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Returning to Eden: Futuristic Symbolism and its Effects on Jehovah's Witnesses

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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 ways in which the movement promotes its millenarian message to prospective recruits. It also considers how the Witnesses are able to hold futuristic beliefs and at the same time, lead active lives in the present. The methods of data collection include unstructured interviews with devotees and content analysis of the movement's own literature. The paper concludes that while the Witnesses' futuristic symbolism is a form of escape from the modern world, it is also part of their own pseudo-corporate 'branding' which has contributed to their international success.

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 their 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 their literature makes reference to the New Kingdom which they believe will be inaugurated by Jehovah at *Armageddon*.[i] The movement boasts huge international success. The Society's worldwide membership rose from a mere 44,080 in 1928 to an impressive 6,035,564 in 2000 - a total net growth of more than 5 per cent per year. (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001).[ii] Although these are the movement's own figures, there is no reason to doubt them. For one thing, they are consistent with government estimates as well as those of independent scholars and for another, the Society publishes losses as well as gains.[iii] Even the most conservative estimates indicate that by the year 2020, there will be around 12,475,115 Witness evangelists (Stark and Iannaccone 1997:153-4).[iv] The Witnesses attribute their international expansion to the fulfilment of Matthew 24 which states that the gospel of the Kingdom will be preached to the ends of the earth. They propound an exclusive millenarian theology 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. All other religious creeds are rejected as heresy, and devotees make extensive use of biblical texts and Watch Tower publications to attract new members. In this respect, the movement is a rational rather than a mystical one.

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 the Witnesses themselves a voice. Where academics have attempted to address agency, it is usually in relation to conversion and/or continuation of membership. To date, there is a serious shortage of material on Watch Tower millenarianism and its effects on the lives of devotees. For the past 130 years, the Witnesses have remained steadfast 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. This paper examines the various ways in which futuristic beliefs are reified within the Watch Tower community and their impact on the consciousness of its members. Images of the utopian Kingdom to come are present in the movement's language and in its visual representations. These images play a key role in sustaining membership and validating beliefs. I write from a sociological perspective, and this calls for an understanding of the cultural dynamics involved in the construction of a millenarian identity and of how those who hold futuristic beliefs live in the present. My aim is to offer an analysis of the Witnesses' brand of millenarianism and its significance in the twenty-first century. In so doing, I hope to chart some of the territory that has been neglected. The data were collected in a recent study of the movement in the North West of England and include extracts from a series of unstructured interviews with devotees and content analysis of the movement's own tracts.

The symbolic construction of the post-Armageddon Kingdom

Millenarian movements like the Watch Tower Society are characterised by explosions of discontent and have emerged within the major world religions, including Christianity and Islam. Equally, some modern political ideologies such as the European socialist vistas of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries have been interpreted as millenarian in the sense that they promise radical social and economic change for which there exists no immediate feasible means. These 'new societies' are constructed as egalitarian and just. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that apocalyptic visions like those of the post-Armageddon paradise are a recent phenomenon. Historian Norman Cohn (1957) traces the origins of millenarianism to Western Europe in the middle ages. During this period, prophecy was a device used by Jews and Christians alike to console, fortify and assert themselves in an attempt to deal with their persecution. The Book of Revelation predicts that after his Second Coming, Christ will reign for a thousand years in his earthly Kingdom before the Last Judgement. The citizens of this Kingdom will be the resurrected Christian martyrs - a prophecy which, according to Cohn, later Christians interpreted in a much more liberal sense

to include themselves as the suffering faithful. Cohn goes on to describe the historical development of millenarian beliefs and their various characteristics. Millenarianism was always collective in that the visions of the Messianic Kingdom depicted large numbers of faithful people enjoying salvation. This salvation would be realised on this earth rather than some extra terrestrial place such as heaven, and the event would be imminent and sudden. Transformation of life would be total, in the sense that eternal bliss would replace suffering and imperfection. Cohn documents a variety of millenarian movements throughout medieval Europe ranging from rigorous ascetics drawn from the dominant classes to the rootless involuntary poor of town and country whose lot was relentless insecurity. This latter group demonstrated the most violent and anarchic forms of millenarianism, largely in their struggle to improve their material conditions. Apocalyptic visions provided peasants and artisans with spiritual ammunition for annihilating the ruling classes, and this provided the basis for collective action (as in the case of peasant revolts). Cohn also maintains that millenarianism had its greatest impact in expanding urban areas that were characterised by rapid social change.[v] In much the same way that Weber argued that charismatic leaders would emerge to give a new moral basis to society, Cohn emphasises the tendency of the poor to offer deference to leaders who presented themselves not simply as holy individuals, but as prophets and saviours who promised salvation. This might help to explain why, in late-nineteenth century America, there was a huge proliferation of evangelical movements.

Conquering evil is the one theme that places the Witnesses' experiences into a framework of order and meaning. Over and above their involvement in public events like Kingdom Hall meetings and annual conventions, the Witnesses conceptualise their relationship with the world by evoking symbols such as artefacts, modes of dress, speech patterns, ceremonial rites, purity codes and bodily expression, all of which are an important part of membership. The Watch Tower symbols to which I refer here include visual images, metaphor and linguistic exchanges between devotees themselves. The representations of good and evil in the movement's published materials depict a world that is about to undergo a dramatic transformation. The Witnesses use language and imagery to construct social boundaries, and these boundaries accentuate difference between members and non-members. Symbols enable devotees to draw around themselves a kind of mental map to affirm who belongs to the community and who does not. Since symbolic representations help to affirm millenarian beliefs and carry with them a message of hope for the future, they are a repository of meaning and a frame of reference for the Witnesses' identity. These images appear in most of the movement's literature. In addition to photographs of Watch Tower evangelists actively announcing Jehovah's Kingdom, every copy of *The Watchtower* and Awake! (the movement's own magazines) and most tracts and hardback publications depict positive images of devotees in a variety of forms. Other pictures are sketched by artists and portray the beautiful world of post-Armageddon. These illustrations are always idealistic and utopian. Deliriously happy characters surrounded by emerald green slopes, clear blue skies and bright sunshine set the scene in the delineation of the world of Jehovah's Witnesses. All artwork is presented in vivid colour and is designed to depict the theology in the most positive visual form. Some pictures show devotees in the New Kingdom reunited with their deceased loved ones, while others portray animals such as lions and tigers (presumably once wild and ferocious) at play, at rest, or being caressed by children. Future-oriented symbolism reminds Witnesses everywhere of their millenarian vision and impresses upon them the need to minister to others. This exaggerated version of contentment conveys a subtle but powerful message to all who peruse the literature - that infinite happiness, justice and peace can be achieved through membership of the Watch Tower movement.

If positive images promote millenarian doctrines, negative ones warn of the presence of evil in the world. The same publications are filled with pictures of women being murdered, children abusing drugs, thieves breaking into houses, heretics worshipping idols and couples acting promiscuously - all of which show life outside the movement as debased. Unlike the pictures of millenarian bliss, these images are presented in dark colour and portray characters with unattractive features. This antithesis of salvation on the inside and depravity on the outside suggests that there can be nothing in-between the two systems and that it is impossible for morality to exist beyond the Watch Tower community. This depiction of sin contrasts sharply with millenarian idealism and the doctrine of salvation. These polarising concepts of sin and

righteousness provide an authenticity which some scholars argue people yearn in a fast-changing world. This has some similarities with Hall's analysis of the representations deployed by patriots in the construction of national identities (Hall 1992). Like nationalism, millenarianism is dependent on a narrative that emphasises origin, continuity and timelessness - all of which are essential features of the imagined *community*.[vi] Since it would be impossible for all the Witnesses in the world to know each other (as it would all people in a nation), the whole community can only be imagined. Imagery enables the movement to romanticise the evangelistic activities of Witnesses *everywhere*, and at the same time offer its devotees a glimpse of what life will be like when the present world has passed away. The uniformity with which these symbols are presented authenticate the Watch Tower community in the same way as national emblems authenticate patriotism.

It could equally be argued that the Witnesses' romantic vision of the future is a response to one of the most widely documented features of the modern world; namely, *disenchantment*. Weber's theme of the ever-increasing rationalisation of the modern world was centred on the notion that the Enlightenment failed to bring about the liberation that people had expected. The application of instrumental reason robbed the world of mystery and excitement, and this led to the increasingly pessimistic view that the costs of modern civilisation outweighed the benefits. In his analysis of cultural change in the post-Enlightenment period, sociologist Robert Bocock argues:

> The project, set in motion by the Enlightenment, of increasing progress, wealth and happiness through the application of science and technology, first to industry and then to social life as a whole, and the weakening of the hold of custom, magic, superstition and other supernatural taboos over which the *philosophes* rejoiced, has been put in question. In the traditional culture of Europe before the Protestant Reformation, religion provided the moral framework for everyone. Everyday life was punctuated by saints days, fairs, pilgrimages, festivals, seasons of feasting, atonement and celebration. The culture of ordinary people was saturated with folk customs, magical spells, rituals and religious occasions. Springs and wells provided healing waters, the relics of saints offered safe journeys or protection to relatives and friends. (Bocock 1992:261)

If Bocock's analysis is correct, utopian thinking can be seen as a reaction to the demystification of culture (part of what modernity theorists suggest has given rise to secularisation) that has existed in various forms since the Reformation. In this sense, utopian imagery is a cultural resource used by the Witnesses to counter the soullessness of the modern rational world. But here lies a paradox. I have already mentioned that the movement promotes calculable doctrines and aims to recruit by essentially rational means. It is this combination of romantic idealism and rational calculation that makes the movement distinctive. The simultaneous usage of the rational and the romantic has contributed greatly to the Witnesses' success, since both resources appeal to people's emotions as well as their intellect. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that in its visual representations of the post-Armageddon world, the movement makes little use of mystical symbols such as angels, heaven, mist or haloes. Instead, its publications contain scenes of lush valleys and flowing streams.[vii] These images portray an earthly rather than a mystical afterlife, illustrating the Witnesses' belief that the overwhelming majority of the faithful will return to Eden - the place that God originally created for humankind. They support this with the prophecy of Daniel 7:13 which they believe foretells the eternal worship of Jehovah on paradise earth. The usage of scriptures to substantiate a millenarian vision of the future seems to suggest that like the rationalists of the eighteenth century who, despite their quest for verifiable knowledge, continued to hold religious beliefs, the Witnesses synthesise faith and reason. Bland though they might seem compared with mystical representations, illustrations of earthly beauty allow the New Kingdom to be easily imagined. The Witnesses' association of a beautiful landscape with eternal peace conveys their preoccupation with tranquillity.

In addition to pictorial representations, metaphor, allegory and analogy are also part of Watch Tower symbolism. These linguistic props create an impression of a community united in Brotherhood, and play a subtle rôle in the Witnesses' evangelistic mission. Socio-linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that everyday language is full of metaphors which

give meaning to the world. Metaphors deepen human experience because of the meanings they are intended to convey and the actions that follow (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Metaphors and allegories are embedded in the Witnesses' *weltanschauung*. The most pervasive of these is, of course, *The Watchtower*, which provides a caption for published literature as well as the official name of the movement. This term is central to millenarian ideology and appeals to devotees to be ever on their guard. More generally, metaphors, allegories and analogies are one of the principal means by which the Witnesses communicate their reality to each other and to prospective converts. The following passage from a Watch Tower publication contains an abundance of these:

> Sometimes a young person may say that he or she associates with another of questionable ways and reputation so as to help that one. To want to help others is a fine thing. But if you go along with them in their selfish pleasures, how much help are you giving them? For example, if you saw a child in a mud puddle, would you take some soap out into the puddle and try to clean the child with it? You would only get yourself dirty as a result. You would first have to try to encourage the child to come out of the mud puddle before you could hope to do anything about cleaning him up at close range. Actually, to accept a person with bad habits as a close associate will often have a bad effect on that person (as well as on yourself). Why? Because it may encourage him to keep on in the same way, feeling that he can always rely on your backing him up. Wouldn't it be of far greater help to limit your association to times when you can really aid the person by pointing out good counsel and by inviting him to accompany you to places where that counsel is explained? (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1976:64-5)

While other metaphors and analogies could have been used to illustrate the Witnesses' desire to purify the impure, the analogy of the mud puddle is significant because of the way in which it is used to warn against self contamination. Equally important is the suggestion that 'good counsel' and 'places of good counsel' can be provided by Jehovah's Witnesses. The scenario of the casualty of evil being delivered to salvation by the righteous reaffirms the importance of seeking only the friendship of those already in the movement or non-members who are willing to be cleansed.

Metaphor is present not only in the Witnesses' written publications, but also in their verbal utterances. In one interview, an elder used metaphor to illustrate how people who join the movement 'grow' at different rates and how they vary in their response to Watch Tower teachings. New recruits were equated with horses being drawn to water, trees bearing fruit and athletes preparing for a race. Witnesses use figurative speech interchangeably with biblical parables both to win converts and to renounce the outside world. Among the titles of the sermons for the Annual District Convention held in the summer of 1997 were 'Walking by faith, not by sight', 'Considering the daily text builds faith', 'Put up a hard fight for the faith' and 'Keep your eye simple'. The evangelists who delivered these sermons made constant use of metaphor and aphorism to impart their message of salvation. When the Witnesses refer to outsiders as 'goats' and 'devil worshippers', they exaggerate the unworthiness of others and present their own belief system as unblemished. Conversation often centres around articles in *The Watchtower*, sermons at meetings and experiences on the door-to-door visits. References to 'the world', 'the Kingdom', 'the ministry', 'Armageddon' and 'the truth' are commonplace. Equally, the terms 'brother' and 'sister' are dominant terms of reference during door-to-door ministry and at the Kingdom Hall. Images, metaphors and verbal exchanges are the symbolic tools for the construction of the perfect community in a world of ambiguity and moral danger.

Temporality: apposition or anachronism?

Mormons, Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses all espouse remarkably similar millenarian doctrines. These three communities are unequivocal in their evangelistic messages concerning the end of time, and all see their mission as an essential part of the fulfilment of biblical prophecy. Although the belief in the Second Coming of Christ is steeped in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, orthodox Christianity has very little to say about how the event will occur, or when it is likely to happen. Consequently, those who belong to established

churches and denominations are less vociferous than world-renouncing sectarians in their eschatological ministry. Indeed, one of the main sources of tension between Christian millenarians and modern-secular society is the expectation of things to come. Like the Witnesses, Mormons believe that their proselytising efforts are essential for the inauguration of a Messianic Age. The gathering of the people of Israel from other nations, the return of the Jews from Jerusalem and the restoration of the lost tribes prophesied in Isaiah 2:2-3 will, according to the Mormons, be brought about by their current worldwide missionary activities, after which, Christ will return in glory and exact his vengeance on the wicked. Similarly, the Seventh-day Adventists believe that Christ's Second Coming will consign the unbelieving to destruction on earth, while the righteous will be taken up to heaven. The Adventists predict the annihilation of Satan and the subsequent transformation of the earth into a place of eternal bliss.

The Witnesses' millenarian prophecies are based on a salvation narrative of past, present and future. According to the Watch Tower movement, human misery was triggered long ago when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit. This literal interpretation of the Book of Genesis substantiates every conceivable human experience in unambiguous terms. Though the Witnesses acknowledge that life can bring happiness as well as sadness, the success of their ministry lies in their ability to persuade the rest of humanity that good fortune is both arbitrary and short-lived. Biblical mythology provides them with an explanation for why life does not always run smoothly. One devotee explained:

> What you've got to remember is that the world is imperfect and we're imperfect, because Jehovah never intended it to be like this. We've inherited our imperfection from Adam and Eve. Jehovah wanted us all to be happy, but we decided to be disobedient and we'll never be truly happy until he steps in and we go back to what he wants it to be like.

This woman's analysis of life's struggles derives from her concept of original sin; something she believes we have all inherited from our ancestral parents. The story of the Fall is central to all Christian belief, but unlike those who follow orthodox Christianity, the Witnesses regard it as a factual event rather than a myth that is intended to introduce humankind to a creator God and/or to the idea that God gives us free-will. Their literal reading of Genesis, Daniel and Revelation characterises their rational belief system. Substantive doctrines enhance the plausibility of the movement and help devotees to contextualise their spiritual mission. But temporal beliefs do much more than this. They equip the movement with the ability to explain the present and predict the future. The occurrence of world events becomes the fulfilment of prophecy so that the Witnesses are, in a very real sense, marking time.

According to modernity theorist Peter Berger, one of the most profound changes in human experience over the centuries is the way in which time is conceptualised; particularly the shift away from concerns about the past and the present towards those of the future (Berger 1977). Berger suggests that the transformation of time has taken place on three levels, the first of which he calls *the level of everyday life*. Here, clocks and wristwatches are used both to arrange and to calculate the length of daily activities. The second level is *the level of biography*, on which the individual perceives and actively plans his/her life as a 'career'. On the third level - the level of an entire society - national governments and other large-scale institutions plan long-term projects, examples of which might be the advance of global capitalism or the management of public expenditure. Berger suggests that these three levels of transformation present ways of conceptualising time that contrast sharply with those preceding modernity. This futuristic concept if time is precise, measurable and in principle, subject to human control. Since time governs the functioning of the whole of modern life from employment to military strategy, it has become something to be mastered. Scientists, intellectuals and technical experts will make life and death decisions by using allegedly objective methods of prediction. Berger argues that we have become time engineers in the most intimate aspects of our lives such as family planning, guidance counselling and sex therapy (ibid.:104-6). There are philosophical issues about modern futurity, however, that Berger brings to our attention. For example, we may need to weigh our preoccupation with time against the detrimental effects of the pace of modern living on our mental and physical health:

> Futurity means endless striving, restlessness and a mounting incapacity for repose. It is precisely this aspect of modernization that is perceived as dehumanizing in many non-Western cultures. There have also been strong rebellions against it within Western societies - a good deal of both youth culture and counterculture can, I think, be understood as insurrections against the tyranny of modern futurity, not to mention the current vogue of 'transcendental meditation' and similar mystical aspirations towards a liberating, timeless 'now'. (ibid.:105)

Berger's analysis provides some useful suggestions for why Jehovah's Witnesses are the subjects of biblical eschatology rather than futurity. Although the Watch Tower movement must plan future events such as annual assemblies and conventions months ahead of schedule, the Witnesses regard time only as a short-term entity. As individuals, they conceptualise everyday life time in much the same way as any other citizen in that they live in accordance with the twenty-four hour clock, but their belief in the imminence of the end of time as we know it prevents them from making advanced plans for the future. The movement's prediction of Armageddon in 1975 had a profound impact on the long-term plans of most devotees. Some made a conscious decision not to have any more children and to cancel all voluntary pension premiums and insurance policies. Others continued to enter into marriage and apply for mortgages, but did not expect to see ripe old age or watch their endowments mature. To this day, most Witnesses think along these lines.

The 'striving, restlessness and a mounting incapacity for repose' to which Berger refers are among the more negative features with which people associate futurity. But modernity theorists also claim that people's reluctance to face the future derives from their discontentment with the present and a pessimistic view that things are becoming progressively worse - a pessimism that often manifests itself in the form of concern about moral decline and a lamentation that the orderly, peaceful past has gone forever (Pearson 1983, Sked 1987, Bailey 1988). Such nostalgia results in moral entrepreneurialism and an attempt to restore tradition.[viii] Christian fundamentalists engage in political affairs, demanding the 'return' of law and order and the prohibition of homosexuality, abortion, pornography and anything else they believe undermines moral decency and traditional family life. While secular society has jettisoned religious versions of temporality that offer millenarian hope for the future, the Watch Tower movement clings to its eschatological explanations of world events. Although few Witnesses tend to bemoan the loss of a great golden age (not least because the movement teaches that Satan has led humankind astray ever since Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden), concern about worsening morality is widespread. Unlike those who come from a more orthodox Christian tradition, however, the Witnesses are prevented from lobbying MPs and organising public demonstrations because of their belief that true devotion to Jehovah is apolitical. Consequently, they remain deeply pessimistic about the present and about people's ability to bring about meaningful social change. Until such time that the world will be transformed by divine intervention, they maintain that the future holds bleak prospects. During the 1980s, the Witnesses frequently referred to the threat of nuclear war as a means of disseminating their belief in the inevitability of self-destruction and the arrival of the New Kingdom. In so doing, they are prevented by their own doctrines from romanticising the past and the present, but they do romanticise the future in a way that is typical of most millenarian movements. Sociologist Roy Wallis argues:

> The world-rejecting movement expects that the millennium will shortly commence or that the movement will sweep the world, and, when all have become members or when they are in a majority, or when they have become guides and counsellors to kings and presidents, then a new world-order will begin, a simpler, more loving, more humane and more spiritual order in which the old evils and mistakes will be eradicated, and utopia will have begun. (Wallis 1984:9)

Wallis's commentary suggests not only that millenarian communities are romantic in their vision of the future, but that they are precise about the conditions that will transform their hopes into reality. Millenarians are in constant dialogue with time inasmuch as they reflect on past events such as wars, famines and earthquakes in their prediction of the Last Days, and it is this temporal view of the cosmos that enables them to sustain their utopian expectations.

Temporality is crucial to the Witnesses who, in their hunger for Armageddon, use the prophecies of Revelation to predict the demise of all other religions and worldly institutions. According to the movement's Governing Body, the prophecies in Matthew 24 have all now been fulfilled. Watch Tower literature persistently claims that Armageddon will occur within the generation of those who were alive in 1914, when Christ returned invisibly to establish Jehovah's Kingdom. These constant references to keeping alert have a huge impact on the minds of members. At Watch Tower meetings, articulate speakers deliver sermons urging congregations to be vigilant and to keep up the good work of door-to-door evangelism; for that it is only when this work is complete, they claim, that the end will come. This exemplifies the symbolic effect of the anticipation of Armageddon and the way in which it impacts on the Witnesses' concept of time. So convinced were they that 1975 would bring eternal glory that in that year, many abandoned their homes and pitched tents in remote areas. One life-long member told me:

> I once remember visiting a brother in 1975 to talk over some congregational matters, and when I arrived, he was patching up his house. He said 'I'm only giving this a lick of paint 'cos it's no good giving it a thorough job.' I said 'What do you mean?' He said 'Well, it's 1975', but I still burnt the paint off my house when it needed it and I still bottomed it and sanded it. I thought 'Why should I do a botch job, I like doing things well.' Now then, I went to see him in '78 and there he was taking the plaster off and putting a new damp course in! We work with a split mind. One is, it could start tomorrow, two is, it might be years, so we've a split mind ... so each day has its anxieties and you cope with them; you plan to continue, but you also realise that if half way through building another extension on the house Armageddon comes, don't cry about it! The Society is living by the same principle. They're putting up buildings galore all over the world, and they're not worried about whether Armageddon's going to come this year, next year; they're just going to go on allowing for expansion as long as the world continues. We are a progressive, forward looking organisation and our time, our efforts, our energy, our thinking and our finance all goes into carrying out Jehovah's work until he is ready for stepping in.

Hence, the Witnesses' expectation of Armageddon is not incompatible with pragmatic activities such as erecting headquarters and ministering to the world. This part alertness, part denial suggests that millenarian beliefs must coexist with evangelism if the principles on which the movement operates are to be put into practise. The Witnesses are living in a twilight world of transition between an unworkable present and an eagerly awaited future - a future that is conceptualised in terms of timelessness and continuity. The twenty-first century encourages a secular image of time either by treating it as a commodity or as a resource that contains no special meaning. Millenarians, on the other hand, maintain that time promises immortality and that death is the fulfilment of a romantic narrative. The events of one's life such as birth, adolescence, employment, marriage, parenting, ageing and finally death, are all part of a large cosmic drama, the finalé of which the Witnesses hope to see.

Conclusion

Millenarian movements are, by their very nature, disruptive since they challenge all other systems of belief and patterns of behaviour, religious and secular. By attributing world catastrophes such as war, famine, murder, environmental pollution, genocide and terrorism to biblical prophecies, the Witnesses are able to support their promise of an imminent utopia in a way that is missing in the esoteric doctrines of Christendom. It is a sociological axiom that in societies where people are allowed the freedom to negotiate their own lifestyles, millenarian communities prosper by presenting themselves as exclusive organisations that affirm unambiguous boundaries between members and non-members. Since they are critical of mainstream religion, their appeal lies in their alternative way of life. The Witnesses recruit others to their cause by offering hope, self-confidence, support and direction in a world they believe is on the brink of chaos. Although their utopian dream can appeal to those who are experiencing personal difficulties, it also has a tacit rôle to play in enabling people to cope with some of the insecurities and uncertainties that the modern world presents. This is particularly true for those who are inclined towards pessimism. The movement's vision of the

future reinforces the pessimistic orientation in its presentation of itself as the perfect antidote to the worst conditions of secular society.

In this paper, I have argued that the Witnesses employ a variety of cultural resources to promote their millenarian creed. Temporal concepts are used by the Watch Tower movement to support its version of reality and its message of hope. The salvation narrative of past, present and future appeals to certain kinds of people at the beginning of the twenty-first century, particularly those who see the world as fragmented, confused, and morally reprehensible. I have also suggested that it is not so much the promises contained in this message as the way they are imparted that strengthens the movement's appeal. If the Witnesses are to fulfil their eschatological mission (which is, after all, their *raison d'être*), they must bring their apocalyptic message to the attention of the widest possible audience. To date, the movement has been remarkably successful in recruiting new members and in using its funds to erect gigantic headquarters in almost every country in the world for the purposes of distributing its millenarian literature and centralising its spiritual activities. These long-term building projects are an important part of the Witnesses' international ministry, the completion of which they believe will accelerate the New Kingdom. This combination of millenarianism and pragmatism raises some interesting questions about their religious identity. For example, how do they juxtapose their enthusiasm for their evangelical ministry with their expectation of an impending holocaust? More importantly, how do they go about the daily business of living in the meantime?

Curiously enough, the Witnesses' rational, business-like approach to their mission is not as incongruous with their belief in the Final Days as one might think. Indeed, these two facets of their religious lives exemplify what devotees themselves refer to as 'the split mind' - a psychological strategy that enables them to plan a future they do not expect to see. Their belief that nothing can be done by outsiders to solve the world's problems means that long-term planning gives way to immediate concerns; hence, they remain trapped in the present. Their refusal to embrace the future in secular terms (in the way described by Berger, for example) is indicative of a people who are acutely aware of moral danger. No doubt, modern living poses anxieties for everyone, but while others approach the new millennium and all its uncertainties with optimism, trepidation or indifference, the Witnesses retreat into their own world of safety - a world in which time is suspended and fear suppressed. At the same time, the Witnesses are very like 'moderns'. The evidence from this paper suggests that they are instrumental people with a utopian imagination. The fact that they pivot between the rational and the idealistic demonstrates the versatility of their beliefs, as well as their willingness to make use of a wide range of resources in a world they find repugnant.

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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] The annual membership statistics are published in the 1 January copy of *The Watchtower*.

[iv] This is based on a projected growth rate of 4 per cent.

[v] Other literature suggests that millenarian beliefs are most common among those under colonial rule (see, for example, Smelser 1962, Lanternari 1963, Aberle 1965 and Worsley 1968).

[vi] Hall borrows this notion of the imagined community from Benedict Anderson (1983).

[vii] All pictorial images are of the New Kingdom on earth rather than in heaven. Since the movement teaches that heaven is reserved for only 144,000 Witnesses (of whom only a small number remain), these images would appear to depict future life for those other than the chosen few.

[viii] Theme parks, museums and The National Trust are examples of how people attempt to compensate for the loss of the past. The heritage industry centres around the artificial reconstruction of history and shared memories.