prominent student of Lacunza
- Darby eventually emerged as the main voice for the revival, and his conservative theological ideas influenced millions of Christians, although only a minority of them joined the Brethren movement



# A European Phenomenon



- Soon, the British «Brethren» learned of similar revivals in Geneva, Switzerland, with the Church of La Pélisserie (left), and in Italy around Count Piero Guicciardini (1808-1886, above, left) and Teodorico Pietrocola Rossetti (1852-1883). The latter (above, right) met Darby in London through his cousin, who was the father of the famous Pre-Raphaelite artist, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1880). Darby later visited both Switzerland and Italy

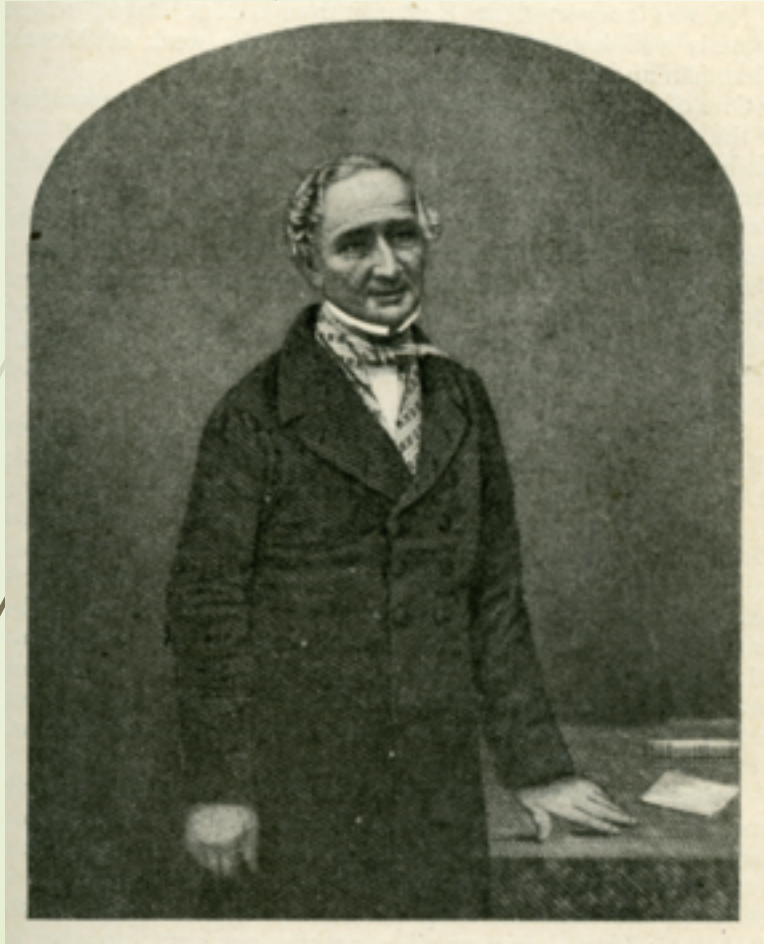
# Two Different Impulses

- Among both the British and the Continental Brethren, the call for a radical renewal was expressed alternatively as a desire for ecumenical unity between Christians, and in the completely opposite terms of strict separation between true believers and «fallen» traditional Churches



Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525-1569),  
*Babylon*

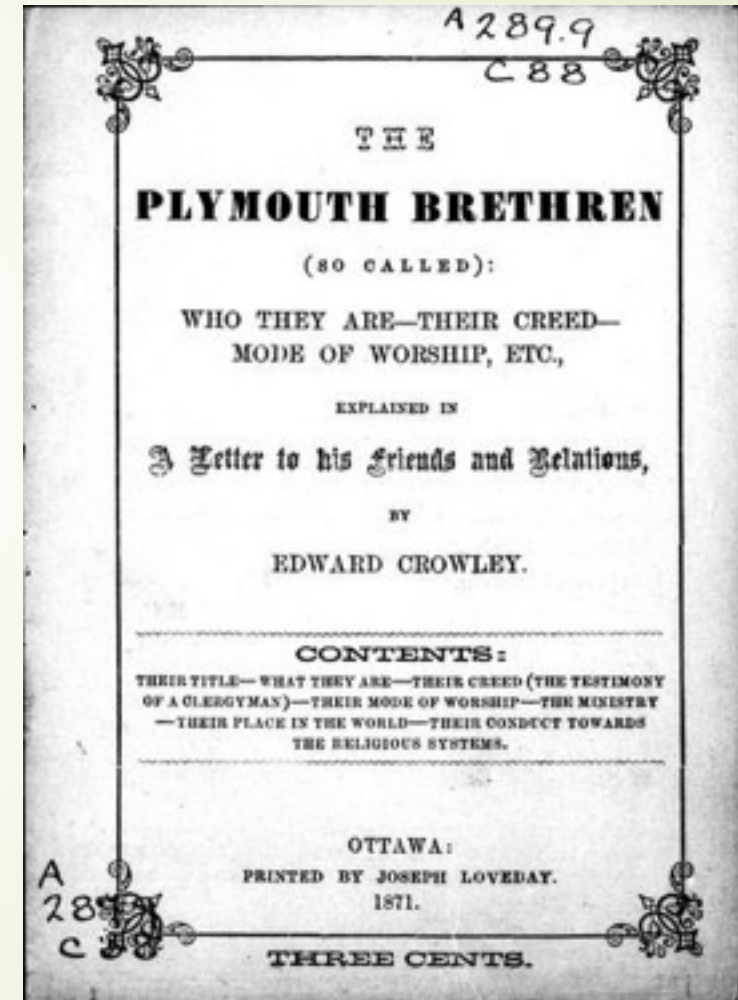
# «Open» and «Exclusive» Brethren



- This led in the 1840s to a bitter separation between Groves (left: and others) and Darby, i.e. between «open» and «exclusive» Brethren. Even the «open» Brethren were too conservative for mainline denominations, and they started their own Assemblies of the Brethren, where Darby's «exclusive» followers came to be known as the Plymouth Brethren

# Edward Crowley (1830-1887)

- One of the defenses of the Exclusive Brethren's point of view was published in 1865 by Edward Crowley, and went into several editions in the Old and the New World. The author, a wealthy brewer, is best known as the father of the British magus Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), who would eventually identify his Brethren education as one root of his extreme anti-Christian feelings





# Brethren by the Numbers

- Further divisions followed, but all the different groups called themselves Brethren. Trying to impose some order, the U.S. Census Bureau adopted in 1936 a classification using Roman numerals, from Brethren I to Brethren VIII. Scholars subsequently added Brethren IX and X
- The open Brethren – Brethren II – remain the largest group today, with 2,5 million members. Brethren I were «moderate» American exclusive Brethren, who merged into Brethren II in 1935. All the other groups – III to X – are exclusive Brethren, with a total membership of 200,000
- Brethren VI, VII, VIII and most of Brethren V merged with Brethren III, today the largest (but declining) group of exclusive Brethren, with a membership of 100,000. A part of the Brethren V, and Brethren VIII, remain small and independent groups. The controversies we study focus on Brethren IV (50,000), the other main group (together with Brethren III) originating from Darby's original exclusive Brethren



## The China Connection

- These figures do not include the Chinese groups originating from Watchman Nee (Ni Shu-Tsu, 1903-1972, left), who joined Brethren IV in 1932. Nee was of the opinion that a certain degree of leniency should be shown to new Chinese converts who committed sins that would have led to them being disfellowshipped in Europe. The leaders in London saw this as «compromise with sin» and Nee was excluded from the Brethren in 1935

# The Local Church

- Nee spent 20 years in the prisons of communist China, but his most gifted pupil, Witness Lee (1905-1997, right), turned his Local Church into a large international organization. It considers itself the direct heir of Nee's ideas, though this is disputed by others. Traces of the teachings of Brethren IV remain clearly visible

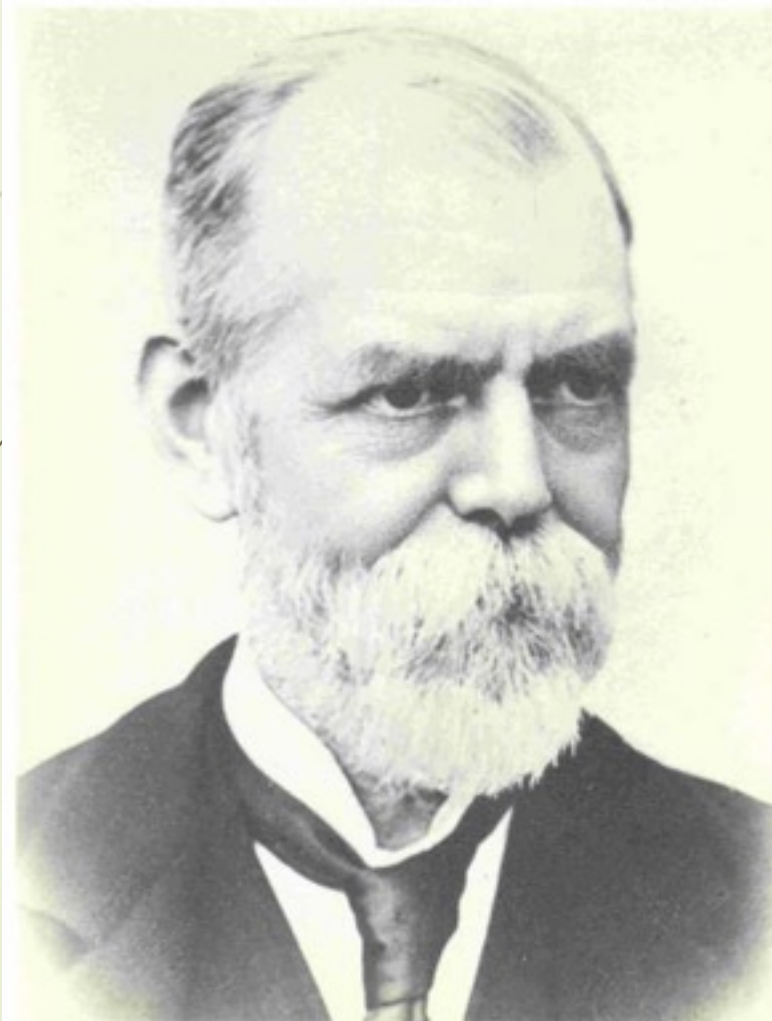


## Brethren IV



- This picture I took in the Pennsylvania home of a member of Brethren IV shows their genealogy: from Darby (left) to Frederick Edward Raven (1837-1903) and his successors James Taylor, Sr. (1870-1953), James Taylor, Jr. (1899-1970), Harvey Simington (1913-1987), John Steven Hales (1922-2002) and Bruce David Hales

# The Raven Controversy



- Raven (left) was the most charismatic Brethren preacher of the Belle Époque. The split in the Darby movement, originating the present separation between III and IV, occurred in 1890 in England
- Theological questions were perhaps less important than a conflict between charisma and «institution». Brethren IV wanted to follow the leadership of an «authorized preacher» - Raven and then its successors – while Brethren III recognized Darby's writings, rather than any living leader, as the ultimate authority after the Scripture

# Theological Controversies



- Brethren IV leaders, including James Taylor Sr. (left, with his second wife Georgina), wrote weighty tomes that are often difficult to interpret. Accusations of heresy sometimes rest on simple misunderstandings. Separations mostly occurred over questions of leadership

## Further Schisms

- «Pre-Aberdeen» dissidents refused to accept James Taylor, Jr.'s succession to his father in 1959. They were joined by «post-Aberdeen» critics who, at the Aberdeen conference of 1970, tried without success to oust Taylor Jr., accusing him inter alia of a moral lapse that may have never happened
- This quarrelsome network, known as Brethren X, includes some 10,000 participants. Accusations of immorality against Taylor Jr. (right) are periodically revamped by opponents of Brethren IV



# «Culture of Separation»



- For Darby, believers need to «separate themselves from the world». This led both Brethren III and IV to a «culture of separation» where they would not worship together with members of «apostate» churches and not even share a meal with them
- They can co-operate with non-Brethren in various professional capacities. The Catholic principal of the New York school is photographed with her Brethren students [left] but does not eat with them

# «Separation» as the Root of Opposition



- Darby and the Brethren's judgement of apostasy against all existing Christian churches and the «culture of separation» generated enormous resentment. This is, ultimately, the root of most Christian counter-cult opposition to Brethren III and IV, with IV singled out because they are more active and visible, particularly with their schools (above: publicity for an anti-Brethren issue of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, 2014)

# Counter-Cult and Anti-Cult

- The *Winnipeg Free Press* report included a laundry list of accusations (largely borrowed from a 2008 book by Australian journalist Michael Bachelard), mixing quite liberally theological criticism derived from counter-cult sources, urban legends – including that Brethren IV girls and women never cut their hair –, and typical anti-cult arguments, from «brainwashing» to the fact that a group whose young people «don't have an abortion», don't smoke marijuana, avoid premarital sex, and maintain a negative view of homosexuality should necessarily be a «cult»

'One of the most sober and well-argued exposés I have ever read ...  
Michael Bachelard reveals the Brethren's God as Mammon, their behaviour  
as that of schoolyard bullies, and their Christianity all about self-love.'  
*The Sunday Age*



## BEHIND THE EXCLUSIVE BRETHREN

Michael Bachelard

# «Investigative» Journalism?



- Of course, by these standards, most Christian counter-cultists would be themselves regarded as members of a «cult». And these boys from the Brethren IV Focus Learning Campus in Sotterbach, Germany seem happily unaware that Brethren are not allowed to practice modern sports – or so the *Winnipeg Free Press* reported



# Problems in the Anti-Cult Movement

- Why *secular* anti-cultists recently became more interested in the Brethren (IV)?
- The anti-cult movement (ACM) experienced a crisis in recent years for several reasons:
  - after 9/11, many governments focused their interest and resources on radical Islam rather than «cults»;
  - the main targets of the ACM either declined (The Family) and became less visible, at least in the West (Unification Church, ISKCON), or proved very capable of resisting in court to official and ACM action (Scientology);
  - a «judicialization of religious freedom» (J. Richardson, SSSR Presidential Address, 2014) led courts to recognize the rights of controversial «cults» in several jurisdictions

# ACM Strategy: 1. Find new targets



- As old targets either proved formidable opponents in court, or became less newsworthy because of their reduced visibility, the ACM needed new targets to prove its continuing relevance
- It found a treasure chest in the long lists of «heretics», including Brethren IV, prepared by Evangelical counter-cultists, and quickly extended to them the accusations of brainwashing

## 2. Play the «save the children» card



- The ACM also realized that there was a widespread moral panic about the idea that children are abused, manipulated, and unduly indoctrinated by religions
- By definition, moral panics do *start* from *real* problems, but amplify and exaggerate their prevalence

# Brethren Schools: A Convenient Target



- Not many «cults» operate their own large school system. Brethren IV do, and offer to the ACM a rare opportunity for criticizing what it describes as massive «indoctrination» or, in French terms, *embrigadement des enfants*

### 3. Find new allies



**It's still a sexist  
homophobic militant cult.  
None worse than the  
other religions in principle  
but as an influence on the  
world it's hardly a positive  
one**

- The struggling ACM also increasingly tries to find allies in other advocacy organizations. It is happy to targets «cults» it can accuse of political activism and support of conservative candidates, allegedly violating the principle of church-state separation, because this can mobilize active political groups and LGBT activists who attacks conservative politicians hostile to same-sex marriage

## Brethren IV and Politics

- Brethren IV were particularly targeted after, encouraged by their present leader Bruce D. Hales, they supported certain conservative candidates and campaigns. Although, as part of the «remnant», Brethren do not vote in political elections, they may occasionally regard as appropriate to advise others who do not belong to the «remnant» and vote



Bruce D. Hales with his wife Jennifer



## In conclusion...

- Exclusive Brethren were always a target of the Christians *counter-cult* movement, for reasons dating back to Darby himself. However, anti-Brethren publications found a limited audience outside the specialized milieu of Evangelical apologetics
- The *anti-cult* movement's interest in the Brethren is comparatively recent and in fact evidences weaknesses and problems in the same ACM. It also shows what strategies the ACM uses in order to confront these problems
- Brethren IV, although smaller, are targeted more than Brethren III because of their very visible schools, and activism on certain sensitive cultural issues

That's all  
Folks!

