

Flirty Fishing in the Children of God: The Sexual Body as a Site of Proselytization and Salvation

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Abstract:

The Children of God [now called The Family] emerged as an apocalyptic new religious movement in the late 1960s. By the late 1970s, the group had engendered a great deal of academic and popular debate due to, among other things, its controversial sexual practices. In this article, I examine one such practice, namely, Flirty Fishing, in which many women in the group used their sexuality in combination with scriptural discussions as a method of proselytization. Utilizing social theories of the body, I explore the ways that many of the women may have adopted strategies that helped them to perceive their bodies and their behaviours in ways that did not threaten their senses of self. I consider both how women were able to endure the physical and emotional aspects of Flirty Fishing, and how they contextualized their behaviour in terms of the group's general dynamics and belief system. Thus, I explore not only the organizational imposition of certain modes of behaviour on the body, but also individual perceptions of, responses to, and negotiations of them. Importantly, this article applies a theoretical approach to the study of new religious movements that few scholars thus far have explored.

Introduction

The Children of God (the COG, hereafter)¹ emerged during the late 1960s under the leadership of the Christian evangelical preacher, David Berg (1919-1994). The group offered a radically different platform from which to worship and spread what Berg believed to be the word of God. Rather than provide a traditional image of Jesus, Berg offered a revolutionary one that appealed to the disenfranchised youth of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Kent, 2001: 146-149). From Berg's reinterpretation of Christianity emerged a belief system that not only condoned, but also actively encouraged, sexual promiscuity between adults, between children, and most alarmingly, between adults and children. This article proposes that the heavy emphasis Berg placed upon sexual relationships contributed to the adoption of specific beliefs in terms of the human body, especially for the women in the group. Critically, Berg framed these ways of understanding and using the body with the language of devotion and salvation.

As Berg legitimated each of the sexual practices (most of which I assume were not ones that members typically engaged in prior to joining the group), not only did he normalise certain beliefs about sexuality, but also he created new embodied experiences for the group's adherents. One aspect of sexual relations within the COG—namely 'Flirty Fishing' (also known as 'FFing')—a

practice that encouraged female members to proselytize using their sexuality as a tool to attract new male converts—provides an especially fascinating example of how the human body exists at the centre of meaning, experience, power, and control.

Theoretical approaches to the body ably demonstrate both the social context of people's bodies and the embodied experiences of individuals within particular settings. In this way, social theories of the body can help to explicate how adherents to particular groups identify with, and perceive their own bodies in relation to others. Importantly, individuals' understanding of their bodies and their embodied experiences influences their perception of their social worlds and the behaviours that they practice therein. This article reveals therefore, not only how women were able to endure the physical and emotional aspects of Flirty Fishing, but also how they contextualized their behaviour in terms of the group's general dynamics and belief system.

My research goals involve exploring the group's organizational imposition of certain modes of behaviour on the body, and the women's individual perceptions of, and responses to them. Theorizing the body helps to elucidate the complex relationship between Berg, his directives for women's bodies, and the women's experiences of (and reactions to) that power dynamic. Central to this relationship is the idea that the process is relational. That is, the women participated in the renegotiation of meaning—Berg did not merely impose it on them (although, at times, pressure to conform to his demands was evident). In order to explore this process, I will use documents that include many of Berg's writings (specifically those that refer to women's bodies, sexuality, and Flirty Fishing), the autobiographical account and research of ex-member Miriam Williams, and some of the comments made by other women in the group who discussed their experiences during interviews (see Chancellor, 2000). As background for examining the practice of Flirty Fishing in the COG, I first review some of the contemporary research literature on the body and the usefulness of adopting this type of approach to the study of new religious movements.

Theoretical Approach: Social Theories of the Body

Social theories of the body help to illuminate the social meanings attached to the body and the social forces that help to shape the body in its context. Approaching the body from this perspective allows for the recognition of both the body's materiality and the fact that it is, in part at least, socially constructed. That is to say, the body is socially constituted; hence, its manifestation and presentation are dependent on social and cultural contexts and the various structures therein. Using the body as an analytical and theoretical tool, one is able to draw on a variety of approaches that enhance our understanding of human interactions, behaviours, and ways of being in the world.

The social sciences more broadly have paid particular attention to the body as a site of analysis.ⁱⁱ No longer the purview of the biological sciences—which focuses solely on the biological materiality of the body—researchers from a variety of disciplines including sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, religious studies, and women's studies have sought to locate the body within the dense matrix of human existence and experience. This corpus of research developed and proliferated over the course of the twentieth century and has been especially abundant over the last thirty years or so. Such research has developed unabated into the twenty-first

century. Perhaps both because of the very ubiquity of human bodies and the myriad of locations in which we can analyse them, ‘the body’ as a concept provides us with a near inexhaustible supply of research potentials. Although many existing anthologies discuss ‘sociology of the body,’ ‘anthropology of the body,’ and so forth as distinct research domains, much discussion cuts across disciplines. As a sociologist, my own preference is to frame my approach within a more general ‘social theories of the body.’ Important to researchers is the recognition that the body in all these contexts typically exists at the intersection of power relations (see Bourdieu, 1977; Csordas 1994; Featherstone, Hepworth, and Turner, Eds. 1991; Foucault 1977; O’Neill, 2004; and Turner, 1984, 1997). Certainly, this insight is an important one for my analysis of Flirty Fishing.

Religious historians have explored the role of the human body from an historical-religious perspective.ⁱⁱⁱ Much of this type of research typically observes and analyses the role of the human body and its connection to salvation and redemption particularly during the Middle Ages. In the Western world, the early Middle Ages saw the adoption of Roman Catholic Christianity in much of Europe. By the late Middle Ages, the practice of Roman Catholic Christianity was widespread, and with it emerged traditions that set out specific prescriptions and proscriptions regarding the body. Moreover, because of the “Christian theology of evil, the body became more central to the characterization of man as a fallen creature”: the Christian conceptualization of “flesh” exemplifies their identification of the body as a problem (Turner, 1997: 21). These same concerns often are highly relevant to approaches to the body in some new religious movements, but they took on unique dimensions within the Children of God where the body became not a site of sin, but instead one of virtue and grace.

The body is pivotal to the exploration of our historical and contemporary religious worlds (Coakley [Ed.], 1997; McGuire, 1990; Csordas, 2002; Simpson, 1993). In her introduction to *Religion and the Body*, Sarah Coakley (1997) articulates the body’s integral place in the history of many world religions. She proposes that we embrace various approaches in our studies of the body in different religious settings. This interdisciplinary volume thus examines bodily ritual and meaning in several established world religions including Judaism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Zoroastrianism, and Sufism. Similarly, *Religious Reflections on the Human Body* edited by Jane Marie Law (1995) brings together a collection of explorations of religious attitudes to the body including those of Islam, Indian Buddhism, Chan/Zen Buddhism, and Malaysian Chinese popular religion. New religions such as the Children of God, however, do not appear in these works.

Meredith McGuire (1990) argues also that the study of religion could take on exciting new directions if researchers were to pay increased attention to the concept of embodiment (McGuire 1990: 283). Drawing on the central positions in the body literature, McGuire summarizes neatly the reasons that sociologists generally (and sociologists of religion in particular) should pay attention to the body. Similarly, John H. Simpson (1993) finds that the body should figure as a central component in the study of religion and society. He reaches this conclusion because of the popularity of contemporary evangelical, ‘hands on’ religiosity that is extremely physical in character; the continued rise in alternative healing therapies; and the challenge that gay and lesbian sexuality poses for heterosexual norms in mainstream Christianity (Simpson, 1993). These insights certainly pertain to my discussion here, especially since the Children of God has evangelical roots.

Although McGuire and others advocate a ‘sociology of the body’ perspective for traditional and mainstream religions, the research literature on *new religious movements* offers scarce discussion on the role of the body in such contexts. Some scholars of new religious movements refer to the body as a concern within a particular religious group, but do not then attend to the body from an analytical or theoretical perspective. An important exception to this observation, however, is Chidester (1988), whose discussion of the People’s Temple incorporates an analysis of the importance of the body in terms of social control, salvation, and revolution. Other movements such as Heaven’s Gate, Scientology, and the Children of God make frequent references to the role of the body in their own literature. As is the case with Heaven’s Gate, these references sometimes are quite explicit and offer excellent opportunities for analysis (see Raine, 2005). More generally, new religious movements afford a rich research ground in which to explore discussions of embodiment, bodily symbolism, expression, and control. One of the goals of this article, therefore, is to encourage this form of research endeavour in new religious movements and other ideological group contexts.

Sexuality and the Children of God

The COG has engendered a great deal of discussion and debate particularly in terms of its sexual doctrines and attendant behaviours, and these dialogues have become quite polarized in nature. Some scholars maintain that sexual sharing and other sexual practices were not problematic and that FFing existed as a form of ‘evangelical outreach’ (for example, see Melton, 1994, 2004). Other academics are quite outspoken in their criticism of the sexual doctrines of the group, and insist that abuses occurred (for example, Kent 1994a; 1994b). More generally, academic debates typically revolve around sexual sharing, FFing, childcare, education, and discipline within the group. (For a review of recent research on the COG [now called The Family] and the ongoing debates found therein, see Raine [2006].) Regardless of their positions, however, all academic critiques make it clear that the members of the COG were part of a group that espoused the sexual and sensual nature of bodies as a means to connect with Jesus and God.

One of the most recent and most comprehensive accounts of the COG is James D. Chancellor’s *Life in the Family: An Oral History of the Children of God* (2000). Chancellor conducted interviews with over seven hundred members of the group, and excerpts from them are very revealing in terms of many members’ experiences of sexual sharing, Flirty Fishing, child sexual abuse, and of the expectations that Berg placed upon women and children. Whilst Chancellor acknowledges the problems associated with the COG/Family, he provides a relatively balanced account of the group that overcomes some of the disparate findings of previous research. Although many people have described positive experiences in the COG, many others have reported times of fear, coercion, sexual misconduct, emotional abuse, and child abuse (indeed, Chancellor’s book confronts most of the controversies and problems head on).^{iv} Furthermore, these alleged abuses did not occur in the same way that they do in the rest of society (that is, as acknowledged criminal acts), but instead they occurred as part of an encouraged, sanctioned, and even written doctrinal system that equated overt and unrestricted sexuality with religious devotion.

For the women of the group, Berg determined not only how they should present their bodies (in terms of appearance) but also what they should do with them—particularly in terms of sexual relationships. As becomes evident, Berg’s influence on women’s bodies grew over time, as he resocialized women and their understanding of their bodies and sexuality within the context of the group’s doctrines. In the following section, I review briefly the evolution of this process, which culminated with the institution of Flirty Fishing. I explore the ways in which women’s bodies became central to the group’s proselytization program, and how the women negotiated the new roles that their bodies played within the movement.

Women’s Bodies

Berg always justified his own promiscuous behaviour with Biblical explanations, comparing himself to prophets who had more than one wife. In most (if not all) of his sexually inspired writings, Berg equated sexuality with Godliness in some way or another and he encouraged his followers not to feel shameful about the sexual nature of their bodies. While positive attitudes about one’s body and sexuality are beneficial to individuals, the reality of sexual sharing and Flirty Fishing for some group members was at times both physically and emotionally difficult, and at other times dangerous.

With the *Mo Letter*,^v ‘One Wife’ (Berg 1972), Berg introduced the concept of plural wives to the group. He declared that because Biblical justifications existed for polygamy, the group should also embrace this doctrine. He insisted that exclusive marriage units of two were “selfish” and against God’s will. Critically, he identified that the wife of any one man henceforth was the wife of all other men (Berg, 1972). Thus, Berg introduced sexual ‘sharing’, a policy that he referred to frequently in his writings.

Berg articulated his preferences for the female body in detail. He did not want the women of the group merely to put their bodies on permanent display; rather, he advised against continuous nudity and articulated his disgust within mainstream pornography. Berg wanted women to have pleasing bodies, but on his terms: ‘**There must be an expression to her body, an expression of excitement, eagerness, and anticipation**’ (Berg, 1973: 1322). Moreover, Berg did not want women just for their bodies, but claimed that they must make men happy in other ways too. Thus, women must attend to men’s physical, emotional, and spiritual needs (Berg, 1973: 1322). That women’s bodies must represent Berg’s desires is evident not only in his writings but also in the abundant drawings that illustrated his ideas in the *Mo Letters*.

In 1976, Berg disseminated his initial publications on FFing to the COG communes.^{vi} Thus, many women began to sexualize their bodies as a means to proselytize to potential male converts. Moreover, the importance of women to the continued expansion of the group became evident. Chancellor reports that “Almost all adult female disciples were involved in FFing to some degree.” He estimated also that many had positive experiences in this practice (Chancellor, 2000: 114).^{vii} Interestingly, he noted also that FFing probably was not very successful in bringing new recruits into the movement, but was “a primary source of financial support and political protection” (Chancellor, 2000: 16).

Berg based the practice of FFing on the experiences of his consort, Maria, with a man called Arthur whom she seduced in England into joining the group (Van Zandt, 1991: 46-47). The basic analogy that Berg used is that women are the “bait” and that men are the “fish” attracted to the bait. In the *Mo Letter* ‘Flirty Little Fish’ (Berg, 1974a), Berg discussed Maria’s attempts to “hook” men:

HOOK THEM THROUGH HER FLESH! Crucify her flesh, Lord, on the Barb of Thy Spirit! O God, even if it penetrate and crucify her flesh, impale her on the point of Thy Spirit that she may die, that those that feed of her flesh may be caught to live! O God, help her, O Jesus, to be willing to be the bait! (Berg 1974a: 528).

The next page depicts two sexually stylized images of women. One is an illustration of a woman wearing hot pants, a bra, and high-heeled boots.^{viii} She is dangling a fishhook from her hand and the caption below reads ‘FISHERS OF MEN!’ On the last page of this publication an image portrays a woman as a mermaid impaled on a hook, but embracing a man, this time with the heading ‘HOOKER FOR JESUS’ (Berg, 1974a: 535). Note that both the terminology and the imagery of this key text are saturated with the rhetoric of prostitution, albeit framed also by Berg’s reinterpretation of Christian doctrine.

Berg depicted the act of FFing in terms of giving one’s love (and sex) to the new recruits as the ultimate commitment to God and to Jesus. Moreover, he told the women, “YOUR BODY IS THE VEHICLE THAT THE SPIRIT IS TRAVELLING IN It’s your body that has to do it, the body has to come first” (Berg, 1976a: 4132). Berg made the women’s bodies profitable, when in 1978 he released the *Mo Letter* ‘Make It Pay’ in which he advised women to get money for their services (Berg 1978a). In some locations, the women also engaged in ‘ESing,’ for a period—a practice that placed them in escort agencies (Chancellor, 2000: 125-128). These two moves arguably strengthen the parallels between FFing and prostitution, although as Williams Boeri^{ix} comments, in one *Mo Letter* Berg worded his directive that women collect money from men in terms of the payment being a “donation” to the *group* indirectly through the woman (Williams Boeri, 2005: 168).^x

Some of the women whom Chancellor interviewed claim that they did not regard FFing as prostitution, a perception that Chancellor accepts (Chancellor, 2000: 119); although he appears to come close to describing it as such on a couple of occasions by placing emphasis on its financial component (Chancellor, 2000: 120, 121). He does describe it also, however, as an “outreach method” (Chancellor, 2000: 120). The women’s position on FFing may be due to Berg’s legitimation and normalization of the practice in Godly terms. In this way, many women may well have come to believe that such divinely inspired and sanctioned behaviour could not possibly compare with the illegal, subjugating, and profane practice of prostitution. Critically, some women perhaps simply *could not* think of their actions these terms. Thus, their denial of it acted to preserve their self-identity and self-respect. The submission of women’s bodies to Berg’s doctrines, however, clearly reveals that he instructed them to exchange their bodies in return for new converts, and later on, for money.

Whether one argues that FFing constituted, or at least compared to prostitution, one must bear in mind that this process was not always coercive, but instead, reflected the complex religious, emotional, and ideological relationship between Berg and his followers. In this way, the women

worked hard to redefine their concepts of what constituted religious behaviour. One must recognize also, that the encouragement and sometimes demands that women engage in this type of behaviour occurred within a patriarchal, high-demand religious movement in which Berg's authority was complete (for example, see Chancellor, 2000: 65, 70). The experience of FFing was not the same for all women who participated in it; thus different perceptions of it are likely (and these perceptions can change over time). Finally, not all FFing involved full sexual intercourse—the women used various degrees of physical intimacy, including dancing and kissing. Berg's program of sharing evolved over a period of time, starting with sexual sharing within the community prior to the introduction of FFing (and ESing). As one ex-member said of the introduction to FFing and ESing: 'I was used to sharing with the brothers, so sleeping with other men was nothing strange' (quoted in Chancellor, 2000: 127).

Berg even advised each woman that during the course of FFing, she likely would encounter a time when a man would attempt to rape her. Quoting scripture, he implied that a woman should forgive the rapist. Berg also claimed that when a woman finds herself in such a situation, 'The safest thing to do in some such cases is simply yield, or the girls could suffer violence!' (Berg, 1974b: 3821). Nevertheless, he did not necessarily blame the fish (i.e. the male aggressor), because "THE GIRL WHO DOES ALL THE REST AND THEN SUDDENLY DOESN'T WANT TO GO ALL THE WAY, IS REALLY GOING TO HAVE NOBODY BUT HERSELF TO BLAME" (Berg, 1974b: 3821). "IF YOU GO AHEAD AND DO IT ONLY BECAUSE YOU WERE FORCED TO, THE LORD'S NOT GOING TO GIVE YOU MUCH CREDIT FOR THAT!" (Berg, 1974b: 3825).

Berg suggested that the women just give themselves willingly because "A rapist is going to fuck you anyway- - even if he has to fuck your dead body! - - It's been done!" (Berg, 1974b: 3825). The entire letter placed rape as the fault of the woman. Berg blamed women for encouraging rape and for saying 'no' to sex with strangers when they actually (according to him) meant 'yes' (Berg, 1974b: 3822-3823). Thus, the women's bodies did not warrant protection—instead the needs of the group came first—even if these needs meant bodily (and psychological-emotional) sacrifice. The women's bodies reflected their position in the group—they were a means to an end in terms of its expansion. In her discussion of religion and the body, McGuire points to the body as a potential site of abuse (McGuire, 1990: 284), and her observation is apt here. Although McGuire does not elaborate, in the context of the COG, one certainly can recognise problematic dynamics. Regardless of whether any women in the COG experienced rape while Flirty Fishing, Berg's clear expectation that they should endure even the *idea* of it seems abusive.

Disregard for the women's bodily and psychological well-being emerged again in Berg's consideration of the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases. Berg discussed the problem of sexually transmitted diseases with the publication of the *Mo Letter* 'Afflictions' (Berg, 1976a: 4188-4219). He began the publication claiming that he had contemplated stopping the practice of FFing because of the very real risks that it posed to the women. As he pondered the problem, however, he concluded that Jesus likely had contracted a venereal disease at some point too, and that there is no shame in anyone now having done so. Thus, just as Jesus suffered disease, and more importantly, crucifixion, the women of the group should continue to surrender their bodies,

‘Even at the risk of afflictions!’ (Berg, 1976a: 4219). Of the many illustrations in this letter, the most telling depicts a naked woman pinned to the bed by a giant nail through her vagina. To the left of the bed is an image of Christ on the cross (Berg, 1976a: 4198). The symbolism of bodily sacrifice is clear. The problem of sexually transmitted diseases emerged again with increased awareness of AIDS. Chancellor notes that fear concerning the spread of AIDS was the main contributing reason behind Berg’s decision to stop FFing altogether (Chancellor, 2000: 22). Note that this reasoning strongly suggests that most FFers were engaging in full sexual contact with the men that they fished.

The practice of Flirty Fishing resulted in members viewing women’s bodies as recruitment tools and as an appropriate way in which to use one’s body in the name of Jesus and God. Thus, sexual contact both in exchange for money and other goods and as a means to bring in new recruits became an acceptable and indeed expected way for women to use their bodies. In addition, in some cases women had to make their bodies freely available to Berg and to other males in the group at any time (see Kent, 1994b: 165-167). Indeed, often Berg promoted the subjugation of women’s bodies, and described their duties and obligations to men in sexual terms.

According to Berg, God “loves whores” so he commanded them to “PROVE YOUR LOVE WITH SEX” because “THEY [MEN] GET FED UP WITH THESE SICKENING SELFISH WOMEN” (Berg, 1976b: 4134). The “sickening selfish” women he refers to are the women who were part of the feminist movement. He criticized them for not looking after men ‘properly.’ Likewise, in ‘Real Mothers!’ (Berg, 1975), Berg derided ‘THIS WOMEN’S LIB IDEA!’ Maria and Berg wrote that women had been “brainwashed” into liberation, and that it was the COG’s duty to “brainwash” them back into motherhood (Berg, 1975: 3521). Berg’s position was obvious. Women were objects for the cause; he regarded their bodies as *his property*. Furthermore, despite Berg’s countercultural appeal, he did not promote the liberation of women and did not grant them equality. In the COG, Berg’s patriarchal and authoritarian dictates bound the roles of women. Interesting to note is that the control and use of women’s bodies in this group occurred exactly at the time when women in mainstream society were making social and political gains as mediated by the feminist movement. As Kent (2001) comments:

By far the most manipulative use of feminist rhetoric against women occurred in the Children of God. Its leader, David Berg, specifically appropriated the language and images of women’s liberation in a manner that subjected women to numerous pregnancies, traditionalist family roles, subservience to men, prostitution, physical violence, and general sexual exploitation (Kent, 2001: 163).

Sexuality was a realm of life in which women generally were gaining equality, but as Miriam Williams reflected on her time as a member who frequently engaged in FFing, “I did not experience pleasure in sex for many, many, years. First it was a duty, then a tool, and finally a burden” (Williams, 1998: 110). In addition, sexism was part of the larger Jesus movement (of which the COG was a part) of the era (Kent, 2001: 164-165). A disparity existed, therefore, between notions of equality in mainstream society and those in the COG. Despite being part of the counterculture, the COG set in place a more restrictive patriarchal authority system than operated in mainstream

society.

Sometimes, however, the presentation of women's place within the COG was rather ambiguous. Berg's portrayal of women in the *Mo Letters* simultaneously elevated *and* denigrated their bodies. On the one hand, he elevated their status by equating their bodies with the divine realm. By commanding women to use their bodies to spread God's love, he encouraged women to redefine their concepts of self and of body. They had to perceive their bodies as objects for the distribution of God's love—as sacred instruments of pleasure and commitment. Thus, by sharing their bodies they believed that they served a higher purpose. On the other hand, often the process of elevation was misleading and contributed also to the denigration of the women. Berg's religious discourse was one that shaped an overt sexualisation and objectification of women's bodies. Using the instructional capacity of the *Mo Letters*, he disseminated a new ideal for women's bodies that was difficult for some of the women to accept. The expectations imposed upon the women were high, and often placed them in dangerous situations with men whom they did not know or know well.

Some ex-members appeared ambivalent about sharing their bodies sexually while at the same time spreading the group's version of the word of God and trying to obtain new recruits. One woman commented about FFing: "Maybe sometimes the motives weren't always right. I know that. But really I believe with all my heart that the motivation behind FFing was to really show people the love of Jesus. And I know that it really changed people's lives. Sure, there were times when men just used the situation, I know that" (quoted in Chancellor, 2000: 116). Others were less tentative about making the connection between sex with strangers for rewards. Another ex-member commented, "Maria sent me a message. She was pretty blunt about it. She told me that she FFed for support of their home. And if she could do it, I damn well could too. She told me to FF to get the money and support..." (quoted in Chancellor, 2000: 123). Thus, some women clearly accepted that Flirty Fishing was a means to bring financial support to the group, and although sexual relations were not always a part of the contact with men, it increasingly became so. Moreover, the lines seemed blurred for others, suggesting that they found it difficult to frame their experiences merely as religious acts.

Ex COG member, Miriam Williams (1998) discusses both her positive and negative experiences related to FFing. Her account provides useful insights into the development of the group's sexual dynamics. Williams identifies that during the early years of the group, Berg forbade sexual relationships between members unless a local group leader gave the couple permission to marry.^{xi} In each commune, leaders segregated men and women's sleeping quarters and monitored much of the male/female interactions. Even during social events, contact was limited. Williams comments, "There was no slow dancing and no touching body-body. It was very innocent and extremely exhilarating" (Williams, 1998: 41). Thus, the group regimented members' bodies during this stage of its development. Men and women had little interaction, and the leaders kept each member of the group extremely busy with commune chores, witnessing, litnessing,^{xii} and worship. Williams explains that she embraced the way of life for "idealistic reasons" (Williams, 1998: 38). Like so many other members, she was willing to construct a new self-identity, one that reflected her commitment to higher ideals of community life and religious salvation and obedience. Critically,

Williams identifies that, for her, part of the appeal of the COG was her ability to reach out to people in very concrete ways (Williams, 1998: 80). The extension of this connection to the sexual realm reveals an enormous degree of bodily and self-sacrifice, the consequences of which would accumulate over a period of years.

Williams describes her own early reaction to the practices of sexual sharing and FFing, revealing that because of the religious aspects of these procedures she accepted them as facets of her life in the movement. She recounts her rationalization of FFing: “Accepting Family [the COG] ideology by faith, I gave my body much as a soldier is taught to give his or her life” (Williams, 1998: 109). Her concept of self was theological: “Well the truth was, my body belonged first to God, then to the Family, then to my husband” (Williams, 1998: 111). Clearly, Williams did not regard her body as *her own*. Thus, she had accepted that her body reflected only her desire to please God, to please Berg, and to please other men. Because of the view of her body that she (and, I argue, many other women in the group) developed, she (and others) came to accept that “Sexual favors to strangers was fast becoming our main method of witnessing about the Lord” (Williams, 1998: 114). Her acceptance of what she terms “sacred prostitution” represented a symbolic and physical response to her acceptance of a new ideology as she became more deeply committed to the movement.

McGuire stresses that our individual agency in our social world is “accomplished through our bodies” (McGuire, 1990: 284). She asserts that one is able to discern the degree of agency that an individual feels by that person’s understanding of his or her body. Evidently, Williams did not regard her body as a source of personal power or as an agent of personal satisfaction. She came to experience her body as suppressed, and that it was the property of others. In this way, the group compromised her agency in her social environment. The continuous degradation of her body constituted a continuous degradation of self.

Williams experienced periods of self-doubt, doubts about Berg’s reasoning, and doubts concerning the direction and position that the group took on many issues. Her belief, however, in community, Jesus, and God maintained her faith in her life with the group. Moreover, complex and multifaceted relationships with her several children, her two husbands, and significant others often ensured that she remained part of the COG movement. Finally, years of psychological, physical, and emotional stress took their toll. Williams’ body, mind, and soul reached a point of nearly complete breakdown. Ultimately she left the group because Berg disseminated literature that promoted adult-child sexual relations, a practice that many members (including Williams) had tried to downplay or ignore (Williams, 1998: 220-221, 229-235).^{xiii} The violation of children’s bodies was a reality that Williams could not and would not endure, and she faced the reality of the abuses when she realised it had happened in her own home within a family that had visited for a while. Consequently, she left the group in 1988.

Conclusion

COG women in the late 1970s and 1980s adopted strategies that helped them to perceive their bodies and their behaviours in ways that did not threaten their senses of self and their religious convictions. Their bodies existed as part of their social world, which in turn shaped their concepts of selfhood. They did their work, they thought, for Berg, for God, and for their own salvation. Believing that they were doing God's work in the end days before the apocalypse, they forsook their bodies, offering them as sacrifices in order to bring more men into the group. They believed that by FFing these men, they brought them God's love and the opportunity for salvation.

Alan Radley (1996) describes embodiment as being 'central to psychological life and to social relationships' (Radley, 1996: 559). He argues that significant to our embodied state is our ability to use our bodies symbolically. Our embodiment speaks of our own existence and of our social reality, including that of our present and of our future. We change our reality by the actions that we engage in with others in our social context. These embodied behaviours, or non-verbal communications, represent our response to our social conditions (Radley, 1996: 560-562). In terms of Flirty Fishing, the women who engaged in this behaviour created a different reality from their pre-group selves. Their bodies symbolized Berg's desires and reflected their need to show their loyalty to his doctrines, in the belief that their sexual behaviours were divinely ordained and secured their salvation.

That bodies are not merely passive objects in our social world is a concept with which many researchers are familiar. As Lyon and Barbalet (1994) observe, the connection between social forces that act upon the body and the social actors' responses to those forces are our emotions, which, as the authors comment, '[are] necessarily embodied' (Lyon and Barbalet, 1994: 50). In the case of FFing, the women of the group negotiated their new roles within the context of their emotional commitment to Berg and the group. Not only did Berg socialize them, but also they contributed to the relational process of creating new identities. In this way, we can understand that many of the women were active participants in the creation of their new roles and were not merely coerced into the situation. This relational process is vital to understanding how and why people engage in behaviours that they would not previously entertain. When we consider the idea that the body expresses the mind (in an integrated rather than dualistic fashion), then we see the connection between what we *do* and what we *believe*.

Of course, other dynamics contributed to the adherence of the women to these new body norms. Susan Palmer (1994) describes women's conversion to new religious movements generally as at least partially a result of their "rolelessness" in mainstream society (Palmer 1994a: xiii). The women of the COG certainly had well-defined roles within the group, and Palmer argues that the sexual identity of women in these roles was positive rather than problematic (Palmer, 1994b). This current article illustrates that, at times, the sexual freedom was indeed a positive aspect of the group for some of the women. As discussed, however, many problems arose for the women when the demands of FFing became too much, or when, the women's perceptions of what they were doing troubled them. Moreover, as I have stressed already, discrepancies existed between perceptions of female equality in the group and actual equality in terms of how the power structure operated.

Women enacted their apparent sexual freedom and perceived equality within the bounds of a patriarchal and highly structured leadership system. The implicit and explicit regulation of women's bodies within the context of the group helped to shape their new self-identities. Within the COG's specific social environment, women's bodies reflected particular social meanings, particularly in terms of sexuality. Their bodies operated according to the COG's rules; therefore, the body clearly emerged as a site of power relations. The women of the group learned new social roles, and as a result their bodies became part of the power hierarchy that Berg instituted. Thus, their reconceptualization of both their own bodies and of their selves is more comprehensible when we consider these social conditions.

The manipulation of women's sex lives in a high-demand group context is not unusual (see Lalich, 1997). Moreover, as we have seen, the emergence of power dynamics often revolves around control of the body. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of symbolic power, McGuire posits:

Religion has historically had a prominent role in . . . symbolic power. Contemporary official religion enjoys far less power . . . but religions and quasi-religions are still very much involved in the struggle for symbolic power, and specifically over the meanings of the body and its senses (McGuire, 1990: 290).

Within the context of the COG in the late 1970s and 1980s, it is important to remember that both sides of the power equation negotiated this process of body meaning. Berg made his aspirations clear, but each of the women who responded to his wishes did so within the context of their own lives, their own goals, and their own quests to achieve salvation. While coercive practices certainly played a role in some cases (Kent, 1994a: 37-38), it seems evident that many of the women were indeed on spiritual quests, seeking new ways to devote themselves to God—ways that traditional religions do not typically afford (See Palmer 1994; Puttick, 1997; and Williams, 1998). Viewed in these terms, we can understand better the fusion of individual accountability with the demands that discipleship required in such a setting.

Notes:

ⁱ The group started as 'Teens for Christ,' became 'The Children of God,' and then 'The Family.' For a history of the movement see, for example: Bainbridge (2002), Chancellor (2000), Davis with Davis (1984), Kent (2001), Melton (2004), Wallis (1981; 1983), and Van Zandt (1991).

ⁱⁱ A full synopsis of body literature is not possible here, but for informative overviews see Csordas (1994), McGuire (1990), Turner (1997), and Turner (1991). Much discussion on the body from non-religious perspectives exists (although religion makes occasional appearances in these discourses). This research explores a variety of themes, including the physical and philosophical constraints and potential of the body; the social construction of gendered bodies; the social organization and categorization of the body; the commodification of the body; body symbolism; the metaphorical importance of the body; and the regulation of the body in various institutional and social settings. For example, see: Csordas Ed. (1994); Featherstone, Hepworth, and Turner Eds. (1991); Feher, Naddaff, and Tazi

Eds. (1989); Leder (1990); Radley (1991); Synott (1993); and Welton Ed. (1998).

Whilst the body in its many manifestations has continued to capture the research imagination, little attempt has been made to construct a meta-theory of the body. Explicitly sociological theories of the body, however, appear in the works most notably of Turner (1984, 1997). Collaborative projects, such as *Fragments for A History of the Human Body* [Volumes One, Two and Three] (Feher with Naddaff and Tazi, 1989), explicitly avoid grand theorizing in favour of—as the title suggests—fragments of history and analysis that overlap and interconnect. The three volumes are arranged according to thematic structures that illuminate different histories of the body. This approach allows for creative analyses unconstrained by the strictures of defined theoretical strategies. Hence, meta-theorizing is largely absent in body theory as most theorizing takes place at the level of individual study, with common themes and ideas running through and connecting much of the work.

- iii For example, see: Eisler (1996), Kaelber (1998), Ranke-Heinmann (1990), Von Thaden (2003), Walker Bynum (1992), and Wiesner-Hanks (2000).
- iv Chancellor's (2000) book contains many interviews that reveal positive and happy experiences. Other interviewees, however, discuss abuses that they suffered. In addition, many ex-members have discussed problems and abuses within a variety of contexts including academic interviews, documentaries, court cases, and the popular media.
- v The *Mo Letters* were Berg's means of communication with the group. More than that, they functioned as a "social control device," (Van Zandt, 1991: 20; see Kent, 1994a: 33) by allowing Berg to distribute his ideological goals, beliefs, and orders to each of the COG colonies. Thus, the letters channeled his "indirect charismatic authority" (Van Zandt, 1991: 55). Berg dictated most of the letters to his lover, Maria, and then sent them to the COG editors and artists for illustration, publication, and distribution. The subject matter of the letters varied considerably. Topics included sex, religion, God, Jesus, politics, endtime prophecy, the United States, childcare, clothing, witnessing, music, films, etc. In the letters, Berg asserted his absolute authority and even rewrote many scriptures in order to legitimate his own views (Van Zandt, 1991: 21-22). Berg had collected letters published in volumes. Some five hundred *Mo Letters* discuss Flirty Fishing (Davis with Davis 1984: 122). Berg used a lot of emphasis in the form of capitalization and underlining of words in his publications. My reproduction of text from the *Mo Letters* follows the exact format that he used in each case.
- vi Berg first introduced Flirty Fishing to the COG in 1976, although he, Maria, and some of the other female disciples had implemented FFing 'trials' as early as 1974 on the island of Tenerife (Van Zandt, 1991: 46). The actual numbers of women who FFed is difficult to determine. Berg boasted that the COG had 8,000 disciples by 1977 (Berg, 1977:1), but does not break down that figure further. A 1981 publication reported that, worldwide, 348,219 men had been witnessed to through the process of FFing (Berg, 1981: 46). Berg announced the discontinuation of FFing and all sex with non group members in 1987 (cited in Williams Boeri, 2005). Berg also had introduced the concept of male COG members FFing to potential female "fish" (see Berg, 1983). It seems, however, that male FFing was not particularly successful (Chancellor, 2000: 16).
- vii Chancellor noted, however, that many people left the group because of the introduction of Flirty Fishing (Chancellor, 2000: 117).

- viii Berg even designed an “FF-Dress” that he described as “VERY SEXY”. He provided the COG homes with a pattern for making the outfit (Berg, 1982).
- ix Miriam Williams Boeri is Miriam Williams’ married name under which she has published her more recent work.
- x Sociologist Roy Wallis described FFing as possessing “all the hallmarks of a sophisticated prostitution business, but with some curious anomalies” (Wallis, 1978: 15). It is difficult to assess exactly how much money FFing brought into the homes. In one of the COG’s own publications, a woman stated that she received \$800 US from a “fish” (Paul & Tirzah, 1983: 274). Former member Miriam Williams described receiving 2000 francs (approximately \$400 US) for the first time she received money for FFing in 1978 (Williams, 1998: 6). Prior to this occasion, Williams said that the fishes she FFed bought her things that she needed in return for sex—items such as food, clothing, and baby supplies (Williams, 1998: 156). One woman reported that she and another disciple in an Australian commune began their own escort service through which they were able to raise enough funds to buy airfare for seven disciples to fly from Australia to Asia (Liberty, 1982: 62). It seems likely that the women received a range of monies for FFing. Notable was the “Monthly FF Witnessing Report” that Berg obligated the women to complete. This form required that the women supply information on each of the men they had FFed, including occupation (e.g. “Gov’t. Officials,” “Professionals,” “Manual Labourers”); the “No. [number] of Times Loved Mate Sexually”; “Names of TOP 3 FF LOVERS OF THE MONTH (SEX)”; along with a variety of other FFing details including FFing expenses and the values of gifts received from the “fish” (Monthly FF Witnessing Report, no date).
- xi The marriages were COG weddings rather than legal weddings. Couples were more likely to obtain legal marriages if the women became pregnant. Additionally, leaders sometimes arranged marriages (Williams, 1998: 56-57).
- xii Litnessing was the term the group used for witnessing while simultaneously selling COG literature.
- xiii In some COG publications, Berg included sex-with-children scenarios in which he was the participating male (See, for example, “Heaven’s Girl!” [Berg 1987] and “The Little Girl Dream” [Berg 1976d]). In the latter publication, Berg described being in bed with a “dark haired little girl of about 10 or 11” who seduced him (Berg 1976d: 391-397). In a published dialogue between Berg and his lover, Maria, they discuss societal taboos against incest. Maria stated, “Well, we’ll just have to tell the kids that it’s not prohibited by God, . . .” (Berg 1980: 7696). After a brief discussion, Berg added, “I DON’T KNOW WHAT THE HELL AGE HAS GOT TO DO WITH IT” (Berg 1980: 7697). Berg’s approach to child-adult sexual relationships extended to the group, when in 1979 Berg issued the *Mo Letter*, “My Little Fish!” (1979a). As a result of this publication, “there was experimentation with small child sex including incest” (Van Zandt, 1991: 170). It is difficult to assess exactly to what degree adults engaged in the sexual abuse of the COG children, but as Chancellor (2000) noted, “throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, sexual activity between adults and children was an accepted practice in a number of communities” (Chancellor 2000: 223). Moreover, he commented that of the people he interviewed for his book, those who had not experienced abuse themselves as minors knew of others who had (Chancellor, 2000: 223).

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