

DR RAYNOR JOHNSON

Did respected author turn blind eye to cult's child abuse?

Dr Raynor Johnson
Co-Founder of The Family

THREE months after the death of Dr Raynor Johnson, an English physicist who was also a highly respected psychical researcher, philosopher and spiritual explorer, Australian police raided a secluded property on Lake Eildon, Victoria, owned by a group with which he was closely connected.

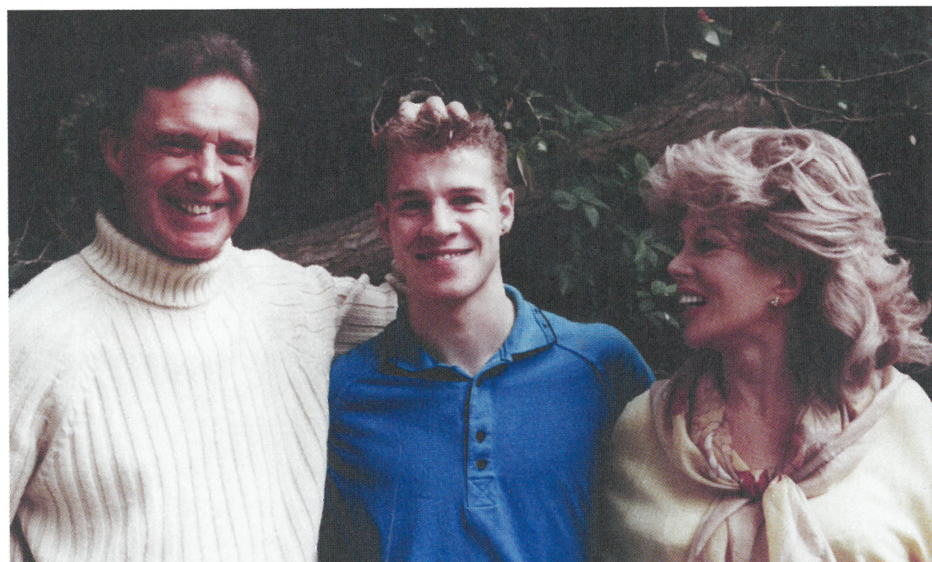
Johnson had spent the last 20 years of his life in quiet retirement in the Dandenong suburb of Melbourne, having become a co-founder of a secretive cult known as The Family which also had property in the area.

It was run by Anne Hamilton-Byrne and her husband Bill, using as their base a property in Ferny Creek, named Santiniketan, where they held meetings in which Johnson regularly participated.

The Family also owned a rural retreat, Kai Lama, at Taylor Bay on Lake Eildon, Victoria, which was filled with children they had "acquired"; some adopted and others taken from their mothers as soon as they were born.

They were impeccably dressed and most had their hair dyed blonde, to look like one large happy family. But in reality most suffered deprivation, starvation and regular beatings. They were also given drugs, including LSD.

Was Raynor Johnson, who died in



Bill and Anne Hamilton-Byrne with "Family" member Adam Lancaster

May 1987, aware of what was happening behind Kai Lama's closed doors?

It's difficult to say, and a BBC Four TV documentary in its Storyville series, titled *The Cult That Stole Children - Inside The Family*, screened in the UK at the end of November, did not provide a conclusive answer. But it seems likely that he was either complicit or gave tacit support to some of its activities.

What the BBC programme made clear, through interviews with some of the children who were rescued by the police on 14 August 1987 after tip-offs from two child escapees, is that many of the 28 children who are said to have passed through its hands are still struggling to

come to terms with what they experienced almost 30 years later.

That is particularly true of those who learned later in life that their mothers – some of whom had become pregnant out of wedlock – had given them up at birth, to be raised by Anne Hamilton-Byrne as her own children. Others were acquired through adoption scams.

Johnson, whose books on various aspects of human spirituality have influenced several generations of truth-seekers, is an unlikely individual to be involved in such a scandal.

Born in Leeds, England, he earned an MA at the University of Oxford and a PhD in physics at the University of London

before moving to Australia to become master of the Methodist Queen's College at the University of Melbourne, a post he held for three decades.

But, like so many others, including lawyers, teachers, doctors and nurses, Johnson fell under Anne Hamilton-Byrne's charismatic spell. He is described in the documentary as one of her first initiates and he brought to the cult "his whole cohort of extremely intellectual and powerful people".

They all came to believe that she was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ in female form, and therefore a living god, and that others in the group had been the Apostles. According to one Melbourne newspaper, which saw his diary after his passing, Raynor Johnson also came to believe that he was John the Baptist reborn.

The Family's purpose was to create a master race which would be rescued by aliens when cataclysms soon struck the Earth.

Hundreds of people turned up for their meetings, including people of high standing in the community,

Johnson was aware, during his lifetime, of what he called "nasty allegations" that had been made against the cult and the programme included part of a filmed interview in which he said that if such people would make those claims publicly "we can take action against them".

Worrying, for those who might have hoped Johnson's reputation would not be tarnished by the revelations about

the family, is the evidence that those children who tried to escape were taken to Newhaven Hospital, a private psychiatric hospital owned by one of the members, for treatment that involved hallucinogenic drugs.

A TV programme that probed The Family while it was still active resulted in the interviewer being told by its management that he needed to return to make another programme portraying it positively. Significantly, the owner of Channel ATVO, which broadcast both programmes in 1971, was Sir Reginald Ansett, a friend of Raynor Johnson.

Johnson was well known among parapsychologists and Spiritualists in London. In the 1970s, readers of his many books, including *The Imprisoned Splendour* (1953), *Psychical Research* (1955), *Nurslings of Immortality* (1957), *Watcher on the Hills* (1959) and *The Spiritual Path* (1972), were eager to hear him lecture.

He did so regularly, to packed audiences, at the College of Psychic Studies in South Kensington and was greatly admired by its principal, Paul Beard. His writings and lectures introduced many people who are currently active in the spiritual world to new concepts and philosophies which may well be valid, despite his involvement with The Family.

Johnson appears to make no reference in his books to the cult with which he was so intimately connected. That is because its motto was *Unseen, Unheard, Unknown*. Secrecy was of paramount importance and

its motto became the title of the first inside exposure of life in the commune, written by one of the children, Sarah Hamilton-Byrne (1995). In it she claimed the children were told that Johnson was their godfather.

The Hamilton-Byrnes fled Australia after the scandal was revealed but were eventually brought back and tried. Unlike the children they imprisoned, they escaped incarceration. Anne and Bill Hamilton-Byrne were each fined AU\$5,000 for making a false declaration.

The Family still has followers and owns various assets. Bill Hamilton-Byrne has passed on but Anne is still alive though suffering from dementia and living in a care home.

As for Raynor C. Johnson, his reputation has largely survived the scandal, and a wing of Melbourne University's Queen's College, whose master he was for 30 years, is still named after him despite protests.

The college's own response to repeated calls for a name change is that Raynor Johnson was "never associated with any wrong-doing and was not accused of any crime" despite providing The Family with "moral and financial support". ■

The BBC documentary coincides with the publication of *The Family* (Scribe) by Chris Johnston and Rosie Jones. Johnston is a journalist with Melbourne-based newspaper *The Age* and documentary filmmaker Rosie Jones directed the BBC Four programme

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Immaculately dressed and some sporting dyed hair, this image of The Family's children gives no indication of their unhappiness and suffering