

Introduction: The Study of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church

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ABSTRACT: The Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC), popularly referred to in some countries as the “Exclusive Brethren,” is a Christian denomination that has become a subject of considerable controversy—both historically and more recently. This introductory article presents this group, contextualizes these controversies, and discusses how they have impacted on both the group’s public image and scholarly analysis.

KEYWORDS: Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, PBCC, Exclusive Brethren, Religious Controversy in Britain, Religious Controversy in Australia, Religious Controversy in New Zealand, Christian Sects in Australia.

Introduction

During December 2019 and January 2020, Australia was ravaged by some of the worst bushfires in living memory—matching even the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983 and the Black Saturday fires of 2009 (Werner 2020). These natural disasters saw widespread mobilization across affected communities by various

religious charitable bodies, many of whom, like the Salvation Army and Uniting Church in Australia, having a long history in community assistance and involvement in disaster relief. However, throughout these events, one of the most visible organizations on the ground, serving food to bushfire affected communities and members of the Rural Fire Service (RFS), was the more recently formed Rapid Relief Team (RRT). Since first registering as a charity with the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profit Commission (ACNC) in 2013, the RRT has become a regular presence during times of crisis and natural disaster—particularly in rural Australia. From providing meals to the homeless and providing catering for various other charities—both religious and secular—to arranging a convoy which travelled from Western Australia to New South Wales carrying hay for drought-stricken farmers, the RRT is becoming well-known amongst rural communities and emergency service volunteers for its charitable work (Cowling, Fookes, and Woodburn 2018; Rapid Relief Team 2021).

These examples are not limited to Australia. Similar accounts are recorded in the United Kingdom, where the RRT provided refreshments to the emergency services dealing with the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017. Flooding in South Yorkshire in 2019 saw the RRT set up refreshment stations to support firefighters and other emergency personnel (Tapsfield and Williams 2019). One of the contributors to this volume was himself the recipient of the RRT's benevolence, receiving bottled water from a refreshment station they had set up on a particularly hot day at Crewe railway station in the summer of 2017. Indeed, there are numerous examples of the RRT undertaking similar low-key and localized humanitarian activities across the globe including, France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden (see e.g., Introvigne 2018, 1–2).

What is less known, and perhaps surprising, is that the RRT is funded and staffed by community volunteers and businesses almost entirely drawn from the local congregations of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC)—better known in Australia and the UK by the name of the “Exclusive Brethren”—a (comparatively) small Christian denomination that traces its roots to a period of evangelical Protestant revival and discontent within both the Established Church of England and other Christian denominations in 1820s Ireland and Britain.

The circumstances that led to the formation of the Brethren principally arose out of a concern for what was perceived to be the corrupt nature of institutional Christianity, exemplified by the practices of the Church of England. The

traditional ecclesiastical structures of the Anglican Church and other denominations were perceived to be both illicit and corrupt, particularly in their partnerships with secular society and the subsequent bureaucratic ties that had developed. Since its inception, and moreover following a series of fractures in the wider “Brethren Movement” following the first major split in 1848, this group spread across the globe—with congregations today spanning the United Kingdom, Africa, New Zealand, Australia, continental Europe, and both North and South America (Doherty 2016; Introvigne 2018; Doherty and Knowles 2021; Plymouth Brethren Christian Church 2021).

Why the emergence of the RRT as a charitable arm of the PBCC might initially appear surprising is easily explicable. Due to their doctrine of separation, which dominates their communities, the PBCC has always sought to maintain a low public profile. Indeed, often cited is a statement by former leader James Harvey Symington (1913–1987): “We have nothing to hide and nothing to parade,” which underlines their intention to this end (cited in Doherty 2014). Thus, the emergence of the RRT might seem to be contradictory to their separation from wider society. However, two reasons can be cited for this seeming change in attitude.

First, beginning in the mid-2000s, the PBCC became the subject of extensive media attention in various countries across the world, owing to its alleged political machinations in support of conservative governments; in particular in Australia and New Zealand, though stretching to various other nations across the globe. Almost overnight, the group’s public image was transformed into that—to cite one particularly sensationalist Australian current affairs program—of “Australia’s biggest cult” (Doherty 2012; 2013). Second, in the United Kingdom, the PBCC was involved in a protracted application to the Charity Commission (2009–14), in which their “public benefit” was initially deemed not to be sufficient to warrant charitable status (Doherty 2020; Knowles 2020).

It was during this period that considerable time and money was pumped into the RRT in the form of substantial public image makeover that included an extensive branding process. This was undertaken in order to demonstrate that the PBCC was actively serving the community and thus providing public benefit. In other words, the RRT was given an explicitly higher profile that would clearly demonstrate its activities in a way that could easily be evidenced and accounted for in terms of providing public benefit to wider society. The setting up of the

RRT has led to accusations of hypocrisy; however, there are many examples of the PBCC undertaking charitable works prior to the UK case (see e.g., Introvigne 2018; Doherty & Dyason [2021]). These events underline the contested history of the PBCC, and some of the more recent flashpoints of controversy that have followed the group.

A History of Controversies

From its origins, the PBCC and other Brethren groups have often been the subject of dispute, first amongst other evangelical Protestants, both those from the Established Church from which a significant number of early Brethren seceded—including John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), whom the PBCC considers its founder—and from dissenting or non-conformist congregations. A number of these attacked the Brethren in sectarian tracts over the course of the 19th and early 20th century. The reasons for these early attacks varied, ranging from relatively minor accusations regarding “sheep-stealing” (converting Christians from other congregations) through to more serious accusations regarding alleged deviations in doctrine, particularly in the areas of Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology (Grass 2006, 213–28).

While the PBCC have steadfastly denied the label of being a Christian “sect,” holding that such divisions are condemned in the New Testament text of *I Corinthians* 1:10–15 (e.g., “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” [KJV]), in sociological terms the group’s emphasis on Darby’s doctrine of “Separation from Evil” and its practices of internal communal discipline, has seen it not unfairly characterized—as in the work of the celebrated British sociologist Bryan R. Wilson (1926–2004)—as an “introversionist sect” (Wilson 1967b). That is, a group that “directs the attention of its followers away from the world and to the community and more particularly to the members’ possession of the Spirit” (Wilson 1967a, 28).

While over the course of the 20th century the wider (non-exclusive) Brethren movement has largely disappeared from most Christian literature criticizing “sects,” the PBCC has continued to be viewed with suspicion by some Christians—owing to controversies over matters ranging from internal discipline

of members and communal life through to their attitudes toward technology, business, voting, and (to a far lesser degree) their theology (see e.g., Scotland 1997; 2000). In short, the PBCC's "mode of insertion" (Beckford 1985, 77) into society has attracted criticism from other Christians, as well as, on some occasions, from wider society.

At the same time as the wider Brethren movement has become a highly respected part of the larger evangelical Protestant milieu, the designation of the PBCC has also shifted. Since the 1960s the group has increasingly come to be referred to less as a Christian "sect," and more often as a "cult"—a pejorative label the PBCC has been unable to shed even into the present. What exacerbates the difficulty with defining the PBCC is the general conflation of the terms "sect" and "cult" in popular parlance. This is particularly common in journalistic accounts and does little to provide clarity, but rather fuels misconceptions about the PBCC and provides barriers to genuine attempts to understand and research the group—not least in removing it from its historical moorings in evangelical Protestant Christianity.

As negative perceptions of the PBCC developed in this direction, members of the larger Brethren movement—with whom the PBCC had split in 1848—have paid far less attention to the PBCC, except to distance themselves from it and other groups on the "Exclusive wing" of the notoriously fissiparous movement (Piepkorn 1970; Introvigne 2018, 61–89). Instead, their extensive scholarly endeavors have focused predominantly elsewhere. As such, while the late 20th and early 21st century witnessed a burgeoning of high-quality scholarship on Brethren historiography—particularly in journals like the *Christian Brethren Research Fellowship Journal* and later the *Brethren Historical Review*—the "Darbyite" or "Exclusive" wing of the movement has been the subject of far less historical or scholarly analysis, particularly since the 1960s.

Scholarly Neglect and Popular Biography

The reasons for this scholarly neglect are numerous—not all of which can be surveyed here (see e.g., Doherty 2015–16; Introvigne 2018). In some instances, particularly amongst a small number of Brethren historians from the "Open" wing of the movement, a distinct hostility exists toward the "Exclusive" wing and vice versa. This antipathy owes much to a combination of historical disputes, and in

some cases negative personal experiences or grievances, and is perhaps best exhibited by the type of historical reminiscence found in a number of ex-member biographies and autobiographies from former PBCC members, which have appeared at intervals since the 1970s (see below). These narratives often represent many of the lamentable features of apostate accounts of new religious movements, and have played a considerable role in framing the general representation of the PBCC in the public sphere. At its more negative amongst scholars, this historical hostility has manifested itself in a highly jaundiced view of any and all developments within the PBCC, with one writer, in a work dating as far back as 1968, calling the PBCC “the darkest blot on the history of the Brethren” (McDowell 1968, 48).

While the separation between the PBCC and the wider Brethren movement dates to 1848, with the boundaries becoming more rigid over the ensuing century, it was only really in the late 1950s through to the 1970s that the PBCC’s reputation took a turn for the worst, as tabloid media coverage and later popular journalistic books, especially in the United Kingdom, brought internal changes and disputes within the PBCC to the attention of a wider public (e.g., Adams 1972). This internal discord led, in the words of historian Roger Shuff, to “substantial hemorrhaging and public notoriety” (Shuff 1997, 21).

Observers from the wider Brethren movement often watched askance as newspapers confused different strands of the movement (a problem which continues into the present). While at least one scholar, Bryan R. Wilson, was able to write an important sociological chapter on the group during this period (Wilson 1967b), the atmosphere, particularly amongst wider historians and scholars of the Brethren movement became exceedingly cautious—owing to fears of legal reprisals after the PBCC instituted a series of legal proceedings against perceived critics, including one against a well-known Dutch evangelical theologian (Dyason and Doherty 2015; Introvigne 2018, 88–9). This situation has continuity, to a certain degree, into the present.

For these Open Brethren scholars, the entire Brethren movement had been compromised by the internal discord in the PBCC, with the important historian Harold H. Rowdon (1926–) later commenting that,

The term “Brethren” became associated with crack-pot regulations, ostracism of non-conforming relatives, broken marriages and broken homes, inhumanity and even suicide (Rowdon 1986, 13).

F. Roy Coad (1925–2011), another authoritative historian of the wider Brethren movement, was equally critical, writing closer to the time that,

The most morbid strains of Darby’s teachings, isolated and exaggerated, reached their over-ripe maturity in those developments, which took the teachings of this exclusive group far from the paths of normal Christian orthodoxy (Coad 1976 [1968], 212–13).

While notable exceptions can be found, the events of the 1950s through to the death of James Taylor Jr (1899–1970) in 1970 cast a pall over scholarship on the PBCC, with very little published work appearing between Wilson’s detailed and much-admired study in his edited volume *Patterns of Sectarianism* (Wilson 1967b) and the turn of the millennium.

This development also owed much to internal changes within the PBCC itself, particularly the increasing introversionist stance of the group, which from the accession of Taylor Jr as global leader in the late 1950s made it increasingly difficult for researchers to access members and the group’s internal literature. Again, as Coad noted during this period,

American leadership of the two James Taylors, father [James Taylor Sr., 1870–1953] and son [James Taylor Jr.], [led to] an introspective and mystical group whose esoteric teachings, and completely closed outlook [...] brought it to the much publicized debacle and public opprobrium of the 1950s and 1960s (Coad 1976 [1968], 212).

What appeared in the stead of this academic vacuum, much of it due to the fallout of controversial decisions taken by leadership, were a series of former member biographies and autobiographies, in some cases little more than “misery memoirs” or evangelical testimonial literature, ostensibly beginning with Christine Wood’s *Exclusive By-Path: The Autobiography of a Pilgrim* (Wood 1976), and represented most recently by Rebecca Stott’s award-winning *In the Days of Rain* (Stott 2017; for a critical review, see Introvigne 2017). Particularly in Christian circles, but also more widely, these often-harrowing books further contributed to the Brethren’s negative reputation—particularly their heart-rending accounts of family estrangement and the long-term impact of this on their authors.

Beginning, however, with the important historical work of Roger Shuff (1997; 2005) and some (generally more critical) articles by Nigel Scotland (1997; 2000), scholars began to look in more detail at the Brethren, and developments after the Aberdeen incident discussed in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* by Neil T.R. Dickson. Moreover, in 2000, Wilson returned to the topic he had

covered in 1967 to author an updated sociological appraisal in which he revisited Brethren history and offered a summary of contemporary Brethren practices (Wilson 2000). With the controversy surrounding the Brethren that emerged in New Zealand and Australia in the mid-2000s, other works began to appear, in which scholars sought to provide basic information about the relationship between the PBCC and other branches of the Brethren movement (e.g., Grass 2006; Introvigne and Maselli 2007), while critical accounts addressed specific aspects of the contemporary controversies (e.g., Mutch 2007).

This period also witnessed the appearance of the long-form journalistic account of the Brethren by Fairfax media reporter Michael Bachelard, *Behind the Exclusive Brethren* (2008), which drew on his investigative reporting on the Brethren going back to 2005, and was described by the author as an exposé of the group. Containing rich data from interviews with ex-members and journalistic research, Bachelard's book highlights both interesting and controversial aspects of contemporary Brethren culture and practice. It was also prone to sensationalizing in its journalistic endeavor. Bachelard's position was ideologically decidedly anti-cult, and much of the information contained therein is now considerably dated.

However, along with his earlier reporting, this book solidified Bachelard's status as a chief moral entrepreneur on matters surrounding the Brethren. Not surprisingly, the PBCC was highly critical of Bachelard. After numerous further articles—some of which recycled material from earlier publications in a “stream of controversies” (van Driel and Richardson 1988, 37) approach to religious reporting—the PBCC took legal action against Fairfax Media in the New South Wales Supreme Court in 2017 following the publication of a piece entitled “Brethren Secrets” in the *Good Weekend* supplement of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Bachelard 2016)—claiming that Fairfax and Bachelard had “run a decade-long vendetta against the church.” While Fairfax Media won the initial case in 2017 (Supreme Court of New South Wales 2017), the decision was overturned on appeal in May 2018 (Court of Appeal of New South Wales 2018).

As mentioned above, the PBCC again became a subject of controversy in 2012—this time in the United Kingdom—when the Charity Commission for England and Wales rejected an application by the PBCC Preston Down Trust (PDT) on the grounds that it was,

not satisfied it was able to determine conclusively that the doctrines and practices of the PBCC as practiced by PDT met the public benefit requirement in charity law and, consequently, that PDT was not established for exclusively charitable purposes for the public benefit (Charity Commission for England and Wales 2014, 3).

What followed was a period of protracted legal negotiations between the PBCC and the Charity Commission, as well as considerably media and political furor, with the ultimate result that in January 2014 the PDT was registered with a Deed of Variation (Doherty 2020). In the meantime, the PBCC increased its public engagement, including with academics.

More recently, the previous experience of historians cited above, to a significant degree, has become a thing of the past, and the PBCC has begun cooperating more openly with scholars. In particular, the PBCC has begun to attract the attention of sociologists and anthropologists of religion, including in June 2015 with a plenary panel on the PBCC at the annual CESNUR conference in Tallinn, Estonia, and a series of subsequent publications by participants (e.g., Dyason and Doherty 2015; Frisk and Nilsson 2018) culminating in Massimo Introvigne's book *The Plymouth Brethren* in 2018. Further scholarship has appeared in recent years (e.g., Webster 2018) and it is against this scholarly backdrop that this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* is positioned.

Beginning to Move Beyond the Lens of Controversy

While as is often the case with scholarship on new religions, much that has been written on the PBCC has focused on controversies involving the group, much less has been written on topics of everyday life and communal practice—ranging from childrearing and education, to how the PBCC's engagement with modern technology has developed. In this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*, the co-editors have sought to bring to a wider open-access audience a series of articles which it is hoped will assist, through careful historical scholarship by leading historians of the Brethren movement, to better explain the importance of several key aspects of Brethren theology and the impact of historical events on the group in various geographic regions including United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Sweden. In addition to this, we have also included a series of topical papers which help to highlight the challenges the PBCC has faced, and indeed continue to face, in negotiating its “mode of insertion” into a variety of geographic and

cultural contexts ranging from education and modern technology, through to the legal sphere.

As is the habit of *The Journal of CESNUR*, the collected authors in this volume have not shied away from issues of controversy, nor indeed are their views on issues uniform. Instead, what the co-editors have sought to bring here are a series of perspectives to assist scholars and general readers in better understanding the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church and some of the controversies they have faced.

Challenges for scholarship, however remain. Probably the most valuable source of information on the PBCC is that published internally through their own publishing house Bible and Gospel Trust, known as the *Ministry*. This is the published transcripts of the preaching and teaching of the global leader taken at meetings he attends. It is conversational in tone, and not a systematic presentation of Brethren theology, nor is it meant to be. Rather, what is contained in the *Ministry* are the thoughts of the “Man of God” on both doctrinal and practical issues pertaining to Brethren life and include interaction with local Brethren leaders, dealing with local and global matters. Deeply contextual, the *Ministry* provides a window into the issues that are important to the Brethren at that moment in time. Moreover, within the *Ministry* there is great respect for former leaders of the movement, who are regularly referenced and demonstrate what they believe to be the continuity of leadership from John Nelson Darby to Bruce Hales in the present.

As important as it is for anyone wanting to research the PBCC, access to *Ministry* is generally prohibited to outsiders. The decision regarding access was made during the leadership tenure of James Taylor Jr, who in the 1960s determined that due to the *Ministry* being taken out of context and quoted by outsiders to promote controversy and cause mischief it should be withheld from non-members. Thus, for approximately 60 years the *Ministry* has been published only for community members who pay a subscription to have it, which is obligatory for all households. This amounts to literally hundreds of volumes of meeting transcripts, to which access is difficult. Moreover, in recent years a copyright embargo has been placed on it to deter non-members from directly citing the *Ministry*. Anyone who does attempt to may find themselves subject to legal proceedings. It is only recently that the PBCC has permitted limited public access to this literature, and unauthorized publication is strictly prohibited.

Indeed, only recently the PBCC has agreed an out of court settlement with an individual former member who published excerpts from the *Ministry* on the Internet without permission (Blackstock 2019; Miller 2019). However, good faith engagement with the PBCC, as experienced by the co-editors and a number of the contributors of this issue, demonstrates that it is possible for scholarship to move forward.

The collection of papers in this special edition commences with a series of historical articles, beginning with Crawford Gribben's analysis of the development of the doctrine of separation that is central to the PBCC community and from where the "Exclusive" label can be traced. Gribben examines the evolution of Brethren ideas around separation, and in particular analyses the development of Darby's understanding, as well as some of the more radical interpretations of it.

This is followed by leading Brethren historian and long-time editor of the *Brethren Historical Review* Neil Dickson's analysis of the history of the PBCC in Scotland from the first meetings in 1838 until 2018. Drawing on a wide variety of documentary sources and interviews, in particular Dickson offers a nuanced and well-documented discussion of the controversial circumstances surrounding James Taylor Jr's visit to Aberdeen in 1970, which led to a schism in the group.

Dickson's chapter is followed by that of New-Zealand-based historian Peter Lineham, in which he carefully examines the background and circumstances to the PBCC's activities during in the 2005 New Zealand national election campaign—an event which alongside similar actions in Australia catapulted the PBCC into the media on both sides of the Tasman. Like Dickson, Lineham's work draws on a wide variety of documentary sources to highlight how the Brethren, despite the high premium they place on communal privacy, had become such a well-known movement in the small Pacific island nation of New Zealand. These historical papers are followed by three thematic studies.

Co-guest-editor Steven Knowles investigates how the PBCC came to embrace information and communication technologies after initially prohibiting its use. He suggests that the pressures of an increasingly technologically driven society have forced the PBCC to reconsider its stance in order for their communities to continue to thrive.

Australian legal scholar Mitchell Landrigan turns a trained legal lens on the vexed issue of parenting orders involving Brethren children under the Australian Family Law Act and how this relates to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, examining some of the important family law jurisprudence relating to such cases. Landrigan's article raises important questions about religious freedom as these relate to Brethren children.

The final contribution, by the late Swedish scholar Liselotte Frisk (1959–2020) and her colleague Sanja Nilsson, provides a rich ethnography of Brethren child rearing and schooling in their small Swedish community, based on interviews and participant observations conducted by the author's at the Brethren's Labora School.

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