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Doing Tolerance: How Jehovah's Witnesses Live with Unbelieving Relatives

Andrew Holden

ABSTRACT

Jehovah's Witnesses are members of a puritanical religious movement that claims to be in but not of the world. The movement has expanded rapidly over the past 130 years and there are now more than 6 million devotees worldwide. This paper examines the effects of Witness conversion on the family lives of non-Witness relatives. Interviews with couples in mixed marriages reveal discrepancies in how devotees deal with the dissonance between personal feelings and religious principles, and demonstrate that there is, in effect, no uniform or stereotypical Jehovah's Witness response to domestic scenarios in which beliefs may need to be tempered. The paper exposes some of the problems that arise in a modern secular society for those who hold millenarian convictions. It concludes that mutual tolerance is essential for amicable domestic relations.

Jehovah's Witnesses are members of a world-renouncing religious movement officially known as the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. The Society was founded by Charles Taze Russell in 1872 and claims to monopolise the word of God. Since the foundation of the movement, devotees have maintained that we are living in the Final Days. Their eschatology



is based on a literal interpretation of the Bible and almost all the movement's literature makes reference to the New Kingdom which the Witnesses believe will be inaugurated by Jehovah at Armageddon.[i] The Society's worldwide membership rose from a mere 44,080 in 1928 to an impressive 6,035,564 in 2000, making an annual net growth of around 5 per cent (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001).[ii] Even the most conservative estimates indicate that by the year 2020, there will be something in the region of 12,475,115 Witness evangelists (Stark and Iannaccone 1997:153-4).[iii] The Witnesses attribute their international success to the fulfilment of the prophecy of Matthew 24 which states that the gospel of the Kingdom will be preached to the ends of the earth. They espouse an exclusive message which declares that while a great multitude of righteous people (including those who do not necessarily share their faith), will be granted eternal life on earth, only 144,000 members of their own community (the figure mentioned in Revelation 14:3) will enter heaven. Their heterodox purity code which prohibits, among other things, sexual relationships outside marriage, blood transfusions, annual celebrations (including Christmas, Easter, birthdays and national festivals) and involvement in all political affairs means that they are highly unlikely, despite their worldwide ministry, to recruit anything other than a small number of zealous members. The Society (to which the Witnesses themselves refer as the truth) rejects all other religious creeds as heresy and supports its doctrines with biblical texts. The movement is fundamentally a rational, rather than a mystical one. It is a religion of disenchantment and serious study of the Bible and Watch Tower publications, of which prospective recruits must demonstrate their knowledge before they can be baptised. Spiritual activities comprise a series of weekly meetings at the local Kingdom Hall (the official name for the Witnesses' place of worship) and aggressive door-to-door evangelism. The movement discourages devotees from associating unnecessarily with non-members and are thus able to offer those who are willing to accept its millenarian message a plausible *weltanschauung* and the security of a tightly knit community. In a modern secular world in which all manner of life options are available, the Witnesses stand out as calculating, conservative and authoritarian. The movement's demand of unquestioning loyalty means that those who violate its moral or doctrinal code risk disfellowship. To the sceptical outsider, this is a movement that bears all the hallmarks of a totalitarian regime.

Despite their successful evangelistic mission, there is a dearth of academic literature on the Witnesses. Beckford (1975a, 1975b, 1976), Wilson (1974, 1978, 1990) and Dobbelaere and Wilson (1980) have carried out the most extensive research, but these studies are now rather dated. Moreover, the Witnesses seldom receive more than a brief mention in most of the key textbooks on the sociology of religion. There is, however, a larger number of published articles on the Watch Tower movement in journals such as *Social Compass*, *Sociological Analysis*, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* and *The British Journal of Sociology*, but even these tend to be written from a macro perspective and fail to give devotees themselves a voice. Where academics have addressed agency, it is usually in relation to conversion and/or continuation of membership. Search as I may in the sociological and anthropological literature on the movement, I find little discussion of the effects of Watch Tower teachings on the Witnesses' relations with non-members. What follows is an attempt to chart some of this territory. I focus my analysis on three families whose lives have been affected by the movement in one way or another. These are 'mixed' families comprising devotees and their 'unbelieving' relatives living in the same household.[iv] The aim of the paper is to examine the effects of Watch Tower membership on family life and to expose some of the ways in which devotees manage their religious identities in the face of their relatives' disapproval. The data were collected in a recent ethnographic study of the movement in the North West of England and include extracts from unstructured interviews with congregational elders, devotees and unbelieving spouses. The interview method was chosen in order that the Witnesses and their relatives might tell their own stories.

Private beliefs and public disapproval

From the moment of their foundation, the Witnesses have remained emphatic in their claim that they are in but not of the world, and they devote the whole of their religious ministry preparing for a Messianic Age. Unlike other separatists such as the Amish, the Hutterites and the Plymouth Brethren, however, the Witnesses live in ordinary neighbourhoods, are employed in mainstream occupations, send their children to state schools and even occupy



the same households as those who do not share their faith. It is not surprising, therefore, that the movement's strict heterodox code has a significant effect on their social relations both in public and private spheres. In domestic settings, this often gives rise to tension with loved ones, be they spouses, siblings or children, who regard the movement's principles as a hindrance to 'normal' family life. The following comments from an interview with Margaret, a devotee who had converted to the movement some five or so years after she had married, and her unbelieving husband, Paul, demonstrate the impact of Watch Tower theology on Margaret's worldview:

As the scriptures say, we obey God as our ruler rather than man. There's only one government that the Bible talks about and that's the heavenly government ... I worry about my child because it's hard for kids these days, having a supposedly good time going to night clubs when these young girls dress up in really short skirts ... I mean they're asking for trouble ... and then they go off with young lads and they're jumping into bed and things ... we really do believe that things are getting worse in the world ... this country is on a par with America for its sex and its crime and its violence and its drugs ... all the other prophecies in the Bible have happened, so we feel the urgency of Armageddon ... I know it's hard for a lot of people to believe there's anything better, but you just have to keep your faith.

Agitated by his wife's comments, Paul, who worked as a paramedic at the time of the research retorted:

You see, I don't agree with her! I believe that life's good ... ninety-nine point nine per cent of the population of the world and what goes on in the world is good ... you see, I'm an optimist ... I could look at the world in a bad light if I wanted to ... it's like football hooliganism, you get fifty thousand people at Old Trafford on a Saturday afternoon, and about five of them will get into trouble and fight ... now what percentage is that?! It's only about nought point one per cent, and that's what Friday and Saturday night in town is like ... ninety-nine point nine per cent of the people are having a good time ... people are basically good; but what percentage of these people end up in bed together? ... about one per cent! ... when these girls go out in short skirts showing everything they've got, it's just the way things are ... it doesn't mean that they're bad people or that they're looking for anything in particular ... but when I talk to these people on a Friday and Saturday night – and I do meet a lot of them – more often than not, they're nice people ... there's optimism and there's pessimism, and the Witnesses are pessimistic ... I see people using drugs and I see fights and domestic disputes and allsorts, and I could easily come home from work and think "It's terrible out there", but I don't!

Paul went on to explain how his atheistic worldview prevented him from accepting the Witnesses' vision of the Last Days or their doctrines of life after death. His optimistic view of secular society enabled him to regard scantily-clad girls entering nightclubs as young people in pursuit of fun. He believed that although crime existed, it was carried out by only a small number of wayward individuals. Paul's secular outlook allowed him to embrace the modern world, for all its discontents, in positive terms. Margaret's perspective, on the other hand, is premised on the view that the world has deteriorated because it has become secular. She was emphatic in her belief that young people who entered nightclubs had questionable motives and that such places were reprehensible. She expressed grave concerns about the influences to which her own child could later be exposed and hoped earnestly for the arrival of Armageddon before things got worse. As far as Margaret was concerned, whatever small concessions the world could offer, be it success in careers, material wealth or a happy marriage, real contentment could only ever be achieved, and sustained, in the Eden-like realm of Jehovah's New Kingdom. Margaret and Paul's heated dialogue shows how contrasting views that may already exist between two people become accentuated when one spouse enters a religious movement that propounds an absolutist creed. This is no ordinary scenario. If Margaret and Paul were to remain married and living in the same household, they had to find a way of managing their different perspectives and all the potential conflicts to which these could give rise. It seems that in situations like these, tolerance is imperative. Paul had no other choice than to allow Margaret the freedom to practise her religion, even if



this meant that there would be many occasions when she would not be at home. Conversely, Margaret needed to temper her zeal and keep her spiritual activities to a minimum if she was to prevent Paul from complaining that her involvement in the movement was having a damaging effect on the family.

Margaret and Paul's story is important to social and cultural theorists not only because it conveys some of the difficulties which millenarian belief-systems pose for modern families, but because it brings wider theoretical issues about the current status of fundamentalist religion to bear. If there is one imposition which people like Margaret have had to come to terms in the last few decades, it is that of having to contain their heterodox beliefs in an increasingly secular society. This idea was propounded by Thomas Luckmann (1967), a secularisation theorist who argued that religious institutions have been progressively forced to withdraw from the modern capitalist economy and occupy a peripheral position in a world that has become increasingly abstract, impersonal and narcissistic. Luckmann refers to this as the privatisation thesis. Luckmann's thesis is based on the claim that non-religious rôles which are both specialised and functionally rational, now dominate the public sphere. In the modern West, this has led many people to adopt a secular view of the world, while those who continue to embrace religious beliefs find themselves moving from secular to sacred activities in routine fashion. Whatever the consequences of modernity, people are left to negotiate their way through a whole series of conflicting ideas and demands. In crude terms, ascetic religion has become an increasingly private matter.[v]

It was, however, Erving Goffman who first developed a phenomenological theory of the relationship between the public and the private. Goffman maintained that everyday life requires the careful management of the self across both these spheres. For Goffman, 'the field of public life' includes the entire realm of face-to-face interaction when people come together in social settings. Conversely, the private sphere is the 'backstage', in which the individual can relax unobserved before preparing for the public theatrical performance of interaction rituals (Goffman 1959, 1963, 1967, 1971). Goffman's ideas are profoundly important for those interested in religious behaviour in non-religious settings. The gradual separation of religion from social, political and economic life means that people with strong religious convictions must manage their beliefs in a hostile world of relativism and uncertainty. What makes this all the more demanding from the Witnesses' point of view is that as modern societies have arguably become more secular, monosemic doctrines have come to be seen as strange and anachronistic, except among those who are like-minded. Most of the time, the Witnesses' world-renouncing perspective enables them to deal with the incompatibility of their own values and those of outsiders. Conflict between the movement's officials and representatives of the state (headteachers, medical practitioners, public sector administrators, judicial officers and the like) often stems from the Witnesses' refusal to thwart their religious principles. The Watch Tower regime cannot tolerate mavericks, and there is no mechanism for taking into account personal motives for action. The Witnesses know only too well the tensions, potential and actual, between public mores and private belief, and recognise that where certain behaviour is prescribed or prohibited, their loyalty is to their co-religionists. But in domestic settings, the 'public' teachings of their community often conflict with the wishes of unbelieving relatives. Even movements with unambiguous boundaries cannot always control the domestic lives of those who defer to its authority, and it is here that devotees must balance their obligation towards their loved ones with their sense of religious duty. Although the Witnesses are corollaries of the privatisation of religion, there are times when their world-renouncing theology costs them their individual privacy.

Stretching the boundaries: tension within the family and marriage

While it is impossible to say exactly how many Witnesses were reared in families in which both parents were members, it is clear that those who convert of their own volition often do so at the expense of their family's happiness. I asked several devotees what kind of tensions their membership created and how they managed their relations with their non-Witness kin. Some of them had interesting stories to tell. The following testimony is that of a retired woman who lived on her own, but who maintained frequent contact with her son and daughter:



Not being able to celebrate Christmas with them or sending them a birthday card was terribly difficult for me. In fact, it got to the stage where I started to think 'Is it really worth it?', but then in time things began to get a little easier. I spent the day before Christmas with two people from the congregation last year and that helped; but even now my son doesn't invite me round at celebration times because he knows I don't want to say 'No'.

Another woman gave a more traumatic account:

When I first started a Bible study with the Witnesses, my family were violently opposed. My eldest son even said he would rather I was dead than become a Jehovah's Witness. He threatened me with violence, tried to bribe me with money; but the more people fought it, the more I thought 'There must be something in this'. But now they all support me and don't want me to give it up.

A young man who had been brought up an Anglican, but still lived with his parents at the time of his conversion, explained:

When I first started studying, my family were totally against it. They said that if I had any questions about the Bible I should go to my own church. I told this to the brother I was studying with and he just said 'Well, you know enough now to go to your old church. Go with your parents and challenge your vicar!' My parents told me that if I was going to become a Witness I would have to move out. They didn't want the neighbours to think I was a Jehovah's Witness. So I carried on studying without attending the meetings and when I managed to save up enough money for a deposit, I told them that I was going to become a Witness. Once they could see that it hadn't sent me round the bend they came round to it. They understand it much better now. From my point of view, I want them to come into the truth.

These stories convey the emotional difficulties experienced by families when someone they love decides to become a Witness. The actions of these individuals pulled hard at the heart-strings of unbelieving relatives who regarded the Witnesses as religious fanatics who had the potential to destroy family life. But there are ideological forces at work that enable devotees to counter disapproval. It is a sociological axiom that world-renouncing religion has grown and prospered on hostility, real or putative. Biblical texts such as Matthew 12:48 where Jesus puts salvation before his own family are used by the Watch Tower community to prepare new recruits for opposition from their nearest and dearest who may have little sympathy for the movement's beliefs. These three testimonies can thus be seen as mythic autobiographies in which new converts are conceived as having carried out a heroic act which involves subjugating their loved ones to the devil. In this respect, opposition from sceptical relatives affirms the Witnesses' view that the ordinary world is sinful and serves to show the individual that s/he is right. Be this as it may, the above testimonies show how difficult it can be for devotees to avert their faith from their relatives. For one thing, remaining silent about millenarian convictions defeats the whole object of evangelising to others, and for another, the movement's heterodox theology and the fervour with which it is upheld is bound, at some stage, to impact on family life. One young woman told me of the dilemma she faced when she had to decide how to acknowledge her mother's birthday without compromising the movement's teachings. Her saving grace was the fact that the movement does not renounce social gatherings and on this basis, she agreed to attend the party. She explained to her mother that although she would be unable to buy her a present or sing Happy Birthday along with the rest of the family, she would treat her to lunch and buy her a gift later in the year. This is one of many scenarios in which Witnesses find themselves having to balance their religious principles with their affection for outsiders.

Some of the best examples of tension within the family, however, occur in marriages in which only one spouse is a Witness, as in the case of Margaret and Paul. Not surprisingly, these marriages are rare, but where they do exist, the potential for conflict is high. Whatever resistance to the movement an unbeliever might continue to display in the longer term, there can be no doubt that his/her spouse's conversion affects the relationship during the initial period. As new converts start to see the world through different lenses, their old selves gradually recede, and it is in these early stages of conversion that opposition from disgruntled



relatives is usually at its most vehement. I have met many converts who claim that in their first few months of membership, they never wanted to be away from their spiritual 'brothers' and 'sisters', and that this led to remonstrations with loved ones. Studying large amounts of religious material, knocking on doors and attending three weekly meetings leave precious little time for family life. Barbara was in her early thirties when she began to 'study' with the Witnesses – a decision that almost caused her agnostic husband, Graham, to leave her. In a joint interview with the couple, Graham commented:

At first, I just couldn't get my head round it. I was really shocked. We've never really talked about religion before. She started shutting herself away upstairs reading the Bible ... I mean, I don't have any strong religious beliefs. I was brought up a Catholic, but I haven't been to church since I was about fifteen ... We've got now to where Barbara does her own thing a lot of the time and I go out playing golf when we can get her mum to have the kids. We do still spend time together, and I've got more used to it now, but at first I was really resentful. I just wanted to walk out and never come back. But even now, I'll never condone what she does.

Graham continued with a story of how Barbara had suggested taking their two sons aged nine and seven years to the Kingdom Hall meeting on a Sunday afternoon, but she retreated when Graham threatened to take the boys to live with his parents in Halifax. He did, however, allow them to attend the mid-week Book Study every alternate week when he worked his evening shift, but was far from sanguine even with this arrangement.[vi] Barbara, on the other hand, longed for her children to know about the promise of the New Kingdom and to learn about the movement's biblical precepts in the hope that they would grow up to live good moral lives. In her efforts to entice Graham into the movement, she would leave evangelistic literature and information about forthcoming events lying around the house, but Graham's resistance was steadfast. Like Margaret and Paul, Barbara and Graham had internalised two very different realities that may or may not affect the survival of the marriage in the long term. Meanwhile, the movement continues to warn Witnesses in mixed marriages of the dangers of excessive contact with outsiders.[vii] This prompted me to ask a senior elder of the movement what advice he would give to devotees whose spouses rejected Watch Tower tenets. He told me:

In the Bible it says that if you're married to an unbeliever, and if the unbeliever is happy to stay with you, you the believer should stay with him or her - it's called an 'unbelieving mate'. The first book of Corinthians chapter 7 says that if the unbeliever is happy to stay with you in that state - because it may be that later on he's won to the faith without you speaking a word because of your conduct; so stay put - so we recommend that wives or husbands who come into the truth stick to their mate.

Since the Witnesses are duty-bound to evangelise, it is difficult to imagine that those in mixed marriages do not live in hope of their partners' conversion. More often than not, Witnesses with unbelieving spouses join the movement after they marry. This suggests not only that those already in membership are unlikely to marry outsiders, but that there is little chance of a non-Witness spouse also converting. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suggest that Watch Tower conversion inevitably destroys marriages or that it is necessarily responsible for mixed marriages that do fail.[viii]

In another account of a spouse's reaction to a Witness conversion, I learned:

I came home and told Colin about it and he said, 'You're crackers! If you have anything to do with it I'm going to leave you.' But I've never been one to go out on my own or go out with the girls on Friday night or anything. I'm loyal and faithful and I wanted to try to be a better person. Anyway, things got from bad to worse and I'm not exaggerating when I say weeks would go by without us speaking. He didn't like me going for my Bible study because I used to go straight from work. To this day we don't talk about our experiences years ago. He's a lot better than he was, now, but he would never listen and he was rude and aggressive when the Witnesses came. He wouldn't even say 'Hello'. He'd just walk out. His dad never spoke to me for two years. But I got the strength and the determination to carry on because I knew what I was doing was right.



This woman (Sandra) went on to explain how, despite her efforts in not mentioning Watch Tower beliefs or the content of the meetings, Colin left home for a period of six weeks and went to live with his parents. The couple then reunited, but the marriage ended several years later. Their 15 year old daughter, Katie, had recently been baptised when Colin moved out of the family home. Despite previous opposition from both Colin and his father, Sandra is clear in her account that she was not prepared to sacrifice her new way of life, but her willingness to remain silent about her beliefs enabled the marriage to survive as long as it did. This shows that in domestic settings where emotional tensions rise, there is a level at which Watch Tower beliefs necessarily become a matter of individual privacy. Sandra proceeded to tell me that over a long period of time, Colin had become less hostile:

It was no issue once he got used to it, although it couldn't have been easy for him. He came round and came to terms with it. His mum had always been quite amenable to 'the truth' really. His dad was quite aggressive when you got him talking about it but we got on quite well. They did come round for a meal one night and Colin stuck up for us! He said, 'I'll tell you what, if we were all like the Witnesses the world would be safe and if I ever turn to a religion it would be the Witnesses', which was very interesting because he'd been so opposed over the years. But Katie's baptism was the final straw!

I did wonder whether Sandra's silence had played some part in winning Colin's respect. Notwithstanding Colin's decision to part from Sandra, it is worth noting that once he had had time to adjust to her new way of life, he found himself commending her principles. This echoes Wilson's findings in his study of parents whose children join the Unification Church:

Almost always, parents were expectedly apprehensive about a son or daughter joining the Moonies. In some instances, their opposition diminished as time passed, but this appears almost invariably to have been because personal parent-child relationships improved, or, more marginally, because parents found the calibre of other adherents impressive, and their activities laudable, and not because they were attracted to Unification doctrines or to the Revd Moon. (Wilson 1990:266)

The Watch Tower Society and the Unification Church are only two examples of world-renouncing religious communities, but it would appear that once unbelieving relatives begin to understand the movement's worldview and/or get to know other devotees, the doctrines appear less strange and bewilderment begins to subside. Indeed, a great many religious converts even publish testimonies claiming that their new found faith brought their families closer together (see Barker 1989:87).

Mutual tolerance seems to be the key to survival when an individual becomes a Witness, but this takes time for all parties. Tolerating a secular worldview is a lot to ask of someone who has internalised Watch Tower doctrines, particularly in the initial stages of membership when enthusiasm for a new way of life is difficult to quell. None the less, Sandra's efforts to undertake door-to-door ministry only when her husband was at work, keep discussions about her beliefs and activities to a minimum and prevent her Witness friends from ringing her unnecessary suggest that while the movement's prescription for salvation is absolute, devotees are not always in a position to discuss their faith openly with their relatives. Sandra's reticence of her religious convictions enabled her, to some extent, to appease her husband and to meet the demands of the movement.

There are dozens of domestic scenarios in which the Witnesses could find themselves having to balance religious principles with family obligations; and what might be an acceptable level of worldly contact to one member might not be acceptable to another. Conversely, what one unbelieving spouse might be willing to tolerate, another might consider unreasonable. If there is one aspect of Watch Tower theology that could impinge heavily on family life, however, it is the celebration of Christmas. Christmas, more than birthdays and Easter, involves contact with close relatives and the exchange of gifts for those who celebrate it. I asked the congregational elder how devotees with unbelieving relatives should approach the festival. This was his reply:

If it's a woman with an unbelieving husband and he wants a Christmas tree and his children to hang up stockings and turkey and Christmas pudding, then the wife should



support him in providing what he needs, even though not celebrating it. In other words, if he says 'I'm going to put a Christmas tree up and put flashing lights on it and I'm going to buy my kids some presents and I'm going to buy a turkey and a plum pudding and I want you to cook it', then she will provide that meal and sit down and have it because he's the head of the house. He wants it for his family and he has the right to it, so she will be supportive, although in her heart not celebrating Christmas because she knows that Christ wasn't born on Christmas day. Now then, if it was the other way round and a woman wanted it all, the husband would say 'Well, if you want to do that out of your housekeeping money, then that's up to you but I won't help you to prepare for it.' She can get the tree, she can buy the turkey and she can cook it.

What lies at the heart of the elder's advice is the movement's teaching of the wife's subservience to the husband within marriage; a teaching which the Witnesses claim is supported in the first book of Corinthians. This explains why mixed marriages in which the believing spouse is female have a reasonable chance of survival. The patriarchal nature of the Watch Tower dictates that whatever the religious convictions of the partners, the husband is the head of the household and the wife must defer to his authority. Interestingly, this rule empowers an unbelieving male to overrule Watch Tower injunctions.[ix] It also explains why, in most mixed marriages, the believer is female. It would be difficult if not impossible for an unbelieving wife to acquiesce to a husband who is imbued with the paternalistic values of the movement unless these are the values which she also upholds. Another reason for those successful mixed marriages is the difficulty that the Governing Body imposes on its members for obtaining a divorce. The only acceptable motive for the legal termination of marriage is in the case of adultery; and even then, divorce is optional. But here lies a paradox. On the one hand, the Governing Body advises devotees to keep their contact with outsiders to a minimum, yet on the other, they are encouraged to remain with unbelieving partners who may revile the movement's doctrines. There are two main reasons for this apparently contradictory advice. One is that Watch Tower officials may fear losing members as a result of family tension; and secondly, mixed marriages are, as the elder's comments above suggest, another way of winning recruits. Ultimately, there is no knowing whether the Governing Body's hunger for converts lies behind its advice, but what is clear is that devotees with unbelieving spouses do not always follow official teachings to the letter when negotiating marital relations. One Witness who was divorced from her husband told me of the problems her religious status had caused at Christmas some years earlier. While I am uncertain about whether this played a significant part in the termination of the marriage, she informed me that during the last Christmas she and her husband spent together, she had refused to decorate the tree and trim the house. Margaret, on the other hand, managed to negotiate Christmas in ways she felt were not detrimental to her religious principles. Devotees who help their husbands with the Christmas preparations claim to eschew the celebratory aspects of the event such as going to parties and visiting friends. Sandra explained that Colin had reached the point where he had been prepared to sacrifice Christmas celebrations at home, though he always visited his family during the festive season. The evidence suggests that Christmas, while having the potential to cause conflict, can be managed by Witnesses in mixed marriages, so long as the time they spend with their unbelieving spouses allows them to retreat from the celebrations. To outsiders, this is an exercise fraught with difficulty. Witnesses who help their non-Witness families prepare for Christmas and who partake in the meal along with other relatives (none of whom may themselves be members), are, to all intents and purposes, celebrating Christmas; yet, those who find themselves in this position insist that this is not the case. These individuals claim they compensate for Christmas by buying their relatives gifts at other times in the year.

When devotees bend Watch Tower rules to accommodate unbelievers, they come perilously close to entering forbidden territory. This supports anthropologist Mary Douglas's contention that people who cross ascetic boundaries are symbolically matter out of place, and provoke disapproval:

... people really do think of their own social environment as consisting of other people joined together or separated by lines which must be respected. Some of the lines are protected by firm physical sanctions.... But wherever the lines are precarious we find pollution ideas come to their support. (Douglas 1966:138-9)



The fear of 'polluting' the Watch Tower community does not only curtail the Witnesses' individual freedom in secular environments, it also heightens their awareness of moral danger. Where the movement's rules are unambiguous, transgressions are dealt with by disfellowship; but where lines are blurred, ideas about whether an individual is in a state of moral danger vary from member to member. So, do Witnesses offend their co-believers when they undertake an activity such as attending a birthday party, trimming the house at Christmas or allowing their children to receive blood transfusions because of pressure from unbelieving relatives? Douglas writes:

Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others. The danger is controlled by ritual which precisely separates him from his old status, segregates him for a time and then publicly declares his entry to a new status. (Douglas 1966:96)

Although Douglas is referring to people who are passing from one category to another because of birth, death, puberty or marriage,[x] this notion of people emanating danger when occupying the interstices between social categories can be equally applied to Witnesses who come close to flouting Watch Tower principles. This is the point at which the spiritual morality of the individual (and hence the community) might be perceived to be under threat; hence, contact with unbelievers carries risks because of the perceived lack of control imputed to the individual. At best, voluntary contact with outsiders is inadvisable; at worst, it contaminates the individual and the movement. This fear of moral pollution controls the Witnesses' relations in secular society and reaffirms their religious belief.

It is clear from the data that the lines of demarcation defining permissible and non-permissible behaviour for devotees are blurred. The fact that there is no uniform Witness response to the dilemmas discussed in this paper suggests that the movement's rules are far from unequivocal. Where doctrines are ambiguous, devotees are left to work out their own solutions to their family problems. It is because the movement recognises that the family and marriage belong to the private sphere that congregational officials temper their authority. This is not to say that Watch Tower theology does not have implications for domestic life, but in the absence of other members, there is no knowing what compromises devotees might make. Reliable methods of investigation would, I suspect, reveal some fascinating data.

Conclusion

I began this discussion with the claim that the privatisation of religious belief is one of the main characteristics of modern secular society. Close analysis of personal testimonies reveals that while religious behaviour may have become a private matter for those who have abandoned orthodox churches (it may even be so for those who have not), it is more difficult for world-renouncing millenarians to exercise privacy. The Witnesses' constant mental reference to the Watch Tower creed in all spheres of their lives shows that contrary to Goffman's assertion, they are unable to separate the self into public and private entities.[xi] The fact that the modern world does not allow millenarians to occupy centre stage means that they are always likely to be marginalised, and this has huge implications for their relations with outsiders. Although there is no denying that the movement's teachings have a significant impact on the private sphere, relationships in which there is an emotional bond between Witnesses and non-Witnesses expose all the incongruities of principles and practise. The data presented in this paper confirm that family relations vary according to circumstances and to the personality of the individual. For some devotees, the freedom to allow one's conscience to dictate one's actions makes life easier, while for others, it causes anxiety. I have argued that Watch Tower rhetoric cannot always override the individual's sense of duty towards those with whom they have long been bonded or for whose welfare they are responsible. Where children are present, spouses are often dependent on each other for financial and practical support. It is here that peace and conflict hang in the balance.

While there are no standard strategies employed by the Witnesses for dealing with situations in which their religious principles might be compromised, their membership of the Watch Tower community is usually source of distress for relatives, particularly when the individual joins the movement in later life. In all the conversion cases I have studied, reactions from



loved ones have always been negative. The reason for this, it seems, is because Watch Tower heterodoxy is unsuited to modern western societies at the beginning of the twenty-first century. When people make the decision to become Jehovah's Witnesses, it is not like converting to Roman Catholicism or the Church of England (or even orthodox Islam). Like Judaism, the appeal of the Watch Tower movement from the point of view of the convert is its exclusivity, and this places a considerable strain on mixed families. Whatever misgivings devotees of other faiths might air about the state of the modern world, few vilify it with as much passion as the Witnesses, and even fewer are prepared to sacrifice their rights of citizenship. Being a Witness involves studying literature, attending meetings, proselytizing and, to a greater or lesser extent, the willingness to renounce one's former life. At present, the movement shows few signs either of relaxing its quasi-totalitarian doctrines or of slowing down its evangelistic mission. In the end, if devotees and their unbelieving relatives wish to live amicably together, they may be forced to do tolerance.

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Endnotes

- [i] The Witnesses always use the name Jehovah from the Hebrew translation Yahweh when referring to God. They regard this as a scriptural requisite. Armageddon is Jehovah's victory over Satan at the end of time.
- [ii] This represents the 'peak' figure. The 'average' figure for 2000 was 120,592.
- [iii] This is based on a projected growth rate of 4 per cent.
- [iv] The Witnesses use the term 'unbeliever' to refer to those who do not share their faith, be they atheists or people who hold alternative religious beliefs.
- [v] This would suggest that Durkheim was correct in his view that 'the cult of the individual' was a social product. However, if religion in the modern world has indeed become privatised, Durkheim's work on positive integration and collective effervescence is now, to a certain extent, redundant.
- [vi] The Book Study comprises a small group of Witnesses who meet at a member's home on a weekly basis. These meetings involve studying religious tracts and arranging door to door ministry. These are usually much shorter meetings than those held at the Kingdom Hall.
- [vii] The movement has also expressed concern in recent years about the increasing numbers of young Witnesses who are dating non-members and failing to attend Kingdom Hall meetings. Those who do this often fail to reach the point of baptism. But since the movement



does not collect official data on young people who defect, it is impossible to comment on the extent to which this is happening.

[viii] There is no knowing what state some of these marriages are in prior to conversion. Indeed, this argument applies to all religious organisations (see Barker 1989:87-91).

[ix] Unbelieving husbands are even allowed to authorise blood transfusions for their children without this jeopardising their wives' membership.

[x] A state which anthropologist Victor Turner calls liminality.

[xi] For this reason, Douglas rejects binary distinctions as a useful tool of analysis (see Douglas 1978).