

**The Open Brethren: A Christian Sect in the Modern World**

**Peter Herriot**

**Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.**

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**(also available as an e-book)**

I approached this book with a certain feeling of trepidation. The author is a retired professor of psychology, so I feared another work of misunderstanding from a social-scientific perspective. I was wrong. Peter Herriot was brought up among Open Brethren in England, and so manages largely to avoid casting them as an exotic ‘other’ (unlike some of the publicity for the book), although his focus on the ‘tight’ Opens makes the title somewhat misleading.

Now a self-identified ‘liberal Methodist’, the author seeks to integrate three ways of approaching his subject: theological, social-scientific and experiential. The last leads him to begin his first section, ‘Perspectives’, with two chapters (he calls them ‘tales’) outlining who British Brethren are and what their message and mission are, from the perspectives of what he calls, using now outdated terminology (nowhere justified), a ‘tight’ brother and a ‘loose’ one. Both are grounded in more recent periodical articles (although the latter has to use material up to fifty years old, presumably because of the relative lack of periodicals apart from *Perspectives*). He could have made more use of book-length treatments, and he should have used other sources apart from my work, now thirteen years old, for his historical information. It is unfortunate that the author appears largely neglectful of BAHN or of the resources on its website. To me as an outsider, the treatment rang fairly true for the most part, although I would not have said the 1840s division was primarily about premillennial doctrine; perhaps it depends how you define that.

From this point, the primary focus is on the ‘tight’ Open Brethren as they offer a more clear-cut example of a fundamentalist movement. There follows what for me was the most stimulating part of the book: ‘The Psychologists’ Tale’ discusses the group in terms of the interplay between differentiation and integration: a movement needs to have something distinctive to offer, or nobody will choose to join it; but on the other hand it needs to relate to the social systems governing our

work, social and intellectual lives, or nobody will hear its message—or if they do, will not understand it. To see Brethren as a movement of Christian unity is arguably faithful to the original vision, but on the other hand it makes it difficult for the movement to retain a distinctive identity, hence the ‘identity crisis’ afflicting many evangelical movements besides Open Brethren. Herriot argues that tight Open Brethren interpret the whole of life in the light of one social system: their own, which is a subsystem of fundamentalist evangelicalism. This gives them a sense of confidence and identity, but, he argues, will result in sharp decline as members find that to survive in the modern world they need to engage with the social systems they encounter at work and in society. Two counter-arguments could be offered: one from looking at Northern Irish assemblies, which appear to have held up rather better than other sectors of British Open Brethren, and the other from noting that his ‘tight’ authors include some who have indeed engaged with the world—a Supreme Court judge, a consultant physician, two university lecturers in English, and at least one successful businessman.

A chapter on ‘Brethren Lives’ fleshes out what it means to live as a member by means of an analysis of 469 obituaries published in *Believer’s Magazine* from 2012 to 2017. The author demonstrates how the entire lives of the subjects are charted in terms of their relation to the assembly (confirming his point about the dominance of the ‘Brethren’ social system in the thinking of members) and described in terms of certain gendered expectations. The next chapter, ‘Salvation and Service’, attempts a similar exercise for full-time workers, using a series from *Assembly Testimony* between 1997 and 2006, ‘My Conversion and Call’. All fifty-eight articles discussed were by men, and he looks at the pattern of their call to service. Herriot notes the importance of the rapture in precipitating a crisis of conversion (did you ever worry as a child that you had missed it? I did!).

The second section focuses on notions of ‘Authority’. Here Herriot argues that tight Open Brethren show characteristic features of fundamentalism, including a preoccupation with issues of authority (biblical, oversight, male) and a hostility to modernity. He looks at the relationship between belief and conformity to group norms and

expectations, and how authority works out in practice. This is a promising topic, although his examination of the questions submitted to *Believer's Magazine* and *Precious Seed* is disappointingly thin on specific references or even overall statistical analysis. But he notes that they focus narrowly on issues of assembly truth and practice, and his conclusion is telling: 'the questioners are positively begging to be given precise instruction about what to believe and how to behave' (83). A chapter on the authority of Scripture follows, noteworthy for the assertion that Brethren were not to vote because the outcome of elections had been divinely predetermined (92, cf. 79). I wonder where that was taught? Herriot then considers 'The Authority of the brother' [*sic*], noting that the process of differentiation drives separatism: we need to put clear blue water between ourselves and others, especially those others with whom we are most likely to be confused.

This leads to the third section, on 'Separation'. A chapter on 'Separation and Identity' argues that tight Brethren reject almost all other social systems and constructions of identity, and the result is that their view of the world and of social relations within it is reduced to 'tight Brethren versus everyone else' (110); in the light of one of the counter-arguments mentioned above, this chapter needs nuancing. 'Pure from the World' considers the significance of the heavenly/earthly duality at the heart of dispensational thought. 'Separated from the Sects' asserts that even the Brethren espousal of assembly autonomy, which has often been seen by Open Brethren writers as more or less of a 'good thing', was itself an expression of opposition to two 'others': the denominations and the Exclusive Brethren. The climax of this section is the next chapter, 'Apart from the Apostates', i.e. 'loose Open Brethren'. This is a rarely noted and even more rarely studied phenomenon, and the author is surely right to stress the importance of this to the maintenance of 'tight' identity and distinctiveness. There is an enlightening discussion of the role of letters of commendation in maintaining purity, which contends that even those who use them see them as inadequate, since they put additional safeguards in place to counter the risk of infection.

The final section discusses Brethren in terms of fundamentalism. Herriot claims that since fundamentalisms constitute reactions to

modernity, defined as ‘the progressive differentiation of social systems from one another’ (143), tight Brethren actually need modernity to survive. Brethren are briefly compared with two other such reactions: the Amish and the ‘Calvinist’ (Reform?) wing of the Church of England. I am not convinced that either comparison works, though a comparison of the Amish with the PBCC might be illuminating. Herriot’s concern is that fundamentalism hinders the ability of religion to contribute to the better inter-relation of global social systems such as economics, the environment, and science: too often those working in these fields proceed as if the others did not exist, and the resulting fragmentation is potentially dangerous to the continued existence of humanity and the planetary ecosystem. But there, sadly, the book stops: there is no real conclusion.

The book offers a stimulating exposition of the author’s claim that tight Open Brethren need to engage far more positively with the world around them, and of their status as ‘an archetypical example of a fundamentalism’ because of their antagonism to modernity. But at times the exposition felt rough around the edges, which could have been smoothed off in engagement with expert peer reviewers. For instance, the author could have explored how some of these very anti-modernists justify their embrace of new modes of communication and forms of technology, which are themselves playing enormously significant roles in changing the way the world works. He could also have offered a much more nuanced account by recognizing that not all ‘conservative’ (a better term than ‘tight’, because not loaded with pejorative connotations) Open Brethren think and act alike. This would have forced him to think further about his portrayal of them as the perfect example of a fundamentalist sect, disengaged from the world and from other Christians. Moreover, his historical and theological grasp is marred by inaccuracies such as the assertion that the big issue in the 1820s Church of Ireland was its perceived compromises with ‘Romanism’ (123), or that the true church, the assemblies, is the new Israel (79). Source references very rarely cite specific page numbers for books and journal articles referenced, which grated on this historian! There is no bibliography, although there is a three-page

glossary of Brethren terminology. A number of the terms glossed relate to death: what does that tell us?

All in all, a thought-provoking and valuable, if perhaps painful and not always reliable, read, which would have been even better if given fuller development and justification, but what a price! (And the electronic version is not much cheaper.)

Tim Grass

**Renovarse o morir. Pasado, presente y futuro de las Asambleas de Hermanos**

**[Be Renewed or Die : Past, Present and Future of Brethren Assemblies]**

**Terence-Pablo Wickham Ferrier**

**Barcelona: Bibliasfera, 2019**

**174 pp. ISBN: 978-9-200-08256-6 11.88€**

Terry Wickham has worked among Brethren assemblies in Spain since 1958 and has chosen to remain there in retirement. His writings include works of biblical exposition, practical guidance for workers, and (with his son, Michael) the only book I know on climate change by a Brethren author. The title of the work under review, which may be paraphrased as ‘Be renewed or die’, reflects the burden of what may be described as a *cri de coeur*: will Spanish assemblies seek personal and corporate renewal to serve God effectively in this generation, or slowly disappear? While not a historical work, the author draws considerably on Brethren history to make his case. He writes especially for young workers because he began his own service when young and points out that Brethren began as a movement of younger leaders. His starting point is that spectacular growth in Africa, Asia, and Latin America does not compensate for tragic losses in the former missionary bases in Europe. The author therefore feels that this is a message not only for Spain but for Western Europe and other former sending countries.

The first chapter seeks to recall readers to the movement’s pre-1848 roots, recalling the lessons to be learned from the past. Here the Spanish context, in which Evangelicalism is a tiny—and for many years persecuted—minority, is particularly significant. Wickham, like