

15 June 2025

Inquiry into Cults and Fringe Groups
Victorian Legislative Assembly
Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament of Victoria, Australia

To the Esteemed Members of the Inquiry:

My name is Janja Lalic. I am Professor Emerita of Sociology and for the past almost 40 years, I have focused on the study of cults and coercive control and am regarded internationally as a leading scholar on the subject. I have also served as expert witness in 25 cult-related legal cases (civil and criminal) in the U.S., including custody cases. My research, including my work on children in cults published in my book *Escaping Utopia*, has provided me with extensive insight into the dynamics of high-demand groups. I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this vital inquiry into the profound and often devastating impact of such groups on individuals and society.

In this statement, I specifically address the Children of God (COG), later known as The Family or The Family International. COG represents a classic and deeply troubling case study of cultic dynamics and the impact on children born and/or raised within such a closed and restrictive environment. With its origins in the counter-cultural movement in the 1970s, the group rapidly devolved into a highly authoritarian and exploitative system, particularly for its most vulnerable members—the children. Based on decades of research, observation, and interviews with survivors (most of whom grew up in the group), in my opinion, COG was (and remains) one of the most extreme and harmful of the groups that emerged during that era. And I wish to stress here that my critique of COG is based on the group's behaviours and practices, not on its beliefs.

To truly understand the insidious nature of the indoctrination within groups like COG, it is necessary to apply a specific analytical framework. My research led me to develop the **Bounded Choice model**, which posits that individuals in cultic groups are not simply "brainwashed" in a passive sense. Instead, they make what they perceive to be rational choices within a severely limited and manipulated environment. This framework rests on four intersecting dimensions:

1. A **charismatic authoritarian leader** who becomes the object of devotion and the ultimate arbiter of truth.
2. A **transcendent ideology** that provides a totalizing worldview and a grand sense of purpose, explaining everything and justifying any action.
3. **Systems of control** (coercive persuasion) that meticulously monitor and manipulate members' behaviour, thoughts and emotions.
4. **Systems of influence** that reconstitute the individual's identity, sense of self and social reality entirely within the closed world of the group. (By "sense of self," I mean one's self-confidence, self-esteem, ability to trust, self-worth, purpose, and moral code.)

For children born in COG, the concept of "choice" was bounded to an extreme degree. They did not choose to join; rather, they were born (or in some cases brought at a young age) into

a totalist reality wherein the above four dimensions orchestrated, controlled, monitored, and thereby defined their entire existence. COG's leader, David Berg ("Moses David"), was not a figure they chose to follow; rather, he was presented as a prophet, a god-like **charismatic authority** to be revered and whose word was absolute. His writings, the "Mo Letters," formed the group's **transcendent ideology**. This was not a belief system to be adopted but rather was regarded as the fundamental "Truth" of the universe that ultimately rationalized abhorrent behaviours and silenced dissent. For a child with no external frame of reference, questioning this extremist ideology was tantamount to questioning reality itself.

The **systems of control** (i.e., the rules and regulations, the expected behaviours) were all-encompassing. Children were isolated from mainstream society, cut off from non-member relatives, and denied formal education, reinforcing total dependence on the group. The **systems of influence** (psychological and emotional pressures and influences) were equally powerful. COG's practices demonstrate a chilling disregard for child welfare. For example, doctrines such as "Flirty Fishing" and the explicit sexualization of children (rebranded as "love sharing") were not presented as abusive but rather as righteous, divinely ordained acts. Within this closed environment, abuse became normalized and acceptable. The typical parent-child bond was either not allowed to develop or was systematically dismantled, replaced with unwavering allegiance to Berg and the group. Ultimately, these enforced and reinforced social-psychological dynamics resulted in a profound dependency that made independent thought nearly impossible. Reality was so meticulously constructed that these children lacked the tools to question, let alone leave, the only world they had ever known.

In sum, the Bounded Choice framework is essential for understanding why the widespread court cases against The Family/COG in the 1990s largely failed to deliver justice. Legal systems are predicated on concepts of free will and overt coercion (i.e., physical force). The courts and law enforcement were, and often still are, ill-equipped to grapple with the nuanced, social-psychological coercion that defines and characterizes the cult experience. The following are explanations of what occurred in the course cases.

- **Distorted Testimony:** When children from COG were brought before legal authorities, they were testifying from within their "bounded" reality. Taught that the group's sexual practices were normal and that outsiders ("Systemites") were evil, the children's inability to label their experiences as "abuse" in a way the court could understand resulted in their testimonies appearing as inconsistent or unreliable. They were not lying; they were articulating the only "truth" they had ever known.
- **The Illusion of Choice:** From the outside, it may have appeared that COG members were "choosing" to stay. The Bounded Choice model clarifies that these were not free choices. The psychological, emotional and social costs of leaving—losing one's entire identity, family, and support system to enter a world they were taught was demonic—were immense. A decision to leave was regarded as impossible for it represented either physical or metaphorical death. This powerful and over-arching coercion was invisible to a legal system looking for direct threats.
- **Lack of Corroborating Evidence:** The group's transient nature, including moving across international borders and separating children from their parents, made gathering physical evidence and consistent jurisdictional oversight nearly impossible.

Therefore, court cases relied heavily on the testimony of survivors and current members. Such testimony was systematically undermined by the very nature of their indoctrination.

In essence, the justice system asked questions that the children of COG could not comprehend. The court sought clear victims; whereas in reality, it was confronted with individuals whose very sense of self and harm had been manipulated by the group's totalist ideology. When COG survivors do emerge, they face immense challenges: grappling with severe trauma, a lack of practical life skills, a distorted understanding of the world, as well as a profound lack of societal resources aimed at helping this vulnerable (and growing) population integrate into society.

It is imperative that this Inquiry recognizes the long-term, intergenerational trauma inflicted by groups like the Children of God. The harm is not solely psychological; it is also physical, emotional, educational, and economic, with consequences that ripple throughout entire lifetimes.

In sum, I urge the Committee to consider the testimonies of survivors with the utmost seriousness. By understanding the mechanisms of coercive control through frameworks like Bounded Choice, we can develop more effective strategies for prevention, intervention, and support for those who have been victimized.

Thank you for your time and attention to this critical matter.

Sincerely,



Janja Lalich, PhD
Sociologist and Author
Founder and CEO, Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion

Books

Janja Writes: The Collected Works of Janja Lalich. In progress.

Take Back Your Life Workbook. In progress.

Recupera Tu Vida -- Spanish-language edition of *Take Back Your Life* (see next entry).

Take Back Your Life: Recovering from Cults and Abusive Relationships. 3rd edition updated and

revised. Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion, 2023. In print and audio.

Escaping Utopia: Growing Up in a Cult, Getting Out, and Starting Over (coauthor Karla McLaren, M.Ed.). Routledge, 2017. In print and audio.

Bounded Choice: True Believers and Charismatic Cults. University of California Press, 2004.

"Crazy" Therapies: What Are They? Do They Work? (coauthor Margaret Thaler Singer). Jossey-Bass, 1996.

Cults in Our Midst: The Hidden Menace in Our Everyday Lives (coauthor Margaret Singer). Jossey-Bass, 1995.

Captive Hearts, Captive Minds: Freedom and Recovery from Cults and Abusive Relationships (coauthor Madeleine Tobias). Hunter House, 1994.

Translations of My Work (partial list)

My books and articles have been translated into Spanish, Italian, German, French, Portuguese, Farsi, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Sinhala, Polish, and Turkish.

“Women Under the Influence: A Study of Women Lives in Totalist Groups,” a special edition of the *Cultic Studies Journal* that I Guest-Edited and in which I authored several articles (see below), was translated into Japanese as a book, titled *Behind the Veil: Sexual and Child Abuse in Cult Religions*. Tokyo: Askcom Publisher, 2007.

Journals: Guest Editor

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Book Chapters

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“Foreword: Repairing the Soul After a Cult Experience,” in Antonio Madaleno, *Cults and High-Control Groups*. Portugal, 2024.

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“Using the Bounded Choice Model as an Analytical Tool: A Case Study of Heaven’s Gate” (reprinted from *Cultic Studies Review*, 2004, 3(2-3), pp. 226-247, in Piotr Nowakowski, Ph.D. (Ed.), *The Phenomena of Cults from a Scientific Perspective* (an English-language book). Dom Wydawniczy Rafael Publisher, 2008.

“My Soul Needed Repair,” in Doreen Piano (ed.), *Cults: Social Issues First Hand*. Gale/Cengage, 2008.

“Pitfalls in the Sociological Study of Cults,” in Benjamin Zablocki and Thomas Robbins (Eds.), *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field*, pp. 123-155. University of Toronto Press, 2001.

“Dominance and Submission: The Psychosexual Exploitation of Women in Cults,” in Marny Hall (Ed.), *Sexualities*, pp. 37-52. Haworth Press, 1996.

“A Little Carrot and a Lot of Stick: A Case Example,” in Michael D. Langone (Ed.), *Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse*, pp. 51-84. Norton, 1999.

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- "Leadership of Islamic Terrorist Groups: Nature and Impact," "No Man Is an Island: How Global Islamist Extremism Is Generated," and "Creating More Ex-Terrorists by Maximizing Disengagement Opportunities," SHARP Final Report on Radicalization, July 2010.¹
- "Inside and Outcast: Multifaceted Stigma and Redemption in the Lives of Gay and Lesbian Jehovah's Witnesses," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 2010, 57, 1303-1333 (coauthor Karla McLaren, M.Ed.).
- "Social Action: A Continuum of Possibilities," *Social Justice in Context*, 2010, 5(1), 1-16 (coauthor Penelope Wong, Ed.D.).
- "The Violent Outcomes of Ideological Extremism: What Have We Learned Since Jonestown?" *Cultic Studies Review*, 2009, 8(3), 281-302.
- "Characteristics Associated with Cultic Groups," translated into Polish from my book *Take Back Your Life: Recovering from Cults and Abusive Relationships*, forthcoming in a Polish magazine, *Sekty i Fakty (Sects and Facts)*, Fall 2007.
- "Using the Bounded Choice Model as an Analytical Tool: A Case Study of Heaven's Gate." *Cultic Studies Review*, 2004, 3(2/3), 226-247.
- "Crazy Therapies." *Harvard Mental Health Letter*, 1997, 14(6), 5-6.
- "Introduction: We Own Her Now." *Women Under the Influence*. Special issue of *Cultic Studies Journal*, 1997, 14(1), 1-3.
- "Dominance and Submission: The Psychosexual Exploitation of Women in Cults." *Cultic Studies Journal*, 1997, 14(1), 4-21.
- "Dominance and Submission: The Psychosexual Exploitation of Women in Cults." *Women & Therapy: A Feminist Quarterly*, 1996, 19(4), 37-52.
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