

The New York Times

Son of Evangelical Royalty Turns His Back, and Tells the Tale

By Mark Oppenheimer

AUG. 19, 2011

NORTHAMPTON, Mass. — In every line of work, there are family businesses. But no business is more defined by dynasties and nepotism than evangelical preaching. Lyman Beecher, Bob Jones, Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Robert H. Schuller, Jim Bakker: all had sons who became ministers.

It is never easy stepping into Dad's shoes, of course. But when the family business is religion, it is especially perilous. That is one of the central laments, anyway, of "Sex, Mom, & God," a new memoir by Frank Schaeffer. To secular Americans, the name Frank Schaeffer means nothing. But to millions of evangelical Christians, the Schaeffer name is royal, and Frank is the reluctant, wayward, traitorous prince. His crime is not financial profligacy, like some pastors' sons, but turning his back on Christian conservatives.

Mr. Schaeffer, who is now 59 and lives north of Boston, grew up in L'Abri, a Christian community in Switzerland founded by his parents, Francis and Edith Schaeffer. In the 1960s, L'Abri was known in Christian circles as a drop-by haven for intellectually curious evangelicals, who could live in the mountains for a few days or even a few years, talking with Francis and Edith about the Bible, Christian art or existentialism. Mr. Schaeffer grew up surrounded by heady talk and, as he discusses in his memoir, tempted by the young women who passed through. He got one of them pregnant when he was 17, then married her.

In the 1970s, Mr. Schaeffer's eccentric, relatively obscure family became wealthy and influential. Books like "The God Who Is There," published in 1968, made his father a hero to American evangelicals, including future political activists like Jerry Falwell. Jesse Helms called the elder Schaeffer his favorite author. Edith Schaeffer also wrote books, and in 1977, Frank, an amateur filmmaker, directed his father in a 10-part documentary, "How Should We Then Live?," in which Francis railed against the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Charles Darwin and abortion. The series was a sensation among evangelicals. Ryan Lizza recently wrote in *The New Yorker* that seeing "How Should We Then Live?" had a "profound influence" on the future presidential candidate Michele Bachmann.

The younger Mr. Schaeffer wrote his own Christian polemics and, helped by the family name, became a well-paid speaker on the evangelical circuit. Having met important Republicans at L'Abri — Barbara Bush, Bob Dole and Betty Ford all visited — Mr. Schaeffer morphed into a versatile right-wing connector. As a literary agent, he discovered Mary Pride, the Christian [home-schooling](#) guru. As he writes in "Sex, Mom, & God," he and his father were present at meetings with Jack Kemp and Presidents Gerald R. Ford, Ronald Reagan and the elder George Bush "when the unholy marriage between the Republican Party" and the pro-life community

“was gradually consummated.” He says that in 1984 he helped produce Mr. Reagan’s book “Abortion and the Conscience of a Nation.”

But “Sex, Mom, & God” is largely a story of Mr. Schaeffer’s doubts, which beset him throughout his career as a conservative activist. His break with conservatism, and with evangelicalism, came in the late 1980s. But he had long been skeptical of many of his bedfellows. He found the television pastor Pat Robertson and some of his colleagues to be “idiots,” he told me last week, when we met for coffee in western Massachusetts. Looking back, Mr. Schaeffer says that once he became disillusioned he “faked it the whole way.”

He faked it because it was easy, it was lucrative, and — rather poignant to say — he felt he had no other options.

“I had been home-schooled,” Mr. Schaeffer told me. “I had no education, no qualifications, and I was groomed to do this stuff. What was I going to do? If two lines are forming, and one has a \$10,000 honorarium to go to a Christian Booksellers Association conference and keynote, and the other is to consider your doubts and get out with nothing else to do, what are you going to do?”

Mr. Schaeffer is still married to his teenage bride, and he now writes novels. He opted out of evangelicalism. But other heirs to Christian dynasties have struggled to uphold their fathers’ good names, and to preserve their institutions. Robert A. Schuller feuded with his father after taking over his father’s Crystal Cathedral ministry, which is now led by his sister — and is in bankruptcy. In 2007, Richard Roberts resigned as president of Oral Roberts University, founded by his father, after he was accused of misusing university funds.

“Any preacher with enough charisma, media savvy and fund-raising appeal can build his own empire,” says Molly Worthen, who teaches religious history at the University of Toronto and has [written about L’Abri](#). “But they are like warlords in tribal Afghanistan, where leadership depends on relationships and force of personality rather than building institutions that can survive after the strongman passes the mantle to his son. Only those evangelical sons who have turned their effort to institution building, rather than trying to recreate their fathers’ charisma, have managed to make the dynasty prosper.”

Then there is Mr. Schaeffer’s more biting take, born of hard experience:

“North Korea and evangelical empires have the same principle of leadership: nepotism to the nth degree. You may not get the call, but you inherit the mailing list.”