

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 December 2017



Children in New Religious Movements

Podcast with **Susan Palmer** (4 December 2017).Interviewed by **David Robertson**Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/children-in-new-religious-movements/>

DR: *I'm here in Bedford. It's a beautiful sunny afternoon at the last day of the CenSAMM conference on Millenarianism and violence. I'm happy to be speaking today with [Susan Palmer](#), welcoming her back to Religious Studies Project – one of the small group of people who've made a return visit! So, first of all, thanks for returning to the Religious Studies Project.*

SP: It's a pleasure, David.

DR: *We're going to be talking today about children in new religious movements, which Susan did her keynote presentation here about. But she's also just about to start a major research project on the subject. Maybe the best place for us to start, then, is for you to tell us how you got interested in the idea of children, in particular, in these movements.*

SP: Well, it all started with my PhD thesis which was on women's roles in new religions. And at the time I had two young children when I was doing my research. So when I would go to visit these groups – the Hare Krishna, the Unification Church – I would sometimes have to drag my children along, because I didn't have a babysitter, you know. So then the focus would be on . . . they would ask me about my children, and they'd introduce me to their children, and we'd be talking about motherhood. And I wasn't really that interested, but I was humouring them! And then my children used to go off and play with their children, and I would realise on the way home that my children found out much more about what was really going on than I did!

DR: (Laughs)

SP: So I sort-of inadvertently got interested in the idea of children in new religions. And I ended up co-editing a book, with Charlotte Hardman, called [Children in New Religions](#). And recently I've come back to the topic because several of the groups I'm interested in have had quite lot of conflict with

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society about their children. In fact, [James Richardson](#) made the point, which I agree with, that the old brainwashing allegation or controversy has sort-of, pretty well, died down. And one way you can attack new religions or criticise them is by focussing on their children. And certainly groups that are sectarian, who live in a commune or who live out in the country and have a lot of children, make people nervous, make their neighbours nervous, make social workers nervous, because they don't really know what's going on. And in today's system children go to school, children go to doctors and you have close neighbours so everyone can keep an eye on how you're raising your children. But if you're off in a millenarian commune, somewhere in the country, that doesn't practice medicine or does home-schooling, you know, authorities get suspicious. And the anti-cult movement has, I think, exploited the situation by publishing materials in which, well: an ex-member might say they were abused, or had a miserable childhood; or they take isolated statements by the leaders and show that these children are in danger. I mean, of course there are some groups, in fact, where children have been badly treated and abused – there's no doubt about that. But there is this tendency – certainly in anti-cult literature in recent years – to assume that children in cults are separated from their parents, or that the parents are following orders from the charismatic leader. And [Margaret Singer](#) says parents are “middle management” in cults; she uses that term over and over again. So what struck me is there's so much variety in how children are perceived. You know: the role of a child, how they're brought up, and also in the patterns of the family as you look at the different groups. (5:00) And it's an ephemeral period. Childhood is over quite quickly and many of the groups aren't even prepared for children; they weren't even thinking about children when they started. And then they have to improvise, make up education and so on. So it's not very well documented. Many of the groups don't really document their own process. Some of them do. [The Children of God](#) have a very rich documentation on all their experiments in their communal life – even like how they wash dishes! So I think it's an important thing to study, but also it's difficult to study, because many of the groups have had problems with social workers and, of course, custody battles. When there's a couple who join a commune and one of them leaves and wants their children to leave with them, they might contact the anti-cult movement and, you know, use their philosophy or their theories in court to get their kid out. So there's a lot of social forces today that are putting pressure on alternative religions to raise their children in the same way as secular children. And I've witnessed raids on children with this group I was studying in France with the [Twelve Tribes](#). And they were raided. Their children were raided in Vermont and then in Germany and when I was visiting them in France there was actually a raid right under my nose, but in this case they were picking the fathers. And then there was the polygamous Mormons in Texas, the [Yearning for Zion](#) people, whose children were taken away. And this seems to be something that's happening today and there are severable forces at work. First of all, there's this idea that our mainstream secular

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culture is the highest type of culture, the right culture, so we want to give children an opportunity to develop, and choose their lifestyle, and get a good education, so they can have a decent profession. And if a child grows up in a Mormon polygamous compound, or the Twelve Tribes, or the [Hare Krishna](#), inevitably they're being deprived and it's sort of our duty to give them all the rights as a citizen and remove them. And, of course, this violates the rights of the parents to practise their religion and raise their children in their own faith. And it also violates the rights of the children to be able to live with their parents and their brothers and sisters. So it's a terrible thing that the children experience when they're taken away. And often they're put in these orphanages. Well, in the case of the Twelve Tribes these children were put in orphanages, or homes for troubled teens, or foster homes: rather cold environments, not very nice environments with terrible food, and so on. In the case of the Yearning for Zion, these children were just plonked in various foster homes and it was even hard to organise to get them back, because they were so widely scattered. So that's one thing, and then the other thing is there seems to be this concern . . . well you were talking today about conspiracy theories about paedophile rings So, there's often this idea that if there's a charismatic prophet who's a spiritual mystic, he must also be a paedophile. Somehow it's a package, today. (10:00) And of course, you do have the odd charismatic leader who does fancy very young women or has anti-social tendencies or sexual appetites. But I get the impression, in many cases, that this is just mud that's thrown at them randomly, and it appears in the media, and has a devastating effect.

DR: *And you've made this point before, in your book on the [Nuwaubian Nation](#). You make the point that this is not only quite a common allegation against cult leaders, but against black cult leaders in particular. And, presumably, that allegation relates to this idea of the child as vulnerable that you were taking about before.*

SP: So I feel it's really important that we study different groups and get a lot of data: and we look at the variety in child-rearing patterns; the variety in how children are perceived; and also in the family, and how the families integrate in with the community. And so we won't have these monolithic stereotypes about children in cults.

DR: *How does the child work as a symbol? What is it that makes the child such a powerful discursive unit in all of this?*

SP: Well, [Mary Douglas](#), in her book, [Natural Symbols](#), she looks at the idea of the body as the perfect vessel that represents the whole group. And the idea that the group is inviolable and has no cracks. And there's tremendous concern in some minority religions, or minority cultures, with diet and

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sexuality. And she sees that as: those are the two holes in which foreign elements could come in. And so, if the group can control the diet and who the person marries then they can protect their culture from assimilation. So she talks about the virgin, as an example, as a symbol of the community. You know, the Virgin Mary among the Early Christians. And she doesn't actually talk about the child but, you know, you can see how, in the literature of some of these groups, or in their ritual practices, some of these groups are very child-centred. So their whole community is looking at the children and intent on breeding these perfect children, and the children are their hope for the future, the children will usher in the Millennium, the children will fight Armageddon, the children will be the 24 elders who will rule beside Jesus in the Millennium, the children will be 144000 elite, and so on. Some groups, of course, have zero interest in children, and they're not allowed at their meetings, and they don't even care if they join or not – like the [Raelians](#), for example. But in other groups it's extremely important that the children carry on the religious mission of their parents, and their education is very important, and the control is very important. And they are the hope and so I read this book recently called [The Child in Post-Apocalyptic Cinema](#), which had a lot of great ideas which applied to this situation. And the editor, whose name is Debbie Olsonn, said the child is this idea of the future, but also the past. So, for example in the Twelve Tribes, they dress their children to look like, you know, pioneers from 1800 or something. So when you go there you feel a sense of nostalgia, you feel you're stepping into early America. (15:00) And their children represent the goodness and the simplicity and the beauty of country children 150 years ago, before things got all screwed up. And also, this idea that the child represents this new humanity that will arise after the destruction of the world.

DR: *Well that's nice, because that ties into this millenarian model of time that we've been talking about today – but we've talked about it on the Religious Studies Project a few times – that millennialism, although it seems so focussed on the future, is actually a way of tying the past and using the future as a lens. But, ultimately, with the pivotal point of it being the present day. So, for somebody who's involved in one of these relatively exclusive or . . . I don't know what the word is . . . the kind of new religions that, to some degree, shuts itself off . . .*

SP: A sectarian group

DR: *. . . a sectarian kind of movement, then you can see why children would be so important. Because, as you say, they're not only embodying the future but they embody the movement of the ideas of the past. And the parent is almost creating that perfected version of the past in the future, by creating these children and controlling their particular set of circumstances and the influences that they have.*

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SP: Yes.

DR: *Is the importance that children have in these kind of sectarian groups, is that the reason that they're so often the site of conflict?*

SP: Yes it is, I think. I mean, it is of course very upsetting to the parents and the leaders of these groups if somebody leaves and wants to take the child out. There's this right-wing Catholic group in Quebec called the [Apostles of Infinite Love](#): *Apôtres de l'amour infini*. Their leader was a mystical pope – he died recently. And they had a monastery which families would join, and then the couple would split up and become celibate monks and nuns. And the children would become the children of the monastery and live this very Spartan life. When people left – usually it was fathers who left, actually, and wanted to take their children out – the attitude of the group seemed to be, “But the world is an evil place, it's going to be destroyed very soon, and we can't let these poor children go.”

DR: *Right*

SP: So they felt it was very much their responsibility not to let the children leave the group, which was like a Noah's Ark. So they had some very intense conflict and struggle that involved four police raids and helicopters and so on. And, you know, hiding children. And their mystical pope actually went to prison for a few years for *séquestration des enfants*, you know, kidnapping or hiding children. And, of course, we don't really know if he did or not. Because he said the mothers just left and sort-of went underground, so that's possible. He said “My people are free to do what they want. I don't tell them what to do.” So anyway on one hand in these groups, often there's a very strong reluctance to let the children go. And from society's point of view, there's the idea that we can't let these poor children be deprived, and warped, and indoctrinated in an unrealistic worldview that thinks the world's going to end, or is patriarchal and sees women as second class citizens who should get married as soon as they turn 18, and so on. So it's very intense . . . there's a very intense struggle going on there, a cultural battle.

DR: *Yes, in a number of cases these conflicts have led to the state visiting violence upon children in these situations. I mean, we could mention [Waco](#), for instance. Tell us a little bit about the situation that you mentioned – this bombing.*

SP: Yes, I was talking yesterday about [MOVE](#), in Philadelphia. And I find it amazing that many people don't know about MOVE. I teach a course on New Religions at Concordia, and when I mention MOVE everyone looks blank. **(20:00)** But my students have all heard of Waco and the Branch

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Davidians and David Koresh.

DR: *I had never heard of this.*

SP: But in 1985 in the city of Philadelphia, the orders of the Mayor were to drop two bombs from a helicopter on a row (terraced) house, in which a new religious movement called MOVE lived. And they're usually depicted as religious anarchists. And they were mainly black, although there were quite a lot of white people living there too. And five children were killed in the bombing, plus six adults.

DR: *When you say bombing . . .*

SP: They literally dropped two bombs! It's unbelievable.

DR: *That's insane. This was 1989?*

SP: 1985. May 13th.

DR: *Right.*

SP: And it was mainly to get rid of . . . They'd created a fortress, a sort of bunker, on the top and they had rifles. And they used to patrol this bunker and shout out criticism with loudspeakers. And all the neighbours hated them. And so, it was mainly to get rid of that bunker and make sure that they all just left. But the trouble was, they had police surrounding the house shooting the people who left. So they couldn't win. And then the mayor didn't want the fire trucks to come in. He wanted to wait, because he wanted to make sure the place was really burned out. But, unfortunately, the rest of the neighbourhood caught fire and sixty-one houses burned to the ground. It's incredible when you look at the pictures. It's amazing. And the people who lived there, the neighbours had be warned to leave. So the houses had been evacuated. But a lot of them had left their pets at home and all the pets had died, too. It was terrible.

DR: *Yes.*

SP: So, as I mentioned in my talk, at the meeting between the police and the mayor and the city councillors, before this happened, they were talking about the children. And they were a bit worried that if they went in and arrested the men, the children would be used as hostages by the MOVE people. And they were also worried that these children could be dangerous because they were “like little wild animals” and they might have weapons. So they saw them as little guerrilla warriors or something. So

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the point that's made in this [book by Robin Wagner-Pacifici](#) is that, you know, they probably wouldn't have dropped a bomb if it had just been ordinary American kids. But they saw them as either being little wild animals or being guerrilla warriors or And you often find that in anti-cult books, or in media reports, looking at children in cults. They can be seen as sort-of scary, like in the [Village of the Damned](#) by John Wyndam; like little aliens. Or they could be seen as brainwashed little zombies.

DR: *Deaththroat children, yeah! My girlfriend once pointed out to me that – this shift of seeing the child as . . . putting so much importance on the children, and their innocence and their importance and how much you have to nurture them, and childhood as this magical time – it's quite modern. It arises in the Victorian era. But there's this tension then between, you know, the Victorian era is the classic example of: yes, for some Victorian children it was a magical time, where they got to be free and innocent; but you also had the vast majority who were living in absolute squalor, ridden with disease, high infant mortality, child prostitution, all the rest of it. And so there's this dichotomy: this feeling of embodying innocence in children happens at times when there's an awareness of inequality of power. And I wonder if there's something going on there about our relationship with power, and our ability to . . . maybe compromise in the position of being an adult, or something? I don't know. How do you think this relationship to power structures is working here?*

SP: (25:00) Yes, I think that's a very interesting idea. Well, a lot of parents who go into new religions are rejecting the state, they're rejecting the authority of the state. But of course, they then find themselves under sometimes even more controlling kinds of authority within the group. But they can accept that because it's spiritual

DR: *And it's personal, maybe, rather than an impersonal distant power of the state.*

SP: Yes. It's charismatic, it's not bureaucratic. But then if you read, you know, media reports or anti-cult literature, they tend to think that within with these groups people don't know how to think. Children are discouraged from independent critical thought. So they grow up very, very passive and rather stupid. But if you read some of the literature by ex-members, for example, by [Pierrepont Noyes](#) who was one of the sons of the leader of the [cult of Perfectionists](#). And he is the most rebellious, mischievous, critical kid you ever imagine. And he describes his childhood with a tremendous humour and so much vitality, and so many little rebellious escapades. And then you have [Krishnamurti](#), of course, who was raised to be the avatar and basically refused, and rejected his role, and spent the rest of his life criticising religion and coming up with his own philosophy. And also I find, just going to these groups, you find that the children often have a sub-culture. Like, I went to one group and the

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parents were telling me that the children were – I won't mention what the group is – they said, “We don't believe in giving our children an allowance, we never give them money, we never let them eat candy and we don't let them play with toys.” And my kids were there, and they'd said, “Go off in the woods and play,” to get them out of my hair. So my kids went off in the woods. And on the way home I said to them in the car, “So, what did you do?” And they said “Oh! Our friends took us in the woods and we dug up a treasure chest!” And I said, “What was in it?” And they said, “Money and candies and trucks!”

DR: (Laughs)

SP: They were doing the real research! But actually, Charlotte Hardman makes this point, too, in our early book – I think it was published in 1998 – that children – she's an anthropologist who's done work on the anthropology of children – she notices that children often have this kind of subculture within a culture. And they see things differently. And I've certainly found that, visiting some of these groups, that the children have their own little “cult within a cult”, if you like.

DR: *That's often the case in my work as well. Even in a relatively small group, you would get the official version, but when you hung around . . . I used to always hang around, or try and have a drink with people, or go to the kitchen and help with the cooking, and things like that. And the more gossipy side of it would start to come out. And you realise that, you know: this situation is just as complex as any other social situation, with all sorts of different levels of discourse going on. You know, a lot of the conversation that we've been having has reminded me of . . . well, obviously there's been quite a lot of stuff about Scientology recently, “[Going Clear](#)” being the most obvious example. And it ties into a number of different things. First of all, this movement away from the idea of brainwashing towards, you know, children being in the frame . . .*

SP: Indoctrinated.

DR: *Yes, indoctrinated, but also physically harmed. There's been much more of a shift recently towards looking at [L. Ron Hubbard's](#) relationship with his own kids.*

SP: Oh really?

DR: *Yes. One of his children committed suicide and another attempted suicide.*

SP: That's right.

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DR: That's probably wrong but . . .

SP: I know one of them committed suicide.

DR: *But I think the other one also, yeah, I can't remember now. I think the other one attempted it as well. But also in "Going Clear", the guy – is it Paul Haggis? It was his daughter coming out as homosexual that caused him to leave the church. So again, his children were involved. But when you were talking about this portrayal of people not being able to think properly and having their information limited – that's exactly the narrative that he gives: that when you're in Scientology you don't get to question it (30:00). Except, of course, we're hearing this from somebody who did question it from within Scientology. So the narrative doesn't really work. And it's playing into so many of these little discourses that you're talking about there.*

SP: Yes.

DR: *Thank you so much for speaking to us again. Another big subject, but this has been a really exciting introduction. And, bringing in the idea of generationality, maybe in a year's time we can meet up and talk about old people in new religions?!*

SP Well thank you, David! (Laughs)

DR: *But thanks, as always, for speaking to me.*

SP: Old people are fun, too!

DR: *Yes, absolutely!*

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