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When Religious Beliefs Justify Child Abuse

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Thirty-two year old David Wong is a bitter man. He has lost his wife and two children to a religious group, he says.

Wong (not his real name) says he himself was fortunate to escape with his life after he was severely beaten by members of the group when he tried to wrest his daughters away.

He now considers himself, like many others here, a victim of the Thusia church. Previously an unknown entity in a country that prides itself on religious tolerance, the church shot into the limelight recently when another father, Roy Joseph, sued his estranged wife for custody of their 11-year-old daughter as a result of alleged abuse at the hands of the leaders of the organization.

In the presence of the press and police, the girl told a harrowing story of both physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her mother, who is a member of the group, and other members. The girl said she was barred from attending school, severely beaten for "possession by evil spirits," and often went without food.

"They said I had evil in me and they had to beat it out. They blamed me and beat me because they said I was lying and masturbating," the girl said, as her father lifted her clothes to show bruises all over her body.

In response, the church hierarchy, which confirmed the beatings, quoted passages from the Bible to justify their actions. "The rod of correction driveth away foolishness from the child's heart," was one of the passages used. The girl's mother agreed with the action of the members of the church, saying the child has a "stubborn spirit."

"If the civil law in Trinidad and Tobago had respected the law of God, she would have been put to death," says the leader of the church, Nyron Medina.

Since the girl's story was revealed to the local media, the authorities have launched an investigation into the operation of the group, which is based in the poor district of Morvant in the mountainous north-western portion of the island.

The group, founded in 1985 by 42-year-old Medina, a lanky, bushy-haired, bearded man, is officially called the Thusia Seventh Day Adventist Church. The membership comprises about 150 persons, including a 12-member board of elders. Four women are among the elders.

Following the widespread publicity and the attempts of the group to present itself as a genuine body, the local headquarters of the Seventh Day Adventist Church (SDA) has made it clear that the group is not affiliated with it.

"This is an offshoot group. They do not have fellowship with us. We disassociate ourselves from the beliefs, activities, and practices of that group. They do not represent SDA doctrines," says Cyril Horrell, Executive Secretary of the South Caribbean Conference of the SDA.

Meanwhile, in a sermon to his flock denouncing the media publicity, Medina said the beatings the child got were “well within the law. All she said was lies, and you all rush to print the lies.”

Medina, who claims to be a medical doctor, says the child had a sexual disease which she contracted from playing with cats. But the child said that she was sexually assaulted several times by a member of the church.

“I used to refuse, but he used to beat me and I had to do it. He would kiss my lips as I lay on top of him,” the girl said.

Medina also admits the child was not allowed to attend school. He says that only children the group felt were strong enough to withstand the contamination of public schools were allowed to attend.

The publicity now being given to the movement has prompted some defectors to come forward to tell their story. One former member, who said she wasted five years with the group, is convinced that it is a “sex-based” cult. She related several stories of attempts by the elders to encourage her daughter to engage in sexual acts.

The woman, who requested anonymity, says the indoctrination process is very gradual. While she was a member she was not allowed to question certain practices such as members not being allowed to read any other book apart from the Bible.

“I went through real hell to get out of there. People think Medina is God. They worship him and he can do no wrong,” says the 45-year-old woman. “The people still in there are hypnotized. When Medina is talking, you have to look him straight in the eye,” she adds.

Raphael Bain of Mayaro, southeast Trinidad, had a similar story to tell. He had three siblings and their spouses in the group; his brother Wilfred Fortune and his sister Susan Fortune-Gold are still members.

Bain says members of the church are discouraged from having children. They say “Christ is coming soon,” and now is not the time to be having children.

Other beliefs require men to wear long hair and a beard, while women must wear ankle-length clothes and keep their hair in its natural state. Members are also required to maintain a vegetarian diet.

“Going to parties and the cinema, following friends, watching TV - you cannot do that and follow Jesus, so we do not advocate such things,” Medina says.

As for Suzanne Fortune-Gold, Bain says his sister left her five children behind when she joined the movement. Those children are now in the care of her mother-in-law. Bain said his sister believes her mission is “to preach the word [of God].”

Two years after joining the group, her marriage broke up as she had been told by the group she had to leave her husband if he was not prepared to become a member. They are now divorced.

Meanwhile, Roy Joseph’s 11-year-old girl is in the care of the state, awaiting a custody hearing on December 1, 1997. Lawyers following the case say that in any question of custody, the Family Law Act says the welfare of the minor is regarded as the “first and paramount consideration.”

*This article was prepared by Sex Weekly Plus editors from staff and other reports.
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