

Book Reviews

Rebecca Stott, *In the Days of Rain. A Daughter. A Father. A Cult*. London: 4th Estate (Harper Collins), 2017. 400 pages. Hc. £ 16.99. ISBN: 9780008209162.

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Anti-cult literature is normally repetitious, and rarely of interest for scholars. “Atrocity stories” by “apostates,” the technical term used by sociologists to designate angry ex-members who have left groups they regard as “cults,” in particular, tend to repeat the same clichés. *In the Days of Rain* by Rebecca Stott, one of many anti-cult “apostate” books by ex-members of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC), deserves, however, more attention. The author is both a well-known novelist and author in unrelated fields and a self-styled apostate from the PBCC, not a frequent combination and one that made her book well-supported by publicists and generously reviewed in mainline media.

Stephen Kent, part of a tiny group of academics who support the anti-cult movement, recently published in an anti-cult journal an article claiming that mainline scholars ignore the “apostate” accounts because of their prejudices, and that in fact apostates are often more reliable than academics (Kent and Swanson 2017). This very review proves that we *do* read apostate accounts, but finding them accurate is an entirely different matter. Even Kent, perhaps, would approach Stott’s book with caution. She left the PBCC when she was seven: a miniature apostate, or a wannabe one. She claims she used a manuscript left to her by her father, a real apostate and a well-known member of the PBCC in Brighton, England. But she declares that the manuscript was unfinished, and how

much she adds and embellishes we cannot know. For a crucial number of incidents, which occupy a good part of her books, she relies on accounts of other apostates or critics of the Brethren.

The claim that she somewhat knows the world of the Brethren first-hand is also undermined by gross theological inaccuracies. She reports for example that the Brethren's central practice of "breaking bread" is based on the doctrine of "transubstantiation": "the bread was supposed to be his [Jesus'] body and the wine his blood" (36). Readers would recognize the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, which is not shared by Protestants in general and certainly not by PBC. Stott also mistakenly attributes to the Brethren the Origenian theory of pre-existence, according to which souls "had pre-existed" human bodies (303).

She claims a few years of Brethren indoctrination were enough for giving her a life-long solid knowledge of the Bible, but we read that she likes the Book of Job, particularly because of the part "about the whale" (226). In Job, there is in fact a passing reference to a whale ("Am I a sea, or a whale, that thou settest a watch over me?", 7:12), but readers who would have the impression that Stott here is confusing Job with Jonas might perhaps be forgiven. All this becomes less surprising when we learn that, after age 7, Stott was exposed to Baptism, Methodism, Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, Hinduism, Darwinism, Secular Humanism, and the hippie counterculture, all sprinkled with generous doses of LSD (200).

Which Brethren was Stott a member of? She calls them "Exclusive Brethren," distinguished from the more moderate "Plymouth Brethren," and at her time they had not yet adopted the name "Plymouth Brethren Christian Church." But both "Plymouth Brethren" and "Exclusive Brethren" are used for different groups. Based on a classification devised by the U.S. Census in 1936, and later expanded by scholars (see Introigne 2018), we can say that Stott joined the Brethren IV, which her family later left to become part of Brethren X. Brethren IV, Stott claims, were once just another Protestant fundamentalist denomination, but became a "cult" during the period when they were led by James Taylor, Jr. (1899–1970), i.e. between 1959 and 1970, when the distinctive Brethren rules of separation from non-Brethren (with whom they, typically, would not share a meal) and society in general were tightened.

Stott's family left the Brethren IV in 1970 and became shortly part of the Brethren X, also called "Post-Aberdeen Outs," as they left after the controversies

surrounding the Aberdeen Conference. At this conference, held shortly before his death, Taylor Jr. was accused not only of criticism some regarded as too harsh and abrasive against his opponents, but also of erratic behavior, of drinking alcohol in excess, and of attitudes disrespectful of women, culminating, or so Stott claims, in an alleged relationship with a married woman. Taylor, the woman in question, and her husband all denied that the relationship ever existed. Stott's father was not a witness to the events, and relied on the accounts by the anti-Taylor faction.

There is convincing evidence that the latter accusations were largely false and were made during a campaign aimed at destroying Taylor's authority by those critical of his leadership. Three authors of books echoing these accusations, including the well-known Dutch evangelical theologian Willem Johannes Ouweneel, publicly recanted their allegations. In 1990, court cases pending in the District Court of Utrecht and the Court of Appeal of Amsterdam against Ouweneel and his publisher were settled, with the Dutch theologian recognizing as reliable a number of documents and witness testimonies showing that most accusations against Taylor Jr. had been fabricated by his opponents (a copy of the settlement agreement is in the archives of CESNUR). Stott is aware of the court cases, but attributes their conclusions to the cleverness of Brethren's lawyers. She continues to believe in the anti-Taylor documents, which were the very foundation of the Brethren X community her father shortly decided to join, before leaving Christianity altogether and ending up in jail for embezzling funds from his company in order to support his gambling activities.

Rebecca Stott was socialized into the anti-cult community, and spent time with exit counselors, who try to extricate "victims" from the "cults" through a "process" "they used to call [...] 'deprogramming'" (302)—Stott's words—although later they changed its name to "exit counseling" for reasons the author prefers not to explain. She even attended a "twelve-week course on the Social Psychology of Cults and Totalitarianism" by Alex Stein (380) and read books against the Brethren, including one by journalist Michael Bachelard, whose diatribes against Brethren IV are particularly vicious. She acquired from the anti-cult milieu a taste for the hyperbole, apparent in sentences such as the one mentioning "the thousands of families that the Brethren have tortured" (33). And she finally found an explanation for the Brethren's success in their practice of "a powerful form of brainwashing" (132).

Nothing is new, here, with respect to hundreds of anti-cult books, but some specific remarks about Brethren IV are in order. Stott quotes two contributions by sociologists on Brethren IV in her bibliography, the old classic chapter by Bryan Wilson (1926–2004) (Wilson 1967) and an article by Matthew Tont (Tont 2001), but does not appear to use them in the text. A familiarity with Wilson’s sociology in general would have warned her against the use of the word “cult” and perhaps helped her realize that the majority of sociologists of religion reject brainwashing theories as pseudo-science. Tont would have contributed to a more balanced approach, including the positive contributions Brethren made to the communities where they live. Conspicuous for its absence is contemporary sociology about the Brethren. Names such as Bernard Doherty and Liselotte Frisk seem to be unknown to Stott, even if the former has written together with an ex-member of PBCC, Laura Dyason.

Sociology in general would have helped Stott realize that some of the features she sees as typical of “cults,” including the prohibition “no sex before marriage” (142), are in fact shared by hundreds of conservative religious organizations throughout the world. Doherty, in particular, would have told her that, if one insists in using an outdated terminology, the Brethren went from sect to “cult” in the 1960s, but they went back from “cult” to sect later (see Doherty 2013). Stott fails to see Taylor Jr.’s retrenchment against the background of the liberal 1960s, which were a cause of concern for all conservative Christians, and dismisses the following mainstreaming as merely cosmetic or the work of public relations agencies. She cannot know, since she has admittedly kept no contact with the Brethren, and simply relies on anti-Brethren literature.

Stott emphasizes the suicides within Brethren IV and attributes them to the church’s strictness. The Brethren have refuted several of Scott’s claims about suicide, or alleged suicide, incidents, some of which were classified by British authorities as accidental deaths (Plymouth Brethren Christian Church 2017). Without access to the legal files (Stott relies herself on press clippings and anti-Brethren Internet forums), these incidents cannot be meaningfully discussed. Social scientists would however ask for statistics, as the relevant question would be whether suicide is more prevalent among Brethren IV than, say, among Roman Catholics or secular humanists. No evidence that such is the case is offered.

Incidentally, Stott supplies unwittingly an argument in favor of the Brethren by not mentioning any incident of sexual abuse of children. There have been isolated

incidents among Brethren IV, as in most other communities, but some anti-cultists have claimed that paedophilia is more present among the Brethren than elsewhere. The fact that Stott, who has not left any stone unturned in her search for gossip about the Brethren, reports no such incident at all seems significant.

Stott also derives, mostly from Bachelard, the impression that contemporary Brethren IV schools, of which again she has no direct experience, are backwards institutions of inferior quality. Doherty, Frisk and her colleague Sanja Nilsson, and the undersigned have visited Brethren IV schools in five different countries, finding that computer technology is state-of-the-art, several of the classic literary masterpieces she describes as banned in her times are available in the school libraries, Darwinism is taught, although as a “theory” and not as a fact (as is the case in many public schools in the American South, where school boards are dominated by Evangelicals), and students perform better than average in national tests. True, they do not eat with their non-Brethren teachers—but they do exist, and I met in rural New York State a *Roman Catholic* principal of a Brethren school, which would perhaps be a surprise to Stott, who emphasizes the extreme anti-Catholicism of Brethren IV. Parenthetically, I am myself a Roman Catholic and have been welcome in the Brethren IV communities I visited as a scholar.

Concerning the suicide cases, Stott argues that in the U.K. Brethren were not held responsible because of the misguided respect of British judges for religious liberty and pluralism. It is unclear whether Stott would rather advocate a Soviet style of justice. But the claim, hardly believable with respect to the British judiciary, would become ridiculous in France, a country known for its sustained hostility against “cults.” In fact, the French governmental body in charge of watching “cults” regarded Brethren schools as suspicious even before they were opened (MIVILUDES 2006, 16, 18, and 24). When, however, they started operating, the French Ministry of Education sent its inspectors, and they concluded that students in Brethren schools enjoyed a quality education and were generally well adjusted (Moracchini, Benoist and Gorge 2014). In other countries, such as Sweden, Brethren schools were accused of perpetuating gender stereotypes—but so were Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and Evangelical schools.

Stott’s book is at times annoyingly arrogant, as she seems very much persuaded that she is part of a literate elite inherently superior to those, mostly rural, unenlightened folks who still believe, as Max Weber (1864–1920) would call it,

in an “enchanted” world inhabited by angels, demons, Heaven, Hell, original sin, and—to say it shortly—God. A look at the recently published book by Jason Josephson Storm would perhaps disenchant Stott about disenchantment (Josephson Storm 2017). Josephson Storm notes that, although no longer (and perhaps never) a majority view, the myth of disenchantment is still prevailing in some subcultures, most notably among journalists of the mainline media. That may explain some surprisingly favorable reviews of Stott’s book. But, in all fairness, there are other reasons for them. When she breaks free of the anti-cult rhetorics, Stott writes in an English better than most, and tells in her own passionate voice the story of the dysfunctional, yet loving, relationship between a rebellious daughter and a gambling-addict father. I would respectfully suggest that Stott employs these talents of her in fields other than religion.

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