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Rhetoric, Authority, and Children of God: Charismatic Authority and Ecstasy in American Religions

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According to Philip Jenkins, as waves of new religious movements flooded the United States' social landscape, they often inspired large counter movements due to their doctrine being deviant from societally accepted practice (16). These counter-movements assumed a category of accepted religions, not open to religions that challenged the hegemonic way of life. Some of these new religions, deemed "cults" by outsider groups, were seemingly able to exert total control over the actions of their followers, especially in their physical and sexual relationships. Many of these religions required that followers live in religious communes, cut off from secular society. Because this has widely been credited to the followers being "brainwashed" by the leader or founder, this allows for further value judgments to be placed on their traditions. Movements like Children of God— the religion to be studied in this paper— place a focus on the feelings and experiences of the physical body as the road to spiritual salvation. It is only through physical and sexual actions, as well as following the spiritual doctrine that followers can truly experience the healing of God and receive salvation.

The charismatic authority present in new religious "cults" creates a body of doctrine that requires complete dedication of both the physical and spiritual bodies of its followers by ritualizing ecstatic physical sensations. Rhetorical tools, such as repetition, thematic consistency, and exclusivist consistency, are used to emphasize this deep and inseparable connection between the physical, sexual, and spiritual parts of human existence in Children of God and their submission to the will of a higher power. This requires a different kind of lifestyle than what is widely practiced in American society: living in community with followers, dedicated entirely to the mission of the movement and relying on the ritual experience of physical sensations in order to grow closer to God. The intent of this paper is to further investigate the rhetoric used to create

the doctrine for followers of new religions, without value judgment, to determine how new religions enforce charismatic authority by requiring physical, sexual, and spiritual submission through ritualized ecstasy—to be defined later— by analyzing the writings of David Berg to his followers in Children of God. Rhetorical analysis is key to understanding how authority is enforced and what the values and practices of this particular group are, as the Mo Letters are the main body of writing to recruit and guide practitioners. By deeply analyzing the text and the context it was written in, the values and rituals of the religion become clear and can be theoretically assessed.

In his analysis of charisma in religious institutions, Weber dissects the use of ecstatic and euphoric experiences to create a religious mood among practitioners in order to bring them closer to sanctification. In his understanding, ecstatic experiences rely on highly elevated moods and are most often associated with sexuality and drug/substance use, what he calls "orgies" (Weber 273). Weber states that these are indicative of self-deification, the manifestation of God within the self, and are not compatible with religions that preach an all-powerful God. He then states that "ethical" religions (Weber 274) therefore rely on euphoria, rather than ecstasy, to create a milder religious mood; Weber categorizes Christianity, Judaism, and Islam among these religions. They utilize abstinence and fasting to reduce human strength in order to connect them to an all-powerful God, rather than what Weber deems as the more self-indulgent experience of ecstasy. Weber states that ecstasy is overall an ineffective way to manifest charisma, as it cannot be physically sustained and will lead to a greater distance between practitioners and God. Weber deems that ethical religions rely on euphoria as a way to target and defeat ecstatic desires, excluding ecstatic religions from this category. In many ways, the Children of God contradict

Weber's understanding of ecstasy in religion. By studying the rhetoric of their doctrine it becomes clear that ecstasy used in a monitored and ritualized way has a vastly different effect than Weber's assumption that it is an ineffective way to enforce charismatic authority. A more in-depth analysis of his interpretation of ecstasy will be done later in this paper.

It is critical to the study of religions in society that academia continues to study new religions. Much of public understanding of new religions is clouded by value judgments, and this contributes to what religions are accepted by societal standards and which are marginalized. New religions provide key information for understanding the foundation of religious authority and leadership; recent movements make it easier to study how charismatic leaders are able to spread their message to followers and the public. However, Weber's understanding of charismatic authority contributes to the marginalization of new religions, especially those that rely on ritualized ecstatic experiences. By expanding on his theory of the use of ecstasy by charismatic religious leaders, it allows for new religions to be held to the same standard as what Weber deems "ethical religions". When new religions are studied without bias, they provide important models to provide a greater understanding of religious leadership.

### **Children of God**

In 1968, David "Mo" Berg founded a new religious movement, later called the Children of God or the Family. Berg was the son of evangelical pastors from the Alliance church, where he later became a pastor as well. While traveling for the church, Berg was removed from his apostolate due to his sermons veering away from the teachings of Alliance Church. Berg began to preach his sermons on the word of God to young, nomadic or homeless people of the

southwest - the “hippies”- calling their group Teens for Christ. Berg and his followers began to travel around the country in 1969 before settling in their first compound in Texas. David and his wife left when they felt the commune was well established and traveled to Israel and across Europe to evangelize internationally; Children of God successfully established communes in several countries, including the largest in Costa Rica and England. Many American followers relocated to the Costa Rican commune.

The core teaching of the Children of God is the Law of Love; this principle states that members of the Family must love all people deeply and sacrificially in order to truly spread the message of God. The Law of Love requires that members are willing to sacrifice all pride, commitments, and personal inhibitions in order to show the love of God to others, especially through sex. The Law of Love is meant to be reflective of the love of Jesus, shown without bounds to others. It is also key that this love is totally sacrificial and without regard for the self. Love, according to their law, is manifested both as platonic/brotherly and sexual and is partially carried out through sexual encounters. Members are encouraged to evangelize to the masses through sexual encounters with those outside of the communes. This practice, known as flirty fishing, is practiced by both men and women in the communes and is still open to members that are married. According to Berg, and as will be discussed in more depth later in the paper, sex is a natural action created by God, and the state of ecstasy achieved in orgasm is the pure experience of the love of God. This is especially prevalent in the letters written by Berg to his followers.

These letters, called the Mo Letters, were the main form of communication between Berg and his followers. Berg and his wife never returned to the communes and lived with a close team elsewhere in the world. Berg communicated his encounters and revelations from God to his

followers through his letters, as well as resolved disputes, weighed in commune life, and reinforced doctrine. Each letter addressed a particular topic in the style of a sermon, and would often be paired with a sexually explicit drawing. Followers from various communes responded through videotapes, which often detailed the sexual encounters they engaged in to follow the teachings of the Letters. Mo refers to the letters as the Word and equates them with equal importance to the bible and the word of God.

In 1994, David Berg died amid allegations of sexual abuse and child molestation within the Children of God. Shortly following Berg's death, the Children of God changed their name to the Family International and renounced many of the teachings from Berg's letters, especially doctrines surrounding sexuality and relationships. The Family is still present today, living in small communities around the globe. The body of my research will analyze the rhetoric of these letters to determine how Berg's rhetoric uses ecstatic experiences to enforce his charismatic authority and to frame a doctrine that incites a total submission of body, sexuality, and spirit of its members.

### **Charismatic Authority**

The model of authority that I will be using for my analysis is based on the work of Max Weber. Weber divides authority into three broad categories: rational, traditional, and charismatic. Rational authority is based on legal and systematic organizations, such as elections in democratic government systems. Traditional authority is based on a cultural norm that runs through the history of that society; this is often associated with monarchies. Charismatic authority is not determined by any formal method, it is determined by a unique and supernatural endowment of

spirit or charisma that is not accessible to any person. Charismatic authority can only be maintained if the leader continues to show the unique quality or gift of the spirit that the followers have come to expect from the leader; if the leader ever loses this quality, their authority crumbles. Traditional authority can take on some characteristics of charismatic authority, in that the tradition by which authority is bestowed can be based on personal characteristics or divination - as in that case of determining the papacy or the successor of Muhammad. According to Weber, charismatic authority is most common in religion, but how this manifests itself is different. Authority in the Catholic church or in Judaism is much more traditional than either of the other forms of authority. Charisma is most clearly manifested in traditions where the leader or founder claims to be a new prophet of God or has a unique connection to the supreme being (God or otherwise). Leaders with charismatic authority also claim to provide or to be the path to salvation after death. How this charisma is maintained or conveyed to followers will vary across religions.

In Max Weber's essay *Different Roads to Salvation*, he addresses two methods of salvation employed by charismatic religious leaders: ecstasy and rational euphoria (Weber 273). Weber understands ecstasy as "an instrument of salvation or self-deification...may have the essential character of a mental aberration or possession, or else the chronically heightened, idiosyncratic religious mood, tending either toward greater intensity of life or alienation from life" (Weber 273). In his analysis, ecstatic experiences occur through alcohol- or drug-induced states, sexuality, or other methods of breaking down "organic inhibitions...in short by orgies" (Weber 273). He describes their intention as being for the purpose of "self-deification" (Weber 274), or the purpose of the embodiment of a god within the self. He further says that these states

are "transitory in their nature and are apt to leave but few positive traces on everyday behavior. Moreover, they lack the meaningful content revealed by prophetic religion" (Weber 274). He goes on to say that ecstatic feelings are not sustainable as they lead to physical exhaustion, that when paired with the heightened religious mood can lead to a psychic collapse as well which "in religious terminology is termed a state of profound abandonment by God" (Weber 276). Because Weber analyzes ecstatic religious experiences as being used for the purposes of self-deification, he also sees them as being only regulated by the participant and existing largely unregulated, leading to physical exhaustion as the body cannot sustain prolonged states of ecstasy. He further states that these states of ecstasy are manipulations of "raw human nature" (Weber 276), and when this is connected to their inability to provide connection to ethical prophetic content, it implies that they cannot be regulated or utilized ethically to connect to God. However, when one looks at the rhetoric of Children of God, it becomes clear that this analysis does not leave space for religions that have ritualized ecstatic experiences and removed them from Weber's self-centered interpretation.

### **Children of God and Weber's Theories of Authority**

In Children of God, David Berg claims that their group has been selected to become the final church of Christ that is tasked with returning humanity to how God intended for them to exist. Berg frequently receives revelations from God in his dreams and reported to his followers on multiple occasions that he had conversations with Jesus or dead Family members in heaven, who give him pieces of God's wisdom. Berg maintains his authority in the group by his continued communication with the heavens, as conveyed to followers in his letters. As will be discussed in

greater detail later, Berg accounts for any misfortune that comes upon the group or its members as a sign of someone's lack of faith; Berg repeatedly states that God requires a complete submission to God's mission through devoted membership in the Family and their communes.

Children of God utilizes the ecstatic experience of orgasm to connect followers to God's love, and their doctrine states that all sexual encounters are first and foremost about sacrificially giving an orgasm to a partner to bring them closer to sanctification. Berg created a doctrine that ritualized ecstasy by framing sex as a God-given ritual that brings practitioners closer to God. It is not self-deification, as Weber stated, because of the sacrificial nature and that orgasm is not the presence of God in the practitioners, but the practitioners experiencing God's love. Weber's assessment first assumes that use of ecstasy is inherently for self-pleasure and indulgence; second, it deems these religions as "unethical" (Weber 275) in comparison to religions that utilize euphoria rather than ecstasy. This further contributes to the marginalization of religions that fall outside of this model of practice. The analysis that I will conduct in this paper will investigate how Berg's language indicates that sex is a ritual practice of Children of God and that Berg utilizes ritualized ecstasy to maintain authority over the spiritual, physical, and emotional lives of his followers, contrary to Weber's assessment that it is unsuccessful in religious leadership.

### **Rhetorical Analysis**

The following sections are analyses of five Mo Letters written at various points in Children of God's time. Mo Letters were the primary means of communication with the communes and the distribution of doctrine among followers and the general public and were the

written embodiment of the religion's doctrine. By analyzing these letters, I hope to establish a clearer model for how the rhetoric of David Berg created an inseparable connection between physical and spiritual action through the ritualization of ecstasy, and how his rhetoric surrounding this part of their doctrine enforced his charismatic authority.

### ***“Revolutionary Sex” No.258***

The first letter to be investigated is "Revolutionary Sex", Mo Letter #258, published in March of 1973. The letter details how sex and sexuality are viewed in the Family. The letter begins by detailing how the current sexual atmosphere affects youth, claiming that it is a "taboo" in Western society that children are taught to dismiss as a sin at a young age. What Berg titles "the System", made up of the American government and churches, has created accepted morals for society based on what best suits their interest- including rules on drugs, alcohol, sex, and relationships. From here, Berg works through his theological justification for the group's teachings on sex before addressing males and female sex roles as created by God. Berg ends with a potential for growth both in and out of the communes - comprehensive, sex-positive education for young children that will allow for women to be "less frigid" in adulthood and embrace God's desired use of the body, along with explicit advice on how to properly practice sex.

An important theme that Berg creates in this letter is that sex and sexuality are created and honored by God and therefore should be viewed as a positive part of human nature. The various rhetorical tools that Berg uses are aimed at conveying the misconception established by secular and religious societies in the West that sex is only accepted under specific restrictions. This letter specifically breaks down these rules and what Berg believes to be their origins in

society and explains how Children of God corrects them to follow the intentions and will of God. According to Berg, control plays an important role in the way sex has been integrated into society, and society's emphasis on maintaining control has pulled Christians away from God's intended use of sex and relationships. By establishing sex as a God-designed practice, Berg lays the foundation for the group's use of sex for spiritual growth.

Most importantly, this letter establishes sex as a ritual practice for those that belong to Children of God. Early in the letter, Berg compares sex to other physical activities that are necessary for the care of the body: "[Sex and masturbation] are perfectly normal, healthful, physical activities just as hiking, swimming, exercising, eating, breathing" (Berg 258:2). Berg includes sex in this list of socially accepted practices as a way to remove the stigma that sex is a taboo societal topic. Sex is set apart from these activities as he progresses through the letter, as he then links it with spiritual fulfillment: "Let yourself go into the bosom of God and let God do it to you in an orgasm of the spirit till you're free!" (Berg 258:93). Not only is sex in this context acceptable, it is set apart by God as a necessity for spiritual freedom. Sex, in the way that Berg presents it, becomes a necessary ritual to practice regularly to connect with God, or one will face spiritual and psychological consequences: "Sexual frustrations can maim you both physically and mentally, and even kill or injure you or even others, including physically, spiritually, mentally, and morally!" (Berg 258:62). It is through sex and the ecstatic experience of orgasm that humans can engage with God's love in the purest form. This encounter renews spiritual drive, relieves physical tensions, and can even be used to bring new souls to Christ (this will be discussed in greater detail in other writings). Berg's interpretation of God's natural design for humanity

creates both a physical and spiritual necessity to engage in sexual activities as permitted by Children of God.

The emphasis on orgasm, especially when applied to the sex roles of men and women, plays a key role in God's plan for sex. Orgasm represents the love and joy of God, and when partners are unable to provide that for each other, the person is not accessing the love of God that they need to be fulfilled. Put in Weber's terms, Berg is relying on the ecstatic experience of orgasm to create an intense religious mood. Once in this state, followers are more apt to feel as though they have encountered God, reinforcing Berg's authority as a Messenger for God. Sex serves as one of the ritual practices of which the intended result is orgasm and connection to God through ecstasy. Weber's analysis of ecstasy versus euphoria concludes that it is more ethical to use euphoria induced by suppressing or denying natural desires to create a milder religious mood. Berg uses ritualized ecstasy as an experience of God rather than just a religious mood, so participants must be fully committed to its experience. When humans fail to produce this experience in their partners, according to the doctrine of the Children of God, they have failed to fully submit to God's will.

Berg relates this back to the system's control by highlighting the ways that it has particularly affected women. Berg places an emphasis on how women's lack of orgasms will make them frigid. Women can only be free of this by submitting to the will of God, and subsequently their male partners, in order to experience God's love completely: "It took me years to persuade my wife that it was not a sin to enjoy sex" (Berg 258:83). Enjoyment of sex and the experience of ecstatic orgasm is full embodiment of God's intention for sex according to Berg. While the ritual act of sex is important, it is the orgasm that Berg emphasizes as the center

of God's plan for sex. Since Berg deems premarital sex as "frowned-upon" by God, especially for women, masturbation becomes a key ritual in the Children of God's understanding of sex.

The difference in sexual attitudes between sexes creates an important foil for the Father figure, whether that be God or Berg. Throughout this letter, Berg stresses role that mothers and "female frigidity" (Berg 258:72) play in the repression of sex in society by constantly referencing the repression his own mother's actions had on his understanding of sex: "Along with it came those terrible inhibitions and almost disastrous guilt complexes inculcated by my poor mother's prohibitions and condemnations and denunciations, scoldings, threatening and dire warnings" (Berg 28:27). The mother then serves as a foil for the freedom of sexuality that God the Father, through Berg's writings and teachings, provides to the Children of God. Because mothers are framed as the general perpetrators of repression in children, they further emphasize the loving characteristics of God who wants sex to be positive. It puts Berg, the father of Children of God in a similar position. He gives limited rules that free humanity from strict repression, symbolized in his examples through mothers and women. He is able to maintain his spiritual role in the lives of the Family.

The central pillar of this letter is the dichotomy of positive and negative control. As Berg discusses the role the "System" plays in defining social and cultural norms, he makes it clear that he opposes their proposed values: "[T]hough all these things are lawful to us, yet not all things are expedient. Therefore, although nudity and sexual activity are perfectly normal, lawful activities as far as God is concerned and as far as humanity is concerned....in Western Culture, it has been made taboo" (Berg 258:3). Berg sets apart the practices and rules of non-religious institutions that organize society, however, it is important to note that he includes religious

institutions outside of Children of God in this dictating system, giving the rules of Christian churches the new name "churchianity" (Berg 258:46). He then emphasizes the control they exert and how they create rules and acceptable practices based on what is of greatest benefit to the system, rather than to humanity overall. By continuing to repeat the negative consequences of the system's sexual rules - especially psychological repression and obsession with sexual deviance (Berg 258:32, 34, 38, 42, 46)- Berg further alienates this "churchianity" from what he constructs as God's intended plan for the body: enjoyment and love: "I don't have a sad God!--I have a happy God who wants me to be happy, and you as well!" (Berg 258:72)

Berg categorizes sex as "God-created, God-given, and God-permitted" (Berg 258:4). In this understanding, the body is simply performing as God intended it to perform, and that any limitations that society has placed on it to categorize it as shameful and secretive are against the will of God. Berg repeatedly pairs "natural", "legal", and sexual activities together throughout the Letter, further enforcing that sex is created with positive intentions. By pairing it with these specific terms, which suggest a form of order, Berg leaves room for the "few ordinances God does have...fornication, adultery, incest, and sodomy" (Berg 258:16). While Berg makes it clear that the laws of the system limit and have negative consequences, the control that God provides allows people to purely enjoy sex as Berg believes it was intended. This rhetoric enforces the idea that ecstasy from sex is not occurring in orgiastic settings as Weber had asserted, but is regulated in order to serve the purpose that God had intended. This contributes to an important image of God, one that is vastly different than a God based in law or control using negative consequences: "God's law is love, not a cold, rigid, traditional, self-righteous service according to false, unscriptural and ungodly rules of certain religions!" (Berg 258:21). The true practice of

God's will is in the form of their sexual ritual based on sacrificial love. It is this positive control that allows people to live truly joyful lives by submitting to God's plan.

To further demonstrate this positive control, Berg utilizes his personal story as a repressed child of Christianity to show how God gradually taught him to accept sex so that he could see the flaws in the system and teach them to his future church: "It was these experiences which helped me to be driven even closer to the Lord in frequent desperate prayer, and to humble me...God had to use something to make me feel like a sinner...God let me think it was bad so I'd feel like a sinner and know I needed to be saved" (Berg 258:36). By emphasizing the motivation for his own struggle, Berg deepens the unique connection he has with God. He was given this understanding due to this unique charisma and made to struggle in order that he learn what the true message is. Berg more deeply understood the ecstasy of orgasm and God's intention for it because of the challenges God put ahead of him.

### ***"The Law of Love!" No. 302***

The Law of Love Letter is dedicated to explaining how one of the most important principles of the doctrine of Children of God is to be carried out. The Law of Love is the guiding model that has shaped the doctrine and practices of Children of God and it is the tool that Berg most relies on to separate their church from others. In this letter, Berg states that Children of God are members of God's "last church" who follow his way perfectly and are freed of Mosaic laws that have previously guided the church. This principle states everything believers do must be done sacrificially in order for everyone to experience the total love of God, and they are no longer subject to strict laws. This requires them to submit to God's will without doubt, pride, or

jealousy, and manifest God's love in both faith and action. Berg also uses this letter to address how marriages and new relationships are handled within the church.

The opening challenge to the readers of this letter is whether they can be trusted to follow God's law and have freedom from strict rules: "Can you be trusted with [freedom], or will you abuse it and use your liberty as license to do wrongfully and lustfully instead of rightfully and lovingly?" (Berg 302:7). The Law of Love is a law, however, it is a law that gives followers freedom to live without strict regulations that are present throughout the Old Testament. By putting it in the form of a challenge Berg creates this liberation as a choice, and this is a theme that carries throughout the letter. It is up to each individual to submit to the Law of Love that God has given them, or they will be "kept in the cage of law" (Berg 302:12) for being unable to act in God's love and harming others in the community. While this could be indicative of the orgiastic and unregulated events of sexuality that Weber had associated with freedom and ecstasy, Berg implements important regulations to guide his followers if they choose to follow his, and subsequently God's, will.

This frame of choice is reinforced by Berg's dichotomy of strong and weak faith. Those with a strong faith in God are able to follow His law and live free from strict ordinances, as God intended: "If you are strong enough in spirit and filled with his love, you can be trusted with his liberty as a useful tool to help others" (Berg 302:8). Those who are strong can follow the law without violating it and manipulating the people around them. Anyone that is unable to break away from the law or uses the freedom to violate God's rule of sacrificial love is categorized as having weak faith. These people are not only violating God but are constructed as being an active threat to believers: "The answer is up to you--whether you will have the lamb-like gentle

loving nature of the Shepherd himself, which loves, rescues, helps and heals and truly cares for the sheep; or the evil wolf-like nature of the Destroyer who rends and rips and gnashes...only to selfishly destroy, devour, harm and scatter the flock" (Berg 302:11). Weak faith is equated with destruction and the Destroyer (in Berg's lexicon: the Devil) and is an immediate threat to those that follow the Lord. Readers are only given two choices: submit to Children of God's teachings and Law of Love or submit to the Devil and his destruction.

As the letter progresses, Berg then discusses marriage and relationship processes in Children of God according to the Law. He states: "any variation from the norm of personal relationships, any substantial change in marital status, any projected sexual associations should have the consent of all parties affected, including approval of leadership and permission of the body" (Berg 302:14). Without this approval, the couple's action is deemed to be against God's Law and was done without love. After creating the dichotomy of strength/good versus weakness/evil, this statement requires that Berg (leader of the Body) have final say over all bonds and relationships of his community. It is only his authority from God that can determine if the action is following God's Law that he has established, or if it is work of the Destroyer from weak members: "Are you doing it because you want to unselfishly and sacrificially help someone...or are you doing it selfishly and unlawfully, not in love for others and God, but merely to 'consume upon your own lusts'?" (Berg 302:16). Berg maintains control over the relationships and unions in the community in order to ensure that God's law is being upheld, as he is the one presenting it from God to the "last church" (Berg 302:1).

Aside from the input of church leadership, marriage under the Law of Love is laid out to have specific functions that do not exist in other Christian traditions. Berg states that true

believers are willing to offer their wives in order to greater serve God: “Are you willing to lay down your life--or even your wife--for a starving brother or sister? Are you willing to give until it hurts, even until it hurts you?” (Berg 302:18,19). This is referring to the practice of flirty fishing described in the background section of this paper. According to the Law as described by Berg, even married partners are to engage in this practice. Sacrificial love in Children of God means that marriage does not exempt adults from the conversion of souls through sexual encounters. Anyone that denies their wife<sup>1</sup> from participating in flirty fishing is of weak faith, and has not submitted to the mission of the Family. Men are encouraged to allow their wives to be tools to bring outsiders to the mission: “Are you willing to plant your seed into the furrow of the Body of God’s Earth, His Wife, His Church that it may be warmed by the sun of His Love, refreshed by the water of His Word, and bring forth much fruit?” (Berg 302:21). It is part of strong faith to be willing to sacrifice one’s partner in order to grow the Body of the Church.

Sacrifice plays an important role in how sex is ritualized in Children of God. The purpose of engaging in sexual encounters is not to receive orgasm, but rather to provide it to others so that they may experience God's love; any benefit one might receive is secondary to the primary intention of sacrifice for the benefit of others. This contradicts Weber's assertion that ecstasy is utilized in the process of self-deification. First, the purpose of orgasm is not to embody God or for God to be incarnate in a human, but for the individual to experience God and his love in this heightened state. Sex and the provision of orgasm are seen as sharing God's love and leading others to God's will and is used primarily for conversion. This leads to my second point of contradiction: the rhetoric surrounding ecstasy and orgasm frames it as unselfish, and at times is

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<sup>1</sup> It was most common for women to participate in flirty fishing, so it is typically men that are addressed when Berg is speaking sacrificing a partner. Men did participate, just in significantly smaller numbers.

at the expense of one practitioner. Sex is primarily about acting selflessly to draw others to God. The Law of Love uses repetition to associate love and sex with sacrifice. By continually associating these terms, it becomes clear that the main use of ecstasy is for others rather than the self in Children of God's ritual.

Strong faith is demonstrated through action in Children of God. This letter demonstrates that it is an active choice to follow God's Law of Love and in order to adhere to it followers must demonstrate active sacrifice and engage in specific activities. Berg explicitly states that faith and action are inseparable: "As it is with the spiritual, so it is with the physical" (Berg 302:21). If one claims to have faith in God, they must act according to the Law and submit to the guidance of Berg and the Body (Children of God). Berg continually stresses that all actions must be equally physically and spiritually beneficial, and if they are not then they do not follow the law. The body and the spirit are connected, and violating one will have consequences on the other.

### ***"FFing and Jealousy!" No.603***

"FFing and Jealousy!" has a notable change in structure from the letter; the first section and lines throughout the letter are written by Maria, David Berg's first wife. The letter is driven by Maria presenting the issue of jealousy in relationships regarding flirty fishing (FFing) and Mo providing the official response from the Children of God doctrine. Maria asks about how to deal with the intense, and occasionally violent, jealousy that women have been experiencing from their husbands for participating in flirty fishing. Berg responds by detailing the role that demons play in spiritual possession and sin. This letter places a particular emphasis on the ability these demons and the Devil have over the physical body if they are able to possess the spirit.

According to Berg, the only way to avoid this possession is to submit your entire spirit to God and his will. The demons will be able to "annoy" you on the outside, but cannot possess you. The conversation between Maria and Berg continues throughout, further teaching on the physical ways sin controls one's life. Berg finally addresses the jealousy in the communities, and he condemns those that have not submitted to God fully and experience these annoyances that lead to jealousy.

Maria's voice having such a prevalent role in this letter adds an important dimension to Berg's authority. Maria was held in high regard in the family, as she was often the one that transcribed Berg's dreams and teachings. Their conversation shows Maria grappling with doctrine and how Children of God understands spiritual possession and sin. Berg's responses are typically to correct Maria, particularly on whether a demon can possess part of a soul if God possesses the remainder. While initially, they disagree, Maria is eventually brought back to the side of Berg. This speaks to his unique relationship with God and further enforces that only he has a full understanding of the functions of the spirit according to God. Without Berg to guide her, she would have been mistaken in her practice of religion. By submitting to Berg's understanding of the religion, it places Berg more firmly in a place of authority.

The letter opens with a discussion on how demons interact with humanity to cause sin. When a person has not submitted to the will of God, demons of various sins- jealousy, gluttony, gambling, etc.- can possess the soul and cause the body to commit horrible sins. When a person has submitted themselves spiritually and physically to God, though, these demons are no longer able to possess the soul, even a piece of it. They can annoy from the outside, but if one has fully committed themselves to God, they can't have an effect: "when it is not demon possession, when

it no longer controls you, when it's not inside but continues to plague you from the outside" (Berg 603:12). When one follows God in their actions, by actively spreading the Gospel and working for the mission of the church as they are directed, they can be freed of these demons.

The relationship these demons have with humanity reinforces the theme of positive and negative control that appears in several letters. Demon possession causes horrible, physical reactions and sins; in passage thirteen a man expels his demon from his presence by preaching the gospel on a street corner, and the demon leaves him and enters into an alcoholic on the street who "fell down and had a fit right on the spot" (Berg 603:13). Berg also states that once someone has become totally possessed, they have no way out. The only way to prevent oneself from this violent possession is to fully submit the physical body and the spirit to God. If a follower believes in God totally, they must submit to the rituals and plans of God. The jealousy over their wives partaking in the flirty fishing ritual is a sign that the men have not totally submitted to God and the Word - the letters: "But we have given them the Word and the cause and the whole motivation for the whole thing. That's where the problem comes in, see--whether they believe the Word or not" (Berg 603:25). Control over spiritual activities, whether that be flirty fishing or preaching on a street corner, is the control Children of God exerts, but it is only for the purpose of living free of possession and having a joyful life.

When their faith is lacking and they will not confess and submit to God completely, they will not receive healing or their healing will be revoked: "Neither can you be healed without confessing healing and constantly praising God and giving your testimony and talking about it--or you're apt to lose it" (Berg 603:31). If you fail to provide the testimony of God in your life and act on it, you will no longer have the protection of God. It requires both spiritual

commitment and physical action, including flirty fishing. According to Berg salvation is conditional, and failing to uphold God's rules and the doctrine of the Children of God means one is now open to horrible physical sin and suffering.

The theme of weak faith remains consistent in this letter as well. If one is so opposed to their wife flirty fishing that they prohibit them from participating in it, their faith is weak. While women are encouraged not to explicitly defy them, they are tasked by Berg with garnering their approval: "All parties concerned have to have the faith for it and agree to it--it has to be with mutual consent. Now if one does not have the faith for it...is jealous or refuses, then the other party is going to have to work on him" (Berg 603:40). The letter goes on to state that if it comes down to a "weak conscience" versus "saving a poor lost soul" (Berg 603:41), Children of God cannot stop following their practices in order to appease a few jealous men. If they cannot bring themselves to allow their wives to participate, it is because they are too weak to submit to God. This weakness will open them up to spiritual plaguing of demons, and allow them to be manipulated by them. Berg explicitly states, "our outfit is no place for weaklings" (Berg 603:56). To be a member of their religion means they are willing to commit themselves completely to the Family and to God- and therefore, to Berg's authority.

***"The Girl Who Wouldn't"* No. 721**

Mo (here addressed as Dad) responds to the request of two women in the Family who have written him. One woman is a high ranking member of the Family who is attracted to women, Lori, and the other is a female member of the Family that was assigned by Berg to be her sexual partner and travel companion, Toni. Toni is requesting that she be given a different

assignment because she cannot bring herself to have sex with another woman. Lori writes a letter agreeing that Toni would be better off in a different position, but still has very positive feelings towards her. Berg responds to this by framing it as defiance to the will and plan of God; he states that this was Toni's divine mission from God to fulfill (Berg 721:5,6). His primary point of concern is that she has defied her mission, and therefore is in complete disobedience to the Family until she fulfills what she was assigned. A key part of understanding this letter is considering that it was a public form of communication distributed to every member of the Family. While it is responding to the issues faced by two members of the community that were privately addressed to Berg, the public nature of his response indicates that Berg is using this private matter to send a larger message.

As previously indicated, Berg states that Toni, the woman who was assigned as a mate to the female official, is acting in violation of the will of God due to being selfish, rebellious, stubborn, and defiant. Berg illustrates this point by saying that a refusal of sex, especially to a partner assigned by him, is in direct opposition to the Letters (Berg 721:6, 21). Berg continually associates the word of God with the Letters and disparages those who disobey either. Berg uses this relationship to establish his unique relationship with God, that his words are equally as powerful and important as the words of God delivered in the Bible. By treating his words as equally imperative to following the will of God, Berg establishes his authority as divinely inspired due to the favor of God.

Berg utilizes a unique relationship between his message and the message of God to condemn those that defy his directions. Toni defied the Family by questioning her suitability for her assigned position. Because Berg's authority is based on his alignment with the will of God,

were he to admit that he chose the wrong person, his unique position with God can now be questioned, as Weber acknowledges in his analysis of charismatic authority: "Pure charisma does not know any 'legitimacy' other than flowing from personal strength, one which is constantly being proven" (Weber 22). By using the public letter to challenge Toni's character and strength of faith, Berg maintains that his placement was still in line with the intentions of God and it was only by her own unwillingness to comply with the will of God and Berg that her mission was failed.

It is important to note the continued theme of submission that is throughout this letter. Toni has failed to submit to Berg's assignment due to personal reservations, indicating that her faith is not strong enough by Children of God's standards. Her failure to carry out her assigned task defies Berg's authority, and based on his previous association between his will and God's, it defies the will of God, as well. Berg emphasizes that she lacks total faith in the religion and in God: "Toni's got too many selfish reservations. If she's even got one selfish reservation, that's too many! She's not wholehearted. She's not 100%. She's holding back in that one thing" (Berg 721:46). Because she will not fully commit, Berg characterizes her as someone that is incapable of performing other duties, even if she is willing to do them. Weak faith, in this case, has manifested in rebellion from the direction of the group, and Berg condemns this by stating she should not be around the children of the group, nor would he want her in his area (Berg 721:80, 47). She denied orgasm and the experience of God's love through sex to another person because of her own reservations, which violates the Law of Love. Her weak faith does not make her a suitable follower since she is not following the law of sacrificial love.

While much of this letter deals specifically Toni and her role in the Family moving forward, Berg also uses Toni as a symbol for a larger agenda. As stated previously, Toni failed to submit her body to her assigned sexual partner. Berg uses this to further emphasize the inseparable connection between the spiritual and the physical: “How can she say ‘I respect Lori with all (?) my heart’ when she’s unwilling to give you her body too!” (Berg 721:58). He goes on to compare her perspective to other Christians: “That’s just like a lot of church people who claim that they have given their hearts to Jesus, but then live with their bodies and hearts 6 ½ days a week totally selfishly” (Berg 721:59). The spiritual, physical, and emotional commitment demanded by this religious group is what sets them apart from most religious traditions. By using Toni’s unwillingness to submit to even one task, Berg further emphasizes the interaction between the physical and spiritual parts of humanity and that they cannot be separated.

Toni's denial triggering such a harsh reaction sends an important message about the role that sex has in the Family. Toni's refusal is met with a call to leave the group entirely; her refusal of sex is explained by Berg as her denial of the truth of his doctrine: "As far as I'm concerned, She doesn't believe what I write because she doesn't obey what I write! She has withheld herself selfishly and independently from [Lori]" (Berg 721:22). Ecstasy through orgasm is to be given without question or hesitation due to personal dilemmas. Her denial of sex violates Berg's teaching that sex is to be sacrificial and for the benefit of the practitioner's partner. This enforces the idea that sex is ritualized in their religion and is made to follow specific guidelines in order to fulfill its proper intention, further contradicting Weber's analysis of ecstasy being for self-centered purposes.

***“IRFer’s<sup>2</sup> Beware!” No. 880***

As with the previous document, Berg uses this letter to address a specific event the relates to the Family, however, what he addresses occurs outside the commune. The letter opens with two articles from American news reports that document the murder of a woman in Kansas who was stabbed to death in her apartment while her children were home and the perpetrator's subsequent arrest. Berg says in his opening statement that charity is an important part of the community, but cannot be given to every person. He then reveals that the woman and her family were members that had left the communes but still reported as being members of Children of God, deeming them "IRFers" (Berg 880:6,8). Berg utilizes their status to speculate at their dedication to the faith and using it as justification for not providing the family with aid. Berg goes on to state that God does all things for a reason, and therefore must have had a reason for calling the mother home (Berg 880:10,11), and God had taken a collection. Berg makes a case that God would not remove the mother for no reason and suggests that she is the reason they left the communes and therefore was leading her husband and children down the wrong path. Much of this letter addresses the issue of "withholding" (Berg 880:58) from God and the Family. Berg distances himself from the story of the attack, by repeatedly stating that they do not know the full story (Berg 880:29, 35, 47, 58) but because of the nature of his relationship with God, he is making "spirit-led guesses" which he says are rarely wrong (Berg 880:41).

This is a public letter that was written in response to an appeal by another IRFer outside of the victim's family that was asking Berg to send some assistance to the woman's family. As with the previous analysis, by making this a community-wide response, it indicates a larger

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<sup>2</sup> IRFer refers to a person that lives outside of the commune, does not tithe, but still reports themselves as a member of the Children of God.

message at hand. Berg makes this not only a response to the writer but an overall warning as to what God may do for those that have not submitted fully to His will. Non-tithing, reporting members (IRFers) will still receive the Mo Letters, so by making this into a more broad warning, Berg is addressing more than the situation at hand.

Keeping with the thematic consistency of the Letters, much of Berg's letter pertains to the issue of submission and commitment. According to Berg, those that leave the communes are "half-hearted and faint-hearted" (Berg 880:21), and are subject to punishment due to their lack of commitment: "So when they go home & leave a full-time service for the Lord & still won't even tithe, there must be something wrong with them spiritually. They probably reaped what they sowed. God's Word says you reap what you sow" (Berg 880:22). The family had left their post in the communes in order to return to the United States but still claimed membership. Berg's interpretation of this issue is that their failure to submit to the work and commune life is associated with a spiritual flaw.

Again, the recurrence of the connection between physical and spiritual submission rises. Despite leaving the commune, and therefore much of their physical commitment to the Family's mission, they still maintained spiritual membership to the group. Berg's interpretation of this position in the group is that they are not really committed at all, especially those that do not tithe. Berg states that the victim's family had the financial means to tithe, but were not doing so, which he attributes to a failure of their faith (Berg 880:10). Berg also infers from the details of the murder that the man was attempting to rape the victim, which he states indicates further physical disobedience: "Maybe that wife persuaded her husband to leave the field they'd been on for four years in South America, & she's probably now reaped what she sowed! Maybe she resisted

FF'ing & wouldn't let the guy fuck her, so she drove him to rape & murder!" (Berg 880:22). The lack of physical submission indicates that she was not properly following the Family, despite remaining a member, which led to physical punishment.

As stated in the quote above, Berg infers that the woman had attempted to flirty fish the murderer but her lack of commitment led her to be killed and subsequently ruined the man's life as well (Berg 880:23). This rhetoric indicates that it is not only performing the rituals that matters but following the letter of the law that dictates them as well. By failing to fully commit to the ritual and submit to sex, the woman was denying both the requirement that practitioners be wholehearted believers and the requirement that all practitioners of the ritual of sex be focused on self-sacrifice. Berg sees her murder as the punishment for failing to follow the requirements of the ritual of sexual encounters. By condemning those that violate the ritual so harshly, it further supports that the ecstasy of sex must follow the rules laid out by God through Berg's teaching, and therefore is able to be regulated. Weber's interpretation of ecstasy does not leave space for religions that strictly enforce the ecstatic experience. This letter serves as a warning for those that violate the ritual's guidelines, primarily flirty fishing without full commitment to sacrificial love.

This letter focuses less on the rituals and laws of Children of God and more on the consequences that come from failing to properly follow them. Berg states "Backsliders<sup>3</sup> beware! IRFers beware! You IRFers are obviously not whole - hearted or you would be tithing or serving the Lord full-time!...I warn you sometimes when you are not willing to give the minimum, God collects the maximum!" (Berg 880:48,50). Berg largely places the blame on the mother due to it

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<sup>3</sup> Backslider is a term for those that were once members but have completely renounced their ties to Children of God.

being her that was killed. The continuous repetition of “she reaped what she sowed!” emphasizes that Berg understands what God will do to punish those that violate His rules, and it deepens Berg’s authority by associating his knowledge of the scenario with “spirit-led guesses” (Berg 880:41).

## **Discussion**

Having analyzed 5 of David Berg’s key letters, I would like to restate the focus of this paper: to use rhetorical analysis to discover how Berg’s use of rhetoric utilizes ritualized ecstasy to enforce his charismatic authority by establishing sex as the major ritual of the Children of God, and how his rhetoric enforces his charismatic authority overall. It is key to analyze the language and context of each letter to understand the rituals and values of Children of God, as the Mo Letters are the main written embodiment of the group’s doctrine, and many of them are written in response to the social context the group was founded in or incidents in the group.

Looking specifically at the role that sex plays in children of God, throughout each letter, Berg frames sex as a ritual for practitioners to either convert or connect their partners to God. As stated earlier in the paper, Weber states that ecstasy is primarily used for the purpose of self-deification, is primarily self-serving and at the will and desire of the individual, and is not an effective tool for enforcing charisma. Children of God poses an issue for this analysis; as is clear through each of the letters, sex is a ritual practice used to connect practitioners to the true love and experience of God. It is not about manifesting a god within the self, as Weber had determined. Berg explicitly states in multiple letters that sex is to be selfless and based on sacrifice, modeling the love of God. Because sex was so strictly regulated, rather than practiced

in orgiastic settings as Weber stated, it did not result in physical or psychic collapse, as Weber inferred that it would. Berg's doctrine regulated when, how, and who was able to participate in sexual activities, most clearly documented in Letters 256, 302, and 721. The ecstasy experienced during orgasm was a vital part of Children of God's doctrine and sex was deemed as a necessary part of following God's will. The regimented nature of sex as ritual changes that nature of ecstasy; Weber's definition does not include religions that practice this way, further pushing new religions or non-traditional religions to the margins of society.

Overall, it is clear that Berg utilizes the letters to enforce his teachings on the relationship between spiritual and physical conditions. The first letter stresses that when someone does not engage in sex, they are both spiritually and physically inhibited, leading to both physical and psychological problems. Rhetoric associating the physical and spiritual parts of practitioners is a common thread in each letter. When a follower fails to follow the physical requirements of the religion, Berg calls into question their spiritual commitment. Physical requirements can include their engagement in sex, their engagement in the community, and fulfilling of their assignments from Berg. Using dichotomies, Berg makes it so that you can either have weak or strong faith; a follower can either be committed to God or committed to God or committed to the Devil. Followers are given almost no choice but to live in the communes and follow all teachings and direction from Berg, otherwise, they are non-believers in the eyes of Berg. This connection makes it more difficult for those that have begun to follow Berg to challenge his direction or to live away from the Family; Mo Letter 880 best highlights how Berg frames living apart from the community. To truly follow God's will, which can only be done by following Berg in Children of God, one must commit to every part of the tradition.

Berg capitalizes on the social events of the era to further his message; Children of God was founded during the sexual revolution and his audience was the "hippies". Berg provides an answer that he believes many of the young people are looking for: a doctrine that is largely sex-positive. The notion that sex is equivalent to depravity has started to pass away during this time, and Berg provides a doctrine that reaches out to those that are seeking a balance between sex and faith. It ethically moderates that abandonment of sexual rules by providing freedom from the laws of churches and society overall, with only a few guidelines regarding the practice of sex. Berg's message encourages sex and embraces the values of many citizens during his time, while still relying on the teachings of the Bible. However, by basing his message on self-sacrifice and benefiting others, Berg implements a selflessness in sex that Weber says is lasting orgiastic settings.

Considering this analysis as a whole, it is clear that Children of God enforces Weber's definition of charismatic authority while providing an exception to his analysis of ecstasy as utilized by religious leaders using charismatic authority. Berg's movement became one of the largest new religious movements in the mid-1900s, but Children of God is not the only new religion that provides a theoretical exception to the bases of authority. Future research will provide a greater understanding of how other new religions utilize ecstasy and how this compares to the theories of scholars such as Weber. Studying new religions is vital to the continued study of religions, especially those that persist into the present day.

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