

Jeff Sharlet. 2008. *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*. New York, New York: Harper Collins. pp. 454. \$29.95. ISBN-978-0-06-055979-3

In 2010, Dr. George Alan Rekers became the latest of Christian Conservative leaders to make a very public fall from grace. As one of the leading voices in the movement that aims to bring America back to a strong moral foundation, Dr. Rekers tried to explain his actions, which involved a ten-day European vacation with a male prostitute as his only traveling companion. The doctor has said that he hired the young man, whom he contacted from the website *rentboy*, to carry his luggage for him on the trip and to counsel his companion on the virtues of a healthy heterosexual life. Since then, many of Rekers' associates distanced themselves as his explanations became increasingly untenable. Rekers' *bona fides* as a Christian Conservative clearly show he has been at the forefront of the Christian Conservative movement. A Baptist minister, Rekers co-founded the Family Research Council with James Dobson in 1993. He was also a prominent member of the National Association for Research and Therapy on Homosexuality (NARTH), which advocates therapy on gay teenagers in order to cure them of their sexual orientation, and had been hired as a consultant for Republican office

\*For clarity, references to the book *The Family* will be italics, and references to the actual group "The Family" will be in quotations.

holders on the possibility of converting homosexuals. In the wake of a series of improprieties on part of religious figures such as Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Baker, and Ted Haggard, the question has arisen as to whether religious conservatism can survive as a plausible influence in American politics.

Jeff Sharlet provides one perspective in his book *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*. Published in 2008, *The Family*\* is part investigative journalism, part historical thesis, and part political analysis. *The Family* makes an important contribution to understanding how Christian fundamentalism has exerted such significant influence in American culture and politics.

For example, Sharlet writes that scandal does not destroy American fundamentalism, “rather, like a natural fire that purges the forest of overgrowth, it makes the movement stronger” (Sharlet, 2010: 322). The scandal *du jure* at the time of Sharlet’s book was the downfall of Pastor Ted Haggard from Colorado. Haggard, who at the pinnacle of his power talked to President George W. Bush via conference call each Monday, was caught with methamphetamine and a male prostitute. For the believers, this just means that Haggard was doing great work and getting under the Devil’s skin. The more powerful the Christian, the greater the temptation, hence the greater likelihood that sin will befall the devout. To the megachurch activists, these actions show the human frailties that can only be mended by God. However, Sharlet notes that finding the true way of life is not an act of individual discovery but an acceptance to follow the path cleared by trailblazers: the economic and political elites.

Sharlet begins his book with an introduction to “The Family” by describing his own experiences as an intern for this communal organization. Sharlet worked during the day cleaning up the rooms at places called “The Ceders” or “Ivanwald” in northern Virginia or the “C Street House” found in Washington DC. These establishments exist for political leaders to relax and to have Bible study and to also get below-market rent as in the case for the C Street House (Boston, 2009: 175). At night, Sharlet took notes of his observations and conversations with other interns in the Bible studies with members of “The Family,” including the group’s reputed leaders, Doug Coe.

Coe has led the family since 1966. Sharlet describes Coe as a man that advocates a transition to a comfortable, accepting type of “soft

authoritarianism” for the United States. Coe believes the path to this Christian paradise will be built through submission to Jesus and his earthly representatives, such as Coe himself. Once people “soften their hearts to authority,” they will naturally lose interest in democracy, since it only fosters rebelliousness (Sharlet, p. 40). Sharlet documents how attractive this vision has been to conservatives by noting the number of elected officials that have taken up residence in Ivanwald.

Anti-democratic religious groups would warrant little concern if they were confined to backwoods America, and remained small and isolated in their membership. Sharlet describes the “The Family” as a powerful, almost sinister group that works behind the scenes as a lobbying organization for many of the world’s most infamous despots. Some of the twentieth century’s best-known *generalissimos* such as Costa e Silva of Brazil, Suharto of Indonesia, and Park Chung Hee of South Korea all used their connections with “The Family” to get funding and military hardware from Washington to strengthen their regimes. Sharlet uses this group’s support for autocrats as for his contention that Christian conservatism of this stripe is less a religion of charity and equality and more a religion of obeisance to the wealthy and powerful.

Sharlet delves into the growth of Christian fundamentalism throughout the text. In the process he answers the question how this segment of Christianity supports the rich and powerful rather than mistrusts them. Any reading of the New Testament would suggest that Christianity would find the excesses of capitalism to be damaging to the soul and harmful to one’s fellow man. However, Sharlet documents how American fundamentalism, a Christian belief that followers should adhere to the “fundamentals” of the faith and avoid sectarian confusion, has evolved from “liberation to authoritarianism”(Sharlet, p. 4).

Sharlet writes that in the 1920s Billy Sunday, the Joel Osteen of his day, preached the prosperity gospel and that God loves the wealthy, setting the stage for the founder of “The Family,” Abraham Vereide. A Norwegian immigrant, Vereide fell in love with the United States and the opportunities it could bring. What he loved most about his newly adopted country were the rich folks. He served as a missionary to them and counseled them not to give up their wealth but to carry the yolk of the powerful and to take care of the poor, much like a *caudillo* would be expected to take care of the peons in Mexico. Sharlet finds the best way to describe Vereide’s world view by using the man’s own

words: “To the big man went strength, to the little man went need. Only the big man was capable of mending the world”(p. 89). Vereide’s family has been helping “big men” govern the world for well over seventy years.

Sharlet’s research hypothesis—that would-be authoritarians are hiding in plain sight in the nation’s capital—should concern anyone who believes in democracy. Such a statement is histrionic for those who believe democracy and pluralism still rule America. But are democracy and pluralism the governing forces of this country because the elites tell us so? As C. Wright Mills writes in his pivotal work *The Power Elite*, “many who believe that there is no elite, or at any rate none of any consequence, rest their argument upon what men of affairs believe about themselves, or at least assert in public” (Mill, 1959: 5). We find from Sharlet’s investigative journalism that the assertions made in private by elites are not so democratic. For political scientists, Sharlet supplements the arguments made within our own research community that democracy is not in control of this country (Winters and Page, 2009: 744).

Of even greater concern for democrats in Oklahoma is the fact that so many prominent politicians of this state are active with “The Family.” Former Senator Nickles and Senators Inhofe and Coburn have strong ties to Doug Coe and his organization. In fact a former aid of Senator Nickles’ is quoted in *The Family* as pining for the day when a kingdom of believers would be established in America (Sharlet, p. 6). It is always paradoxical for a free country to debate how much freedom should be allowed for those who wish to take away freedom. Following Madison’s admonition in *Federalist 10*, the best way to deal with antidemocrats in a democracy is to shed light on their practices and beliefs. This is Sharlet’s most important contribution. Sharlet does not want this powerful network to be destroyed. That would only cause the group go deeper underground and behind the scenes or it would help the group make the case that its persecution shows how Satan is alive and well in the United States. Instead Sharlet advocates that “The Family” be exposed for what it truly is, which is another lobbying group. For all the handshakes, smiles and Bible studies, “The Family” turns out to be one more interest group with the intent to keep the rich and powerful , more rich and more powerful. Jeff Sharlet’s *The Family* describes the marriage between religion and politics and how the offspring are a privileged lot. This reminds us that preservation of democracy requires

constant vigilance. But democracy cannot be preserved, let alone strengthened, unless the democrats know what they are up against. Sharlet lets us know, and that makes his research vital.

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