

Behind Closed Doors

Bibliographic information

Behind Closed Doors is an inside look at what goes on behind the doors of the Exclusive Brethren. The book answers the question of what it is like to be a member of a select group who believe they are chosen to maintain the only pure path of Christianity. The author, Ngaire Thomas, was born into the church in the 1940s and left in the 1970s.

It is probably just coincidence that this book was launched at roughly the same time that sociologist Bryan Wilson died. Wilson published the definitive study on the Exclusive Brethren in 1967, and was an expert witness in their court cases. Wilson's conclusions were based on information the religion provided about itself; he dismissed ex-members' accounts as suspect atrocity stories and warned courts not to give credence to their testimony.ⁱ Today, after outbreaks of violence in other religions have repeatedly demonstrated that ex-members accounts are often more accurate than academic ones,ⁱⁱ we may be more welcoming of their insights.

As one such ex-member account, Ngaire Thomas' book is compelling. Her style is non-judgemental; she describes her experiences while acknowledging the Exclusive Brethren's right to follow a religious path in which they find meaning.

The book begins with Ngaire's childhood. She is different from the other children with her long dresses and strict upbringing. She loves school because it is the only place that she can be her real self. Worldly things are forbidden: there are no radios (because Satan rules the airwaves) or non-Brethren books. Life revolves around the Bible, and when Ngaire brings friends home from school her mother preaches to them about the end times in Revelation. Other Christians are also deemed suspect, and Ngaire recalls getting the strap when caught secretly attending Bible in School classes.

A Salem-like undercurrent of holy surveillance pervades the scenes, and this undercurrent surfaces in Chapter 10, when Ngaire is pressured into falsely admitting that she has "committed fornication" with her cousin (she has no idea what

Introduction
Statement of book's purpose
Statement about the author

Places the book in a context

Statement about book's genre and potential significance

Overall evaluation

Summary of the book's beginning – giving details which provide the context of the author's conflict

“fornication” means). Her case is taken to the Auckland assembly, and after a hearing in which she is found guilty, she is forced to confess, sobbing, before 500-600 solemn faces. But the story has a strange twist – which I won’t spoil for the reader.

In the next chapter, Ngaire meets her future husband, Denis. They marry in the 1960s during the church’s notorious “no compromise” era in which the rules are tightened. Members are not allowed to eat and drink with outsiders, and can not be part of another association, such as a library. Even beloved pets are deemed to be idols, and are destroyed, given away or just disappear. There are rules for Ngaire too: she must limit her conversation to 10% of her husband’s (which proves difficult as he is generally silent).

Of value is Ngaire’s account of the bouts of “confession madness” that swept through the church at this time. The priests take on the role of religious police, examining people’s lives like forensic investigators, dragging up rumours from decades past. Members are forced to confess to sins real and imagined, and encouraged to drink whiskey to prove they have nothing to hide. Those who confess pay heavily. They are “shut up” (in effect placed under house arrest) or “withdrawn from” (excommunicated), and lose access to loved ones. Almost inevitably, Ngaire (who has now had four children) and her family are withdrawn from.

The family’s adjustment is massive. They are unused to their new freedom and do not know how to act in normal society. The two eldest sons end up in prison. (The boys love the prison discipline, and when they earn a reduced sentence they choose to stay instead.) Denis dies of liver cancer, and Ngaire goes to University. Readers, especially those familiar with Fowler’s stages of faith, will be interested in following Ngaire’s shifts in faith throughout, as she ultimately finds the kingdom of heaven within.

It is difficult not to like the author with her unpretentious forgiving style. To be sure, there are some weaknesses in the book. The structure is a little unpolished (some later sections would be better as appendices), and there is a small printing error on the inside cover. Also while the author answers many questions, she invites even more. Why, for example, is the most serious abuse limited to only a few passing sentences? Nevertheless the book provides a valuable and absorbing window into a religion that is for most of us inaccessible. As religious autobiographies go, *Behind Closed Doors* may not have the theological complexities of St Augustine’s *Confessions*, or the mystical insights of Teresa of Avila’s *Life*, but there is

More summary of later parts of the book, showing how the author has related her own experiences to the experiences of others and to the philosophies that were dominating the religion at the time

Reviewer indicating the value for readers interested in research on the development of and changes in faith

Further evaluation – some weaknesses and omissions noted

Restatement of overall impression and recommendation

something almost archetypal about one woman's courage to speak her own truth.

References: These are formatted on a separate page according to APA 7th edition.

References

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