
This weighty volume is the outcome of a large grant funded by the Swedish Research Council (2012–2016) called “Kids in Cults: Religious Upbringings in Minority Religions in Sweden.” The children and parents interviewed were from seven groups: the Church of Scientology; the Plymouth Brethren; ISKCON (Hare Krishnas); Knutby Filadelfia, a Swedish Pentecostal church; Unificationism; The Family International; and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Appendix 1 discusses all the groups. The interview sample was 50:50 male:female and both ex-members and current members were interviewed; there were seventy-five interviews in all—fifty-three children and twenty-two parents. Appendix 2 gives details of the interviewees.

The book is in three parts. The first, “General Overview and Perspectives,” opens with a chapter by Åkerbäck that sketches the Swedish (and European more generally) context for the study. He covers religious freedom, anti-cult groups in Sweden, information provided to the public by government reports, journalism and popular books by ex-members, and ideas about children’s rights and individualism. While the book does not address Pagan studies directly, its remit is generalizable to children in all minority religions, which includes Paganism in all its multifarious forms.

The second chapter by Nilsson is a survey of Swedish debates about religion and children’s rights. There is demographic information (children are two of Sweden’s nine million inhabitants), government provisions about religious education, and an analysis of twelve newspaper articles. This reveals the contested areas; “the debate over parents’ rights versus the rights of the child, and the division between good and bad religion” (58). Frisk’s chapter focuses on constructions of childhood with reference to relations with parents, the religious community, and wider society. The research reveals that older communitarian models that were regarded as controversial as they separated children from parents are no longer common, and all the groups are nuclear family-oriented. Compare the Swedish data with recent scholarship on American Pagan families and childhoods,

The second part, “Different Groups and Different Perspectives,” starts with “Recently Reborn: To Return as a Child of Scientologist Parents” by Åkerbäck. The striking title refers to L. Ron Hubbard’s ideas about children and parenting, which begins with a gestation period that is directed to giving as few negative experiences to the fetus as possible, followed by a completely silent birth. As children are reincarnated souls, Scientology allows children to make serious decisions (such as joining the elite Sea Org) and also expects them to work. Health matters are discussed, including Scientology’s opposition to certain medicines, which results in some children not being vaccinated.

Frisk and Nilsson next tackle The Family International (formerly the Children of God), a new religious movement that has been hugely controversial (for example, because of “flirty fishing,” the technique of evangelism by young women who had sex with potential converts). The 2005 murder suicide by “Ricky Rodriguez (Davidito), son of Karen Zerby (Maria) and adopted by [the founder David] Berg, [who] killed one of his former nannies and then killed himself” (127) drew attention to the sexual abuse of children, which he had protested since leaving TFI in 2001. The interviews in this case reveal these areas, of sexuality around children, disruptions in life, and other phenomena that permit the construction of “victim” apostasy narratives (143). In the Pagan community there are several controversial authors who have advocated for children’s sexual experiences, most notably Gavin and Yvonne Frost, whose initiation at puberty ritual, originally published in *The Witch’s Bible* (1972) has been widely criticized and repudiated.

The sixth to ninth chapters are by Frisk. These cover parenting styles among Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Osho Movement (formerly the Rajneeshis), then apostate reflections on childhood by young leavers and ex-members. Here Frisk interviewed a range of people, some hostile ex-members, some still “sort-of” members, others who gradually drifted away, and those whose parents split up and opened a space for change. She sums up factors that influence leaving, the process of leaving, and the implications their upbringing has for life in the wider world. Chapters 8 and 9 cover the issue of corporal punishment in the Twelve Tribes and attitudes to medicine and healthcare.
These two studies are careful to explain distinctions the groups make (for example, the Twelve Tribes distinguish corporal punishment from child abuse, and the six groups all have particular ways of constructing the notion of “health” that justifies their selective use of the Swedish healthcare system) and all unusual usages are compared to mainstream ideas on the subject. The final chapter in this part is Nilsson’s “The Charismatic Leader in Knutby Filadelfia: The Children’s Perspective,” which discusses how the children in this small, and quite closed, Pentecostal community responded to Åsa Waldau, the leader of the group who was understood to be the “bride of Christ” (257). Her interviews record children and young congregants longing to be in Waldau’s presence, and viewing her as the source of authority, despite her seclusion since 2008, after murder rocked the community in 2004.

The third part, “Systems of Education,” asks how minority religions approach the education of their children, as some groups determinedly want to protect their young from secular society. Åkerbäck’s opening chapter, “Learning the Principles: Socialization of Children within the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification through Sunday School,” considers the materials used for religious education of this particular group of followers of Sun Myung Moon. The lessons, which incorporate creative activities and fun, act to socialize the young members of the religion into specific doctrines, such as sinless birth, purity and marriage, the importance of the community, and virtue. Nilsson discusses the experiences of children in an ISKCON school “which operated between 1979 and 2003” (312). The complexities of running a boarding school till 1988 are frankly admitted and the reasons why ISKCON was permitted to open a school at all are canvassed. Interviewees recall stick rules, the pain of separation from parents, and uncertainty about the outside world, while revealing that the children were creative in working around the rules to manage their school life.

Frisk and Nilsson’s study of Plymouth Brethren schooling reveals higher levels of tension with the outside world in socialization (not eating with non-members, no radio and television, and so on), and criticisms of the Brethren Labora School, which was founded in 2007. However, interviews reported student satisfaction, close friendships and strong parental involvement. Frisk’s chapter on Waldorf education in Sweden is an outlier as Anthroposophy is not one of the seven religious and spiritual groups featured in the book, but it extends the
reader’s awareness of the range of educational possibilities available to parents. The last substantive chapter is also by Frisk, and analyses L. Ron Hubbard’s Applied Scholastics educational method. The book concludes with a brief co-authored conclusion.

Children in Minority Religions: Growing Up in Controversial Religious Groups is a major achievement that uses extensive field research to draw well-informed and useful conclusions about the different experiences of childhood that young members of minority religions have. The study is about Sweden, but the material is illuminating for most Western countries. There are connections that could be teased out between the Swedish studies and, for example, Helen A. Berger’s A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the United States (1999). The book is strongly recommended and deserves an enthusiastic readership.

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