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'Big Brother Australia' evictee recounts youth in controversial religious group

David Tchappat, a popular housemate recently evicted from the television reality program Big Brother Australia, has spoken out critically of his childhood experiences in the controversial religious group "Raven-Taylor-Hales Brethren", referred to in Australian media as "Exclusive Brethren". Tchappat was a participant in the edition Big Brother Australia 2008, and was voted off the show on May 25.

Tchappat, 33, a former police officer and presently a firefighter, left the controversial group at age 19. He says he attempted to leave at age 17 but was brought back by members of the group and "interrogated" by group leadership for months. Up until he left he had never eaten in a restaurant, listened to the radio or been to the movie theater. According to Macquarie National News, Tchappat's former community numbers number approximately 15,000 in Australia. Raven-Taylor-Hales Brethren is a sect of Protestant Christianity and a breakaway group from Exclusive Brethren.

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Due to his departure from the group, Tchappat had to break off contact with family members still inside the organization, though at times he speaks with his parents. Members do not vote in elections because they feel it contradicts their belief that God should determine who is in power, but they provide finances to the Liberal Party of Australia. Tchappat's cousin Andrew left the group a few months after he did.

After getting to know his fellow *Big Brother Australia* housemates for three weeks, Tchappat recounted some of his experiences in his former religious group. "Look, I don't like to say it's a cult, but it basically is. My whole life was controlled. I didn't have a say in it myself," he said on one episode. He grew up in the Raven-Taylor-Hales Brethren community in Gosford, New South Wales, and explained: "It's based on Christian values but it's very strict. So I had no TV, no radio, no computer, never been to a movie or a restaurant or kissed a girl - you name it, I didn't do it."

In an interview Tuesday with former *Big Brother Australia* runner-up Tim Brunero on *Macquarie National News*, Tchappat said he is planning on releasing a book about his experiences growing up in the controversial religious group. "I've spent the last two years writing it. It just happened that I got into Big Brother in the tail-end of it. Obviously there's a few more chapters to add, but I'm really pumped, it's an interesting story," he said. He plans to title the book *Losing my Religion*.

He was also interviewed by *ninemsn* on Tuesday, and said he does not regret discussing his experiences in Raven-Taylor-Hales Brethren on Australian national television. "I'm an example of how you can go out and be successful. I say to people that if you are thinking about leaving, and you're serious, take a punt and give it a go. You can always go back if you don't like it." Former members of the group were inspired by Tchappat's comments and empathized with his experiences in posts to *Big Brother* Internet message boards.

Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd criticized the Raven-Taylor-Hales Brethren group in August 2007. At the time he was leader of the Australian Labor Party, and requested that then-Prime Minister John Howard reveal what took place in a private meeting with senior members of the religious group. "I believe this is an extremist cult and sect. I also believe that it breaks up families," said Rudd to reporters in Adelaide according to *The Sydney Morning Herald*. He noted that the organization was being investigated by the Australian Federal Police for prior election activities, and wanted to know how much funding had been given by the group to the Liberal Party.

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During his election campaign Rudd called on Australian federal agencies including the anti-money laundering agency Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (AUSTRAC), the Australian Federal Police, the Australian Taxation Office, and the Australian Electoral Commission to investigate the activities of Raven-Taylor-Hales Brethren. In spite of Rudd's criticism of Raven-Taylor-Hales Brethren, the religious group was guaranteed AUD10 million in taxpayer funding for its school facilities in January 2008. Rudd had promised during his election campaign to maintain education funding levels for non-government schools if he became Prime Minister.

Australia media reported on May 18 that Rudd rejected a request from former members of Raven-Taylor-Hales Brethren to investigate the group. 34 ex-members of the religious group had sent a letter to the Prime Minister's office asking him to investigate how they were treated in the the organization. A spokesman for Rudd said that the ex-members should instead take their request to the police, and that a government investigation would raise religious freedom issues. Rudd's chief of staff David Epstein said that the Prime Minister "does not resile from the views he expressed last year" and "remains concerned about the reported imposition of doctrines that weaken family bonds".

Australian Greens spokeswoman Christine Milne told Australia's *ABC News* said that the well-being of children still in the group should be of primary concern. "The issue here is not about religious freedom, it is about what this cult is doing to destroy families and effectively to undermine the law," said Milne.

Ex-member Peter Flinn, who wrote the letter sent to Rudd which was signed by 33 other former members, was disappointed by the Prime Minister's response. "We just want to highlight other equally fundamental human rights, such as access to family who remain Brethren members, a right callously denied for decades," he said in a statement in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Senator Bob Brown of the Australian Greens party has proposed a government inquiry into the group's public funding, tax concessions and possible practices that harm children.

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