

---

## BOOK REVIEW

---

Frisk, Liselotte, Sanja Nilsson and Peter Åkerbäck. 2018. *Children in Minority Religions: Growing up in Controversial Religious Groups*. Sheffield: Equinox. vi + 429 pp. ISBN: 978-1-7817-9420-3 £75.00 (hbk); ISBN: 978-1-7817-9591-0 £75.00 (e-book).

Reviewed by: George D. Chryssides, York St John University, York, UK  
GDChryssides@religion21.com

**Keywords:** children; controversial religious groups; education; minority religions; new religious movements; parenting.

As new religious movements (NRMs) have moved on, so has academic scholarship. Fewer members are converts, but belong to a second or third generation. In this volume, Liselotte Frisk, Sanja Nilsson and Peter Åkerbäck present the results of an ambitious research project funded by the Swedish Research Council, which ran from 2012 to 2016, entitled “Kids in the Cults: Religious Upbringings in Minority Religions in Sweden”. By minority religions, the authors mean NRMs, not minorities who belong to traditional religions such as Jews and Muslims.

The NRMs that are covered are the Church of Scientology, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (formerly the Unification Church), the Family International, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON—the Hare Krishna organization), Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church. Also included is Knutby Filadelfia, a small Pentecostalist congregation of 85 members, and which gained notoriety through a murder that was instigated by its pastor. There is also a chapter entitled “The Waldorf Education System and Religion”; although not strictly a religion, Waldorf education derives from Anthroposophy, labelled by founder Rudolf Steiner as a “spiritual science”. For readers who are unfamiliar with these NRMs, a number of useful appendices outline their origins and practices.

The book is in three sections. Section 1 consists of three chapters setting the political and social contexts, spanning the Swedish political background, children’s rights, and how perceptions of childhood are constructed. Section 2 deals with specific NRMs, interrupted by two chapters dealing with ex-membership and healthcare. Section 3 deals exclusively with education. The data was collected largely by extensive interviews with informants who were brought up in NRMs, but have now reached adulthood, and additionally a number of parents. The 93 interviewees were acquired by “snowballing”; 15 were ex-members, and 22 were parents, all of the latter being members. No interviews appear to have been conducted in connection with Waldorf schooling, the data on which was acquired by observation at Annaskolan, a small school in Darlana. The authors do not claim that their sample reflects a representative cross-section of NRM children, nor that the memories of childhood

are accurate or unbiased, but rather that they have acquired a good number of perceptions of childhood, reflecting their current understanding of what life was like. They acknowledge that these accounts may well be influenced by the interviewees' present life situation, cultural support, and ex-member testimony.

The issues that were explored include family and communal life, discipline, schooling, attitudes to medicine and healthcare, charismatic leadership, and relationships with mainstream society. The authors conclude, understandably, that it is impossible to generalize about these groups, all of which are different, giving rise to different experiences of childhood. They note that NRMs change over time, sometimes giving rise to markedly different experiences, even within the same organization: for example, ISKCON's child education changed from the ashram-based *gurukula* system, which was popular in the 1980s, to more conventional education, affording greater contact between children and families. The researchers also found differences among parents; some adhered strictly to their organization's teachings, while others were more liberal. Differences could also be found between one congregation and another, as in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses in Sweden. Other findings include different levels of engagement among children: while some children conformed to expectations, others found ways of avoiding restrictions and adopting ways of behaviour that were more in accordance with mainstream society. The relationship between members and ex-members also varied: the practice of shunning among Jehovah's Witnesses and the Plymouth Brethren meant that leaving the organization involved a serious break with those who remained, while in other NRMs ex-members might maintain cordial relationships. Those who have left an organization were not necessarily negative, and some perceived benefits that they had gained through belonging: for example one ex-Jehovah's Witness claimed to have acquired good public-speaking skills.

The topic of child abuse and sexual abuse has received much recent attention among critics of NRMs. These issues receive frequent mention in the volume, and emerge at various points in the interviews. The authors cite several extraneous sources that report child abuse, but Frisk and her collaborators found little evidence from their own informants. One ex-Jehovah's Witness claimed to have experienced sexual abuse (pp. 184–87), and one ex-Family International member alleged repeated sexual abuse by her father, but her sister repudiated such claims (pp. 137–40). Some affirmed that discipline was strict, and there was evidence of some mistreatment within Knutby Filadelfia. However, the authors distinguish between spanking—now illegal in Sweden—and more harmful physical abuse, which the informants did not report.

My one criticism of the volume relates to Chapter 6, where Frisk compares parenting in the Osho Movement with that of Jehovah's Witnesses. This is a somewhat curious essay, partly because of the choice of comparison, but especially because informant testimony was only elicited for Jehovah's Witnesses, whereas information on Osho was entirely text-based. The chapter draws on the parenting styles model of Diana Baumrind, and it makes interesting observations about each group's stance on family, children, parenting, sex, and education.

Sadly, Liselotte Frisk died in October 2020 at the untimely age of 61. Her work on new religions, and particularly the role of children within them, was impressive, involving a considerable amount of fieldwork worldwide. She will be sadly missed, and it is to be hoped that her collaborators, as well as other colleagues, will be able to continue her research.