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Peering Through the Watch Tower: How Jehovah's Witnesses Learn to Worship and Evangelise

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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 has managed to retain a millenarian orientation in a world that is, for the most part, indifferent to its beliefs. The Witnesses reject many commonly recognised accoutrements of sacred practise such as mystical concepts, awesome rituals and transcendental symbolism in favour of a rationalised form of religion based on the study of published texts. Ethnographic analysis reveals the dependency of this quasi-totalitarian movement on the very physical and cultural resources it condemns. The paper concludes that the Witnesses' anti-mystical faith is both an inverted form of corporate 'branding' and an anti-modern quest for certainty in a hostile world of relativism. The movement's relationship with the modern world is, therefore, ambivalent and paradoxical.

In 1872, a Pittsburgh draper by the name of Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916), founded what became known as the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society - the official name for the



organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses. This world-renouncing religious movement is now a huge international corporation with over six million members who claim to monopolise truth. Since the foundation of the Society 130 years ago, the Witnesses have maintained that we are living in the Final Days. Their eschatology is based on the texts of the New Testament and almost all their literature makes reference to the annihilation of evil at *Armageddon*; hence, they are on a mission to evangelise to as many prospective converts as possible.[i] The movement boasts huge international success. Its worldwide membership increased from a mere 44,080 in 1928 to an extraordinary 6,035,564 in 2000 making an annual net growth of more than 5 per cent. The 1 January 2001 issue of *The Watchtower* recorded 126,297 Witnesses in Britain alone in 2000 (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 something in the region of 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 throughout the whole world.

Despite the success of their evangelistic mission, there are surprisingly few academic studies on the Watch Tower movement. Beckford (1975a, 1975b, 1976), Wilson (1974, 1978, 1990) and Dobbelaere and Wilson (1980) have carried out the most extensive research, although these studies are now rather dated. There is a slightly larger number of articles on the movement in journals such as *Social Compass*, *Sociological Analysis*, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* and *The British Journal of Sociology*, but most of these are written from a macro perspective and make little reference to the Witnesses' ministerial activities. As far as major texts are concerned, the most comprehensive study of the Witnesses is undoubtedly James Beckford's *The Trumpet of Prophecy* cited above (1975a), but even this book offers little ethnographic detail of how devotees sell their theology to others. In recent years, social scientists have devoted their attention to the religions of the New Age (see, for example, Bruce 1995, 1996 and Heelas 1996) at the expense of authoritarian movements that have grown much more rapidly. For all its conservatism, the Watch Tower Society is still managing to win converts in numbers of which any religious organisation offering an alternative to mainstream Christianity would be proud. For this reason, the movement warrants our attention. This paper examines the movement's style of worship and ministerial activities and contains data from a recent ethnographic study of the Witnesses in the North West of England. The principal methods of inquiry include analysis of Watch Tower literature, observations of activities in Kingdom Halls (the official name for the Witnesses' place of worship) and unstructured interviews with practising members. I write as a sociologist with many years interest in how members of religious movements come to see the world in a particular way and how they convey their version of reality to others. It is, however, impossible for sociologists to understand any such organisation without knowing something about its mission. I begin, therefore, with a brief overview of Watch Tower doctrines and some details of what exactly the Witnesses are trying to achieve.

The end is nigh

Despite its success in winning new recruits, the movement has had a chequered evolution caused mainly, though by no means exclusively, by a series of embarrassing prophecy failures. The years of 1874, 1914, 1918, 1925 and 1975 were all earmarked, to a greater or lesser extent, as times for the Second Coming of Christ, yet all brought disappointment. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that the Society has continued to recruit and expand with the success that it has. The Witnesses propound 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 the Watch Tower community (the figure mentioned in Revelation 14:3) will enter heaven. Moreover, their heterodox purity code prohibiting among other things blood transfusions, Christmas celebrations and unnecessary association with non-members means that they are highly unlikely, despite their worldwide ministry, to recruit anything other than a small number of zealous devotees. When people convert to the Watch Tower movement, they defer



unquestioningly to the authority of its Governing Body (a small number of presidential officials in Brooklyn) and every member is expected to contribute to the recruitment effort.

Over the years, reactions towards the movement (to which devotees refer as the truth) have ranged from sympathy to hatred. Several years of social disruption and military catastrophe both in Europe and the United States in the late-nineteenth century seemed for Russell to point towards the Second Coming of Christ predicted in the Book of Revelation. His strong disdain for orthodox Christian explanations of the ills of late nineteenth century America provided the context for his new movement and its teachings. The escalating international arms race, the spread of famine and the outbreak of war were all events for which Russell's prescription for cure (that is, the annihilation of the wicked at Armageddon) differed from many of his Christian contemporaries. For him, the appeal of world-renouncing doctrines during this period lay in the hope they gave for social justice. The movement was founded at a time not only of great social unrest, but one that was characterised by the birth of a number of other world-renouncing movements. The Mormons had entered and settled in the valley of the Great Salt Lake in the late 1840s and early 1850s, by which time the Seventh-day Adventists had begun their missionary outreach and in the 1870s, Mary Baker Eddy founded Christian Science. While immigration was of key significance in the expansion of the Mormon church, the renunciation of the world appealed largely to those for whom social and political agitation were signs of the end.

Witnesses everywhere are expected to adhere to a strict fundamentalist code. To this day, they see themselves not just as members of a religious movement, but one that monopolises truth. They take most of the Bible literally (including the stories in Genesis) and dismiss all other religious creeds as heresy. For this reason, they feel they are called upon to proselytise. Non-conformist ideas that were widespread during the period in which the movement was founded provided the basis for some of its teachings. The one imperative belief, however, is that the Bible, from beginning to end, is the inspired word of God.[v] Scriptural texts are used by the Witnesses to substantiate their narrative of past, present and future. World catastrophes such as war, famine, murder, environmental pollution, genocide and terrorism provide them with empirical evidence with which to support their theology. When ministering on the doorstep, devotees often use biblical texts to explain recent world events - events that they claim signify the Last Days. By attributing world events to biblical prophecy, the Witnesses are able to support their promise of an imminent utopia in a way that orthodox Christianity is not.

The movement rejects annual events such as Christmas, Easter, birthdays and national festivals. According to the Witnesses, the only two people mentioned in the Bible to celebrate their birthdays are a Pharaoh of Egypt and the Roman ruler Herod Antipas (Genesis 40:18-22; and Mark 6:21-28), neither of whom were true believers. Though the movement recognises that the birth of Christ is presented as a joyful occasion by the synoptic writers, it forbids its members to partake in Christmas celebrations on the grounds that the precise date is unknown and that the festival has become tainted with secular images. As far as Easter is concerned, the Witnesses maintain that the egg is a pagan symbol for the celebration of the return of spring and the rabbit is an emblem of fertility, neither of which are connected with the resurrection of Christ (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1989:179). Moreover, they associate annual celebrations with immodest behaviour and excessive alcohol-consumption - practises which they believe violate biblical principles.

The Witnesses object both to jury and military service (on the grounds of pacifism and neutrality), and refuse to support local or national charities; although some do join leisure clubs and progress to post-compulsory education. Rules about physical and moral cleanliness are used to establish lines of demarcation between good and evil and act as a powerful armoury for resisting those aspects of modern life which they regard as sinful. When individuals undergo baptism, they are committing themselves to a way of life that has huge implications for how they live and with whom they will spend their time in the future. The Witnesses have never been able to accept sexual freedom as a basic human right and their allegiance to a strict puritanical creed tends to attract people who see the modern world as permissive. Sex is regarded as a strictly heterosexual affair that should only be practised within marriage – an injunction that is rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. This approach



regards sexual desire as hedonistic and contrasts sharply with the libertarian position in which sexual gratification is regarded as benign and life enhancing. While the 1960s reforms concerning homosexuality, obscenity, family planning and theatre censorship were arguably little more than an attempt to regulate behaviour that had previously been subjected to unworkable laws, the appeal of the Watch Tower movement in Britain owes much to the Witnesses' persistent condemnation of a world they believe is on the brink of chaos. Drug abuse, smoking and the excessive consumption of alcohol are also believed to be offensive to Jehovah. Blood transfusions are condemned by the movement on the grounds that they are both symbolically and physically polluting. Like many other religious movements, the Society imparts a theology that embraces a large number of complex issues and each member usually has at his or her disposal several tracts containing hundreds of biblical references substantiating beliefs. These strict moral precepts belong to a group of religionists whose loyalty is first and foremost to an organisation that secures their salvation. But before salvation can be achieved, devotees must try to sell their millenarian message to a sceptical crowd.

Eschewing mysticism

If there is one feature of the Kingdom Hall that occupied my thoughts in the initial stages of my fieldwork, it would have to have been the absence of *mysticism*. I had not known what to expect before I sought permission to attend my first Witness meeting and my Catholic upbringing could never have prepared me for what I was about to experience. During my first observation, I was bewildered by what seemed like a numbing dullness of the Kingdom Hall compared with the awesome ambience of the Catholic Church. It was as though my childhood memories of penance, rosaries, plenary indulgences, novenas, transubstantiation and benediction belonged to a different world. Here, no one meditated or lit candles and the elders never burned incense. Nor did they wear vestments or stand before an altar. Though they contend that Jehovah loves all people and cares about what happens to them, the Witnesses' anticipation of Armageddon seems to prevent them from beseeching him for world peace or good fortune.[vi] Their failure to spend much time in meditation, prayer, healing, and other such rituals demonstrates their unwillingness to recognise that God will intervene in human affairs.[vii] I could not help being struck by the stark contrast between the awesome symbols of a church with which I was familiar and the rationalism of the Watch Tower movement.

Rationalism is an essential characteristic of the modern world that stems from the Enlightenment tradition. It involves a qualitatively new way of thinking concerned with innate ideas independent of experience.[viii] Weber (1970) regarded the rise of science and technology in industrial capitalist societies as evidence of a whole process of rationalisation. He argued that this would manifest itself in the economic distribution of goods and services, in the ordering of work and in social life in general. Weber also suggested that rationalism would lead to tension with traditional cultures in which ordinary people for whom religion had been an important influence would not easily adapt to laws and procedures that were devoid of human emotion. Communities that operate on rational precepts cannot easily accommodate charisma or individual creativity. Rational systems are generally purposeful and pragmatic, eschewing all arbitrary performances and events. Religious beliefs are, however, based on faith; and since this is something that cannot be quantified, a certain amount of tension between these two phenomena is inevitable.

The Witnesses pose a challenge to traditional religion, not least because they undermine the beliefs and rituals of established churches.[ix] Their rational system of beliefs equips them with strategies for recruitment and enables them to prove beyond all doubt that their theology is the word of God. The contrast between this and mystical religion manifests itself in visual imagery and styles of worship. Biblical texts are consulted not only for the substantiation of doctrines but as a blueprint for everyday conduct. Scriptural literalism is a rational means by which the world and its problems can be explained. The Witnesses believe that Jehovah created the world in seven days and intended Adam and Eve to live in a state of eternal happiness. However, it is as though they believe that since the fall, he has gone into semi-retirement until such time that humankind reaches the point of its own destruction. This is perhaps one of the reasons they spend little time in prayer. Glossolalia, creed recitation, even



periods of silent meditation are so far removed from the Witnesses' activities that someone claiming to have had an experience of a transcendental nature are unlikely to find solace in a Kingdom Hall. At no point in meetings is time devoted to individual prayer. Spontaneous prayer and prayer by invitation are also absent. Unlike the Roman Catholic tradition in which relics, crucifixes, statues, pictures, holy water and tabernacles are an indispensable part of the spiritual ethos, these places of worship are sparse and disenchanting. Although they are always clean, tastefully decorated and well maintained, Kingdom Halls are essentially functional places.[x] The spatial layout of formally arranged chairs and an elevated platform on which devotees delivered their well-rehearsed sermons exemplify the Witnesses' rational style of worship. Elders in the background who quietly confirm the order and content of the meeting from their official itineraries enhance the atmosphere of order and precision.

The Watch Tower movement does not only eschew mysticism, it openly condemns it. Its magazines repeatedly warn devotees of the dangers of apostasy by showing pictures of Catholics praying before images of saints (particularly the Virgin Mary) for intercession. Elders propound the view that venerating anything or anybody other than Jehovah constitutes false worship and is forbidden in scripture.[xi] This idea is nothing new (it was, after all, one of the arguments that came out of the Protestant Reformation), but what is significant is that the Witnesses' style of worship resonates with the idea that religious superstition is contrary to modernity. In his work on the Enlightenment in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Isaiah Berlin writes:

The rational reorganisation of society would put an end to spiritual and intellectual confusion, the reign of prejudice and superstition, blind obedience to unexamined dogmas, and the stupidities and cruelties of the oppressive regimes which such intellectual darkness bred and promoted. All that was wanted was the identification of the principal human needs and discovery of the means of satisfying them. (Berlin 1990:5)

Berlin is suggesting here that rationalisation would bring about the death of superstition and the rise of human emancipation. Few people would regard the Watch Tower movement as liberating in any sense of the word, yet the Witnesses' unabated attack on saint-cults and their refusal to accept the "unexamined dogmas" to which Berlin refers could be seen as freedom from what many regard as the oppressive forces of traditional religion. Though they are religious in the sense that they believe in the supernatural and offer their allegiance to a deity, the Witnesses' one true interpretation of scripture eradicates superstition, drawing instead on the principles of modern reason. This suggests that the 'knowledge' required for membership of the Watch Tower community is fundamentally different from the emotional intensity often associated with, for example, evangelical Christianity.[xii] Reading textual material is more intellectually demanding and time-consuming than making a sudden decision to offer one's life to God at a charismatic revival meeting. This is not to suggest that the Witnesses do not believe what they 'know', or that evangelical Christian ministers are always sure that those who step forward to be saved have genuine conviction, but rather that preparation for Watch Tower ministry is devoid of supernatural invocation.[xiii] One indicator of this is the fact that the familiar stories in which born-again Christians declare how lost they were before they saw the light are absent in the testimonies of Witness converts. The Witnesses' failure to acknowledge grace or even their own unworthiness reflects their belief that salvation can be earned by taking the time to read about God and adhere to the way of life prescribed by the Governing Body of his earthly Society. The people I interviewed referred to the uniformity of Watch Tower doctrines and their complete scriptural basis, but what was significant about their reasons for joining the movement was the consistency with which they claimed the Witnesses were able to offer them 'facts' that were free from dogma. Here are two such examples:

When I first read some of the literature and started a study with the Witnesses, every question I had ever thought of when I was growing up like 'Why are we here?' and 'What happens to a person when they die?' The Witnesses showed me in the Bible what happens to people when they die and I knew then that other religions had got it wrong. So, that started me thinking. To tell you the truth, when I started studying, I tried to prove them wrong if you know what I mean. I started to read the Bible for



myself then, and when I went for my weekly study, I used to have question after question after question and I tried to pull them up, but I couldn't. They could show me in the Bible the facts.

When I first started studying, I tried to prove it wrong actually. They answered the questions I asked in a reasoning way. The answer was always shown to me from the Bible. I'd never used the Bible before as a Catholic, but the Witnesses always showed me from the Bible.

Although these two converts reveal a highly simplistic notion of right and wrong, their accounts contain a concept of (biblical) reason. Those who express an interest in the movement must demonstrate a willingness to familiarise themselves with its theology and undertake serious study of its publications. It is not uncommon for recent converts to ask each other how long they have been in the *truth* or when they first began to *study*. Since becoming a respectable Witness involves reading large amounts of textual information in preparation for a never-ending series of meetings, *learning* (or *studying*) is a more appropriate description of their weekly activities than *worship*. In this sense, *studying* implies disdain for superstition.

The Witnesses are expected to attend three weekly meetings, two of which are held at the Kingdom Hall, while the third (known as the *Book Study*) is held in a member's home. The two Kingdom Hall meetings each last approximately two hours. The first meeting is held on a weekday evening and centres around sermons, ministry and discussions of moral and theological issues from various publications. The second (held by most congregations on Sundays) comprise a *public talk* and a *Watchtower study*. Each congregation is responsible for conducting its own meetings. Book Study meetings last one hour and consist of groups of around twenty devotees. Although a number of groups meet at different houses on the same evening, it should be possible for every Witness to attend a meeting at a house near to where he or she lives. The meetings I attended were formal events that followed the schedule of the Watch Tower itinerary to the letter. These standard procedures for conducting meetings adds to the movement's coherence. Male Witnesses in positions of seniority attend the entrance of the hall at every meeting to welcome the members with a handshake. Copies of *The Watchtower* are printed in most languages for Witnesses worldwide, and are used at these meetings in almost every country in the world. So uniform is the movement's theology and content of meetings that, in principle, every active Witness in the world will read the same literature during the same week in preparation for the same programme at their local Kingdom Hall.

Despite the Witnesses' claim that the Bible is their only source of authority, they make constant use of a huge welter of hard and paperback publications, tracts and *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* magazines. In fact, without these aids it would be impossible for devotees to standardise their meetings or to recruit new members. Materials such as *The Watchtower* are as significant as the Bible, since the information they contain is regarded as the inspired work of theologians. Of all the literature published by the movement, articles from *The Watchtower* and various extracts from a circular entitled *Our Kingdom Ministry* provide the Witnesses with their weekly reading material. The meetings are structured around these articles which devotees are expected to read as part of their weekly preparation. These texts provide an important topic of conversation before the meetings begin and after they have ended. Some devotees highlight certain paragraphs and key phrases in their tracts while others prepare their answers to the attached questions on notepaper. Not surprisingly, scriptural references are used to support the discussion. Publications serve to enhance sermons and appended questions are used to invite responses from the audience. The responses are elicited by microphones offered by congregational attendants. These question and answer sessions seem to be viewed as the most effective way of *studying* and are analogous to the didactic teaching and learning styles commonly employed by teachers in classrooms. Despite the fact that the Witnesses claim to reason from the scriptures, their theology is taught in a highly mechanistic fashion and written publications encourage learning by rote. One woman in her early thirties who had defected from the community two years before I interviewed her had vivid memories of how she was trained to prepare for meetings:



You had to read it through, read it through again, answer the question and then read it through *again*. So by the time Sunday came, you were an expert at it. You were a fully trained parrot! Everybody had their answers underlined. You could see everybody looking at each other's *Watchtower* to check if the answers were underlined. Everybody comes out with the same answer. You virtually repeated the answer out of the book ... it's like 'learn with mother!'

Mid-week Book Study meetings also involve this kind of learning. Although the size of the groups and homely setting of the meetings would suggest that these are informal occasions, chairs are arranged in three or four rows in order that the congregational official can be seen at the front. On entering the house, people chat in a friendly manner and supply the host with packets of biscuits and home-made cakes for the refreshment period at the end. Once the meeting is about to begin, the twenty or so people sit attentively with their books opened at the correct page. For the next hour, the selected passage is read from the tract paragraph by paragraph. In a similar way to the Watch Tower meetings, the accompanying questions are read out one at a time by an official who co-ordinates the responses. Personal contributions are discouraged and devotees may only volunteer an answer by raising their hands. The absence of mysticism does not seem to prevent officials from achieving a high level of commitment from the congregation. Though literal biblical interpretation may not constitute rational thinking to outsiders, it is, in fact, a rational means by which devotees make sense of the cosmos. Their objective search for truth and their ability to run meetings in a business-like fashion demonstrate their willingness to make use of modern resources in order to create a mood of certainty and to protect themselves from the seductive forces of the outside world.

Learning to minister

One of the peculiarities of the Watch Tower movement is that faith in its millenarian position is not enough to constitute being a Witness. Belief in the doctrines must also be expressed in religious participation and in this sense, devotees are not only believers, they are also activists. Those who take the step of becoming full members of the community and publicly acknowledge this in baptism are automatically ordained as ministers. This means that they have a moral obligation to disseminate Watch Tower doctrines as evangelists of the truth. The Witnesses claim that ministering and believing must coexist if their principal mission of accelerating the New Kingdom is to be achieved.[xiv] Door-to-door proselytising is considered the most appropriate means of alerting the rest of the world to 'the signs of the end'; that is, of disseminating the prophecies of Matthew 24:14.

Evangelism can be a great source of inspiration for millenarian communities. The capacity of the movement to stir devotees into action is achieved mainly through its delegation and calculation of religious activities. The Governing Body centralises the worldwide ministerial effort of devotees and publishes annual reports (including statistical information) on the success of door-to-door proselytising in gaining new members. The onus is on every congregation in the world to improve its previous year's recruitment performance and is the reason for the large amount of time spent at the Kingdom Hall in the practice of effective ministry. Every Witness has a personal responsibility to spread the good news and to monitor their performance by logging the total number of monthly hours allocated to the ministry. The specific amount of literature left with the householder, the number of return visits made to a prospective convert's home and the number of home Bible studies conducted are meticulously recorded. These details are submitted on a monthly basis to the congregational secretary. Those who fail to devote the minimum amount of time to doorstep evangelism (currently around seventeen hours per month in Britain and the United States) soon lose the respect of their co-religionists and may even be disfellowshipped. Though the Watch Tower authorities acknowledge that factors such as old age, infirmity and family responsibilities mean that some people are unable to devote as much time to the ministry as others, all Witnesses are expected to do what they can to win converts and are thus forced to think quantitatively about their salvation. Those whose activities might be hindered for any of the above reasons are expected to write letters for the movement to publish or to Witness by telephone. This is an extremely resourceful movement in which everyone is a missionary. This is no place for anyone wishing to tag along as a free-rider.



The Witnesses' eager anticipation of the Millenarian Age is epitomised in the industry with which they approach their evangelistic mission. Their endless ministerial efforts (vis-à-vis the scepticism with which their message of salvation is often received) echo the work ethic of the Calvinists in the sixteenth century. Weber's famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* conveys how Calvin's high regard for the virtues of self-discipline, purity and industry encouraged a rational and efficient approach to work. Weber argued that these virtues sowed the seeds for the development of modern capitalism (Weber 1930).[xv] But the Protestant ethic did not only produce a spirit of capitalism, it also produced a new spirit of labour which is reflected in the Witnesses' dedication to their ministry. The precise calculation of the time spent by devotees in their door-to-door proselytising and the planning and rehearsing required for success bear all the hallmarks of Calvinist rationalism. Ministering to the general public at their homes and out on the streets is something devotees are ever trying to improve. Photographs of Witnesses from all ethnic backgrounds happily evangelising to prospective converts appear in a large number of the movement's publications and demonstrate an unreserved anti-racist stance.[xvi] Some of this literature also contains pictures of the huge buildings in which the movement's tracts are printed and from which they are distributed. These images echo the Witnesses' rapid expansion. Annual *Yearbooks* are packed with information about the various activities that have taken place since the last edition including the number of Kingdom Halls built around the world (making a grand total of 89,985 in January 2000), the tens of thousands of books printed in various branches, the number of baptisms conducted, the millions of dollars spent on overseas travel and the total number of hours recorded for missionary work (1,096,065,354 in 1995 alone). While success of this kind confirms the fulfilment of prophecy, it also serves to remind devotees that this work must be complete before the arrival of Armageddon and that no one can afford to rest on their laurels. Doubtless, the Witnesses face rejection upon rejection at the majority of their house calls, but it would be wrong to think that their doorstep proselytising is fruitless. On present performance, if the number of worldwide annual Witnessing hours are divided by the total number of new recruits, each publisher would need to devote an average of only twenty hours per month to achieve a 7 per cent rate of growth. Although this means that it would take the collective effort of fourteen evangelists per annum to produce just one baptism, the end result is nevertheless impressive.

The Witnesses spend an inordinate amount of time learning to deliver doorstep sermons. At each weekly Ministry School meeting, one full hour is devoted to platform rôle-play where missionary skills are honed in front of enthusiastic congregations. Every possible reaction from householders is met with Watch Tower rhetoric. Rôle-play activities include doorstep sermons, street proselytising, home Bible studies and workplace ministry - all contexts in which the Witnesses are encouraged, should the opportunity arise, to share their faith. At the end of each activity, the congregational officials assess the quality of the rehearsal and provide the individual with comments on which s/he is expected to reflect. Criteria such as 'fluency', 'pronunciation', 'use of biblical references', 'audibility', 'speed' and 'eye contact' ensure that the participant makes a constant effort to fine-tune his or her delivery. A personal assessment report is then given to the evangelist at the end of the session as an indicator of his/her performance.[xvii] These ministerial strategies show how, despite their constant verbal attacks on the modern world, the Witnesses depend on its resources. The training involved in effective communication for the sole purpose of winning recruits is not unlike that undertaken by sales personnel in the secular world of business.[xviii] The close attention to style and presentation exemplified in the wearing of suits and the carrying of briefcases characterises a rational, professional people who know exactly how to sell their message; hence, it is not difficult to see that the Witnesses' way of ministering is conducive to their belief that magic, miracles, and superstition do not belong to the twenty-first century.[xix]

Over and above the formal assessment of presentations at Kingdom Hall meetings, devotees are expected to reflect on their evangelistic skills when they are engaged in door to door ministry. The success of presenting Watch Tower beliefs to the general public might, for example, be measured by considering the effects of the sermon on the recipient. The willingness of the householder to listen attentively and to accept a copy of *The Watchtower* is regarded as a successful first visit. Witnesses who manage to persuade their host to agree to a second visit can commend themselves on having made progress, for it is at this point that a



prospective convert beckons. Ultimately, the aim of every Watch Tower evangelist is to make a series of visits to the same householder in the hope that it will result in a Bible study and a subsequent invitation to the Kingdom Hall. When the Witnesses cannot even persuade a householder to accept a free pamphlet or a copy of *The Watchtower*, they concede to the knowledge that rejection is a sign of people's unworthiness. Doorstep rebuffs are regarded by the movement as the fulfilment of New Testament prophecy; namely, that 'Christ's true followers will be the objects of hatred on account of his name' (Matthew 24:9). Hostility merely confirms the Witnesses' negative perceptions of the outside world and supports their rational biblical logic. This predictive value of Bible-like science makes possible the precise calculation of the Last Days and an unambiguous explanation of the whole of human existence from the beginning to the end of time. These are the tools with which the Witnesses are able to make sense of the world in its present state.

Conclusion

Until recently, sociological literature has tended to propound the view that world-renouncing sectarian religion cannot survive the onslaught of modernity which is, among other things, rational, secular and materialistic. But these theories offer scant empirical analysis of millenarian movements. The rise of the modern state, modern capitalism and modern science have no doubt been the cause of great tension between faith and reason, but they can in no way be shown to have brought about the death of God. The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society is an example of a movement that has managed to maintain a piety that is as ascetic and puritanical as any version of orthodox Christianity. At the same time, it is a religion of disenchantment that involves the systematic study of textual material. This requires skills of literacy, reason and learning by rote. The Witnesses' style of worship, their meticulous collation of statistical data and their ministerial methodology reveal an indubitable dependency on modern rational principles. In an age in which social movements articulate expressive and aesthetic identities, the Watch Tower Society stands out as rational, calculating and conservative. Its style of worship and ministerial procedures reflect a community that operates on the basis of what Weber called 'technical reason'. Weber argued that in the post-industrial period, Western societies had become governed by rules and regulations deriving from legal-rational authority (Weber 1922).[xx] While some devotees find the movement's demand for loyalty difficult to satisfy, however, it would be a mistake to suggest that they find its appeal for service oppressive. Its rational-authoritarian nature produces both the conformity and the strong feeling of unity that enable it to function.

Watch Tower evangelism succeeds because of the technological and cultural resources that are available in the twenty-first century. The Witnesses' recruitment methodology requires the use of modern communication techniques as well as sophisticated technology such as multi-media software. The movement operates an international business enterprise for the production and dissemination of tracts and magazines and the expansion of its membership. Photographs of gigantic office blocks representing its headquarters and printing works appear in glossy reading materials. These photographs do not, in any sense, depict an organisation that is anti-modern or anti-materialistic, but rather one that prides itself on its modern rational image. This is, to all intents and purposes, a global, multicultural corporation. The modern world the Witnesses ostensibly oppose is the world they also mimic. Notwithstanding the tension between faith on the one hand and reason on the other, the Witnesses are remarkably successful in utilising rational means for their equally rational ends.

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[i] Armageddon is the battle at which God will defeat 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] The Witnesses believe that God has a personal name – Jehovah (taken from the Hebrew word Yahweh). In orthodox Christian terms, this is God the Father.

[vi] The Witnesses' belief in free-will rather than predestination suggests that this pessimism derives from their knowledge that Jehovah has prepared a place for them as part of a much greater plan.

[vii] One interesting feature of Watch Tower theology is that expressions such as 'Good luck' are banned by the movement because they imply superstition.

[viii] Hamilton (1992) traces the origin of reason back to the seventeenth century philosophers - particularly Descartes and Pascal who used the concept to support their work on empiricism.

[ix] Wilson offers some examples of 'therapeutic' sects that adopt rational patterns of organisation. His two most interesting examples are Christian Science and the Church of Scientology (1982:108-10).

[x] It would, however, be misleading to suggest that the Witnesses do not hold a concept of sacredness. Rather, their rejection of mystical accoutrements is a rejection of what they see as idolatrous worship. Their 'sacredness' is thus expressed in a Protestant form.

[xi] The Witnesses quote biblical texts such as Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomy 27:15 to support this injunction. In addition to idolatry, the movement teaches that fortune-telling constitutes superstition as indicated in Acts 16:16.

[xii] Psychoanalyst Carl Christensen (1963) provides a fascinating description of the psychological effects of mystical conversion among born-again Christians.

[xiii] Hence, the theological debate about whether faith, works or a combination of the two provide the route to salvation.

[xiv] In her work on New Religious Movements, Eileen Barker refers to this as kingdom building (Barker 1982).

[xv] This work has been criticised by historians such as Tawney (1926) and Eisenstadt (1967), both of whom argue that Weber's account is chronologically incorrect. Notwithstanding this, it is Weber's description of the work ethic that is important here.

[xvi] The movement is successful in recruiting from a wide range of ethnic groups. In the United States alone, African, Hispanic and Asian-Americans form the majority of self-identified Witnesses. This may enhance the success of the movement in Latin America, Africa and Asia (see Stark and Iannaccone 1997:150).



[xvii] Newly baptised Witnesses usually learn to minister by accompanying established members, but it may be a long time before they acquire the necessary skill and confidence to present their own sermons. In some cases, this can be several months after baptism.

[xviii] Similarly, Bruce (1990) discusses the ways in which Christian fundamentalists in the USA have made use of the electronic media as in the case of televangelism.

[xix] Although they are scriptural literalists, the Witnesses do acknowledge the miracles of Jesus in the synoptic gospels. However, they maintain that these miracles were performed only for the purpose of spreading the kerygma. The Witnesses believe that, once Jesus had died and the ministry had expanded, miracles were no longer necessary.

[xx] Weber suggested that legal-rational authority gives rise to modern bureaucracies. He also identified two other types of authority. These were traditional and charismatic.