

Friedrich Griess, and an ex-member

Testimonials about Smith Friends (ACFF)

When in 1983 our daughter, then aged twenty, sympathized with a questionable Christian group, at first my wife and I were not too worried. When she temporarily had a Muslim friend, we quietly considered what it would mean for her to convert to Islam. But gradually we realized that this was not just a matter of faith because she started beating me, her father; because she believed it was her duty to convert me to her new religion with violence. She went skiing with a skirt because the leaders of the new religion taught that women who wore trousers would never go to heaven. She later said she was damned and that God could not save her. She claimed she had done something against her conscience that, according to the teaching of this group, was a sin against the Holy Spirit and could not be forgiven. She said she was trying to convert her parents and then commit suicide. Then we realized that it was not just a religion but a power system that could lead people to suicide, and we were afraid for her life. We decided that my wife had to try to keep in touch with her, while I, because of my conscience to public accountability, was determined to warn the public against this group so far quite unknown, which turned out to be "The Smith friends." Since we had lived in Norway where this group came from and we understood the language, it was possible for me to fully investigate them. We have had contacts with more than a hundred former members in various countries, including France, where the group is called "Assembly of Christians of France and Francophone countries".

Over the past 30 years, the group changed its outward appearance while the pressure on the members has not changed; the old dress code for women has disappeared, while the pressure to donate huge amounts of money became current. Ms. XXXX was born in this group and she lived thus for many years until she escape; she will now tell you about her experience.

Ms XXXX:

I was born into this extremist religious group in 1964, 3 years after its foundation; my parents and a couple from Switzerland and the three children they had then, were the first adepts of the Assembly in France.

It is around this core name of "Assembly" that the group is recognizable from within. Apart from the fact that it is an association, nothing appears beyond the constitution of the administrative team and few know it's different names, which vary from country to country, such as "Smith's Friends" in Norway or "Norwegian Brothers" in the Netherlands ...

In 1976, after the death of Elias Aslaksen, friend and successor of the original founder, Johan Oscar Smith, the different assemblies were forced to rally "The Friends of Smith", which became the Community of Brunstad and then DKM¹ (initials of The Christian Community in Norwegian).

¹ Den Kristelige Menighet - The Christian Community (or Assembly)

In France, the Assembly chose ACFE (Assemblies of Christians of France and Francophone countries). In the late 70s, the leaders began to travel on other continents and created other ramifications to finance, among others, the development of the Brunstad complex in Norway, complex which at the time was presented as the largest, most modern conference centre in the world, with translation facilities ... Of course, the place was a bottomless financial pit but at the time it was out of question to bring in laymen that we called "people of the world"...

I cannot address the context in which I was raised, not to mention my parents. Both have had a very difficult life course; they had in common that they were both the last from large sibling families and have experienced rejection and violence.

- My father was an orphan. He was placed from family to family and experienced acts of abuse that have favoured that he developed a kind of pseudo-autism: he rocked in his chair, humming a song representing each of his anxieties, etc ... in order to find refuge and protect his world ... Back in France after four years in Africa during his military service, a neighbour had introduced him to a Pentecostal group.
- My mother, meanwhile, was disabled at the age of 11 years after the war; she spent five years in hospital in Berck-Plage, in a Catholic institution, with perverse sisters who martyred their young patients. On leaving the hospital, 5 years later, she was raped and experienced rejection from her family. That's where the Pentecostals entered her life. I always knew my mother through long phases of depression followed by more positive phases which did not last ... For my father, my mother was the woman who replaced his mother; also at home and in contrast to the doctrine of the Friends of Smith, it was she who led the dance ...

Since I was born, the Assembly was only based in Nancy. At first, it recruited its followers among the Pentecostals, where my parents were and where they met the Swiss couple and their three children ... On one of their trips to their native country, the Swiss couple had heard good reports from one of its cousins about this group, about his meeting with Smith Friends of Norway.

Back in Lorraine, the Assembly was founded and soon The Smith's Friends sent one of their Norwegian families to Nancy.

As we did not live together, each family educated its children according to the strict doctrine of The Smith's Friends but each with its own understanding of biblical texts, literal or figurative, and according to its social context and its own experience ...

There's no place for jokes ... if we show our emotions, joy or sadness, there's necessarily something suspicious... anger or any other emotion revealing frustration, have to be repressed if we do not want to be punished. Obedient, we could not talk about our feelings they could only be basely human, devil inspired ... Children were constantly under the control of expression, of saying and doing ... innocence was not recognized ...

Children who had character were more controlled than the others, for example, changing school to escape bad influence from wrong friends ...

Devastating effects: discipline your being in order to remain nonexistent, existential negation to follow the culture of denouncement of beliefs, human reality perceived as

negative. A direct consequence of renunciation and one of its achievements is that of submission. A totalitarian, authoritarian, autocratic, education and if I face the truth it was close to an auto-promoted fascism.

In the Assembly, when a child is born, it is assumed to be already full of vice, until it is baptized and all sins are washed away and it commits itself with regard to God, to walk in the footsteps of Jesus without ever sinning since invested by the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is from majority, an age when one is supposed to be responsible, engagement, marriage, and procreation usually follow in the wake ...

As the child grows, the bad side of human nature grows and he naturally wants to feed on evil... So, man being bad by nature, the only possibility of transformation is through learning from the life of Jesus as an example, he, who overcame the flesh (needs, desires and pleasures), who suffered unto death and saved the poor sinners that we are... So total self-sacrifice and empathy that make us even more docile is required...

Devastating effects: learning self-denial, what the psychologists call "repression".

As children, we seemingly lived normal lives; obedience was the key word ... I had to keep quiet and obey... Our references were the Assembly and its preaching, and our parents, to whom we gave all our trust, were convinced that the "world" was the door of Hell.

When believers speak of the world, they talk about the other sphere, the sphere of human error, their lifestyle and their anti-values that were precursors of the today's society which has lost its values .. .

My mother had to undergo several operations and long hospitalizations and my father resumed his studies and continued his job. My sisters and I had to be placed several months in the health centre, with a host family or hostel for my elder sister... At that time, my family had very little help from the members of the group; this shows the gap between the word and the way it was applied, and consequently the reading and the analysis of the biblical texts; this often shows the ambiguity between theory and practice.

Devastating effects: all this acts further to achieve non-recognition of one's identity, and once again accentuates the persuasion of self-negation.

There is a quadruple negativity: social, tribal, familial and individual. Once again abandon of identity which actively participates in the de-socialisation of Self.

As the school was not obligatory before the age of 6, I had no contacts with the outside world before that age; I made my entry into this world that was supposed to be evil... For me this meant: going to school without being there; we had to remain unnoticed, to avoid eye contact that later could lead to a conversation, the friendly gesture that would enrol us unwittingly, or just the questions this provoked to which we could not reply because we were ignorant or because we were terrified and shameful ... Every day we endured mockery, real trial by fire when we tried to think like Jesus on the cross who said: "Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing."

We were taught to love our enemies, to bless those who curse us, to do well to those who hate us and pray for those who do us wrong and persecute us, as the apostles in the New Testament recommend. But to remain unnoticed was not possible because we stood out in the street, without any doubt as the Americans recognized the Amish...

The Assembly rented, later bought a hall where we met 3 to 4 times a week. We only lived together during the conferences, several times a year in various countries that united the members of various nationalities for one to three weeks.

My parents worked so hard and were so taken by their work in the community... Every month money was collected from everybody, each watching the other, thus all obliged to donate...

Between the meetings and conferences, everybody when living at home should fight against the world and its temptations... We were not entitled to speak with the "people of the world" who could contaminate us with their satanic words and acts ... This was only allowed at school because it was necessary and we could not escape; anyway, we did not speak or we spoke little with the other children, only with the teachers and always in connection with school work ... Everything that was taught was censored; we were not allowed to take part in courses of natural science treating the subject of sexuality ...

Humour, music, art, the media were forbidden, what we read was controlled: I remember that my mother made a fuss at college because the French teacher had asked us to read "Le Grand Meaulnes" by Alain Fournier... I read it secretly, under my blankets with a torch; but my resistance to this rule helped open the doors to culture; I henceforth read several "forbidden" books... We were only allowed to read the Bible that we studied daily, books about the Shoah, about conversions, and... the dictionary... I never went to any end of term party at school or in the village, nor any birthday party, or other festive occasion ...

If, when we were very small, school was a world where the danger of temptation was everywhere, with everyone and in everything, a world full of fear, because we had to fight our nature the whole time; when we grew up, school was a revelation, a human zoo to observe and at the same time we felt that we carried a universal secret, a secret only for us about the 144000 chosen by God to be part of his heavenly kingdom, the People chosen by Him if we managed to reach a Christ-like perfection here below... Although we had a deep and faithful admiration for the Jewish people, it was out of question that they should be the chosen people of God, because they had not believed that Jesus was the Messiah... with regard to Israel and Jerusalem, it was more of a symbol because it was Jacob's country and a heavenly Jerusalem, that should come after the last judgement ...

The threat of the Apocalypse was permanent, the arrival of Jesus imminent: in our lifetime... We were taught to live in a parallel world that was THE truth, the outside world was just an abomination. We were taught to live in fear of ourselves, we could betray, consciously or not, the doctrine we were taught; we were taught to fear each other, inside the group, but also to fear the original family outside, and the world in general ...

School which is expected to be the first place where children are socialised after the family, became (as Durkheim² said) its antithesis by its effect of de-socialisation with respect to me... In my time, the teaching of Johan Oscar Smith was cold and very strict: boys were not allowed to have long hair, the hair-cut was military. The girls should have

² Émile Durkheim, French sociologist and ethnologist

long hair, but as this could be seductive, they had to attach them in braids or in a bun; no stray hair must be left free.

Clothes should be buttoned at the throat or be crew necked, no décolleté was allowed, even one open button; sleeves should be long enough and armpits hidden; dresses and skirts should reach below the knees. Trousers were absolutely forbidden and parents asked for adolescent girls to be dispensed from sport so that they need not wear tracksuits or swim suits. Makeup, jewellery, and everything that was related to fashion were banned. Nothing should provoke boys or men...

Paradoxically, the leaders' children wore top designer brand clothes, bought in Paris; their daughters wore make up, bleached their hair and wore high heels. Although boys and girls were not allowed to look at each other, nor mingle and talk together, their daughters laughed at the boys' jokes without anyone taking any notice, it was normal. But if the others, considered of a lower class and intellectually "poor", were caught doing so, especially the girls, we were harassed by the brothers and sisters of the movement, told to repent and to convert; but we were also very closely watched. We inevitably suffered from setbacks or from a forced departure of a family abroad or by beatings, confinement, deprivation of food, teasing and isolation within the group and treated as if we had a virus to avoid ...

Devastating effects: by the representation of our family within the caste system of the Assembly; we were at the bottom of the pyramid.

It should also be noted: the identity stigma effect by the quality of clothes.

Double negation social-identity: of self with regard to the Assembly and of self as inferior. Once more existential self-sacrifice, heavy to bear; a heavy load for a little girl.

They told us that we were not here to think; reason was considered as the beginning of perdition, we just had to have confidence in the Word of God received through the elders; our duty was to obey without asking any questions; simply because it was written ... We were not allowed to doubt the Word which would have meant questioning the very existence of God ... Unifying and devastating conversion where I was concerned.

The movement grew from the inside; few people from outside joined the Assembly; newcomers were accepted with a certain curiosity and always with warmth and open arms; but from the minute of their conversion onwards, they were quickly subjected to the ordeal of suffering: humbled, humiliated, infantilised...

My mother who was 80% physically handicapped had only three children, and the fact that she could have no more, discredited her and questioned her loyalty, because the other women chained pregnancy after pregnancy. I knew the case of one woman in Germany who delivered her 18th child while her eldest daughter delivered her first one.

A woman who did not have a child within the first year marriage or who marked a too lengthy period between pregnancies was quickly suspected and very quickly one heard questions whispered from ear to ear: "Why does she not have children?", "Does she refuse herself to her husband?", "Is it that she is taking the pill?", or "Did the couple sin?".

There was always a kind of rivalry in the group between individuals and families and many unspoken words; an internal coercive xenophobia, competition to

achieve a state of virgin purity ... encouragement of performance to get to the top of perfection rapidly ...

We were always expected to be active; idleness was the root of all vice; many games were forbidden, certain toys too: i.e. Barbie dolls ...

From the youngest age, common household tasks were only for girls, and our manual activities were sewing, embroidery, knitting layettes for the many births ... Young girls were not encouraged to study; we were educated to be wives who would submit and serve, exemplary mothers in self-denial, and I insist on the choice of that expression,... self-denial. It was considered good luck when the first born were girls, because they could share the housework and take care of the smaller children. During the holidays, children would be exchanged between families: the girls became "au pairs" in families abroad, and the boys were expected to work in the building trade where they built a new hall, or at the complex of Brunstad that grew larger and larger ...

In one of the families where I worked in Switzerland, I had, among others, to scrub the kitchen and living room floors using my nails to scratch between the tiles or planks of 150m², on my knees, the whole day, while being insulted by the couple that hosted me; they enjoyed to dominate and see others suffer. We were trained to follow in Jesus' foot-steps who had suffered for us and who left us his model, never having committed sin nor spoken lies; if we violated the rules, which happened every day and very often unconsciously, we were beaten (with metal curtain rods, broomsticks or hazel sticks, fathers' wide leather belts, wooden spoons and other sticks... not to mention being smashed against the wall or floor, punched and kicked, hit hard on the head, slapped...).

During my youth, I have adopted a posture in order to protect myself, which I call the "Turtle" (in French "Tortue", if you add an "r" before the "e", you understand the link): I squatted down to protect my limbs, neck, breasts, and soles. We were verbally humiliated: my mother often treated us of "dirty Arab girls" because my father had a dark complexion: she told us she "preferred the children of the Assembly" or "her daughters were the daughters of the Assembly"...

Confined without speaking for hours, starved, sometimes because of poverty, but more often as a punishment for one or two days; and on and on ... We were Nothing, and paradoxically we were educated as part of an "Elite", the chosen People of God, who would be saved at the end of the time.

It is easy to understand the devastating effects on my health; I had an ulcer at 10 years, chronic gastritis, I wet my bed until adolescence, suicide attempts through drugs, pains and aches in a body old before its time ...

Violence against the children and youngsters was justified every time with the quotation: "*Who loves well chastises well*" and biblical verses "*Those who withhold the rod hate their children, but the one who loves them applies discipline..*". The more they believed this, the more they beat with arrogance ...

Thus they justified the right to violate the physical and mental integrity of the child and had no qualms for the suffering they caused ... As Jesus suffered, one had to suffer, because out of this physical and more specifically, mental suffering would come redemption ...

Just before my fifteenth year, my father left and gave no more news. My mother started taking drugs to sleep, but also increased in aggressiveness. I had to stop her in the act of stabbing my 18 years older sister because she had cut a lock of her hair. I felt

invested with the motherly mission of protecting my sisters. Therefore, I encouraged my older sister to join my father; in turn, she came to fetch me and I went to live with them, and there I started to live... But my mother contacted the youth protection judge and the gendarmes came to fetch me. She sent me to the Mennonites in Ain³ where several summer conferences had taken place. There I was made to believe that I was possessed by Satan. Then, I was harassed every day by the patriarch of this house, to force me to convert.

However my mother, judging that I had too much freedom (loose hair, trousers) came to fetch me, but our relation was so degraded that she dropped me on the motorway ... I ran away and she threatened me with a research warrant by Interpol (about 10 km from the Swiss border), and finally I attempted suicide with my mother's sleeping pills before her eyes. When the ambulance arrived, I was in a coma. They needed her parental authorisation to take me to the nearest hospital, passing through Switzerland. She refused and screamed: "She wanted to die, let her die!" Finally, my father gave the authorisation by phone ...

The medical team heard my cry for help and contacted the youth's judge in Nancy, and I was taken care of by a foster home of the DASS⁴. I looked so responsible that they took me for a teacher.

The last time I met the group was at the funeral of the older son of the Swiss couple. We two had lived a small romance that caused a scandal and my departure from the Mennonites near Geneva. This young man died at the age of 21 in a car accident, while he participated at the summer conference in France. From what I was told, the boys, among them 8 minors, had been given the exceptional permission to go to the pool in the nearest city. They had to be back at 6.30 p.m. Five minutes too late, the young man missed a turn because he was driving too fast ... He was old enough to live independently and to assume the fact that he was five minutes late... He lost his life, because he was afraid... afraid of the punishment that his violent father would give him ... at 21 years of age.

Eighteen months after leaving the Assembly, I met my husband. He turned out to be a manipulating personality, who was unfaithful, who was violent with me several times and forced me to abort ... I was fascinated by this living encyclopaedia: he was an eloquent speaker and a manipulator of quality. I let him speak and fill my emptiness; he rationalised my thoughts by his enlightened dialectic. This made me feel safe and kept me with him. He became a tyrant and an exploited me financially: at that time I earned more than he did; without any doubt this was unconsciously a relationship of inverse domination, producing a kind of balance of demands.

In spite of all this, we had 4 kids, all desired as far as I was concerned; he took the opportunity to develop his zeal to exploit me, but 23 years later and after multiple conflicts, though I still did not know that he had a mistress, I could no longer tolerate his perversity towards me, his criticism of my very existence in this world saying that I did not have my place on earth, that if I was paid for my foolishness, I would be a billionaire, etc. ... I once again attempted suicide by drugs on our holiday in the South. But realising

³ French department close to the city of Geneva in Switzerland

⁴ Direction des Affaires Sanitaires et Sociales – Direction of Health and Social Affaires

that I was going to leave my kids without a mom, I called the SAMU⁵ and there I awoke, in a psychiatric hospital. I had a dozen books in my suitcase, bought at Emmaüs, treating about cults, in view of writing a book about my experience. Thence, I was accused by the psychiatrist of wanting to take my kids to the cult, according to the sayings of their father...

Devastating effects: political and administrative incomprehension. I experienced this institution as a prison and not as a place to improve before returning to normal life; I became a victim of the pharmaceutical lobby, nobody listened to me; for these people, I was sick and a protocol of care was imposed against my will...

I should add that, today I am about to regain my dignity because I won my lawsuit against the hospital. I am considered as having been arbitrarily detained and my case has reached the stage of demands for damages and interests.

At this stage, I went back to my employment in Lorraine, I regained the custody of my children, although in this respect nothing has yet been won with regard to my image as a mother; one of the key elements was the image the father had painted of me through his hatred and the way he manipulated them...

Assuming the role of a dedicated mother, which was in fact the natural product of my own education, without realising it I have spoilt my sons, the consequence of excessive kindness and love, one could say, but also my inner submission to the male gender which my education had instilled since birth. They took advantage of the situation and I think that my children, as young adults, show themselves quite indifferent with regard to me ...but they are very balanced beings, smiling and full of life; they agree that their education was special, non-violent, built on dialogue, complicity and trust, which gave them an open mind; that makes me think that with the required hindsight, they will one day understand my wish to make sure, with all my love, that they be balanced and free beings ...

Devastating effects: I have a trend both to agoraphobia and claustrophobia. Therefore, where I live, I always eliminate a maximum of doors, except those of the bedrooms and intimate places, but I never close them when I am there ... Likewise, I never put curtains on the windows either ...

For a long time, I was unable to just go out and buy a baguette from the bakery, for example ...

Even now, I still need to have some time alone during the day, to recharge my energy so as to face the world in a more serene way ...

As recently as last fall, my father mentioned the word cult in a discussion and I took the opportunity to ask him how he had met the Pentecostals. He replied, but then lost his temper; he cancelled his visit to the party planned for my 50th birthday and shut me out saying he wanted to end his life in peace, without hearing about this period of his life any more ... I have not seen him since ...

⁵ Service d'Aide Médicale Urgente – Medical Emergency Service

In fact, I can say that one lives with it all one's life, you too cherish your past ... but that's where we feel the theft of our childhood, of our adolescence ... not to mention that our character was forged by these people and the education they forced on us; every new encounter, every relationship is based on brotherhood, which can cause serious setbacks or serious disappointments.

Sometimes, at the very beginning of our exit to freedom, there is a certain "nostalgia", doubts, when discovering the world outside and understanding the way it works, doubts may arise concerning our choice ... But in the end, freedom is priceless and far exceeds the discomfort of this other society of casts, which is neither better nor worse, and in which, having deciphered the codes, I share today with you with pleasure anyway... because I am me ... and that I give myself the right to exist and to affirm that I am !

According to the latest news I heard that followers were told that no one ever left the Assembly... and those who have tried had returned... terrified, unable to adapt to a foreign world for which they were not prepared... For the youth of the Assembly, they are the living example of the parable of the prodigal son who ventured into the world but returned to his family, repentant... Two months ago, I read on a Dutch forum⁶ that there were now about 150-200 followers among the Norwegian Brothers in the Netherlands, ready to get out but that they did not have the courage.

I want to thank Yves Toni who asked me to speak in his stead, thinking that my testimony was more important than his. He has fought for years, without success, to be able to see his children who have now reached their majority... and who today regularly receives messages from people in the Assembly, who are in distress or lost ...

I can't do anything for them, for all those people and all those children, I can just tell them what I experienced and what some still experience... I dare to hope that you could do something for them, but I doubt it, remembering the statements made, a short while ago, by the President of the French Association of Magistrates for Youth and Family, Marie-Pierre Hourcade, that "to educate one's children in accordance with religious principles, considered by some as radical, is not prohibited in France" ...

As far as I'm concerned, rigorous religious practice tolerated on the child assumes that the human being is not considered, as one, from birth ... This is an abuse of power that deprives the child of its freedom of thought, of its freedom of just Being... this is what I want to denounce.

It seems important for me to clarify that I do not feel that I am a "victim" of my life ... My life is as it is; I was born in that environment that was my "normality" throughout my childhood and I joined another world that also has its own "normality" in which victimization can be nourished ...

Also, to best preserve my freedom and my personal balance, I have learnt to accept these events as experiences, mitigating the impact on my life by not looking at the perspective of victimization but by choosing to focus my views on the enrichment of being; that's probably what helped me in my education and today has led me to fully accept my differences, my "originality".

⁶ <http://www.hotforum.nl/forum/index.php?name=anderekant&>

I wrote a collection of poems, self-published, in which there is, although it is not the subject, some information about my experience in the cult and particularly in *Le Bac à lauréats*⁷ and *La tortue*⁸, about which I spoke to you just before...

⁷ final examination qualifying for university entrance

⁸ The turtle