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Special report
Religious affairs

Secretive sect softens ban on outside contact

Brethren priests admit 'hasty' decisions split families

Stephen Bates, religious affairs correspondent

Saturday March 15, 2003

[The Guardian](#)

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One of the world's most reclusive Christian sects, the Exclusive Brethren, may be thawing towards the world after the appointment of a new worldwide leader.

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The Brethren, founded in the 19th century, cut themselves off from outsiders to the extent of refusing even to eat with them. But the new leader, an Australian called Bruce Hales, may be about to change all that.

A BBC Everyman film about the sect on Tuesday interviews local leaders for the first time. They admit to making mistakes and taking "hasty" decisions in splitting British families when members wished to leave the sect.

The film's producer, Nick Gray, was surprised to be offered an opportunity to speak to senior members of the Brethren. But they still accused him of bringing the devil with him.

He said: "They told me: 'Christ had to face Pontius Pilate. We have to face you.' I know that puts me among the villains of history, but it made me think that they obviously believe themselves right up there with Jesus Christ."

On another occasion, Gray was told: "We're rich. We'll take you to the cleaners," and "The devil's here. I can see him behind you."

The Brethren are believed to have about 15,000 members in Britain, with 98 meeting centres, and about 42,000 followers worldwide.

Members are not allowed to have televisions or radios and they are forbidden from using the internet, because the book of Revelation tells them that the devil is "the prince with the power of the air". Although some run computer businesses, the technology is frowned upon for private use because it has the power to employ the satanic number 666.

Women members wear headscarves, to signify their submission to man's authority, and men do not wear ties.





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In some cases, the belief that they should separate themselves from contamination by outsiders means they will refuse to live in semi-detached houses, where they might have to share utilities with non-believers.

Not surprisingly, the Brethren stick together, to the extent of employing each other and lending money to other members to buy acceptable accommodation.

The Victorian writer Edmund Gosse wrote about the sect in his memoir *Father and Son*, and a similar group is described in Jeanette Winterson's debut novel, *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*.

Like other exclusive sects, the Brethren have had a history of dictatorial and dogmatic leaders with a firm belief that only sect members will be saved at the end of the world.

If members are expelled for excessive contact with outsiders, they are routinely refused all contact with their families and, if they return, they may be shut away in isolation until the Lord decides they have truly repented.

The programme makers interviewed a number of former Brethren who had lost contact with their families as a result of leaving the sect.

A young woman is filmed taking her children to visit her parents for the first time and, during a meeting lasting only a few moments, being refused admission to the house.

In another case, a man who had been denied access to his children for four years is filmed being told by local priests: "We want to protect these dear children. You see, the devil's got hold of you ... I think you will find your position is absolutely untenable."

But the appointment of Bruce Hales, who succeeded his father to the job of universal leader or "Man of God" last year, appears to have brought about a slight thawing in the rules on accessibility.

The three priests who put themselves forward for interview for the programme said the leadership had been too hasty in its treatment of the excluded former members highlighted in the programme. Those members have since been told they may be allowed to see their relatives again.

Everyman, BBC2, Tuesday March 18, 11.20pm

Minority beliefs

• **Mormons** Derived from Joe Smith Jr and the Book of Mormon. In a dream in 1822 the angel Moroni revealed to

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Smith where gold tablets were to be found on which were written God's words. They believe that whatever gods there are have evolved from man and that man may in time evolve into gods. Estimated to have 11 million members.

• **Christian Scientists** Founded in 1879 by Mary Baker Eddy, who claimed to cure herself of a severe injury without the use of medicine. She devoted herself to the healing emphasis in early Christianity using positive thinking, faith healing and belief. Thought to have between 150,000 and 1.5 million members.

• **Jehovah's Witnesses** Derived from Charles Taze Russell in the late 19th century in Pennsylvania. With an emphasis on taking the Bible literally and the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God which will emerge after the battle of Armageddon. The word is spread by selling the magazine Watchtower. Thought to have 6 million members.

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