

Review - Features - The Brethren sent us to Hell If a member of the Exclusive Brethren strays outside ...

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Review - Features - The Brethren sent us to Hell If a member of the **Exclusive Brethren** strays outside the sect into the 'Devil's domain', there is a high price to pay. Julia Llewellyn Smith meets a couple whose family was destroyed by their 'terrifying' church elders.

Christine and Andrew Wallach's world changed forever early one Sunday morning in 1994 when their two teenage sons staggered home the worse for drink. Many families would have laughed it off, but as members of a secretive Christian sect, the **Exclusive Brethren**, the Wallachs, from Cheshunt, Hertfordshire, were terrified. By visiting a snooker hall, the boys had "transgressed" and the whole family would be punished for it.

Two days later, the Wallachs were officially "shut up" - ostracised by their community. For the next eight years, Christine and Andrew were denied all contact with their two eldest daughters and their grandchildren. In 1996, Andrew, 57, was sacked from the Brethren-owned pharmaceutical business where he worked and the couple were then "cast out" of the Brethren, to survive by themselves in the outside world, which they had been brought up to believe was full of evil.

"It was something we could never come to terms with," Christine says now. Her voice catches, as she adds: "It's been like a living death."

Little about the Wallachs suggests their extraordinary history. The red walls of their terraced house in Newton le Willows, North Yorkshire, are lined with photographs of their daughters in party dresses. A television and video - instruments of Satan, according to the Brethren - sit in the corner, and there are Jilly Cooper paperbacks on the shelves and lipsticks in the bathroom.

Only the odd picture of the daughters in frumpy dresses with long hair under a scarf - the Brethren dress code - hints at their past. Today, Christine's hair is short and she wears a red trouser suit. "I have to be someone completely different and leave the past behind," she explains. "Otherwise I'd be forever dwelling on it."

Andrew and Christine were born into this 15,000-strong "fellowship" - an extremist off-shoot of the Plymouth Brethren - which is based mainly in the South East, and models itself strictly on Biblical teachings. Brethren believe that the world is the domain of the Devil and spend most of their time in "safe places" - meeting rooms and their own houses (which must be detached). Although they use mainstream shops and services, socialising with "worldly people" is completely forbidden.

"We were told to be 'friendly strangers', that we are in this world but not of it," Christine explains. "We would say hello to our neighbours, but that was it. We felt we had been singled out for higher things."

Children are usually educated in Brethren schools; they do not take part in sports or social activities; further education is banned. Men work in Brethren-owned businesses - often in manufacturing or wholesale - many of which are highly successful. Women marry young and stay at home to bring up their children. The Brethren are non-proselytising, and rely on having large families to swell their ranks. Members do not vote. Radios, televisions, newspapers, computers and mobile phones are all banned.

The fellowship is controlled by elders, "who rule by fear". "From birth they tell you that if you sin you will be cast out to burn in Hell and never be able to talk to anyone you know again," says Lucy Wallach, 22, Andrew and Christine's youngest child. "It's a terrifying prospect."

Yet it was a prospect the Wallachs were forced to face after their sons' drunken night out. "They were so inebriated, there was no way we could get them to Sunday communion and that blew the whole thing wide open," Christine says, laughing at the appalling memory.

In accordance with Biblical teaching on lepers, "transgressors" are "shut up" so they do not contaminate the rest of the community. The Wallachs and their sons, Neil, 18, and Robert, 17, were banned from contact with anyone but elders. Andrew could only go to work after everyone else had left for the day.

Their eldest two daughters were married, but the three youngest, Lucy, Marianne and Gail, had to stay with friends and relations. None was allowed to talk to their parents or brothers. "When we saw them in the streets they blanked us like ghosts. One daughter was banned from meetings because she had to pass our house to get there and they suspected she'd wave at us across the road."

"We felt we deserved it," Christine recalls. "We had failed as parents and were unclean."

The sons begged the elders for forgiveness, but were rejected. "Neil fell apart," Christine says. Lonely and miserable, he made friends with worldly people and eventually became a heroin addict, ending up in prison twice. Robert seemed set to follow. Andrew and Christine were desperate to help them. But when they asked the elders for assistance, they were told they must disown their sons.

They refused to do so, and Andrew lost his job because he stood by his sons. "The final straw was when the elders heard a radio of Robert's blaring in the house," Christine explains. Two years after that, she, too, was cast out for supporting her husband. Their five youngest children followed them, but the two eldest, Polly, 33, and Alex, 32, decided to stay in the Brethren. "It was like being split in two," their mother says.

Adjusting to the outside world was a shock. "The Brethren are very wealthy and there's always someone there to pick up the pieces," Christine says. "No Brethren is ever without a job or a roof over their head. Suddenly we were anchorless. Andrew was 50, he had never used a computer, and he had no A-levels because he had been banned from taking them. No one would give him an interview. We were astonished - it had never occurred to us that it could be hard to get a job."

For eight years, the Wallachs were denied all contact with their Brethren relations. "They didn't even tell me when I became a grandmother again," Christine says bleakly. "When my mother died, they called me at the last minute, saying, 'If you hurry to hospital, you might be able to say goodbye to her.' I didn't even know she was ill."

Three years ago, the Wallachs surprised Alex on her birthday. "She'd moved, but I tracked her down," her mother recalls. "We just turned up at the door. She opened it, heavily pregnant, and just burst into tears. She kept asking: 'Why are you in this position? You know where the right place is.' We gave her a card and left. It was dreadfully upsetting."

Even as a young couple, the Wallachs had known the anger of the elders. "In 1974, the whole family was 'shut up' for four months, and Andrew and I had to sleep in separate rooms. He was in disgrace for being 'too ambitious'," Christine says. Her husband rolls his eyes.

The Brethren has a long history of family schisms. Founded in 1863, the sect today has 40,000 followers worldwide. In 1959, thousands left when new laws were established banning eating and drinking with "worldly people". In 1970 the sect lost another 8,000 members when the then leader, Big Jim Taylor, was caught in bed with another Brethren's wife.

Most ex-Brethren must accept they will never see their families again. Andy Giles, 35, from Worthing, was denied all access to his four children aged between six and 13 for four years after he was "cast out". Andy, an engineer, had enjoyed his childhood in the Brethren but as an adult grew increasingly unhappy.

"We'd always been told that only within the Brethren could you find true happiness, but then I started

spending a lot of time with a non-Brethren employee in my firm and I realised it simply wasn't true," he says. "Once the doubts start, the implications are immense. I was giving lip service to something I no longer believed in and that's an impossible way to live.

"If you try to question anything with the priests, they reply you are in the true and right position and immensely privileged. I realised all fundamentalist religions think they are God's chosen people, and wondered why we were so special, but that was almost blasphemous and I didn't dare voice it."

Andy knew he had to leave, but was frightened to take his wife and children too. "I thought, 'What if the Brethren are right and the world really is a terrible place?' I thought I could risk myself, but not them. In hindsight I should have, but at the time I was really scared."

He left once, but returned after three days. "The emotional pressure that's put on you to return is enormous. I realised that the only way of getting out was to be cast out, which meant I had to do something really bad." With this in mind, he committed adultery, then returned home and confessed it to his wife. "I was out within hours. I've never had a conversation with my wife since that moment."

Like the Wallachs, Andy was alone in a mysterious new world. "The Brethren say that if you are cast out you will be ruined 'financially, morally and physically', but after a few months, when I'd found a job and hadn't been run over by a bus, I began to relax." He found a room in a shared house and let his incredulous flatmates introduce him to the outside world.

'I was a social virgin," he laughs. "I'd never got drunk and for a while I went mad watching rubbish on television. There were so many things I'd been denied - sport, travel, studying for a degree - and I just wanted to make up for all of that."

The Wallachs had the same experience. "When we left the fellowship, we all went a bit mad, wanting to spend as much time in the pub as possible," Lucy Wallach recalls. "But most of the time I was still looking over my shoulder, thinking 'I shouldn't be doing this.'" Lucy is engaged to a "worldly" with whom she has a baby, but she still finds it difficult to trust people outside her family. "But when I look at my son, I think there's no way I would ever want him to be part of the Brethren. I want him to be as normal as possible."

Having wavered for three years about going back, Andrew and Christine are now also both embracing their new life. "For years we were traumatised by what had happened, but now we realise that they did us a favour kicking us out when they did, that there was another life to go into," Andrew says. "Now we have a lot of our lives to cram into a very short time." Recently they moved to Yorkshire, where he works as a sales manager. She does cookery demonstrations and is writing a book about her experiences.

Yet the family is far from recovered. Neil attempted suicide. "He was overwhelmed with guilt, feeling that everything that had happened to the family was his fault," his mother says.

Marianne is on anti-depressants, while Gail - who still works for a Brethren business - is under constant pressure to leave her "worldly" boyfriend and return to the fellowship. "All my children have had to have counselling," Christine says.

Things improved only after BBC's Everyman announced that it was making a programme about the Brethren. The Wallachs were visited by the sect's "universal leader", an Australian, Bruce Hayles, as well as several elders, who apologised for past "mistakes" and invited them to return. Another Brethren paid off the couple's mortgage - £110,000 - but then announced that the fellowship wanted a legal charge on the property. "We feel they are trying to buy us," Christine says.

Andy Giles is now allowed very limited access to his children. "I don't encourage them to leave, but I hope they will see that I have made a life for myself and one day they will have the guts to do what I did." The Wallachs can now occasionally see their grandchildren. "But it's not like being a grandpa," Andrew says. "There's no hugs and kisses, and we're not allowed to eat with them."

Rather than being mollified by the Brethren's overtures, the couple are outraged. "It's gutting," Christine cries. "All this suffering and then they say, 'Oh, it was just a mistake, it can be reversed.' I don't think these people have any idea how much pain they cause. They're just stuck in their little blinkered world and anyone who steps out of line is treated like dirt."

Everyman: The **Exclusive Brethren**, Tuesday, BBC2 11.20pm.

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