

"THE BRETHERN"
A CURRENT SOCIOLOGICAL APPRAISAL

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

During the past forty years, Bryan Wilson has become well-known in academic circles for his research into religious minorities both in Britain and overseas. He has written extensively on such movements as Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists, Christadelphians, Pentecostals, Hutterites and some African and Japanese movements. At different times, he has held appointments as Commonwealth Fund Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley, U.S.A., Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara; Visiting Professor at Soka University, Japan; Visiting Professor at the University of Louvain, Belgium; Visiting Fellow at the University of Toronto, Canada; Visiting Fellow at Ormond College, University of Melbourne, Australia; Research Consultant for the Sociology of Religion to the University of Padua, Italy. For the years 1971-1975, he was President of the Conference Internationale de Sociologie Religieuse, which is the world-wide organisation for the discipline and in 1991 he was elected Honorary President of this (now re-designated) organization the *Societe Internationale de sociologie des Religions*. He has been European editor of the *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion*, and he was later an editor of the *Annual Review of the Social Sciences of Religion*. He has lectured extensively on sectarian movements in Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, Belgium and Japan and, on occasion, in Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden. Among the books he has published are eight which are devoted to minority religious movements:

Sects and Society: The Sociology of Three Religious Groups in Britain (London: Heinemann, 1961; reprinted Westport, Conn: The Greenwood Press, 1978);

Patterns of Sectarianism (edited) (London: Heinemann, 1967);

Religious Sects (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, and New York: McGraw Hill, 1970; also published in French, German, Swedish, Spanish and Japanese translations);

Magic and the Millennium, (London: Heinemann, and New York, Harper and Row, 1973);

Contemporary Transformations of Religion (London: Oxford University Press, 1976; also published in Japanese and Italian translations);

The Social Impact of the New Religious Movements, (edited) (New York: Rose of Sharon Press, 1981);

The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism, (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1990);

New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response, (edited) (London: Routledge, 1999).

Bryan Wilson has also contributed more than thirty papers on this subject to learned journals in Britain, the United States, France, Belgium and Japan. Among the minority religious movements on which Bryan Wilson has undertaken research is the Brethren movement. As far as is known, he is the only scholar to have engaged in a sociological study of this movement.

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THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE BRETHREN MOVEMENT

The first of those who came to call themselves Brethren began meeting in the late 1820s in Dublin in the conviction that the condition of the established church (to which many of them belonged) was no longer adequate to their spiritual needs. The early Brethren met to re-examine the Scriptures, to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, and to give due emphasis to what they regarded as the truths of the Bible. They were men who had come to doubt the legitimacy of the churches, and in particular they came to reject the association of church and state, and the warrant for clerical orders. These early members were far from being ignorant men. Twelve of the earliest Brethren were, or were training to be, Anglican Clergymen (in England and Ireland), and five were ministers in Nonconformist churches. A number of them were men of private means, including five titled gentry; and eight of them were, or had been, commissioned officers. They sought to establish congregational arrangements which they believed restored the form of organization for Christians depicted in the New Testament. The Brethren regarded it as necessary to obey fully the Scriptures, and so to keep themselves apart from the existing churches. The principle of separation was a central feature of their position. They were not, of course, the first Christians to adopt this position, and it could easily be shown that the desire to be separate from the world was part of the original motivation of movements as different from each other as Baptists, Mennonites, Congregationalists and Quakers.

The early Brethren believed that, by separating from what they regarded as the unwarranted system represented by the organization of the churches, they possessed an adequate basis for the unity of all properly motivated Christians. Initially, they saw no need for any but the simplest pattern of organization. Separation was not conceived as a negative option: rather, it was regarded as the only basis on which the unity of true Christians could be established. Like many other movements which are generally regarded as sectarian, the Brethren began with a profound and deeply anti-sectarian sentiment, and they still reject the designation “sect”. They opposed the various arrangements adopted by different denominations, many of which were designated by the names of their founders (as in the names Mennonite or Wesleyan). The Brethren believed that if they restored the biblical pattern of order, they would then live in conformity with the will of God, and that such an arrangement would provide common ground for all Christians who were prepared to abandon the corrupt ecclesiastical system that operated in their contemporary society.

Early conceptions of Christian fellowship based on minimal organization but lacking doctrinal consensus, proved to be inadequate for the maintenance of an integrated separate community in the longer run. It became apparent, within a few years, that some Brethren attached more importance to different bases of conformity from those endorsed by J.N. Darby, who had come to be regarded as the leading member of the movement. The question of who should be admitted to the breaking of bread ceremony became important, as Darby taught that true Christians must separate not only from the churches, but also from those who were impure in faith or morals.

The principle of separating from evil as the essential basis for true Christian unity was taken to apply to separation from all forms of human association which did not have Christ as their head, and also from those who were at all involved in worldly practices, and who were therefore considered to “dishonour God”. Only those who acted together and who separated from evil were able to join in common fellowship. Thus, the principle of separation became acknowledged as the basis for fellowship, as Darby frequently reiterated. As early as 1836, Hargrove, one of the early Brethren, had emphasized that separation from evil was the primary duty of a Christian. When evil was detected among any who were themselves members of the fellowship, it followed that it was the duty of the rest to withdraw from him.

Differences of doctrine led to divisions within an assembly, and some of these divisions ramified through the fellowship during the nineteenth century, since withdrawal from iniquity entailed withdrawal even from those who, not initially sinful themselves, became tainted by failing to dissociate themselves from unrepentant evil-doers. The pattern of scrupulous regard for purity was established at the very beginnings of the movement. The Brethren came to expect that there would be need to assert their purity by separation. Darby wrote in 1880, “The assembly purges itself”. The need to judge unrighteousness had been strongly affirmed by Darby in 1845, and that judgment had to be made in the assembly. Those who were “put out” of a meeting might repent their iniquity, and upon true repentance be restored if the conscience of the assembly so determined. Darby wrote, “the discipline of putting away is always done with the view of restoring the person who has been subjected to it, and never to get rid of him.” This discipline was itself essential to the fellowship: it was the bond which it could not do without, for apart from the possibility of restoring the individual, discipline secured and maintained the purity of the fellowship.

Even though the Brethren experienced several divisions during the course of their history, which brought into being several different fellowships of people who called themselves Brethren, the followers of Mr Darby and his successors in the leadership lived for decades during the first half of the twentieth century without attracting public notice. In 1959 and in the early 60s, and again in 1970, differences arose among the Brethren. At a time when the wider society was rapidly becoming more permissive, the exercise of moral constraint among the Brethren has appeared to become relatively more pronounced as they have sought to reinforce the protection of their community

from worldly influences which, without such measures, might have affected their way of life. Several issues have arisen as the leading brethren have sought to clarify the application of their principles to new social exigencies - as, for example, the need to define an attitude to radio and television and more recently to computers. Other matters became the subject of discipline as leading brethren drew attention to the range of moral constraints in accordance with the light from the Holy Spirit. By the early 1960s, the Brethren had come to see that eating together was an act of fellowship, and therefore they should eat only with those with whom they could partake of the Lord's Supper. Thus Brethren practice exemplifies the sociological principle that commensality reinforces group and community solidarity. In general, although there were dissentients at these times, the majority recognized that the reinforcement of moral rigour was necessary to believers in Christ. Its reassertion served to intensify the group life of the Brethren, to reduce the occasions on which they might be tempted into worldly associations, and to emphasize the sanctity of family life.

THE PRINCIPLE OF SEPARATION

It has already been mentioned above that the obligation to separate from evil is a cardinal principle of the Brethren's religion and way of life. The community of the Brethren in each place maintain the responsibility for their own local members, and seek to ensure that those who err are brought to repentance. If the fact that a member is behaving badly comes to the notice of another brother, he will seek, in an informal way, to make that individual aware of the error of his ways. Such an act is seen by the whole community as an act of love - one brother, as a priest, ministering to another. If a matter is less clear and if some investigation has to take place, an individual who is believed to have erred and who does not repent, will, for a time, in the terminology of the Brethren, be "shut up", that is temporarily not admitted to the religious life of the community until the situation is clarified and the conscience of the assembly is expressed. If it is established that the individual has indeed been guilty of misdemeanour, and if he fails to repent, he will be "put out" (withdrawn from). It is the rigour with which the Brethren maintain this position which has led on certain occasions, in themselves not numerous except at the time of schisms, to divisions within families, since the act of putting out a former member implies not only that he will no longer be admitted to participate in the movement's religious activities, but that he will also cease to enjoy normal everyday intercourse with those who remain within the movement. For the Brethren, there is a strong continuity between the religious life of the community and ordinary everyday family life. The assembly becomes a model for the individual household, and the purity which is to be maintained in the one is to be reflected in the other. It follows that when an individual is put out, it becomes the obligation of his or her spouse, parents and kinsfolk to implement in domestic life the implications of the decision to put him or her out of the assembly.

The idea and practice of the separation of the sacred from the profane is generally accepted as being a fundamental feature of all religion, and it is explicitly enjoined in

the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Sacred places, occasions, and acts are hedged about with interdictions and restrictions in the interest of maintaining purity. When an entire community conceives itself as sacred or especially blessed, the principle of separation from whatever might defile its purity is extended to all aspects of everyday life. This principle is most trenchantly espoused by religious minorities. It could easily be shown that this idea of separation informs the distinctive way of life of orthodox Jews, among whom vigorously enforced and categorically stated prohibitions affect commensality and conjugality. The early Christians were exhorted to separate from all iniquity and from all evil-doers, and to maintain the highest standards of an undefiled life, and it is of course these scriptural injunctions that form the basis of the Brethren's teaching and practice. Like other minorities, the early Christians in the first centuries after Christ claimed a special status as a chosen people. The demand for separation from unbelievers, and the maintenance of a higher code of moral practice constituted the tangible demonstration of this state of blessedness. Once Christians came to form the majority in western society, these injunctions came to have less pertinence for them, although the demands for a more rigorous Christianity were subsequently and recurrently reasserted by reform and revivalist groups. Since such reform movements arose within societies that were almost totally Christian, those from whom they saw themselves as enjoined by the Scriptures to separate were, therefore, the general, nominally Christian, majority within which they lived. It was what these sects regarded as the pretence of Christianity which offended them most, and the evil and uncleanness from which they saw it as necessary to keep themselves apart became identified with the laxness of the Church and all its scripturally unauthorized institutions and practices.

It will already be clear from the foregoing that the principle of separation is far from being confined to the Brethren movement. Whilst the issues on which separation has turned have differed, the idea of religious separation can be found in a number of movements in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. "Separatists" was a term widely used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for those movements which rejected the association of church and state, and so it was applied to the major nonconformist bodies, such as the Congregationalists, Baptists and Presbyterians in England, and also to several smaller movements at different times - Quakers, Mennonites, Evangelical Brethren and Adventists.

Nor has the practice of withdrawing from, or putting out, those who differed in doctrine or whose lives failed to manifest appropriate moral demeanour, been uncommon among Christian movements. Excommunication has been practised by the Roman Catholic Church for centuries, and for a long time with consequences more severe than those that prevail for someone from whom the Brethren withdraw. The practice is known by other names, "disowning" and "disfellowshipping", among them. The Quakers have such a practice - most recently invoked against those that have enrolled contrary to the injunctions of the sect, in the armed services, but in the past exercised over a much wider moral domain. For a long time in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Quakers carefully watched over their members, requiring them to seek

the meeting's permission before marrying and before changing their place of residence. One authority has said that "the congregation's control of each member was almost absolute." Those of "disorderly walk" were disowned. The Mennonites, who today exist in several distinct bodies, some of which have hundreds of thousands of adherents, exercised a ban (Meidung) on those who became involved in worldly associations, and this ban operated within families in much the same way as that practised by the Brethren. A Mennonite would not eat a meal with anyone who had been banned, and if one of two spouses was thus excommunicated, then normal relations between them were discontinued. The practice of shunning excommunicated members was included in the Schleithem Confession of 1527, and again in the Dortrecht Confession of 1632. Menno Simons himself reiterated this rule in the words of 1 Cor. 5:11 "But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat." AV. Although the General Conference of Mennonites has today relaxed its moral austerity, the idea of the ban is still well known, and its practice continues among other groups of Mennonites.

The desire to maintain purity of community by expelling the iniquitous has been practised among other Christian movements including those that were not formed explicitly on the principle of separating from evil as the basis of community life. The Methodists developed a set of stringent moral requirements for their members, and in the nineteenth century wayward Methodists were refused admission tickets to the band meeting. Members were closely catechized about their sins in such meetings, and were disowned for such things as disorderly walk, frivolous conversation, whistling, and improper dress. Among other Christian fellowships that arose more or less contemporaneously with the Brethren, similar moral requirements were exacted, and similar sanctions of "disfellowshipping" were practised. The Christadelphians, whose beginnings in Britain were in the 1840s, and whose fellowship was similar in both polity and ethos to that of the Brethren, maintained very similar canons of moral discipline, disfellowshipping wayward members very frequently. Both the Christadelphians and Jehovah's Witnesses continue the practice of disfellowshipping those members who are guilty of misdemeanours or who persist in wrong teaching.

The demand among the Brethren for morality so much more rigorous than that prevailing in the wider society derives from the movement's strong sense of separateness, which gives relevance and urgency to the maintenance of discipline in the community.

THE FUNCTIONS OF EXCLUSIVISM

The Brethren do not accept the designation “sect”, but that is a term which is widely applied to them by outsiders. It is often used in a pejorative sense. Sociologists use this term as a neutral descriptive term, however, and from the sociological point of view the Brethren would be classified as a sect. A religious sect is a separated, voluntary association following a distinctive pattern of worship, morality and organization, characteristically preoccupied with maintaining those teachings and practices through which its special claim to historical significance is expressed. The members of a sect tend to see themselves as a gathered remnant, a specially chosen people, a community emerging at the culmination of a long historical process in which the special truths that God has sought to bring to mankind are inherited (or recovered) by its own founders, leaders, or members. This is the position of the Brethren who regard themselves as being in receipt of a very precious heritage.

It follows that the community regards itself as having a sacred trust to maintain its truths and practices, and to continue to do what is conceived to be the will of God. When a sect considers that God’s will is being progressively made known to them, then new applications of their teachings may occur, and these must be followed with the same characteristic fidelity. This is the case with the Brethren. Since the sect is a voluntary body, the members of which are self-selected, and the leaders of which may exercise only very limited sanctions (i.e. discipline to which members themselves consent) there are always limits to the measure of “coercion” that can obtain within the movement. The popular press disseminates many misleading impressions concerning the power wielded within sects, and these, unfortunately, are often the only information available to the public, giving rise to general misunderstanding of the nature of sectarianism. So long as a movement operates within the framework of the law, it must be acknowledged that members voluntarily commit themselves to sect discipline, and they look to their acknowledged leaders to set forth the appropriate requirements of scripture to enable them to maintain moral and doctrinally prescribed patterns of behaviour and belief.

Leadership among the Brethren is entirely informal, in the sense that there are no specified offices or roles. “Leading Brethren” emerge in local assemblies, and for the world-wide fellowship there is, at any given time, one recognized, especially beloved Brother whose word is deemed to embody the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and who, in periodic expositions of scripture — “ministry” — reveals measures appropriate to the maintenance of the standards of sanctification and purity embodied in Brethren tradition. Thus, in the late 1970s, the then leading brother set forth in his ministry the need for Brethren to reaffirm the principle of separation from evil by ensuring that their homes and their businesses did not occupy premises in which a party wall was shared with non-Brethren: their buildings were to be free-standing and detached. This commitment was no merely symbolic gesture: it had the practical consequence of

sparing the Brethren involvement with outsiders in legal and administrative matters such as shared facilities, property rights, and disputed ownership.

Guidance through ministry is expected by the Brethren community, and is normally unanimously accepted. True, some Brethren resisted the increasingly rigorous and more stringent moral control which, in the 1960s, was introduced to protect the community from the growing laxity and moral permissiveness then occurring among the general public, and this led to some defections. But in general the Brethren readily commit themselves to measures which they see as the recovery of biblical demands. Whilst, individual defections have not been uncommon — and at times serious schisms have occurred — the much more remarkable fact is the generally sustained level of voluntary commitment to sect discipline.

At the same time, it must also be recognized that for the committed member, the prospect of discipline is always serious and even alarming, and nowhere more so than in a movement in which members are closely drawn together and in considerable measure separated from outsiders. Such is the case with the Brethren. That anguish has been occasioned when individuals have been disciplined and “put out” is entirely understandable. Expulsion from the community is a severe sentence, even considered in purely social terms. When, to this is added the spiritual seriousness with which membership is regarded, one sees why passion is so readily engendered. Yet, given their interpretation of evil and the need to separate from it, such procedures, harrowing as they must be for all concerned, appear to the Brethren to be unavoidable.

Obedience to God and commitment to the way of life which reflects that obedience are the first obligations of Brethren, transcending all social obligations, including even those of the family. Divisions within families, deeply regretted as these are, are recognized as, at times, inevitable, if the community is to remain pure. Brethren recall such texts as Luke 14: 26 “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” and Luke 12: 52-3, “...there shall be five in one house divided, three against two, and two against three. The father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father; the mother against the daughter, and the daughter against the mother . . .” AV.

THE BRETHERN WAY OF LIFE

The Brethren seek to lead exemplary moral lives. The rules which govern their comportment may be likened to those that are maintained in a Roman Catholic religious order. In general, a sect may be likened to such a religious order (allowing always for the important difference that an order comprises persons of only one sex, and that, in consequence, the moral problems peculiar to family life do not emerge there). Just as in a religious order, many activities are proscribed, and just as monks seek to keep themselves from the corrupting influences of the wider society, and to live a social life that is completely consonant with elevated spiritual precepts, so a similar concern characterizes the members of a sect like that of the Brethren. Like a religious order, the Brethren also constitute a moral community in which each member is committed to the others, and for the sake of which each has the obligation to lead a life of religious dedication. There is a much more pronounced consistency and continuity between what is preached and the individual member's comportment in everyday life than obtains within the often relaxed life practices of the members of the majority churches and denominations. Nor are Brethren shy of publically proclaiming Christ as Saviour, and do so by street preaching, daily or weekly, in every place in which they have an assembly. This is a salient activity of the Brethren way of life.

The moral rigour to which the Brethren are committed puts into perspective the practice of "putting out", but our concern in the foregoing pages to explain the basis of separation among the Brethren, should not obscure the very important fact that, in normal circumstances, family life among the members of the movement is characterized by bonds of the strongest affection. Sects generally attach the greatest importance to the sanctity and quality of family relationships, and of no sect may this point be made more emphatically than of the Brethren. Family life is seen by the Brethren as a most precious spiritual possession and it is the arena in which the individual manifests the moral and spiritual qualities enjoined by his religion. The Brethren conceive of their assembly as a model for the individual household, and see their entire community as an extended family. The individual is thus supported within an actual biological family in which life is lived to a coherent pattern and consistent standards, and this family life is itself supported by the bonds of affection that are cultivated throughout the entire sect. The anguish which is occasioned when the assembly feels in conscience that it must withdraw from an individual is itself testimony to the fact that a well-conducted family life is of vital importance for Brethren. It is this anguish which is seized on by the press on the relatively rare occasions when (periods of schism apart) a breakdown occurs in a Brethren family. Such a breakdown, given the integration among the Brethren of religious beliefs and moral practice, is always a religious matter and can always be represented by the press as a case of some sort of religious persecution, and because this makes dramatic news the media can sensationalize the relatively rare instance of domestic breakdown among the Brethren, whilst they ignore the multitude of cases (far higher in percentage terms) among the general population.

The Brethren make their family life their central concern. Since they eschew other social commitments, the family, and the reinforcing involvements of the community, constitute their social world. Harmonious family life is the norm for which all Brethren strive. Because they do not participate in outside activities, there is a heightened concentration on sharing within the family, and family members are much more closely bound together than is usually the case in other families. Relationships with non-Brethren at work and at school are kept to the minimum of what is necessary, and whilst Brethren conduct themselves with integrity, responsibility, and courtesy, they do not look to these external involvements to provide them with any social life.

It is a religious obligation for Brethren to be diligent and conscientious parents, providing consistent love and security for their children. In the consistency of their performance, in the integrity of their dealings, and in the closeness of their family life, there can be no doubt at all that Brethren families maintain standards far higher than those of the general population. Children are well nourished, given a great deal of attention, encouraged to enjoy themselves in play, and to be conscientious in their schoolwork. Cases of child neglect, brutality, truancy, delinquency, and bad home management, simply do not occur among the Brethren. Children are protected from the deleterious influences of the mass media, and learn to make their enjoyment from creative activities of their own as well as in the cultivation of wholesome interests which are common to other well brought up youngsters. A wide range of children's playthings will be found in the homes of Brethren families — dolls, children's books, stamp collections, photographs, musical instruments and toys. Seen in their own homes, the children give the impression of being just as happy, active, and impish as other children, whilst they are in general more positive and polite than the average for children in other households. The Brethren do not take their children on holidays at popular holiday resorts and this reflects their wish to avoid what they see as baleful influences, many of which are promoted by the entertainment industry. It has at times been asserted that the children of the Brethren lead cloistered lives, experiencing little opportunity to associate with other young people from outside their sequestered local meeting. This is far from the case. The pattern of Brethren meetings is such that offspring from different assemblies regularly come together. Wherever geographic distances permit, each assembly engages in twice or thrice weekly interchange as guests and hosts with at least one other nearby congregation, and sometimes with two, thus bringing young people from different localities together. Beyond this, there are monthly fellowship meetings in which representatives from assemblies spread over entire continents - Europe, Australasia, and North America - participate. Children from the age of eight may attend these gatherings where they meet a wider selection of their fellow believers, including other young people. Older children are eligible to be invited to the three-day meetings which are also held monthly, and to which young people eagerly look forward. On such visits, the invited membership stay in the homes of other Brethren, and so the young enlarge their circle of acquaintance.

During the last decade, schooling for many Brethren children has undergone basic re-organization. Senior schools at that time were experiencing mounting problems with drugs, moral corruption and disorderly conduct. Brethren were concerned by the increasing use of television and videos in school-teaching, and, because moved by conscience to seek exemption from such teaching, they recognized the growing difficulty for teachers to accommodate their demands. Brethren also became alarmed by the growing impact of electronic media on the morals of young people in the wider society, and, at this point in particular, by the influence of the internet. So it was that Brethren welcomed ministry which clarified the demarcation line which established just which forms of electronic communication were suitable for their use. Contingent on this concern, was the issue of what subjects might be appropriate for their children to be taught in school. A stand was taken: Brethren children were to seek exemption from instruction in information technology. Whilst many head teachers were willing to cooperate with such requirements of Brethren conscience, it was clear that the influence of information technology was destined to grow and that exemption might become increasingly difficult to negotiate. The Brethren decided to take advantage of distance learning programmes. Children would study at home under parental supervision, and, in Britain would usually follow the national curriculum in those subjects to which they could conscientiously subscribe. Thus they would avoid subjects like information technology, which on grounds of conscience they regarded as unsuitable, and, at the same time, the children would be spared the deleterious effects of what Brethren regarded as the increasingly corrupt influence of contemporary school life, particularly at the secondary and higher stages of education.

To enhance the quality of this method of learning, the Brethren, in locations where they were sufficiently concentrated, established their own learning centres. Children at secondary level or above attend these centres on one and a half, two or more days a week for instruction by qualified teachers, who usually are not themselves Brethren, and who are hired by the centre's trustees. Teachers supervise the homework of pupils, and coordinate home study. The capital cost of establishing a centre is borne by local members, who periodically also donate funds to cover running costs, so augmenting the receipts from school fees paid by pupils' parents. At the same time, it should be made clear that the learning centres are in no sense "religious denominational schools". Religion is not one of the subjects taught, and there is no corporate act of religious worship or assembly. Some centres have made their facilities available to non-Brethren children for them to sit public examinations. The centres are viable even with few students (there were as few as eighteen in one centre that I visited) and local Brethren regard their development as a worthwhile investment, protecting their children from deleterious influences, maintaining the requirements of conscience, and providing an educational experience which, it must be said, can certainly be no worse, and is probably generally much better than that provided by the state system. Classes are small, and pupils receive what amounts to almost individual tuition in a wholly supportive atmosphere. Parents, trustees, and other local Brethren, often retired men or

businessmen who have the independence to devote their own time to their local centre, are regularly on the premises: members of the fellowship take a direct and active, sustained interest in their educational enterprise. They have reason to be satisfied with the above average GCSE results obtained by children in the centres that I visited, and with the achievements of pupils pursuing a business studies course (organized in co-operation with local advanced education colleges) — nominally a two-year course — which students at the centre manage to accomplish successfully in one.

The atmosphere in learning centres is relaxed, positive and enthusiastic. The tutors whom I interviewed — often retired professionals — commended the commitment of the pupils compared with what they had sometimes experienced in comprehensive schools and found them tractable and easy to teach. More than one expressed profound happiness with the job and a sense of gratified satisfaction compared to their experience as teachers in the state system. Administration was so much less exacting. Discipline was scarcely a problem. At its worst, indiscipline was seemingly confined to the marked disposition of the children to chatter to their fellow students — a tendency perhaps enhanced among Brethren children because these “school” relationships now reinforced the multiple shared activities and involvements that were part of their separated, but none the less intense, community life. The tutors, who often had no more than a sketchy knowledge of the history and belief-system of the Brethren, appreciated the degree of interest shown by parents and other Brethren, and invariably acknowledged the ease with which good relations were maintained. Some, it must be said, were puzzled by some aspects of Brethren practices — the need to eat separately when on school outings, the scrupulous vetting of textbooks, and the exclusion of some material in English and History — but the Brethren carefully interviewed all applicants for their tutorships, and at least ensured that their staff were acquainted with their distinctive requirements and were prepared to view them sympathetically.

At present there are already over 100 study centres operating throughout the world, but not all Brethren children are enrolled in distance learning or attend such centres. In some places, there are not enough Brethren families with children of eligible age to support a learning centre, and in any case there is no suggestion of any compulsion for all Brethren children to participate. Although some parents may not themselves be able to afford fees, they would not be denied the facilities of the study centre, since other local Brethren by no means infrequently volunteer financial assistance. National figures are not available, but it can be said that some Brethren children still attend local authority schools, particularly at primary level: relatively few, and almost certainly a declining proportion of Brethren children of eleven or over, attend schools in the state system.

At school, Brethren children are hard-working, ready to learn, and easily taught. They have a sense of personal responsibility at an early age, and they rarely present disciplinary problems. School teachers have informed me of the pleasure that they have taken in teaching the children of Brethren because of both their responsiveness and the general encouragement that they receive from home to take school work seriously. The comprehensive school reports that I examined some years ago indicated that their children were certainly as bright as others and generally more co-operative than average. Brethren children still in the state school system participate in normal school life and get to know other children there, although they do not expect to make close friends of children not of the same religion. Those undertaking education in state schools do not take part in extra-curricular activities or sports, although there is some engagement in games and physical education at the learning centres. Children are encouraged to pursue practical knowledge and such things as typing, sewing, crafts, cooking, woodworking, mechanical and engineering skills, and — now popular at the learning centres — business studies.

The Brethren are scrupulous in maintaining high standards of honesty in business, in promptitude in paying bills, and in good standards of service. They do not encourage tertiary education for their children except in technical knowledge, since they are disposed to see university education as uncondusive to their life of faith and as an agency in the dissemination of alien and secular values. The student unrest of recent years and the recurrent evidences of dissidence among student populations have perhaps served to reinforce their convictions on this subject. Today, the Brethren tend to follow occupations in various types of practical activities and marketing enterprises. Since they do not join associations such as trades unions or professional bodies, many occupations are closed to them. Consequently there are fewer members of the Brethren in professions than there were, but there are many people with small businesses and in various technical occupations.

The businesses in which many of today's Brethren earn their livelihoods are typically family concerns, often developed in supplying niche markets. Whilst small manufacturing concerns are certainly not uncommon among them, perhaps the majority of Brethren businessmen are merchants. No national figures are available, but it appears that, in the United Kingdom, the Brethren have among their number a higher proportion of businessmen of this kind than obtains in the general population. Understandably, these business concerns tend to employ other Brethren, and in particular to employ the single women in the local fellowship. But employed staff are by no means only Brethren: in many such concerns, Brethren employees work amicably alongside non-Brethren. A distinctive feature of these enterprises is that all of them operate without installing computers or facsimile machines, and without the use of mobile phones. These means of electronic communication which Brethren renounce, and which was the subject of ministry in 1982, are identified with "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: among whom

also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh ...” Ephesians 2: 2-3. AV. Therefore, Brethren should not be tainted by involvement in the up-building of the technological system of modern society. They are exhorted not only to distance themselves from current scientific developments, which constitute a system perceived as a modern Babylon, but also to cease lusting after its purported benefits, which are seen as desired only because they make available the time in which to gratify fleshly lusts. The Lord will soon exact judgment on such a system, and Brethren are to support that judgment. Their commitment is to take Christ as the model of authority in their endeavour to lead the simple Christian life. I have visited various successful Brethren-owned firms that are entirely controlled and organized by manual accountancy and stock control systems. Their owners remain convinced of the viability of their card, file, and ledger methods of control, and, indeed, in some respects of their superiority to computers. Their chosen control systems also have the incidental advantage of using more labour, and so of creating work — often for employees who are Brethren.

Only on the basis of a thorough study of the history and teachings of the movement, and of their sociological significance, is it possible to understand the nature of family life in a sect like the Brethren, and to form any properly informed judgment about such matters as the psychological maturity or emotional stability of members of the movement, including the children. Without such knowledge, psychological and psychiatric appraisal of individual sect members must be subject to very severe distortion. It is well established among sociologists that individual behaviour can be assessed only once the norms of the community are understood. Psychological development is very much affected by the norms, mores, and values of the community in which the individual is brought up and it must be apparent that the tenor of life among the Brethren differs in significant respects from that of the wider community in western societies. Just as it is well established that the assumption of psychiatric and psychological analysis must be considerably modified in application to peoples of non-western societies, and just as it is now widely recognized that Freud’s psychoanalytic principles were distorted because they were based so largely on the specific problems of middle-class middle-aged, Viennese women who were Jewish, so it is increasingly apparent that the psychology of the members of small somewhat insulated sects (such as the Hutterites, Amish Mennonites, Jehovah’s Witnesses or the Brethren) cannot be understood without sociological analysis of those communities. It is a cause for concern that not infrequently in cases of the disputed custody of children courts have placed considerable reliance on the evidence of psychologists and psychiatrists who are ignorant of the religious and sociological character of the sectarian communities in which their subjects have been brought up. In some cases, psychiatrists have formed their opinions after brief interviews of only a few hours duration conducted in the alien atmosphere of consulting rooms and clinics, and have themselves never had the opportunity of watching the normal everyday life of those about whom they are expected to provide diagnoses.

Popular opinion concerning the way of life of sectarian groups is moulded in considerable part by journalists who have themselves often only a very tenuous grasp of sectarian religion (and sometimes of any sort of religious knowledge). Clinical experts themselves often draw their background assumptions about sects from newspaper reports which are misinformed and sensationalist. It is not difficult to present a strongly negative picture of sectarian life, and particularly so by taking the most libertarian perspective. The sect can then be represented as a coercive community, the leaders of which oppress the ordinary members who are said (in what amounts to a very serious misuse of the term) to be “brainwashed”. Two processes appear to be involved. The first is to present a sect, specifically the Brethren, as a type of conspiracy in restraint of the normal liberties of citizens. The second is to imply guilt by association of one sect with other movements about which the public has received highly sensational accounts.

There can be no doubt that the Brethren refrain from a wide variety of activities and associations which the majority of people regard as normal. Their social norms can be presented in negative terms when the wider society is used as the criterion of normality. The Brethren would themselves readily accede to the charge that they keep themselves away from the everyday world to a very considerable extent. They do so, however, from the force of voluntary conviction, and whilst more experienced members will caution and advise other members about their behaviour, that behaviour is sustained by the general consensus of the members of the movement. Certainly, it is not easy for an individual to leave the group, but the difficulty arises from his own conscientious awareness of group standards and from the fact that he is unlikely to have many, if any, friends outside the community. Departure from the group occasions the gravest disturbance for him and for his relatives, and indeed for the whole community of Brethren. But people do leave, and the fact that they do so must make apparent the fact that there is no coercion in the normal sense in which that word is used.

Because in recent years there have been numerous problems arising among a wide variety of religious movements, the press have presented material about sects in which they have frequently written of them without much discrimination. Many press statements are factually in error, but such comments, coming in such profusion, lead to serious misinformation about individual movements and create a climate of guilt by association for movements which have nothing in common except that they severally subscribe to religious tenets which diverge from those of the wider society. It has become particularly fashionable to lump sects together and to play upon the anxieties created by the mass suicide of the members of the People’s Temple in Guyana in 1978, and to recall such remote and bizarre episodes as the Anabaptist rule at Miinster in 1534. It may be said without reservation that these dramatic instances bear no relevance to the issues arising from the operation of a contemporary sect like the Brethren.

The Brethren order their affairs by reference to guidance which is explicitly and exclusively biblical in origin. Unlike those movements which depend on charismatic leaders and self-styled messiahs, the Brethren maintain their affairs by a considerable measure of spontaneous participation. Whilst they have leading brethren among them, whose teachings they accept as authoritative, those leaders are not charismatic leaders, and the framework within which their influence extends is grounded in the extensive knowledge of Scripture that is shared by the membership. The Brethren are a settled religious movement, which has existed in various parts of the English-speaking world and on the continent of Europe for over 170 years. Over most of that time, the members of the movement, many of them in families which have remained Brethren from one generation to another, have attracted little public attention, but have led lives of exemplary moral demeanour. Like several other well-established sects, they have convictions which lead them to separate themselves from the wider community and to dissociate themselves from many activities which are now current in contemporary society. In some respects, their moral standards are closer to those that were normative more widely in society some decades ago. They are clearly not one of the “new religions” issuing a radical challenge and adopting self-consciously a new “alternative life style”. They must rather be represented as an established sect preserving values to which a much wider public has subscribed in the past. Like many other sects, the Brethren dissent on a variety of issues on grounds of conscience. The general history of religious freedom in western societies over the last three centuries has been a steady course of acknowledgment of the rights of minorities to act in accordance with conscience, and a large number of established Christian minorities have increasingly been accorded the right to pursue their own way of life. The rights of sects to order their own way of life have been steadily extended in English-speaking countries and also to some extent on the continent of Europe, and those rights include the possibility of practising a code of morality that is more stringent than that followed by the majority.

