"THAT'S NOT ME": MULTIGENERATIONAL ADULT LEAVERS OF CULTIC GROUPS

By Jill Aebi-Mytton

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Many people in the cultic studies field are now familiar with the terms *first-generation adult* (FGA) and *second-generation adult* (SGA) former members. "But that's not me" is a thought I used to have at ICSA conferences and when I was reading related books and journal articles. Neither of these terms seemed to be a category I fit into or could identify with, though I was uncertain why. In this article, I introduce a possible third category, *multigenerational adult* (MGA) leavers, which emerged during my doctoral research.

FGAs and SGAs

FGAs are those who join a cultic group. At some point they leave. They can return to their previous life, perhaps return to their families and old friends. They may even be able to return to an occupation they had once trained for. Of course, it is often very difficult to leave the group, in which many have experienced different forms of abuse, and negotiate that transition back into a world they once knew. Reintegrating into a society they perhaps once spurned is often a huge challenge.

SGAs are those born and/or raised in a cultic group who subsequently leave. They usually know no other world than the cultic world; they have no previous life, no previous identity to return to. Other likely SGA experiences include a *lifetime* of abuse and neglect, along with attachment disorders; and some former members also lack any education. When they leave the group, they often lose all that they have ever known—family, friends, belief systems, employment, and their attachments to the group and family. They can feel as if the rug has been pulled from under their feet. They have to make sense of a new world that they were taught as children to fear—a fear that may include a belief, as the leader(s) and group foretold, that something dreadful is going to happen to them because they left.

These two categories—FGAs and SGAs—however, do not always fit our experiences. Where do I belong if I am of the third or fourth generation within the cultic group and does it matter? When I started going to ICSA conferences in 2007 in Brussels, I felt like a bit of an outsider. The conference seemed to be mostly about FGAs, and "that's not me." The cultic groups I heard about did not match my experience: Maybe my group was not even cultic after all? There *was* some mention of SGAs, but that didn't seem to fit my experience either.

The next ICSA conference I attended was in 2009 in Geneva. The program encompassed more on second-generation leavers, including a paper I presented. Yet at the "Working With Second-Generation Former Cultists" workshop, I still did not quite feel that the topic was about me or anyone else leaving groups such as the Exclusive Brethren, my former group, where the majority of members are born into the group.

The ICSA conference theme in Stockholm in 2015 was "Children in High-Control Groups." In spite of this focus, I still felt some unease. Discussions, though, were beginning about those with generations of cultic-group history behind them. I felt encouraged.

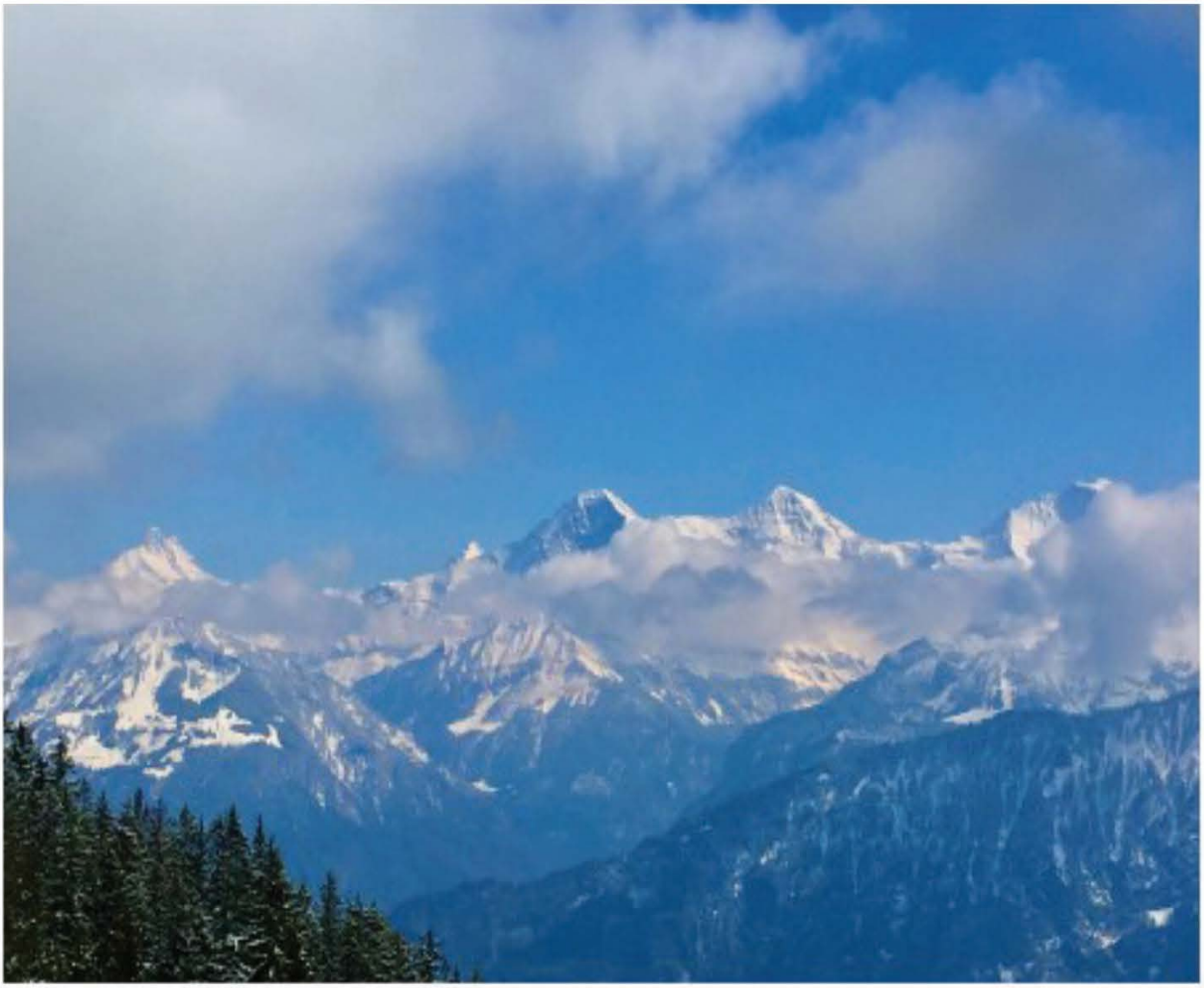
"But that's not me" is a thought I used to have at ICSA conferences and when I was reading related books and journal articles.

During these years I was also carrying out research, both quantitative and qualitative, that focused entirely on former members of the Exclusive Brethren. It was during the qualitative research for my doctoral thesis that I began to understand my disquiet about being categorized as an SGA (Aebi-Mytton, 2017).

Two of the six participants, or "storytellers," in my research were true SGAs in that, for both, their parents had joined the Brethren. And there seemed to be a difference in their narratives compared to the narratives of the other four former members.

I wrote much of my thesis up in the mountains of Switzerland (see Figure 1), where I hid myself away for 3 weeks at a time.

Figure 1. Mountains of Switzerland



I remember looking out across to the snow lords, pondering why it was that Ian, one of my study participants who was born the same year as I was, had had such a different childhood and talked so differently about his Brethren experiences.

I looked at the mountains and saw that each one was different, carved out over time by the snow, the wind, and avalanches. In spite of having experienced the same environment, they were all different. Each mountain has its own life story of when and how it was formed, a story that never ends. Underneath them all, though, lay their bedrock. I began to realize that whilst the six stories I had for my research were all very different, underneath them all lay the narrators' experiences in their cultic groups. Taking the metaphor a little further, I wondered whether that bedrock went deeper for those with a long generational history, like mine. Along with my own experiences, I began to explore what the differences were between the stories of the two true SGAs and those of the other four storytellers.

Before I introduce two of the storytellers to demonstrate my points and what I realized is the need for a third category, I want to digress into something else that is relevant. In Montreal, at the 2012 ICSA conference, Gillie Jenkinson and I were preparing for a clinical presentation. We discussed how families can take various positions in a cultic group. For clarity, when I refer to *family* I mean the family as a unit, including their experiences, values, beliefs, child-rearing practices, culture, ways of relating, and so on. So within a cultic group, the family might only overlap in limited ways with the those of the group, in which case the family dynamics could mitigate the effect of the group on a developing child. Or the family might be encircled by the group, in which case the group control would be much more powerful. I began to develop this idea. In contrast, a family who is encircled by the group might be deeply enmeshed in the cultic system, accepting the doctrines and systems of influence and control. It may be hard for a child in this family to distinguish between the family and the group; the boundaries between the two are blurred.

Although most cultic-group families do not live in a community, as the Amish do, I believe the universality and cohesiveness of the cultic system creates strong enough bonds for the gossamer threads of the doctrines and practices to reach all corners of each member's world. The stronger the group's social and ideological boundaries, the greater the tension between the group and society, and the more segregated the socialization of the children within the group, who are indoctrinated into the culture and belief system from birth. As Deardorff (2009) said, "…the degree of collectivism of a society is a measure for the solidity of the invisible wall that divides a moral group from another" (p. 42).

With the family and cultic group deeply enmeshed, it becomes hard if not impossible for family members to resist the dominant discourse; the parents become part of the coercive influence of the group. The reasons for this are many. To begin with, the range of discourses available is limited, the children are raised not to question, critical discourse is not permitted, and the idea of change is not on the agenda. Learning is not encouraged, and questions raised receive inadequate answers or are dismissed. Dissent is not tolerated; activities are restricted; love is experienced as conditional; and fear, threat, and guilt are present.

What if the parents were themselves born and raised in the group? Maybe then this dynamic of enmeshment and an inability to resist that dominant cultic discourse would be even more powerful. Is this where the difference lies—in the long, generational history in the group?

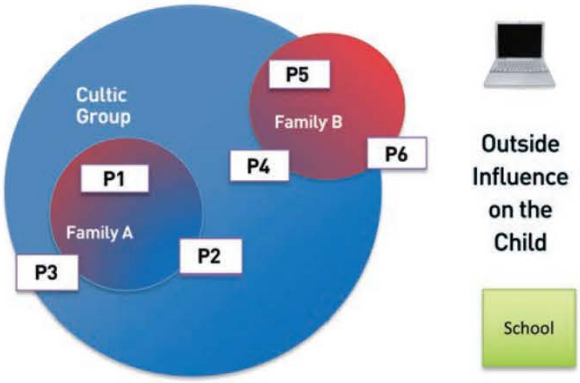
With this question in mind, I began to see parents as gatekeepers who determine to what extent the doctrines and practices of the cultic group are passed on to the children and to what extent outside influences are allowed in. I created a diagram to demonstrate potential relationships between the family and the cultic group. In Figure 2, the blue circle represents the cultic group. The red circles represent two families. Family A is entirely within the blue circle, deeply enmeshed in the cultic system. Family B, however, is overlapping with the outside world, and thus not entirely enmeshed with the group.

Even if Family A *is* enmeshed within the group and has little in the way of autonomy as a family within the group, the individual members of that family may position themselves differently according to other factors. And because people change, these positions will not necessarily be static. For example, each child in the family has

- a different personality
- a different position in the family (e.g., first child, middle child, youngest child)
- different life experiences (e.g., different influences that impact them, such as unique relationships with teachers and classmates at school and in the outside world with friends, a doctor, a neighbor…)
- different strengths and weaknesses, abilities, interests

Using the diagram, Family A, Person 1 might be a child striving hard to be accepted by both family and the cultic group, seeing the two systems as one. I would place myself in this slot. Family A, Person 2 might perceive the cultic-group context as even more salient than the family and allow a greater influence from the cultic group. Perhaps this is why my oldest brother stayed in the group when we left. Family A, Person 3 may only be marginally socialized in the group's culture, even though the family is enmeshed. As an example, my second brother was naughty and rebellious as a child. A key person came into his life, a teacher who spent time with him and told him that it was his choice to accept or reject what the Brethren were teaching him. Until this teacher spoke with him, it had not occurred to him that he could reject the dominant discourse in his life.

Figure 2. Positioning of Families and Their Members in a Group



Turning to Family B, Person 4 is again deeply entrenched in the cultic group even though the family is not. Person 5 is with the family and doing what the family does. Person 6, however, is already looking out into the world.

Thinking of my family in this way has helped me to understand why my experience of my Brethren childhood was so different from the experiences of my brothers. These positions within the family, and the family's position within the cultic system, are not fixed, however. My family, although firmly enmeshed in the Brethren, changed this entrenched position over time to one of dissent and left, taking three of their four children with them. This diagram also illustrates how children in the same family in a cultic group can have very different experiences. Using categories does not work as clearly as we might want.

Considering again FGAs, their parents come from a noncultic background, and their families are often not involved; therefore, this enmeshment between family and group is less likely to occur. What can occur is that the cultic group becomes the FGA member's family, and the member can then become attached to the leader and the group. However, the FGA spent a childhood that may have been considered normal, in that it

was not in a cultic group. As children, perhaps FGAs were able to develop their identities and their values; they were able to learn freely, ask questions, and so on. Of course, there are exceptions to all of this.

At this point, a term that is useful to the discussion is *narrative inheritance*. Narrative inheritance refers to the stories told within a family, of family members' past history, their experiences. Some narratives are powerful, often constructed with omissions and distortions, and some are not told at all. The stories from our ancestors enable us to form our identities—who we are, where we came from, and where we might be heading.

What if the parents were themselves born and raised in the group? Maybe then this dynamic of enmeshment and an inability to resist that dominant cultic discourse would be even more powerful.

Alternatively, SGAs' parents joined the cultic group, bringing with them their past in the non-cultic world. Their narrative inheritance is not related to the cultic group. The family is therefore less likely to become enmeshed. Of course, some of these parents will have been fully radicalized, totally rejecting their past worlds. Those parents join more fully with the cultic group, and thus fall more into the Family A scenario.

Finally, what about those individuals whose parents did not join but were also born into the group, as perhaps their parents were before them? These former members have a long, generational history in the group. Their narrative inheritance is often restricted to stories about the cultic group, in which their family history resides.

I reached the point in my process of research and reflection of acknowledging that "I am not an SGA"; but then, "What am I"? My family was clearly Family A, not Family B, for we had no foot in the outside world apart from what was necessary: work and school. The sense of cultic group history ran deep in our family.

In the next two sections, I explore two of my storytellers, one who is by definition an SGA, and one who is not. I chose these two individuals because they seem to portray experiences at the extremes of what we might view as a spectrum of cultic group members. I discuss this idea further at the end of the paper.

Ian

Ian is a true SGA: His parents joined the cultic group either before or just after he was born. His parents brought their knowledge of the outside world with them into the family system; they did not have any restrictive generational narratives in their history. They could, if they chose, talk about their noncultic group past experiences and stories.

Ian spoke of his family and of the Brethren as separate entities, although there was some overlap. The family were not deeply enmeshed in the cultic group. Following is a quote from his story, illustrating how unique his experience was compared to perhaps many cultic-group families. His family discussed a wide range of topics. Independent critical thinking was nurtured, and Ian's interest in science was supported. He was encouraged to ask questions, which were answered.

> We had some quite deep philosophical discussions as a family sometimes…
>
> When I asked questions about how things work, or why things work, it was usually taken seriously. My parents did their best to listen to my questions, and answer as well, if they were able.
>
> We even discussed things like psychology. I remember having long discussions about what it is that makes people make decisions.
>
> And my interest in science was encouraged by my parents.

Ian was able to develop personal, social-group identities as a child. This is how he described himself in his narrative:

- A brother in the cultic group; felt he belonged; they approved of him as an "up and coming spiritual brother"
- A loving son
- A scientist
- Someone who loved knowledge, nurtured by his family
- Scottish, and was proud to be so
- Someone who could not put up with inhumanity and injustice
- Someone who had the ability to think critically and independently
- Eventually, someone who could dare to question

Even Ian's experiences of church were fairly positive:

> …quite enjoyed the Brethren's company, and they were often in our house; I usually looked forward to them being there, or being invited to their houses…
>
> [Being in church] I don't think it was particularly harmful necessarily. You can spend a lot of time thinking, and it can be quite productive ... for a child to have a sort of obligatory period of reflection. I did a lot of thinking and dreaming, and imagining, thinking about science for instance, and how things worked.

Eventually, though, Ian felt he had to leave—he became progressively unhappy about the way some members of the cultic group were behaving, toward both other members and former members. Their practices seemed cruel and inhumane to him. He tried to speak out in an attempt to change things from within, but the priests would not have it and spent hours with him trying to prove him wrong. He eventually realized he could not change things; and because the whole episode was upsetting his mother, he decided to leave.

> I left the house… there was no one… I didn't know any friends that I could call on to give me a bed for the night; I didn't know how you went about trying to find accommodation;
>
> I didn't know all the different kinds of accommodation available; I didn't know what the various words meant … *lodgings, digs, shared flats,* and *furnished* and *unfurnished accommodation*. I had heard of hotels but never stayed in one, so I had really no idea what I was going to do for a bed that night.

After leaving, Ian described himself as "…a very naïve 24-year old … ignorant of the world outside." Leaving was traumatic because he lost his friends and family, and found himself suddenly on his own outside. He realized how ignorant he was about the outside world.

He quickly recovered though: "After making the decision to leave the Brethren … I just constantly found constant confirmation that it was a wise move, because the… ahh… I found that outside, the best things in life were all outside."

Ian began to read topics he had not read about before, such as "cosmology and anthropology and astronomy and all the different branches of biology. I studied mathematics … found it fascinating." He registered for a PhD in the biological sciences.

Rachel

Rachel, by contrast, had a long, generational history in a cultic group behind her. Her parents, her grandparents, and some of her great-grandparents were born into the Brethren. It was difficult to get her to talk about her childhood. Her narratives were restricted to certain stories about her past. She filled the space with stories of her ancestral family and the Brethren. Even now, so many years after she left, she was focused on her heritage—who was married to whom, what happened in some year when this or that happened. I asked her a few times how she felt as she experienced these events, but she seemed unable to tell me. She strongly identified as a Brethren Sister. It was self-evident that she would stay:

> But that was our heritage, you know. That's where we came from. And all of them [her relatives] were in the meeting, basically. So we never had any sort of thought [of leaving] or anything…
>
> I don't know; I feel like I'm talking of Brethren pedigree [laughter].

So deeply enmeshed were Rachel's family that she did not think of leaving. Here is a snippet of our conversation:

> **Rachel:** We've been through the ups and downs of life in the Brethren but we never would've thought of ever leaving.
>
> **Jill:** Why do you think that was? It didn't occur to you?
>
> **Rachel:** No thought of leaving. No. It's just this was normal life. And it was kind of… a bit… sort of half-privileged, if you like.
>
> **Jill:** Half-privileged in what way?
>
> **Rachel:** Privileged as, I don't know, we were special people… and all our relatives, friends and relatives, were all in there, you know... And there were kind of ups and downs, but the thought of ever leaving …of ever leaving never crossed my mind.

Rachel also spoke of a series of difficult, frightening events; but even so, she still did not think of leaving. One day, her husband dared to ask a question in the meeting (service) about why someone had been excommunicated. This question was seen as contentious, and he was told the Brethren could "no longer walk with him." He walked out, and Rachel followed, with great fear, terrified of what would happen to them. The event clearly distressed her still: "I think I pretty much had a nervous breakdown." She spoke of the loss of her support system and social network, the loss of those people she had been telling me about.

I coined the phrase *multigenerational adults* (MGAs), to acknowledge and appreciate that some former members come from families whose history is steeped in the cultic group.

Her final reflection was insightful:

> What it's left me with is, it's almost like I'm two people: this person I am now and the person that has this background history.
>
> I was Brethren, almost as if that's a blanket thing that covers anything weird that there might be about me, and I hope I'm not too weird now. [Laughter]

MGAs

As I looked out to the mountains, I thought about Ian's, Rachel's, and my lives and felt the need to create a new category. I do not like categories because they rarely really fit. However, I decided that the differences between our experiences needed some recognition. I coined the phrase *multigenerational adults* (MGAs), to acknowledge and appreciate that some former members come from families whose history is steeped in the cultic group.

...those families who are deeply enmeshed are least exposed to outside influences and are less able to challenge the group's ideology. ...this description applies to most MGAs.

My family, like Rachel's, has a long, generational history in the Brethren. The Brethren movement began nearly 200 years ago, and my ancestors, going back generations, were Brethren. That is my narrative inheritance, and it is Rachel's too. Our experiences as children were different from Ian's: Rachel and I did not talk about science, philosophy, the arts, or anything else at home other than what was happening in the group at that time, and about our relatives, and who knew whom, and so on. Our parents knew little of the outside world. Neither Rachel nor I ever thought of leaving; life in the Brethren was normal to us; it was a given. We could not resist the dominant discourse. Both our families were deeply enmeshed in the cultic system. Many MGAs, such as my brother, however, manage to rebel somehow as children. We really are not all the same and perhaps do not fit neatly into these categories.

I have heard many stories over the years, and those from people born or raised in a cultic group usually contain narratives of restriction. For instance, George, another pure SGA like Ian, said,

> I would place my parents in the liberal camp. We always celebrated Christmas, including a tree and decorations, Santa and gifts. I knew it was best not to talk about this in the group.
>
> I could mix with other pupils and bring them home.

Christmas was clearly something George's FGA parents brought into the household with them; MGA families in the Brethren usually would not have had Christmas. Like Ian, George told me that they talked about "normal" things at home—politics, sports, world events, and so on.

Another storyteller though, Craig, also with two FGA parents, told me they only talked about

> Brethren people and goings-on (i.e., the fellowship, and 3-day meetings that were taking place, and who we were having over for dinner on Sunday)… We were not allowed to have non-Brethren friends into the house and were not allowed to go into non-Brethren homes.

Clearly, there is much variation within these families, and perhaps particularly amongst SGA families.

Impact Upon Leaving

When they leave, FGAs have an idea of what to expect in the outside world, for they have already been part of it. But SGAs and MGAs often do not know. This difference may be especially true for MGAs because their parents' discourse was often not about the outside world, and it was more limited.

SGAs and MGAs, having been born into the group, may have developmental deficits that are hard to overcome upon leaving, another aspect in which they differ from FGAs. A number of potential problems, however, are common to both. Being raised in a cultic group can impact seriously and impair a child's

- cognitive development—For example, the child may have limited decision-making skills, ability to ask questions, and ability to think critically.
- social development—For example, the child may not be comfortable making new friends or being in social settings.
- emotional development—e.g., the child may not know how to express feelings or even know how to name them.
- moral development—Moral values are often given by the group; so upon leaving, the child may not have a moral compass.
- basic life-skills development—e.g., the child may not learn how to open a bank account, order a meal in a restaurant, write a curriculum vitae, or go for an interview.

As the saying goes, "Comparisons are odious"; nevertheless, we tend to make them. Table 1 lists some of the possible differences between SGAs and MGAs. However, bear in mind that these examples do not refer to definitive differences but ones that might be observed.

The two cases of Ian and Rachel represent the extreme ends of what is perhaps a continuum of enmeshment when it comes to SGA and MGA descriptions and experiences. It is simplistic to think we can all fit neatly into some category. Most of us fall more in the middle: We are rarely thoroughbreds, and often more like hybrids. For example, someone might have an SGA mother and an FGA father; another might have an FGA mother

Second-Generation Adult (SGA) Leavers	Multigenerational Adult (MGA) Leavers
May have some knowledge of outside world.	Likely to have little knowledge of outside world.
May have had noncultic conversations with the family.	Less Likely to have had noncultic conversations.
Narrative inheritance did not include stories related to cultic group.	Narrative inheritance of cultic-group-related stories might go back several generations.
Likely to have relatives outside the group.	Much less likely to have relatives outside the group.
Family possibly not deeply enmeshed in the cultic group.	Family more likely to be deeply enmeshed in the cultic group.
Will lack some life skills for outside world, but parents also may have shared some.	Likely to have a greater lack of basic life skills.

Table 1. Observed Differences Between SGAs and MGAs

and an MGA father. Regardless of the configuration, those families who are deeply enmeshed are least exposed to outside influences and are less able to challenge the group's ideology. We are likely to find that this description applies to most MGAs. Families such as Ian's, who are more exposed to outside influences, may be better placed to challenge the group's ideology.

In today's world, an increasing number of people born or raised in cultic groups are leaving them and trying to integrate into society. If we are to understand them (and sometimes, "they are us"), we will need to acknowledge their histories, including their generational backgrounds. Distinguishing between second-generation and multigenerational backgrounds, I believe, is an essential part of that effort. On a personal level, with my family's long history in the cultic group, I sometimes feel as if the Brethren are part of my DNA, so deeply do they seem to dwell in my pores. My thinking, feeling, and behaving, even after all the decades since I left, feel so "Brethren" still in their origins. I am who I was—a Brethren child. ■

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About the Author

Jill Mytton, MSc, CPsychol, DPsych, is a Chartered Counselling Psychologist. In 2017, she completed a Professional Doctorate in Psychotherapy at the Metanoia Institute affiliated with Middlesex University. Her primary research interest is the mental health of Multigenerational (a new category coined by Jill) and Second-Generation Adults—i.e., those born or raised in cultic groups. She is listed on the British Psychological Society media list for Cults and Thought Reform and has been involved in several TV and radio broadcasts. She has presented at several conferences, including the annual Division of Counselling Psychology conferences in Newcastle, 2018, and Cardiff, 2019; the ICSA Annual Conferences in Stockholm, 2015, Bordeaux, 2017, and Manchester, 2019. She was born and raised in the Exclusive Brethren, leaving at the age of 16, when her parents decided to leave. She now has a portfolio career comprising a small private practice, clinical supervision, research supervision for the MSc Psychology of Coercive Control at the University of Salford, and assessor for the Division of Counselling Psychology Qualification. She also runs an email support group for former Exclusive Brethren members and has become a point of contact for leavers of several groups. ■