

**Brethren in Gamrie:
A Review Article**

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**The Anthropology of Protestantism: Faith and Crises among
Scottish Fisherman**

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**The Eschatology of Global Warming in a Scottish Fishing
Village**

Joseph Webster

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Meenie's Horse had an iconic status in my father's idea of what made a 'good' morning meeting. The horse was to be found in Gardenstown or 'Gamrie' (as it is known locally), which is a small fishing village perched on a steep coastline of the Moray Firth in north-east Scotland. It entered my father's lore through a story told to him some fifty years ago by Alex Jack, a fishing-boat skipper who lived in Gamrie and who was then the leading brother in the village's Open assembly. One Sunday morning, Alex Jack had asked Chrissie Murray, a rather indomitable widow who was member of the assembly, what she had thought of the morning meeting which had just ended. She replied, "Ocht! You were a' like Meenie's Horse." When asked for an explanation, she had cryptically told him to look at the horse the next time he was in Meenie's house. As soon as he could, he had called in on Meenie, and while she was making the obligatory cup of tea, he had approached the mantelpiece on which sat a porcelain horse. To inspect it more closely he had attempted to lift it, and to his surprise had found it was stuck fast. Meenie had explained. Tired of it being knocked over, she had cemented it to the

shelf. The point was taken. The brethren had lacked ‘exercise’, and had been glued to their seats.

Gamrie is a community which values the ‘couthy’ [sociable] and the ‘pawky’ [shrewd wit], which, in the face-to-face life of the village, made someone like Chrissie Murray a legend. It is also famed within Scotland as an intensely religious place, and Chrissie Murray’s disgust that Sunday morning last century had arisen from the fact that the men were failing to be open to the leading of the Spirit. At present Gamrie has a population of about 700 and there are six churches. There are two Presbyterian ones: ‘the kirk’, which is a congregation of the Church of Scotland, and a secession from it which is now a congregation of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, the denomination founded by Ian Paisley. There are four Brethren assemblies: an Open Brethren one, two Exclusive Brethren, and one former Exclusive assembly which has moved in a charismatic direction. The last assembly, which meets in Braehead Hall, was an ‘Out’ assembly which seceded from the Taylorite connexion in 1961. It has forged formal links with Riverside Church in Banff, which is part of Derek Brown’s apostolic network, and so its Brethrenism might be regarded as being increasingly tenuous.¹ The Brethren have heavily influenced all the Gamrie churches, especially in eschatology. It was this community which Joseph Webster, an anthropologist, chose to study for his doctoral thesis, now published as *The Anthropology of Protestantism* (hereafter *AoP*). The paper on global warming (hereafter EoGW) is another product of the fieldwork not integrated into the main thesis.

Webster is a lecturer at Queen’s University in Belfast, and is himself an evangelical Christian, being, when he undertook his research, a member of the Free Church of Scotland (not to be confused with Ian Paisley’s denomination). He made this plain in his

1. Derek Brown has apostolic authority over the KC21 network and is based at the King’s Centre in Aldershot, Hampshire: <<http://www.kc21.net/connections/>>, accessed Oct. 2013; <http://www.harvestministries.org.uk/Groups/129405/Harvest_Ministries/Riverside_Banff/About_Us/Our_Vision/Our_Vision.aspx>, accessed Sept. 2013.

initial letter to the six village churches, hoping that this would make them more receptive to his study (he addressed them as ‘Dear Brothers’). The Open Brethren were slow to reply, and the Exclusives never replied, but in the event he had access to all the congregations and to their members. Given the value placed on ‘couthiness’, he received a warm reception. There are some amusing self-reflexive descriptions by Webster of the conflicting feelings he has when confronted with some of the zanier practices or beliefs of radical evangelicalism among those whom he regards as co-religionists. Some were suspicious of his orthodoxy. Webster tells us that an open reception to the Lord’s table was practised only in Braehead, the former Exclusive assembly. It is also the only church in which he hears a woman preach—‘a wifey preacher’ in the local parlance.² This more liberal outlook has, however, been attained through what is referred to as ‘the scattering’, and one of Webster’s informants hints darkly that this had involved various nefarious machinations (*AoP*, 144). Perhaps inverted commas should be placed round ‘Open Brethren’ in any discussion of this section of the movement in Gamrie, as in this context ‘Open’ is a misnomer. In the Open assembly he is asked by one of the leading brethren not to participate in taking the bread and wine as it is for baptized believers only. As there are others who might consider allowing Webster to participate, the anonymous leading brother asks not to make his request public, and so Webster’s abstention appears to the others to be his own choice. The effect is a closed table, but one which seems to cut against the village traditions of hospitality. This would be standard practice in most similar assemblies in north-east Scotland where reception would be denied even to Brethren who were regarded as ‘progressive’.³ In the event Webster spent fifteen months in the village doing his fieldwork, attended weekly prayer meetings

2. ‘Wife’ in Scots retains the archaic English sense of being a synonym for ‘woman’ (cf. ‘Wife of Bath’), with the additional reduced vowel in north-east ‘Doric’ making it a diminutive.

3. I have been told of such refusals by those who were not admitted to the Lord’s table.

and Bible studies, heard about 400 hundred sermons, and made two trips to sea on trawlers. In addition he had numerous interactions with the locals in informal contexts such having a ‘blether’ [chat] with the retired fishermen at the Gamrie pier or over cups of tea. Some concluded, as he had been the first person to have worshipped in all the different denominations, that he was doing ‘God’s work’ in bringing Gamrie Christians together (*AoP*, 21–2).

The book is the single-most detailed examination of the Brethren within a community in Britain, and as such it is to be warmly welcomed. There are, however, several unfortunate errors in the Brethren history which Webster offers. He refers to Darby as the ‘founder of the Plymouth Brethren’ (EoGW, n.1), and places the Brethren as having always been Arminian in their soteriology. More seriously, in an otherwise excellent figure in *AoP* setting out the family tree of the Gamrie churches, he has the split into Exclusive and Open Brethren taking place locally in 1946, and he states in the text that the division was over the issue of baptism (*AoP*, 44). He also dates ‘any real foothold’ of the Brethren locally to the ‘Herring Revival’ or the ‘Fisherman’s Revival’ of 1921 (*AoP*, 33). Certainly this revival, which was the last one to affect mainland Britain, had a deep effect on the fishing communities of north-east Scotland, but Webster seems to be over-dependent here on what his interviewees have told him, as the revival will be on the edges of communal memory, and therefore among the often a-historical Brethren might loom large as an origin myth. Confusingly he dates the influence of the Brethren in the Gamrie churches to the 1850s, and he has the movement first appearing in the village in that decade which is much too early. In fact, a Gamrie assembly first features in the Exclusive assembly address list in 1877,⁴ showing it was among the first

4. The previous extant Exclusive assembly address list is for 1873, and therefore Gamrie was probably founded at some point in the succeeding four years. I am grateful to Dr Tim Grass for this reference. The assembly met in the Castle Grant which was at one time a net store near the harbour. As the building was not a large one, it does suggest that the Exclusive assembly in the late nineteenth century was not especially numerous. A photograph of Castle Grant can be seen at <<http://ukwells.org/locations/displaylocations/1182>> accessed Sept. 2013. The

assemblies formed by the Exclusives on the Moray coast which began to appear there during the 1870s. Until the Aberdeen Incident of 1970, the Exclusives were always strong in the village, and it achieved a certain fame within Scotland for that reason. The Open Brethren—historically much the weaker group in Gamrie—were independently imported more recently. They date from 1945 when two returning servicemen, who had met with Brethren in the war, formed an assembly in the village.⁵ The historical errors of *AoP* seem to point to a difficulty with an anthropological approach which substitutes oral history for checking printed sources where these are available. However, as Webster cites in his bibliography Roy Coad's history in addition to a published paper by the present writer on the Brethren in north-east Scotland, he can be criticised as paying insufficient attention to the secondary sources consulted, although he might additionally be criticised for not looking at more recent historical literature.

These historiographical blots are a pity, for Webster records fascinating material which constitutes an invaluable source that will be drawn upon by future students of the Brethren in the early twenty-first century (on a personal note, I have already cited some of his evidence in a paper I am working on). There are a number of observations which many brought up within Brethren households will recognize, such as the Sunday lunches and teas which 'were major gastronomic events and occasions for competitive hospitality, with women attempting to outdo one another in what sometimes felt like an arms race of home economics' (*AoP*, 82). There are extracts from sermons, especially gospel preaching, illustrating the way in which revivalism has tempered the original Calvinism of the Brethren by a more Arminian emphasis on free will. From a useful summary table in *AoP* setting out the practices of all six churches, it

building also became the centre for the 1921 revival in the village cf. Stanley C. Griffen, *A Forgotten Revival: East Anglia and NE Scotland—1921* (Bromley, Kent, n.d.), 72.

5. 'How it Began: Gardenstown, Banffshire', *Believer's Magazine*, 99 (1989), 2-5; in addition, *pace* Webster, there is an Open assembly in Wick.

can be readily seen that the three conservative Brethren assemblies are the only ones to insist that women have their heads covered. This has become a test of orthodoxy for traditionalist Brethren (*AoP*, 145). There are, however, ways in which the specifically anthropological approach illuminates the movement. Some of the theorizing will doubtless appeal more strongly to those with an interest in anthropology, such as Webster's analysis of preaching as a form of sacrifice (*AoP*, 75–85). Other concepts, nevertheless—such as the Weberian notion of disenchantment, which is central to both the works under review—will interest all those with a concern for religion and society. Webster notes the way in which the conversion of men involves them in a sacrifice of masculinity, replacing more macho values with 'abject weakness, feminine dependence, and childlike helplessness' (*AoP*, 113), with the result that they have learned to care more deeply for their wives and children. Webster defends the weeping that strong men engaged in whilst recounting their testimony from the accusation that it is pathological or theatrical by noting its coherence within local practice and the global cultural logic of Christianity. Testifying demonstrates how the moral life and gendered self has been transformed by conversion. Nevertheless, there are continuities. Witnessing calls for the same characteristics as does being a good skipper: 'a competitive, all-or-nothing, self-made, workaholic' (*AoP*, 152). One Presbyterian elder comments critically of the frequent splits among Brethren 'They're their own bosses at sea and their own bosses in their meeting; every man is his own skipper and he can go *wherever* he likes' (*AoP*, 59).⁶ Webster picks this analysis up, and through applying Weber's concept of elective affinity, perceptively observes that within the Protestant economy of Gamrie, not only is every man his own skipper, but is also his own priest. In a process that will be recognized as especially true of Brethrenism, the believer pursues his own individual quest in enchanted labour. The

6. Webster modifies this quotation to 'their own bosses in their [religious] meeting[s]', presumably not understanding that 'meeting' here is being used as synonym for 'assembly' or 'church'.

anthropological approach also illuminates Brethren eschatology. For the gospel preacher, notes Webster, there are only two times: tonight and eternity (*AoP*, 175). As a result the ‘near future’ if it exists at all for the Christians of Gamrie, is a time of waiting. In a description that many familiar with Brethren eschatology will recognise, Gamrie Christians are always living in the last of the last days, no matter how often the signs of the times have to be reevaluated.

Some of the eschatological perspectives might strike even those familiar with that of the Brethren as being new. The European Community is widely perceived among Gamrie Christians as the Antichrist, something that is easily perceived in a fishing community due to EU directives and quotas. Global warming as a concept is perceived as a false eschatology and instead is a demonic conspiracy that threatens the entire human race (*EoGW*, 71–2). *Star Trek* is seen by one individual as a sign of the end times. These positions, and others such as the way in which the demonic is seen to penetrate material life, seem to owe more to *God TV*, American fundamentalist internet websites, or charismatic Christianity, than Brethrenism, although the last doubtless prepared the way by spreading its eschatological views to American fundamentalism. The ecclesiastical nuances here might escape the inattentive reader who could easily assume that such views originate in the Brethren. The research, in fact, shows how globalized evangelicalism is. Nevertheless, despite the attempts to modernize hyper-supernaturalism by applying it to contemporary life, evangelicalism is a threatened belief system in Gamrie. Webster sees the Christians in the village as facing a ‘triple pinch’ which threatens oblivion. The third of these pinches is the perception by Christians that they are living in the end times; but the other two pinches are economic and demographical. Fishing has brought enormous wealth to the fishermen of Gamrie. Those who live in the new, ostentatious ‘fisher mansions’ have moved out of the old Seatown and are more secular in their attitudes and behaviour. The Seatown is being taken over by mainly English incomers—artists or second home owners—who have no interest in the traditional religious life of the village. Younger people are moving away to the larger centres for work or to the oil rigs, and as a

result the churches have an ageing membership. Grandparents lament over unsaved grandchildren, and one man comments to Webster, 'There's only old ones left now Joe. Soon we'll have to close the doors for good' (*AoP*, 67).

There are now about eighty Brethren members, half of them Open Brethren, out of a total church membership of some 190, which gives the Brethren forty-two per cent of a membership which is some twenty-seven per cent of the village population.⁷ The end is not yet, then, but imminent. In a conscious rejection of village piety, the local bikers time their deafening Sunday morning run down the brae to coincide with the beginning of church services. Gamrie religion demands complete surrender to an enchanted universe in which the emotions are fervently engaged. '*Thump it oot!*' is the advice offered to the gospel preacher (*AoP*, 88). In contemporary society, however, from which an increasing number of Gamrie's present inhabitants derive their values, most are not inclined to the religious enthusiasm of a Chrissie Murray, but adhere to being aloof like Meenie's Horse.

7. These figures have been calculated from *AoP*, Figure 1.4, pp.50–1.

