

SSHRC INSIGHT GRANT (2017-2022):

Children in Sectarian Religions and State Control

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The Project Description:

The aim of this research project is to explore the variety of ways that new, sectarian religions socialize their second and third generations. Our second focus is on conflicts between minority religions and secular authorities; conflicts generated by the groups' radical and alternative childrearing methods.

The goal of the first part of this project will be to launch a series of ethnographic studies of religiously-based approaches to childrearing, covering a wide range of alternative communities and utopian movements in North America and Western Europe, from 1950 to 2020. Groups with unique, highly-developed, spiritually-based childrearing practices will be the main focus of this study. Beliefs and practices will include child-centered rites of passage, eugenics theory and practice, the child's spiritual identity and role in family and community life, education and pedagogy, socialization in gender roles, children in domestic work and industries, children's participation in missionary activities, children's place in the group's eschatology and millennial vision, the child's relationship with the charismatic prophet or teacher.

The groups chosen for this study demonstrate different orientations to secular society - from the communal, millenarian "world rejecting" groups, to the "world affirming" groups seeking material success and personal empowerment, to the socially neutral "world accommodating" groups (Wallis 1984). Their beliefs are often eclectic and syncretic, deriving from Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist traditions, or "New Age", ufology, or magical-arcane sources. The "world-rejecting" groups will be our main focus, since they tend to develop the most distinct, radically alternative subcultures.

Our team will undertake a sociological analysis of the various strategies of state control of new religious family life found in different countries. Those communities with a history of state intervention and child custody battles will be our focus. Case histories of the "public management" of groups deemed as "radical" or "fundamentalist" in the U.S., Canada, France and Germany will be documented, and the trajectories of their conflicts (police raids, social welfare investigations, custody disputes and court hearings) analysed. The role of "moral authorities", cultural opponents or "anticult" groups involved in these controversies will be examined.

The issue of harm to children in unconventional religions and the theological rationales behind controversial childrearing practices will be investigated. While the concern of policy makers and the general public over children's well-being in sectarian religions has reached a peak in the last ten years, it is in fact difficult, sometimes impossible, to gain access to reliable information on the childrearing practices of certain sectarian religions. Thus, the researchers will be the attempt to gain access to these groups in order to better understand allegations of harm, and to identify the structural causes of systemic child abuse, where and if relevant.

The Socio-political Context:

This topic emerged out of the Primary Investigator's previous research in the field of new religious studies. Data on children was collected inadvertently in the course of other SSHRC-funded research projects (Standard Grants) which explored various topics: gender roles (Palmer 1994), alternative styles of parenting (Palmer and Hardman 1999), apocalyptic and nationalist movements (Robbins and Palmer, 1998; Palmer 2004), France's *anti-secte* lobbying (Palmer 2011), and government raids on religious communities (Wright and Palmer, 2015). Unique approaches to childrearing and the controversies that swirled around sectarian, child-centered groups kept coming to the PI's attention.

The social relevance of this topic may be verified by looking at the high media profile of recent conflicts involving the children of radical religions in Canada. These include the 2013 flight of the Lev Tahor from Quebec's social services intervention; the 2013 seizure of 40 children from the Old Mennonites in Manitoba by Family Services; and the 2014 case of Yohanan Lowen, a Hasidic Jew who sued the Quebec government for depriving him of an adequate education. Similar stories are issuing from Israel, Brazil, France, U.K. and other countries. These stories spur debates on the social identity and ownership of children. Similar cases in Canada's past were the RCMP seizure of Doukhobor children in the 1950s, the 1980s raids and arrests targeting the Apostles of Infinite Love, due to allegations of "sequestration des enfants", and the 1889s mass suicides/homicides involving children in the Solar Temple (1990s). The theme of child abuse in *les sectes* has been echoed in the work of Quebecois documentary filmmakers Jacques Godbout (*l'Affaire Norman William*, 1994) and Azzopardi (*Savage Messiah*, 2002).

As Western Europe and North America have become more "child-centered", a corresponding research interest in children's involvement and experience in world religions has followed. British sociologist, Linda Morehead, stated in a 2016 plenary address: "The importance of children in shaping the future of religion and non-religion has been seriously under-estimated." The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) produced Article 14 that reads: "State Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion." In England or Italy this means children's freedom *to* their parents' religion, but in other countries (France and Germany) it is interpreted as freedom *from* religion. The heated debate over voluntary conversion *versus* brainwashing in the first generation of converts to "cults" has now shifted to a debate over their children's welfare and freedom of choice (Richardson, 1999).

While media stereotypes of captive, abused children in "apocalyptic cults" has been widely disseminated, existing research indicates that the groups we label as "NRMs" vary considerably in their childrearing methods, and in the very ways they conceptualize the "child" and "childhood". They also vary in terms of their success in socializing their second generations into their spiritual worldviews – which is vital to their survival as faith community. For these reasons, it is important, indeed essential, that we gain accurate and up-to-date information on children's lives within new and sectarian minority religious movements.