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Breakout: How I Escaped from the Exclusive Brethren

David Tchappat

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One could approach this book from different directions. Those who seek an in-depth analysis of the Exclusive Brethren [EBs] will be disappointed, although there is some interesting light shed on them. Those who expect a deep spiritual transformation will also be disappointed. Those who want an element of sensation and a view of a secret world will probably be the most satisfied, although the book does not seek to titillate or exaggerate.

David Tchappat's grandfather came into the Exclusive fold by 'chance'—having emigrated to Australia from an Open Brethren background ('the more relaxed arm of the EB'!) in Switzerland, he went looking for a Brethren bookstore in Sydney and found the Exclusive outlet.

David describes his own formative years, his rebellious feelings as a teenage boy, his efforts to break from the Exclusives, and his life 'outside'. In many ways the most interesting aspect of the book is his struggle to break free, while still feeling the ties to his family. The first time he escaped he was brought back; another time, during the 'Review' of 2003, he was sought after by family members under instruction from Bruce Hales, and was sorely tempted to return even though he had experienced the usual ostracism and condemnation as a result of leaving.

In his quest for freedom, he followed the classic 'wine, women and song' path—in fact, this reviewer was saddened by the fact that he seemed to think a 'normal' young Australian male life consisted of a series of sexual relationships and a lot of drinking alcohol to excess. Late in the book he writes that he was 'brought up to fear God and that will never change', but he does not seem to have a current Christian commitment.

One chapter is devoted to explaining the Exclusive lifestyle and the many rules and regulations as they were in the 1990s. Readers

who know of the Taylor Exclusive way of life will not be surprised to learn of the many restrictions (including a ban on wearing suits and ties!) and the regimented and constant attendance at meetings. Some may not be as aware of the extreme control exercised by the Man of God in such matters as marriage—vetoes for no good reason against seemingly suitable couples marrying—and the ordering of wholesale removal from one suburb to another, or from city to regional area.

The current leader, Bruce Hales, whom Tchappat has met, is described as ‘super intelligent, business driven and extremely charismatic’. Nevertheless Tchappat wonders whether ‘power has blurred his vision’, and his experience has made him determined never to fear another human being. From a psychological point of view, I found it interesting that the two career paths Tchappat chose were the police force and subsequently the fire service—both areas which demand a high degree of conformity and structure. He also spent some time as a contestant on ‘Big Brother’, and he himself discusses the ironies of voluntarily being shut in a monitored world.

The book is illustrated by some black and white photographs, including one of the interior of a meeting room, and has a short history of the EBs, written by an anonymous former member, as an Appendix. This is a reasonable summary of the early years of the movement, of necessity centred around Darby’s role (no other early leader is mentioned), and of the ‘reigns’ of the subsequent leaders. Both this summary, and indeed the whole book, makes every effort to avoid bitterness and unnecessary criticism, even where it would be entirely natural to be resentful and angry at some of the actions of the ‘priests’, family members, and Hales.

Elisabeth Wilson