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TRUTH-TELLING IN VULGARIA

by Nathan Schneider

Questions for Kathryn Joyce, who bursts the international Christian adoption bubble in her new book, *The Child Catchers*.



“They said father didn’t keep his Life Insurance paid up!”—advertisement for Prudential Insurance Company of America.

You’ve set yourself to questioning the motives of those who take orphan children into their homes. How dare you?

It was at times an incredibly difficult subject to write about because it’s covering something not just personal but, for many people, very primal—the most important family relationships in their lives. But as difficult and uncomfortable as that can be, I often think of some of the first interviews I did on this subject, with U.S. mothers who relinquished children to adoption under coercive or forcible circumstances. Many were still mourning the loss of their children decades later. The perspective of *adoptive* parents has been the center of all discussions of adoption for decades, and there’s no way to

bring in the other sides of this issue without calling into the question the dominant narrative of adoption as always a humanitarian project of orphan rescue. The truth is that adoption often involves a lot of tragedy as well, some of it avoidable.

You reveal international adoption to be a boom-and-bust industry, prowling from country to country, crisis zone to crisis zone. Is this book ultimately a critique of capitalism and empire?

I think in some ways you could say that. What you see in the Christian adoption movement is an incredible emphasis on helping to address the “global orphan crisis”—the idea, based on misleading statistics, that there are hundreds of millions of orphaned children around the world, presumably in need of adoption—by adopting one child at a time. It’s a remarkable extension of privatized social welfare—something that many conservative Christians already believe in, arguing that the church rather than the government is the correct body to help the poor.

Now this movement has taken what is really better understood as a global poverty crisis, a global crisis of instability and poor development, and framed it as an orphan crisis that should be addressed by individual families raising \$35,000 to add to their family. That probably does less than nothing to actually address poverty, because just as an adoption culture grows in U.S. churches, encouraging families to adopt, a corresponding adoption culture can grow in developing nations, where sending children overseas becomes the go-to solution to dealing with any family problems.

In your last book, *Quiverfull*, you took on the super-fertile Christians. Now it’s the less-fertile adopters. What makes you so interested in Christian child-rearing?

One led to the other, as I hear often happens with books. When I started seeing some of my Quiverfull families adopting in large numbers, I wondered why. I started looking into that, and found not just the ties to crisis pregnancy centers' advocacy of domestic adoption that I first reported on, but some of the strings that would eventually lead me to the Christian adoption movement that was then just starting to get seriously organized.

In general, I like stories that are about larger things. Even though both Quiverfull and *The Child Catchers* seem like they're about very specific subjects, in my mind, they expand out to cover a lot of issues—Christianity and feminism for *Quiverfull*; sex, race, class, religion, and colonialism in *The Child Catchers*.

Do you *like* reporting on conservative Christians? Do you like being around these communities, day to day?

Not always. When the stories are relentlessly negative, the only motivation for the story seems like justice. That's a compelling motive, and it goes a long way, but the negativity can still be exhausting. During the reporting of this book, though, for all the stories that left me angry and sad, there were sources—including many conservative, moderate, and liberal Christians—whose work for reform and justice offered an antidote in terms of their bravery, compassion, and clear-sightedness.

What lengths have you gone to to win the trust of sources?

I once sent a source in a very conservative religious group a link to a previous story of mine that I knew she would dislike. I sent it in my first email of introduction and explained where I was coming from in writing it. I was laying my cards on the table, knowing from reading her website that she would look me up anyway and wagering that she would appreciate my

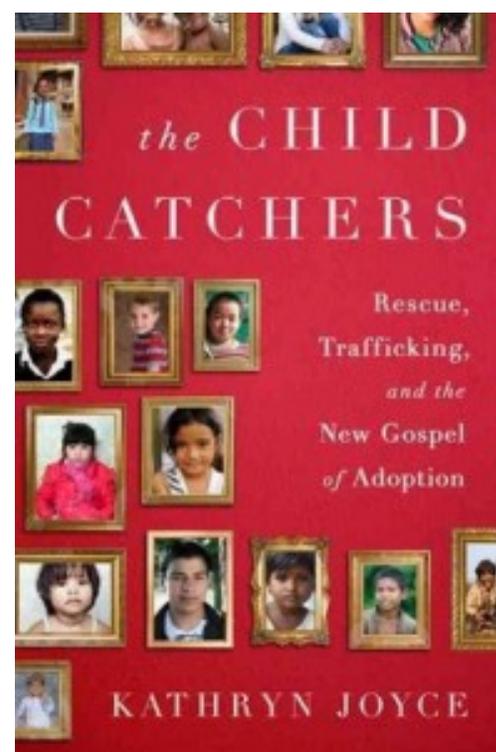
showing respect for her intelligence. It paid off and was one of my more memorable interviews.

Do you expect to convince the Christian adoption enthusiasts of anything?

Maybe. Probably more likely to be convinced are people who already have questions about whether or not adoption is the best way for Christians to embrace what they see as their calling to care for orphans. A lot of Christians in and around this movement, I've found, have already been wary of some of the widespread promotion of adoption. The theological tone has put them off, or what they see as the disregard for mothers or families of origin, or the logical gaps in addressing developing world poverty by raising tens of thousands of dollars to pay a U.S. agency to facilitate a single adoption.

I've heard from some of these people already, and they're glad the conversation is being had out loud, finally. Some others, however, will continue to embrace adoption as a new culture-war issue, pitting unqualified support for mass adoption against targets as varied as UNICEF, the State Department, and abortion-rights supporters.

Despite the couple of knee-jerk denunciations of the book I've come across so far, I've been moved and inspired by the reactions of a number of conservative Christians who are actually grappling with these issues. Considering some Christian readers have written me to say they're afraid



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their ministry will lose funding if they support the book too much, I'm very grateful for those willing to engage with outside criticism.

Is secular adoption more ethical than Christian adoption? How about, say, Hindu adoption?

Not necessarily. Many of the same problems existed in the adoption industry before the mobilization of the Christian adoption movement—for instance, the rush to trending countries creating a boom-bust cycle and the invisibility of biological families (or “birth families”). But I think the Christian adoption movement deepens some of these problems. While adoption has always been cast, often misleadingly, as an unqualified good, the Christian movement frames it even more explicitly as rescue, and then adds the element of spiritual salvation as well.

While examples of abusive adoption practices have always been rationalized away as “bad apple” anomalies, even Christians who are leaders in the adoption field acknowledge that evangelicals can be the worst at promoting adoption with a “by any means necessary” attitude that excuses fraud or corruption as the cost of saving a child. If you think adoption is God's mission, as many now do, it's much easier to say—as some leaders told me they heard—that you're “following God's law, not man's.”

Did working on the book bring you to any crises of any kind of faith?

Early in the project, after I'd done a fair bit of preliminary research and reporting, I had to spend a few weeks thinking very seriously about what it was that I was concerned with in this movement. There were some things about it that had simply repelled me—the sometimes self-congratulatory attitude surrounding the movement, for example—but that wasn't

something I wanted to or could have spent years working on. So maybe there was not a crisis of faith so much as there were a number of moments when I had to dedicate time to thinking about what were the real issues in each topic I was covering and how to shape the story to try to reflect that.

Have you seen your writing cause crises for others?

Some people have contacted me over the course of the process, and now that the book is out, asking me for advice about how to make sure they're not involved with an unethical adoption. That's another of the heartbreaking things I found in reporting: that so many prospective parents are willing to look more closely at these questions but are finding no trustworthy roadmap to do things the right way.

What is the worst insult that has ever been used on you?

For laughs, I was given the dis-honorary title of "[The Child Catcher of Vulgaria](#)" in 2009, based on *Quiverfull*, by an organization I'd written about—Vision Forum, a far, far-right homeschooling publisher in Texas. They said I'd done the most of anyone that year—more even than President Obama!—to harm the "cause of the family," which in their eyes is a very specific cause indeed. Something that outlandish is almost a gift, though.

So that's where you got the title for this book?

It was certainly a phrase that stuck in my head. But by the time I got to the point of naming the book, the way I thought about it had changed. I wanted a title that would reflect the two polarized narratives about adoption—adoption as rescue or adoption as kidnapping. The idea of catching children seemed to do both: children caught while falling and brought to safety, or children caught by forces taking them away from their homes. Anyone who writes about adoption will come across these dueling

interpretations.

Who knew insults could be such helpful inspiration?

Less helpful and more frustrating are knee-jerk responses that any critical writing is “anti-Christian” or “anti-adoption.” I see both of those, frankly, as lazy and intellectually dishonest terms that say a lot more about circling wagons than the content of my reporting. But in the case of this book, I think it’s also simply not true; if one could say that there are good guys and bad guys in the book, many on *both* sides are Christian.

The book strikes me as an all-too-common story of the perversion of good intentions. Can we ever trust good intentions again?

One of my evangelical sources told me something I thought was smart and accurate—that no side has the market cornered on good intentions that lead to bad outcomes, and that working on complicated global problems of poverty and development almost inevitably bring about secondary consequences. I think a good rule of thumb should be that if your good intentions—or your sense of God’s calling—align too closely with what you already want, they deserve extra scrutiny.

Why is it, do you think, that people are so attracted to other people’s children in the first place?

Almost universally, prospective adoptive parents would not think of it in those terms. Rather, as in the Christian adoption movement, most people conceive of adoption as a humanitarian cause and a “win-win” scenario precisely because it’s supposedly joining adults who long for a child with an orphan in need of a home. However, what I learned in my reporting is that the ideas that there is an “orphan crisis” and that adoption is purely an act of “rescue” renders the biological families invisible.

One of my sources, who was an adoption reform advocate as well as an evangelical, pointed out that too often people in this movement address only half of the scriptural verse they say guides them—James 1:27, which calls helping widows and orphans “pure religion.” Whereas the Bible calls for helping widows and orphans together—such as by equipping vulnerable and poor families to keep their children—too often the Christian adoption movement seeks to help children alone, independent from the families that bore them. It’s easy to understand why. Compared to the blank slate that a supposedly orphaned child represents, ready to be filled with whatever hopes prospective adoptive parents project, widows are messy. They are adults in need of help, possibly because of choices or mistakes that they’ve made. They’re in danger of becoming dependent on outside assistance. It’s a more complicated form of charity and development work to engage with entire families and communities, and it poses more challenges to the would-be benefactors. But whether from a religious or secular perspective, that’s the more just and truly humanitarian calling.

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