Children of God - Fishing for Christ

By Janet Winikoff • TSW

In 1968, a charismatic preacher named David Berg launched a controversial religious group and christened it the "Children of God."

Until the mid-1980s, Berg's COG was a strong religious magnet that attracted members by advocating Christian fundamentalism through free love.

Believers withdrew from the outside world ("The System"), declared a love for Jesus, and then committed themselves to heavy-duty proselytizing.

COG adherents often separated themselves from their families, lived in communes, and took biblical names to show their devotion.

Several celebrities were raised as Family members, including actors Rain, Summer, and Joaquin Phoenix and their late brother River, who died of a drug overdose in 1993.

"Charmed" actress Rose McGowan's father was the head of a COG commune in Italy. "There was a trail of some very damaged children that were in this group," she revealed to *People* magazine.

The Growth of a Bizarre Cult

A preacher who had been kicked out of a traditional ministry for sexual misconduct, Berg advocated that free love was going to play a major role in his church.

Considered a prophet, Berg was known by followers as "Moses David," "Mo," "Father David," and "Dad." Like its founder, the COG has also had several different names, including "The Family of Love," "The Family," and "The Family International" (TFI).

Berg advocated an "anything goes" mentality, where virtually nothing was off limits, especially when it came to sex.

"Dad" communicated his unconventional and sometimes disturbing beliefs with COG followers through tracts known as "Mo Letters." Given catchy titles like "I Gotta Split," "Death in Your Arms," and "Squeeze Don't Jerk," Mo Letters provided supporters with insight into Berg's values and gave specific religious instruction.

> *"You'd better enjoy being a buck private while you can - with very little worry or responsibility… One of these days you may be the general, and have most of the work and nearly all of the worry - and usually all the blame," he wrote in his 1970 "So You Want to Be a Leader" Mo Letter.*

Flirty Fishing

Known for his freewheeling sexual beliefs, Berg published a Mo Letter entitled "Sex Works," which explained that free love was akin to flipping on a light switch and could make the darkness disappear.

> *"Flip out and have fun with Him! He's your electricity. He's what turns you on!" Berg wrote in the June 1974 publication.*

One of "Dad's" most controversial teachings was "flirty fishing," or FFing. Considered a form of "outreach ministry," female members were cajoled into using sex to attract new members and keep fellow COG "brothers" and "sisters" in

the fold.

Berg allegedly came up with the idea for flirty fishing after encouraging his second wife, Karen Zerby (known as "Maria"), to dance with a lonely man and noticing how the man responded to her advances.

Berg's phrase "Flirty Fishes" was derived from Jesus' description of his followers as "fishers of men." COG followers soon learned that the world was their sea, and the fishing was good.

> *"[Fishing] can be anywhere! - On the street, in a park - while going to the store, in discotheques or in clubs!" the group wrote in one publication.*

Pamphlets that looked more like sexual comic books than religious tracts were used to instruct members how to reel in converts for Christ. Berg and Zerby's son "Davidito," who used the name Rick Rodriguez after separating from COG in adulthood, was allegedly conceived by Zerby and a hotel employee whom she "flirty fished" while living in the Canary Islands.

"FFs" were expected to procure converts, favors, and money for the group. Women were required to keep statistics of sexual exploits, including numbers of converts and expenses.

Noting that "God loves statistics!" FFs were required to give a complete accounting of jewelry and clothing used on "fishing trips," note liaisons with politicians, reporters, salesmen, students, or laborers, and account for the "average cost per Fish witnessed."

Actress Rose McGowan revealed that as a child she had seen this dark side of COG.

> *"…At a very early age, I decided I did not want to be like those women. They were basically there to serve the men sexually."*

While Flirty Fishing was a popular recruiting tool in the 1970s, the website davidberg.org claimed that the group eventually abandoned the practice "in response to the threat of AIDS." The site, however, maintained that FFing was a "misunderstood ministry."

The Suicide of Rick Rodriguez

The Family may have grown under Berg's watchful eye, but the group was continually plagued by allegations of fiscal and sexual misconduct.

The biggest blow to the COG occurred when Berg's "son" Rick Rodriguez leveled charges of incest and molestation after separating from the organization.

Berg had hoped that "Davidito" and "Davida," the girl who was raised as Rodriguez's sister, would take over COG as adults, but Rodriguez had other plans.

After Berg's death in 1994, Rodriguez publicly accused the COG, his mother, and her new husband, Steven Kelly ("Peter"), of perpetuating the abuse he had experienced as a child.

In 2005, at the age of 30, Rodriguez sought catharsis.

According to ex-wife Elixcia Munume, Rodriguez's goal was to find Zerby, who took over as leader of the COG when Berg died, and confront her in order to "right his mother's wrongs." The confrontation never occurred.

With a Heineken in one hand and a gun in the other, Rodriguez created a videotaped suicide note shown in the documentary “Cult Killer: The Rick Rodriguez Story.” The documentary details Rodriguez’s anger, sadness, and determination to settle the score with his mother.

Zerby’s location was often kept secret, which made finding her a complicated process. After learning that Zerby was periodically visiting her elderly parents in Tucson, Rodriguez moved to Arizona and waited to make contact.

When Rodriguez still could not trace his mother, he reached out to Zerby’s close friend and prominent COG member Angela Smith, perhaps hoping she would provide Zerby’s location.

Known as “Sue” in The Family, Smith was also accused by Rodriguez of involvement in the sexual abuse of COG children.

Things did not turn out as planned. Angry and desperate, Rodriguez slashed Smith’s throat. Before taking his own life, the man once known as “Davidito” called his ex-wife Elixcia and recounted Smith’s murder by phone.

> *“[Angela] didn’t understand what she had done…these people don’t get it…I don’t understand how they cannot see what they have done,” he said.*

At the time of the original article, the group continued to preach Berg’s free-love philosophies. But what was the COG left with after Berg was gone?

One murder, one suicide, hundreds of troubled ex-followers and their children…and former Flirty Fish Zerby at the ship’s helm.

Unit 731 - A U.S. Cover-Up of Cruelty

By Janet Winikoff • TSW

Harbin, Manchuria, was once considered China's "Paris of the East," an Asian oasis of European culture in close proximity to Russia.

But in 1937, Japanese medical researcher Shiro Ishii turned Japanese-occupied Manchuria into a region of terror by constructing a top-secret facility named Unit 731.

It was at Unit 731 that thousands of people were tortured and killed in biological-warfare, chemical-warfare, and weapons experiments.

Documents later released by the U.S. government showed that the United States spared Ishii and his scientists from war-crimes trials in exchange for the data they had collected.

Ishii's Harbin horror story first gained international attention in the mid-1980s.

A talented medical researcher in the Imperial Army, Ishii was born to a wealthy family who indulged his every whim.

Considered a thoughtful and dutiful husband and father, Ishii's peers and colleagues described him as arrogant and selfish, with little regard for anyone he considered beneath him.

But there were two things everyone could agree on: Ishii was brilliant, and he was obsessed with helping Japan develop a biological-warfare program. *A Plague Upon Humanity* author Daniel Barenblatt described Ishii as "a brash and flamboyantly corrupt man who considered himself a visionary."

No Sense of Humanity

Ishii's biggest problem was the 1925 Geneva Protocol, an international agreement created after gas warfare killed thousands in World War I.

The agreement, which prohibited the use of gas, poison, and biological weaponry, was signed by countries across the globe - including Japan. But Ishii convinced Japanese officials that biological warfare must be effective if the international community was seeking its ban.

The doctor was not about to let an international treaty stand in his way.

> *"The man had no sense of humanity," said Sheldon Harris, author of Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare 1932-1945 and the American Cover-up.*

By 1936, Shiro Ishii had gained Emperor Hirohito's approval to construct Unit 731. Hirohito's blessing was Ishii's dream come true.

Soon the military doctor was busy recruiting Japan's top scientists, doctors, veterinarians, and medical specialists.

While there has been debate regarding how much Hirohito knew about the project, historians have examined the extent of imperial knowledge and authorization surrounding Japan's biological-warfare program.

Harbin's "Lumber Mill"

In addition to building the facility, Ishii also needed to construct cover stories.

When speaking with Japanese and international officials, Unit 731 was an “Anti-Epidemic Water Supply and Purification Bureau.”

But the story for Harbin’s residents was even more benign: the building was said to be a lumber mill. Using dehumanizing language that also helped conceal the facility’s purpose, researchers nicknamed their subjects “logs.”

Unit 731 employees euphemistically talked about cutting, chopping, carrying, stacking, burying, and burning their “logs.” When more subjects were needed, Japanese secret police swept up political protesters, alleged lawbreakers, and others and sent them to Harbin.

Ishii’s Unit 731 had two goals: to develop biological weapons for use against Japan’s enemies and to study defenses against biological weapons that might be used against Japanese soldiers.

Some research subjects were deliberately infected so that scientists could track the effects of disease.

Chinese nationals, Russian expatriates, and prisoners of war were used for experimentation. Men, women, and children were among the victims.

War Crimes: Loosened Lips for Immunity

Once the war ended and Japan was under U.S. occupation, Ishii and his associates sought to avoid prosecution as war criminals by offering to share their data with U.S. officials in exchange for protection.

Fort Detrick scientists Edwin Hill and Joseph Victor concluded that Unit 731 scientists would be more forthcoming if immunity were offered.

Colonel Murray Sanders, a Fort Detrick military officer tasked with uncovering information about Japan’s biological-warfare program, also recommended immunity for Unit 731 personnel.

A 2006 National Archives publication, *Researching Japanese War Crimes: Introductory Essays*, discussed U.S. handling of evidence and clemency issues related to Japanese war crimes.

According to the Virginia-based nonprofit World Future Fund, Unit 731 research intended to give the Japanese military an advantage ultimately provided information to the U.S. military.

Protecting War Criminals for Scientific Secrets

Secrecy helped shield Japanese scientists from prosecution while giving U.S. officials access to information about biological weapons during the early Cold War.

In 2000, Congress passed the Japanese Imperial Government Disclosure Act, which directed a review of classified U.S. records relating to Japanese war crimes.

While many war criminals were tried and, if convicted, imprisoned or executed, numerous Unit 731 personnel went on to postwar careers.

> *“By virtue, ostensibly, of their cooperation with their American conquerors, the former leadership of Unit 731 lived relatively quietly and undisturbed in the postwar period. The freedom they enjoyed stands in stark contrast to the fates of other, better known, ‘Class A’ war criminals,” wrote Hal Gold, author of Unit 731:*

Testimony.

There has also been speculation about Ishii's activities after the war. He died of throat cancer in 1959 at the age of 67.

And then there were Unit 731's victims. The World Future Fund wrote in its paper "Japanese Biological Warfare Atrocities and the U.S. Cover-Up":

> *"To this day, the victims of biological and chemical experiments in Manchuria have received neither compensation nor an apology for Japanese wrong-doing."*

Anti-Proselytizing Memo Sparks Conservative Outrage

By Janet Winikoff • TSW

A poorly written Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC) policy meant to prevent proselytizing sparked anger among religious and political conservatives across the nation.

The hospital's September 14 memo, entitled "Wounded, Ill and Injured Partners in Care Guidelines," was designed to provide guest policies.

The memo addressed a variety of rules, including scheduling visits from family members and visits from minors, celebrities, legislators, nonprofit representatives, and members of the media.

But some religious conservatives were angered by a section discussing non-family members, known as "Partners in Care."

> *The policy said: "No religious items (i.e. Bibles, reading material, and/or artifacts) are allowed to be given away or used during a visit."*

Across-the-Board Ban on Bibles?

Although positioned by some religious leaders and legislators as an across-the-board Bible ban, Walter Reed's rescinded policy did *not* prohibit family and friends from bringing religious materials.

Calling the memo "plenty bad," Iowa Representative Steve King criticized Walter Reed's policy on the House floor. He stated:

> *"[U.S. soldiers] have given their all for America …the people that come to visit them can't bring a religious artifact, they can't bring a Bible, they can't use them in the services, a priest can't walk in with the Eucharist and offer communion to a patient who might be on their death bed because it's prohibited in this memo."*

Interviewed by "Fox & Friends" co-host Steve Doocy, King said that he went "straight up in the air" after reading the notice.

Walter Reed officials said the guidelines were intended to protect patient privacy and religious choice, and the WRNMMC website notified visitors that the policy was being rewritten.

> *The statement affirmed that "Bibles and other religious materials have always been and will always remain available for patient use."*

The statement also described the hospital's long-standing policy of respecting multiple faiths.

Family Research Council

Walter Reed's controversy gained momentum after King and the Washington, D.C.-based Family Research Council (FRC) learned of the memo.

The FRC created an online petition urging Walter Reed officials "to permanently end the ban on Bibles and other religious materials at the hospital."

The FRC also announced plans to seek records related to the policy under the Freedom of Information Act.

A letter sent by FRC President Tony Perkins to Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jonathan Greenert sought information related to the "origins and scope" of the policy, along with letters, notes, memos, emails, and text messages.

Actor Chuck Norris also criticized the policy in a column.

> *"It's one thing to watch 'Merry Christmas' be omitted from signs in your favorite department store, but quite another to see Bibles withheld from wounded warriors at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center," Norris wrote.*

Representatives King and Senator Chuck Grassley met with Walter Reed officials to express their concerns, and King's website said the lawmakers later accepted regrets from Walter Reed staffers.

King asked to review the hospital's revised policy before its official release and called for WRNMMC to identify the person responsible for writing the disputed language.

Walter Reed spokesperson Sandy Dean said that while the memo may have been imprecise, the hospital was working on a clarification.

> *"We don't want there to be any misrepresentation of what we're trying to say," Dean said, adding, "We appreciate Congressman King bringing this to our attention. We don't want our instructions to be ambiguous."*

Proselytizing: The Military's Pervasive Problem

While some evangelical groups criticized the U.S. military over religious tolerance, the military had also taken steps to rein in proselytizing at military bases, military academies, funerals, and hospitals.

The Military Religious Freedom Foundation reported that proselytizing was widespread.

Although rarely discussed, nonreligious soldiers as well as soldiers of different faiths said that evangelical messaging in the military was pervasive.

The Kansas-based Westboro Baptist Church was known for protesting at military funerals, while Unlimited Potential, Inc. provided religious "baseball camps" for military personnel.

In 2005, Jewish and Christian cadets at the Air Force Academy complained of being heavily proselytized by evangelical officers.

> *"As Walter Reed rewrites this policy, we humbly suggest that its drafters draw the distinction between supporting wounded warriors and imposing on them while at their most vulnerable," contributors to the military chaplain blog Chaplains Under Fire wrote.*

> *"The least we can do is give them control over how to practice their faiths - or not… Let the warrior ask for a Bible or a rosary or a Koran or… and in those cases where injuries prevent warriors from making their views known, check the records. This is basically the policy military chaplains are taught and, from what we saw, it works."*