"The Family" & Faith: The Theology of Power

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“THE FAMILY” & FAITH: THE THEOLOGY OF POWER

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Updated April 2, 2012
“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all”\(^1\); one nation, under God. This is not the original version of the Pledge of Allegiance. However, it is now the version in which elementary schools across America recite and teach. Why would a country, which holds freedom as its greatest priority, limit citizens from all religious backgrounds into saying they pledge their allegiance under God; under one God? How did we, as a nation, begin identifying a God to “be under”? Often in the media we see, hear, and read about other countries, which do not claim separation of church and state, struggling between politics and religious groups. Occasionally, we hear or read about this struggle within the United States when hot topics, such as gay rights and abortion, are forced into center stage regarding legislation. People often do not realize the behind-the-scenes religious influence close to people of power in political settings that happens daily.

The Family, formally known as The Fellowship, is an organization that functions mostly underground, out of the public eye, but also in plain sight. This organization can be a good focus for when considering the blurred line between the separation of church and state in the United States. The Family has sunk its teeth into the heart of American ideals, as is reflected by the group’s connection with the addition of “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance.\(^2\) What does this group want? Why does this group seem to be everywhere yet nowhere at the same time? The Family concerns itself with powerful people, often those with involved with politics, thus aligning them with promising individuals who could bring power to the organization, or who

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they could use in order to gain power. What kind of power? The Family’s power encompasses everything that makes society function: the control of economic, religious, organizational, financial, and public decisions. Yet their self-identification as a religious group makes them available and attractive to potential members, or potential ‘friends’. Perhaps it is this self-identification as a religious organization that allows them to begin to have such an influence. I mean, who could say no to someone who preaches the simplistic Idea of Jesus plus nothing?

While The Family is one in a million-and-one religious organizations throughout the world, it is quite arguably one of the most fascinating, especially when it comes to American history. Studying this group can provide understanding as to the idea of a ‘successful’ religious organization. Thus, the broader question exists: how do successful religious groups, such as The Family, gain such power and influence?

I believe that no religion, or any other type of organization would be productive without its community, that is, without its members. In order to understand any organization a person must look at how members function within the organization and what the organization reflects about its members. The Family is no different. Without its highly powerful, and political, members it would not be as successful as it is. What would draw the members in to such an organization? The organization itself, that is what it reflects and preaches, what the members see that they would be able to get from the organization. It is a circular relationship between community and what an organization promotes. The Family relies on the power of its members for its success and influence. If the organization did not promote or in this case preach something attractive, it would not obtain any powerful members or members at all. If an organization does not have any members, it will fail, thus showing the importance of members to any organization. Therefore, we see the importance of promoting a belief in order to attract the members an
organization seeks. Perhaps The Family’s founders understood when scholar Emile Durkheim wrote, “for religion cannot be defined except by the characteristics which are found wherever religion itself is found”\(^3\), explicitly connecting the environment to religion. That is, religion cannot be defined without considering those surrounding it. Communal needs determine belief.

**Introduction to The Family**

What is behind this entity that calls itself “The Family”? What is its official doctrine, since it is a religious organization, and how has it been able to have such success regarding its emergence and being as a whole? Perhaps it is the ability to function in almost absolute secrecy. Maybe it is its emphasis regarding its organizational structure, or with whom it aligns with. Perhaps maybe it is just the attractiveness of the messages it preaches, most namely the idea of Jesus plus nothing, combined with the passion and drive of its leaders. I believe that with every successful organization, there is a brain behind it making the bigger decisions; that is, the success of any organization relies on the decisions of the leader. Abraham Vereide started the organization, while Douglas Coe took it over after his passing.\(^4\) Each man believed in obtaining power, aligning themselves, as well as the group with it, and ultimately strove for it. However each man brought something different to the group and the group’s history. Abram laid its foundations, its original goals, and created the original powerful relationships, but it was Coe that really brought it to where it is today regarding its religious emphasis and influence in national and international politics; “men would come from around the world to spend time with


Doug Coe, or his predecessor Abraham Vereide, to ‘catch the spirit of the work’. Sometimes they’d talk politics; sometimes they’d make business deals”.5

The name “The Family” actually came later as a calculated move by Doug Coe. Prior to this, the group was referred to as “The Fellowship”. Love had always been a stronghold in the bonds between the members, with other members, as well as with God. Perhaps changing the name brought the bonds of the members to their beliefs to the forefront, a constant reminder of love for a common belief, Jesus. In Coe’s eyes, and through his influence, what a strong love it was, as “love in The Family was the love that ‘conquers’, the love that ‘consumes’.”6 Further, by renaming the group, Coe brought that love-bond to the forefront, “families, as Coe would be the first to point out, are about love. Not accountability...”.7 Members of The Family are coined ‘brothers’ or ‘sisters’ to keep with the theme of family, and for Coe, this meaning of brother represents the ultimate love of a person for another and for their cause that binds them, “to be willing to- happy to- die for your cause”.8 This ultimate love and lack of accountability for actions of members within The Family’s structure both were key ingredients, I believe, for how the group has come so far. Combined with the concept of “Jesus plus nothing,” this family front allowed members to not personally be held accountable for any decisions they were to make, as the choice for their actions or decisions was not theirs, it was Jesus’. How convenient of a concept for powerful politicians. This shows the genius in how The Family has progressed and gained influence; it recognized the needs of its community. The community of powerful

5 Ibid., 60.
6 Ibid., 42.
7 Ibid., 283.
8 Ibid., 254.
individuals in The Family needed to make decisions yet not be held accountable for the outcome if it went south, thus The Family and its beliefs formed around that need.

If The Family is so successful, then why have most people, American citizens, probably not heard of it prior to this paper, especially if it has been around for 75+ years? This group functions mainly underground, which might sound a little uncommon especially when considering their influence, but The Family prides itself on its secrecy. The Family can be both seen and summarized as a “movement of elite fundamentalism, bent not on salvation for all but the cultivation of the powerful ‘key men’ chosen by god to direct the affairs of the nation”. 9 This brief definition marks the priorities of the group; a) the focus on powerful people b) everything is all up to God and c) controlling the nation. Would an average American citizen join a religious organization outlined as such? Probably not, and The Family probably would not want to be portrayed as such to the public masses. Therefore working underground works for them. They do not preach every weekend on CSPAN, though they do host the very public National Prayer Breakfast once a year, and they don’t necessarily have leaders that you have heard of before.

Formally, the secrecy of this group became more prominent with Doug Coe in charge, as he believed that “the more you can make your organization invisible, the more influence it will have”. 10 This underground structure that The Family eventually established reflects Coe’s thoughts on structure itself. Coe says he isn’t against structure, rather he “thinks that it needs to be underground”. 11 Thus, he can be cited on different occasions as discussing the importance of secrecy for any organization; this gives emphasis as to how The Family must be kept running, in

9 Ibid., 7.
10 Ibid., 21.
11 Ibid., 218.
secrecy. Needless to say, whenever you think that perhaps there is something religious underlying political decisions, but cannot quite figure out what it is since it has not been stated, chances are the Family or Doug Coe is somehow involved, such as with the Pledge of Allegiance or the addition of “In God We Trust” on our currency.  

Aside from secrecy, The Family also had deep rooted focus on obedience and submission. Perhaps the idea of submission outdates the focus of secrecy within the group. The group’s founder, Abraham had “wanted elites to ‘die to the self’” by submitting completely to Jesus. Aside from the long-held need for total submission of its members, The Family also stressed the concept of obedience. For The Family, everything you did was because either you obeyed Jesus or you obeyed “the people who rule the world”. Together, this emphasis on submission and obedience paints the group’s members as perhaps vulnerable to influence; they believed in whatever belief was being preached, since they were to obey and submit authority. This is where I believe the need for an attractive doctrine is necessary; since there are so many other religious organizations out there, why would people submit and obey to something they didn’t find worthy?

I still haven’t quite figured out where The Family aligns itself regarding religious labels, other than the broad term of Christianity. However it doesn’t require its members to identify as Christian. Maybe this flexibility and openness for all different people, of all different beliefs, makes it an attractive organization. The only problem with labeling them as a Christian group is

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12 Ibid., 199.
13 Ibid., 207.
14 Ibid., 38.
15 Ibid., 43.
that they flat out deny the label. In his best-selling book solely about The Family, and from his research within the group, yes he spent time in the group, author Jeff Sharlet suggests perhaps they can be categorized as dominionists. Personally, given the definition Sharlet provides and having read his work, I think that this is a fair category for The Family to be included in as:

Dominionist theologies hold the Bible to be a guide to every decision, high and low, from whom God wants you to marry to whether God thinks you should buy a new lawn mower.... They view themselves as the new chosen and claim a Christian doctrine of covenantalism, meaning covenants not only between God and humanity but at every level of society, replacing the rule of law and its secular contracts.

The Family insists on its preaching of ‘Jesus plus nothing’; that it is God’s will and he choses who is in power and what those people do with said power. Coe looks at the teaching of Jesus plus nothing as one that is free of problem, as “one who preaches Jesus plus nothing claims to be in possession of pure Godhead”. Why is this important? For Coe, it was not Jesus’ teachings, or what Jesus stood for. No, for Coe it was “simply the fact of His being”. Jesus’ existence meant a source of power and by focusing on this, Coe was able to apply this set-up to The Family; they follow the cult of personality, the person. The teachings? Not necessarily Christ-like, rather more America-focused. Ultimately perhaps it is The Family’s desire to stand out, as an entity within itself that it denies the Christian label yet also does not claim any other label. That is, The Family is The Family; it does not need to be attached to anything else as it is its own ultimate entity, a power move.

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16 Ibid., 51.
17 Ibid., 44.
18 Ibid., 252
19 Ibid.
At its simplest, the function at the heart of this group is to work “through the men and women we put in power”, thus aligning the group with power from the beginning of the connection. However, The Family will never admit this. No, it would counteract their belief in Jesus plus nothing. To them, it is not them that are working through the rich and powerful; rather it is God. God has chosen his key men and women, and they just happen to be the ones already holding the earthly power and riches. The genius behind the concept of Jesus plus nothing is in the formula itself, its malleability, you could insert any value at the end of the equation, and that’s your outcome. Because of the Jesus plus nothing doctrine, “people didn’t use people, according to the Idea. People didn’t do anything. Rather they were used by God, and their only two choices were to struggle against the inevitable, or to allow God to pull their strings”, and this Idea alone allowed the leaders to have all the power.

They also believe in the importance of covenants, maybe not as strongly when they first were founded, but surely stronger under the leadership of Douglas Coe. For Coe, it was through the use of covenants between brothers, a covenant with Christ, which would change the world, as for him a covenant was synonymous with “total unity”. Granted, Coe used examples such as Lenin, Hitler, Ho Chi Minh, and bin Laden as people who were able to change the world through the strength of their covenants with their brothers. Total unity, a covenant, is what binds the brothers together, binds their community together. However what those aforementioned men

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20 Ibid., 284.

21 Ibid., 217.

22 Ibid., 250.

23 Ibid., 54.
apparently were missing in their plans was what the Family had, what was going to make them succeed in changing the world: Jesus.  

Aside from the emphasis on the teaching of Jesus plus nothing, Coe placed extreme emphasis on the existence of prayer cells. These prayer cells are made up of members of The Family and are defined as “publically invisible but privately identifiable groups of companions”. The members of a cell group were very close knit and monitored the actions of each other in order to make sure they were not deviating from “Christ’s will”. The creation of these cells reflects both Coe’s insistence on secrecy as well as obedience to the group and ultimately to God. It is also in these cells that “Christ speaks directly to his anointed” thus showing how important these cells are to the members’ spirituality, or covenant with God. What was discussed in these cell meetings? Sure, the general loosely Christian-based theology, but also political and business deals that each member was facing, thus fusing church and state. Members talk about their needs in these prayer cells; these cells highly reflect how Coe has incorporated the importance of the relationship between belief and community. In the prayer cells members discuss communal needs and then the belief is generated that then reflects such needs, thus giving members their answers.

*The Men With The Power*

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24 Ibid., 30.

25 Ibid., 44.

26 Ibid., 45.

27 Ibid., 264.
Abraham Veriede, Abram for short, a Norwegian immigrant believed that God had promised him peace. However, as Abram saw it, something was wrong with the world, and it was not the absence of peace. No, for Abram it was “clear something [was] wrong with the world: the poor. They are, it seems plain to him, out of place. Literally out of order”. Being an immigrant, Abram believed that the U.S. was the Promise Land. Yet when he arrived, the poor still existed. With this observation in mind, Abram received a revelation from God: “to the big man went strength, to the little man went need. Only the big man was capable of mending the world”. Thus began Abram’s, and later The Family’s, obsession with power and the ‘big men’.

Upon this revelation, Abram directed his attention at then present main issue: helping those who could help the poor. He had reflected on what he believed the communal needs of his community were, which then shaped the beliefs moving forward. To Abram, this could “distribute the Lord’s blessings to the little men, whose envy would be soothed, violence averted, disorder controlled”. The year was 1935 and Abram was forty-nine and named the solution to the poor problem, ‘the new world order’ and the timing could not have been be more perfect. Abram was able to preach his new Idea during the time of FDR’s New Deal and the Cold War: a time of economic instability and vulnerable ears. It could even be argued that Abram’s religious organization began as an opposition to the New Deal itself. Author Jeff Sharlet points out the

28 Ibid., 88.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 89.
31 Ibid., 90.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 210.
connection between the timing of the war and political moves resulting in the creation and emergence of The Family. He writes:

The Cold War liberalism that led to American wars and proxy wars, for example, ran parallel with elite fundamentalism’s sense of its own divine universalism. The Family’s Worldwide Spiritual Offense infused America’s global mission - the economic reconstruction of Western Europe and the militaristic destruction of Southeast Asia alike - and that imperial project in turn sparked the imaginations of elite fundamentalists, providing them with an alternative to traditional fundamentalist separatism.  

The Family’s rise could not have come from a more opportune time with regards to American history. America had a need, and The Family would answer through its doctrine, ultimately through its members.

Regarded as a “new regime”, The Family, otherwise known as The Fellowship at that point was established with the movement of elite fundamentalism right behind it. According to Sharlet, with Abram’s new Idea, he, Abram, “stood at the vanguard of an elite fundamentalism that shaped the last half century of American and world politics in ways only now becoming visible”. Abram quickly gained influence and popularity; presidents of major companies, such as Quaker Oats and Chevrolet set up meetings with him and congressmen in Washington also saw promise in his Idea. In the spring of 1946 however, Abram suffered an illness with his appendix that almost killed him. Through this dance with mortality, Abram, insisting it was not a dream, had direct communication with Jesus. This ‘meeting’ with Jesus left Abram with the

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34 Ibid., 288.
35 Ibid., 117.
36 Ibid., 90.
37 Ibid, 139.
realization that “the body is no more than ‘our means of contact with the physical world’”;\textsuperscript{38} the body was just a tool and thus has no strings of humanity itself. Perhaps it was this realization, that the physical body is not humanity itself, which sparked Abram’s change in his goal. His mission from here on out was no longer one of the “Social Gospel”, but rather one that focused on “conquering new territory”.\textsuperscript{39} This is where, stemming from his realization from his meeting with Jesus, Abram’s religion changed into one focused on power. What he believed his communal needs were had right there, determined his beliefs yet again. The circular relationship between community and what an organization promotes is clear.

Luckily for Abram, he found his connection to power during the Cold War when he met a widow named Marian Aymar Johnson, a second cousin to FDR, and who had a wealthy background. He would describe Marian as willing to give up her social status and participation for “total Christianity”.\textsuperscript{40} This easily made Marian useful to Abram’s goal, and use her, he did. Marian helped Abram buy a four-story mansion, which he had hoped would serve as a “headquarters for politicians and diplomats of all denominations, a place for businessmen visiting Washington... to share their concerns with brothers-in-Christ in spiritual, not material, terms”.\textsuperscript{41} I believe it is in this interaction and purchase that Abram blatantly used community for his belief. Marian had become a person of his new community, and by preaching to her his beliefs, he was able to gain the goods necessary to further the progress of his new group. Thus

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 153.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 156.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
was the start of what Sharlet calls the “Christian Embassy”. With this new building Abram was able to set up a headquarters, not for the politicians and businessmen like he had told Marian, but really a headquarters for his Idea. It was in this headquarters that Abram’s ability to get involved with powerful people really evolved. This building was made for an enterprise; it had two dining rooms, one for powerful people, the other for servants, a library for gatherings, Abram’s office, a reception hall, guest rooms, and even drawing rooms for something Abram would term ‘soul surgery’.

Things shifted for Abram with the coming of the United Nations in 1944. At first he was on board, yet it was only when he realized the UN was not going to become an “international Christian congress”, and the Cold War was knocking on the door, that he changed his attitude. With the continuation of the Cold War, Abram began to fear Communism more and more, “now it was as great and grand as Lucifer’s kingdom”. For Abram, fighting communism was a new goal. However, despite this new goal, Abram’s other vision, his vision of power, still was as prevalent as ever. It was through the powerful connections he had created, by the faith he preached for the ‘powerful’, synonymous with political men, that he found his entry into the anti-communism front. This is when I believe Abram’s Idea really started expanding into other countries. As he saw it, his community of America’s powerful needed something more; they needed help maintaining their power. This is where Abram’s belief was determined by his sense of communal need, the need to fight against communism. By marking communism and those that supported it as the “other”, Abram also was able to strengthen his community.

\[42\] Ibid.

\[43\] Ibid.

\[44\] Ibid., 157.
“Abram’s fundamentalism was polite only within the confines of Washington; projected onto the world, it thrived on violence and raised up the most capable of it”. 45 His fear of the rise of communism enabled Abram to grow his Idea in a way that allowed him to project this fear into those who would listen to and follow him. Through his connections, within the United States, with powerful political men, Abram was allowed leeway when it came to whom he recruited for his Idea and how he went about doing so. The most explicit example of this is when in 1946 Abram went to Germany after writing to, and getting clearance and support from, the United States’ State Department. Abram successfully initiated the trip by writing to Major John H. Hildring, Undersecretary of State at the time, claiming that men from his Senate and House prayer groups “insisted that he carry The Idea to defeated Germany”. 46 This is one of the most explicit examples of how Abram had used his Idea, belief, in order to fulfill what he perceived as his community’s needs; this illustrates how communal needs determine belief. Yet this example also illustrates the power that Abram had with his Idea, as he was not going to Germany to carry the Idea to average German citizens. No. Abram was looking for ex-Nazis, ready to have something else to believe in; he “scoured the Allied prisons in Germany for men ‘of the predictable type’ ready to turn their allegiance from Hitler to Christ, and thus, in Abram’s thinking, America”. 47 Abram was essentially looking for anyone he could use in order to bring him more power, anyone who would listen to what he would preach. The ex-Nazis would have shown him how devoted to a person, and idea, they could be; they were the vulnerable followers

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 158.

he needed that could be easily transformed into men of Christ, that Abram would need to boost his Idea to reach more and more individuals.

With more of his success, Abram found himself with more power, and being involved with more and more people with power. “In the United States fundamentalism grew during the 1950’s and ‘60s by presenting itself as a greater force, to which men of either party could pay tribute in return for divine favors”\(^\text{48}\);\(^\text{48}\) he had successfully grown his Idea into a convincing religious movement with American power as its ultimate goal. Abram had convinced his new community of “faithful” and political powerful men of his beliefs, by using the needs of this new community as the underlying motivation. Abram had figured out that he could become successful if he created a new community of relatively successful individuals. Power was what his community members had in common, and power was the ultimate goal he preached, and it also was the underlying belief Abram preached. The term “the Family” first seemed appropriated to Abram for his new community, as to him, it represented “a nation of cozy little kingdoms ruled by Father”\(^\text{49}\);\(^\text{49}\) while yes, it has a divine interpretation, I believe the greater interpretation should be seen as little prayer cells overseen by Abram himself as Father. Thus, the doctrine ultimately gave Abram the power he so desired.

Moving forward with his influence, it was in 1952 that Abram both strategically inserted himself in the election and influenced his followers’ votes. “Abram had directed his two-hundred-plus prayer cells across the nation to devote themselves to spreading ‘alertness to the right choice and vote in the November elections.’ God, he wrote, had spoken these words to him:

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 179.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 180.
‘your mission is to concentrate on a few men in leadership capacity’”.\textsuperscript{50} With his influence with power, and his use of his connection with God, most of his candidates won that year. With his candidates winning their offices, Abram was thus able to step deeper in the politically powerful scene, the scene I believe was his ultimate, behind-the-scenes goal to influence, and thus, the National Prayer Breakfast was born.\textsuperscript{51} In short, the Prayer Breakfast functioned as a way to get politically powerful individuals, from all over the world, together for peace, breakfast, and a political deal or two. It was with the creation of this, now annual, event that planted the seed to realizing that perhaps America was actually a Christian nation, or at least officially being portrayed to be so. With the creation of this event, Abram put the communal needs of America on the forefront and used doctrine to find and promote answers.

Perhaps this creation of the National Prayer Breakfast was the biggest success to come from Abram’s legacy, as it will be discussed later; it was certainly the last ‘big’ thing that he contributed before his death. The year was 1966, and as he got older, Abram started to focus more on the lessons of what he wanted his Idea to teach, rather than scheming, recruiting, and planning, as he did in his earlier days. “‘The strength of the wolf is the pack’, Abram reminded his disciples that year, retreating into parable as he advanced into his last days, ‘but the strength of the pack is the wolf’”,\textsuperscript{52} clearly Abram was concerned about his successor and what would happen to his group after he passed, and even more clearly, power was still his main concern. Abram was set on finding the right wolf to lead the pack after he himself would be gone, and he wanted that wolf to remember that who he had in his pack was key to the survival of the power

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 194 – 195

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 206.
of the group. In 1969, Abram was “‘promoted’ to heaven” and the wolf that he had chosen to lead the pack was a seemingly friendly Oregonian named Doug Coe.\textsuperscript{53}

Despite The Family’s desire to be behind-the-scenes, and being described by various persons as a “shadowy figure”\textsuperscript{54} Douglas Coe, Abram’s successor, has been ranked by Time magazine as being one of the top twenty-five most influential Evangelicals in America ever.\textsuperscript{55} Within the Time article itself, it even states Coe’s relationship with both powerful and influential people; “he specializes in the spiritual struggles of the powerful”,\textsuperscript{56} which is highly reflective of how he has been able to keep Abram’s goal alive, and how the group has maintained both its influence and power. As seen by members of The Family, Doug Coe is described as being “closer to Jesus than perhaps any other man alive, and thus privy to information the rest of us are too spiritually ‘immature’ to understand”.\textsuperscript{57} Coe has set himself up to be in a position of absolute power- power so strong that members of the group believe that he himself is the closest thing to Jesus Christ. Unlike Abram who had “cared most for America”, Coe took it to the next level as he “cared most for the American Christ”, thus combining two aspects of life in which the United States has maintained to be separate; church and state.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 260.


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} Jeff Sharlet, \textit{The Family}, 21.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 223.
Doug Coe was not the only one bidding to be Abram’s successor but he was the one who won the title despite the other candidates’ qualifications. Perhaps it was due to the fact that he had spent many years studying Abram and learning persuasion and authority. Coe understood Abram’s emphasis on understanding power and how to go about gaining and maintaining such power through the belief-centered lens. He studied how to base belief off of what he could convince the community they needed; he studied what Abram had spent years perfecting, and he understood that maintaining power and influence in America is what Abram wanted for the future of The Family. Yet, perhaps Coe was too perfect of the successor. According to Jeff Sharlet, what Coe brought to The Family with his leadership was a “darker appeal”.

Building on what was left behind by Abram, that is, the power, the people, and the basic tools, Coe was able to expand the religion behind The Idea. For Coe, he thought, “‘religion’ distracts people from Jesus... and allows them to isolate Christ’s will from their work in the world”. That is, he believed that God’s law and our law should be completely the same, identical. Thus, Coe introduced the phrase ‘Jesus plus nothing’ which became the doctrine he preached. I believe that Coe had to bring religion back into The Idea, since he was present in a time much different than Abram’s. Abram was in charge during a time where terms such as ‘extremism’ and ‘religious corruption’ were hardly mentioned in conversation, whereas Coe’s legacy coincides with such terms being mentioned seemingly weekly throughout various news stories, daily conversations, and other media. Therefore, the community needed Jesus to become more present, more obvious rather than hidden by the agenda of power, or distracted with what

59 Ibid., 210.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 29-30.
was going on in the world. Despite going into Doug Coe’s personal familial history, he has a son named David who shares this same passion for bringing Jesus back into The Family’s forefront, but yet, of course with the, now underlying, presence of maintaining power. From Sharlet’s time living at Ivanwald, the communal home for brothers of The Family, he recounts a time in which David preached to all the brothers regarding how they were there “to learn how to rule the world”.\textsuperscript{62} Furthermore, from this lesson on how to rule the world, what Sharlet took away from David was the idea that, “we’re just toys. Created for God. For His pleasure, nothing else. Just a toy. Period”.\textsuperscript{63} This is the same kind of thinking as his father, that Jesus will just use us as He pleases, thus establishing power the way it was “meant to be”; it is divine will.

The idea of “Jesus plus nothing” did not originate with Coe. Instead it started with a man named Dawson Trotman, of whom Coe was a disciple before becoming involved with Abram.\textsuperscript{64} Trotman, Sharlet considers to be perhaps a “cruder version of Abram”; both men started in opposition of the New Deal and were considered “old-schooled fundamentalists”.\textsuperscript{65} Apparently for Trotman, the fact that fundamentalism itself was too intellectual became the reason he began the concept of ‘Jesus plus nothing’, in order to make it simpler.\textsuperscript{66} It was at one of Trotman’s retreats that Coe actually figured out, thanks to Jesus, what to make of the Christian religion, as he had struggled with remembering who was who and who did what in the traditional Christian stories. According to an apparent message from Jesus, Coe was told that all the stories he

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 211.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 210.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 211.
couldn’t keep straight could easily all be broken down to love. Yet further, according to what Jesus told Coe, love was synonymous with obey; therefore this experience planted the seed of obedience to him. He was to “obey, then teach”. Perhaps this emphasis on obedience was what made Coe more appealing to Abram as a future successor, as with obedience comes power as members cannot refuse. Yet despite being a disciple of Dawson Trotman, Coe was seen as a natural leader, which perhaps is why he has been so successful within The Family.

Aside from bringing the group new concepts regarding Jesus and faith, Coe managed to bring the group more and more influence regarding lives that the group touched. In order to obtain more power, you need to have more influence, and Coe understood this. For him, the way he thought about gaining more influence was to “convert the weak, encircle the strong”. While the organization was already out of public eyes for the most part, with Coe’s leadership, the organization only plunged further underground. Abram had successfully laid the foundations for this mega-group to exist but Coe cemented its priorities: secrecy and influence, ultimately resulting in untraceable power. As Sharlet says, “The Fellowship would avoid at all turns any appearance of an organization, even as Coe crafted ever more complex hierarchies behind-the-scenes”. By bringing the group out of the public eye completely, aside from the annual Prayer Breakfast, Coe was able to stay behind the scenes. That is, he was able to maintain power without being noticed by ‘outsiders’, or people not affiliated with The Family.

67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 213.
69 Ibid., 222.
70 Ibid., 223.
For Coe, success was not personal, not his own doing, but rather the work of Jesus. This is another difference between him and Abram. Coe introduced the concept of Jesus plus nothing and revamped the biblical influence in the doctrine the Family now preached. Furthermore, whereas Abram seemed to have played ignorant of the dangerous men he involved himself with, most noticeably ex-Nazis, Coe realized and thrived on the understanding that he would have to deal with “violent characters”. For Coe, the Idea encompassed the concept of the cult of personality coupled with concept of Jesus plus nothing. This allowed him to put anything in the equation, Jesus plus nothing, and make it work; “it was a theology of total malleability, perfect for American expansion”. Coe was succeeding where Abram lacked focus; Coe was bringing Jesus to the forefront, again, of the message. This is where The Family’s intermingling with religion and politics takes the plunge to be all encompassing for the members and friends of the organization. After all, who could argue with Jesus and what Jesus ‘wanted’? Successfully, Coe had started to use Jesus and religion in order to gain more influence, more power, especially in American politics. Perhaps it is his charisma, his understanding of the cult of personality, or his reliance on Jesus, but Doug Coe understood how communal needs determine belief. Yes, he understood how to get the community to ‘need’ something, and how to use belief, Jesus, to provide for that need. By providing for the communal need, he gained his power. Through this, the circular relationship between community and belief provided by an organization can be seen as well.

*Domestic Influence*

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71 Ibid., 216.

72 Ibid., 217.
A huge part of The Family’s success surrounds how much influence they have had here in the United States. As already mentioned in the introduction, many people may not be aware that the Allegiance underwent a change in 1954 and God was introduced. Further, the individuals who brought this change had ties to the Family. The introduction of God in the nation’s pledge gives some evidence for a deity in which all Americans acknowledge, namely the Christian God. Senator Homer Ferguson led the campaign to have “under God” added to the pledge and obviously won. “In God We Trust” was also added to our currency thanks to congressman Charles E. Bennett. Both Bennett and Ferguson had ties to The Family. Interestingly, Ferguson even gave the opening prayers at the second Presidential Prayer Breakfast.

Supreme Court chief justice Earl Warren was in attendance at the Presidential Prayer Breakfast that year as well. He is quoted as saying that “church and state was fine” as long as “men of religious faith” were the ones leading the ‘Christian land, governed by Christian principles’.

At another Prayer Breakfast, President George H. W. Bush “praised Doug Coe for what he described as ‘quiet diplomacy’”. Perhaps this was a public ‘thank you’, to Coe, for his efforts in bringing the United States that much closer to becoming a Christian nation. These two examples explicitly demonstrate the blurred line between church and state as well as the link of powerful politicians to the Family. Maybe Abram got lucky with the men he influenced, but more than likely, he targeted his audience. After all, some other highly recognizable names come

73 Ibid., 198.
74 Ibid., 199.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 25.
up when looking at close ties with the Family are; Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Dwight Eisenhower\textsuperscript{77} and Hillary Clinton.\textsuperscript{78} Abram was able to see what his community of powerful, political, elitists needed. They needed something to bring unity, and he brought them the belief that would do just that; thus the change in the pledge and currency of the United States.

Another interesting piece in American history, thanks to Abram’s Prayer Breakfast, was the 1958 propagandist film \textit{The Blob}. Kate Phillips, a screenwriter, and Irvin Yeaworth, an evangelical filmmaker, met at the 1957 Prayer Breakfast.\textsuperscript{79} Unfortunately, it really isn’t that great of a film. While Abram neither introduced the two individuals nor came up with the idea for the film, the timing and focus of Abram at that time mirrored the result. If it were not for his Prayer Breakfast, we wouldn’t have the movie representation of the Cold War and the Red Army. As mentioned previously, Abram feared communism and the Family grew out of the opportunities presented by the Cold War and FDR’s New Deal. How funny that this film came out of a Prayer Breakfast led by such a man as Abram; its as if his fears were the baseline of the movie, after all, they were the baseline for his teachings at the time. This film is a product of what I believe is the idea of ‘communal needs determining belief’ in action. America needed a bad guy, needed help of escaping the communist ‘blob’. Thus, Abram delivered and from his teachings and Prayer Breakfast, the belief was outlined and supported.

\textit{Influence Abroad}

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid. 33.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid. 272.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 182.
“There are people responsible for cities, and above them people responsible for regions, and above them people responsible for countries. And above them, there is Doug Coe”.  
Doug Coe understood the power trip that would come from expanding the Family’s influence to as many other countries that he could. In essence, Coe would see Abram’s efforts regarding international influence, and expand on it. Coe took The Family into more international territories; “Jesus must rule every nation through the vessel of American power”, and he was well aware of this possibility. Granted, the times of Abram and Coe faced different challenges and were in different contexts. While Abram was focused on making America great and defending it from the Communists, Coe was able to focus on more abroad influence as there wasn’t any dooming threat during his control. Coe has even been quoted as saying “we work with power wherever we can... build new power where we can’t”, which shows his dedication to obtaining power footholds, even if he has to create them himself. The further you could spread your Idea, the further your power reached, and thus Coe needed to gain international influence. And he did just that. For him, Abram’s prayer cells and spiritual conferences were not enough. He understood the mission of the Idea to be “an empire of spirit”, one where “Jesus must rule every nation through the vessel of American power”.

“Coe used the power of the American flag to win submission to the fundamentalist God of key men in little nations nobody cared about and big nations nobody understood”. Somalia,

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80 Ibid., 244.
81 Ibid., 218.
82 Ibid., 25.
83 Ibid., 218.
84 Ibid., 222.
Angola, Brazil, Uganda, Mongolia were just a few examples of the little nations in which Coe found he could gain influence.\(^8^5\) Granted these nations were ruled by dictators when Coe came into contact with them, but that did not matter when it came to gaining influence; Coe would influence whomever he could, no matter what horrors they committed. Doug Coe “would pray with anyone and he would bless anyone so long as they had the strength to submit their nation to God”,\(^8^6\) and that showed when he would work with the dictators such as Siad Barre of Somalia, Jonas Savimbi from Angola, General Costa e Silva from Brazil, and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda.\(^8^7\) In these small countries, The Family has been successful in implementing and persuading political laws, most explicitly regarding both gay rites abortion rites.\(^8^8\)

Their status as dictators really did not bother Coe. He is quoted as addressing the issue, “I don’t turn my back to anyone. You know, the bible is full of mass murderers”.\(^8^9\) The fact that Doug Coe would align himself and his organization with such men with such reputations is fascinating; it shows that he was not afraid of dealing with whomever he can as long as it resulted in his influence and the spread of his power-holding. With these little nations, Coe was able to address the needs of the community, mainly decided by such dictators, and form the beliefs he preached to fit those needs. Perhaps it was easy for Coe to overlook the sins of the brutal dictators, as with elite fundamentalism such as his, he didn’t necessarily care about sin at

\(^{8^5}\) Ibid.

\(^{8^6}\) Ibid., 218.

\(^{8^7}\) Ibid., 222-223.


\(^{8^9}\) Jeff Sharlet, *The Family*, 222.
all. Rather, he cared about salvation and understood it “in terms of nations, not souls, embodied by the rulers to whom God had given power, whether through ballots or bullets”.90

Prayer Breakfast

While the Presidential Prayer Breakfast could have been included under the section ‘domestic influence’, I believe this achievement is so influential it deserves its own separate section. By no means does this downplay the other achievements the men with the power reached, however, this one is the most consistent year after year. “The Family’s only publicized gathering is the National Prayer Breakfast, which it established in 1953 and which, with congressional sponsorship, it continues to organize every February at the Washington D.C. Hilton”.91 Every president since President Eisenhower’s first attendance has attended this event.92 The Prayer Breakfast was earlier coined the Presidential Prayer Breakfast but then later renamed to the National Prayer Breakfast; perhaps the term presidential overtook the focus of the event exposing what really was going on. For Abram, when he first created this event, hoped that it would “lop off the left end of the political spectrum and cauterize the wound” regarding what the United States was currently facing politically and threatened by internationally.93 Thus from the beginning, and as its first name shows, this event combined political power with agenda with religion. Abram was able to gather the most politically powerful men in a room and “pray” together over breakfast food, while also discussing politics and other business deals. At this first Prayer Breakfast, Abram “presented Eisenhower’s cabinet to God. ‘Save them from self-

90 Ibid., 220.
91 Ibid., 22.
92 Ibid., 196.
93 Ibid., 195.
deception, conceit, and the folly of independence of Thee, oh God”

Abram successfully took the community of powerful men, all bound together through their power, and preached a belief solely based upon what they ‘needed’.

Despite the name change, these Prayer Breakfasts continue today as an annual event even picked up by a TV outlet. Coe has taken the foundations laid by Abram regarding the event and made it worldwide. This reflects how Abram and Coe used the event to reflect America’s ‘needs’ of the times. Whereas Abram’s focus needed to be on mostly domestic issues and strategy given the Cold War and the New Deal, Coe has been able to further his focus into international waters by inviting leaders from other nations. By opening the doors to the event, Coe has been able to take Abram’s original 400 men and raise it to anywhere around 3000 dignitaries from around the world, who pay $425 just to attend the event. By opening the doors, Coe opens again his influence, “the breakfast is regarded by the Family as merely a tool in a larger purpose: to recruit the powerful attendees into smaller, more frequent prayer meetings, where they can ‘meet Jesus man to man’”. By hosting this breakfast, The Family not only encourages political and business deals to be made among attendees, but it also allows them to further promote their needs by scheduling new meeting groups and convince the greater community at the breakfast of further beliefs to be discussed in more prayer meetings. Coe may never be seen at this event, as he enjoys leading from behind the scenes, but let it be known that “nobody speaks from that

94 Ibid., 197.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid., 22.
97 Ibid., 24.
podium, including the president, without Doug’s nod of approval”.

It is as if at this event, Coe has the ultimate power and control, even more so than the president.

Conclusion

The Family is still very much functional, successful, and influential in modern politics. Reverend Rob Schenck, founder of an offshoot group similar to the Family had this to say about The Family’s powerful influence, “you need them as your friends. Even Hillary will need them. They keep a sort of cultural homeostasis in Washington. Washington right now is town where if you’re going to be powerful, you need religion”.

Hillary Clinton has been tied to this group numerous times throughout Jeff Sharlet’s book, interviews, and even various webpages associated with The Family. She even writes of Coe in her memoir Living History, and describes him as “a unique presence in Washington: a genuinely loving spiritual mentor and guide to anyone, regardless of party or faith, who wants to deepen his or her relationship with God.”

Hillary learned from the teachings of The Family as well as other fundamentalist teachers such as Billy Graham and even “became a regular visitor to The Family’s C Street House in 2005”.

In Sharlet’s book there is even an entire section dedicated to the relationship between Hillary Clinton and The Family.

She is not a member, or as they would call it, a sister of the family, rather she is simply just considered a friend. According to the members, Hillary Clinton is even “more chosen than


98 Ibid., 260.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid., 272.

101 Ibid., 276.
the rest of us”.\textsuperscript{102} Since she is not a member of the group, Hillary works with them when their interests intersect, as they do not necessarily agree on everything. The doctrine of Jesus plus nothing is one of the sources of intersection. This doctrine is considered “diplomatic” in practice and is described as “not confronting ideas but rather coexisting with them. Its cells multiplying by absorbing enemies rather than destroying them” and love is the common denominator in all situations.\textsuperscript{103} The love of and from Jesus made things what they are, we are just pawns. Would the average American citizen have known this? Probably not. One of our 2016 presidential candidates has close ties to this organization. As I sit here writing this, I can hear CNN in the background saying that Hillary Clinton has won four out of five primaries of the day. The Family is still functional, successful, and influential in modern politics and is still very much powerful and relevant in American history.

How does a religious group gain so much influence, nationally and internationally, in politics and in business, resulting in so much power? The Family preaches Jesus plus nothing and has a targeted audience; in essence they preach power to power. They target individuals who have wealth and power, politically or through business, and they preach that everything they do boils down to Jesus. Through obedience and submission to Jesus, somehow the members will find the answers they search for. With a founder who understood the importance of laying the groundwork Idea for his successor while also getting his foot in the door with powerful political men, the group was sure to succeed. By having a successor like Doug Coe, the group transformed beyond what I believe Abram could have imagined. Coe understood the power of being heard, the power of spreading influence abroad, and the power of secrecy. Both Abram and

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 272.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
Coe were successful in realizing the communal needs of their day and then building belief from it. What came after the interactions, how they used the relationship between community and belief, was what they had wanted to preach all along; they created the theology of power.
Bibliography


