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Averting Risk: A Cultural Analysis of the Worldview of Jehovah's Witnesses

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 ways in which the Witnesses conceptualise the modern world and how they resist the secular forces that threaten their religious identity. Close analysis of the testimonies of current members reveals that the movement's millenarian weltanschauung is a reaction to a world that is perceived as hostile and ambiguous. The paper concludes that the Witnesses' allegiance to this quasi-totalitarian movement signifies an escape from a modern age that hedonistically celebrates individual freedom.

There could be no period more appropriate than the beginning of a new millennium in which to consider the activities of those who hold beliefs about the end of the world. In 1872, Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916), a Pittsburgh draper, founded what became known as the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society - the official name for the organisation of Jehovah's



Witnesses. Russell had a fascination for biblical eschatology - a fascination that would play a significant part in the expansion of what is now a huge international corporation with over six million members. The Witnesses are members of a world-renouncing puritanical movement which claims to be the sole guardian of truth and refuses ecumenical relations with all other religious denominations. In a modern age in which people are free to construct their own aesthetic identities, the Witnesses stand out as authoritarian, calculating and aloof, and this makes their organisation distinctive from other social movements. This paper examines the appeal of movement and its strategies for averting the 'risks' posed by the modern world. For the Witnesses, the outside world is one in which dangers of all kind loom large and this calls for a system of prescriptive boundaries. Despite their belief in Satan's earthly presence, however, the Witnesses do not go as far as members of religious organisations such as the Plymouth Brethren in isolating themselves from outsiders. They do, in fact, live in ordinary neighbourhoods and are employed in most mainstream occupations. None the less, their persistent refusal to engage in many cultural and political activities including voting in elections, joining trade unions and partaking in annual celebrations is indicative of their disdain for secular society. An empirical analysis of the testimonies of practising members provides rich insight into their perception of the cosmos and uncovers the ways in which they are able to fend off what they see as dangerous forces. This kind of analysis is essential if we are to understand the movement's success.

The movement boasts huge international expansion. 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 around 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).¹ 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.² Moreover, the Witnesses are loath to include anyone other than active evangelists. Even the most conservative estimates indicate that by the year 2020, there will be something in the region of 12,475,115 members (Stark and Iannaccone 1997:153-4).³ The Witnesses attribute their worldwide growth to the fulfilment of Matthew 24 which states that the gospel of the Kingdom will be preached to the ends of the earth. For the last 130 years, 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 proselytise to as many prospective converts as possible.

The Watch Tower Society has had a chequered evolution. From the moment of its foundation, devotees have lived in anticipation of a new Messianic Kingdom in which all earthly wickedness would be destroyed and Paradise be inaugurated by Jehovah.⁴ 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 Witnesses have continued to recruit and expand with remarkable success. The movement espouses an exclusive message which declares that although 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, the Witnesses' 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 members. When people convert to the Watch Tower, they defer unquestioningly to the authority of those who are appointed to enforce its doctrines and the individual becomes the property of whole community. This tightly bound movement provides new recruits not only with a ready-made explanation of their life experiences, but also an opportunity to contribute to a worldwide spiritual mission.

Over the years, reactions towards the movement (to which devotees refer as *the truth*) include fascination, compassion, anger and hatred. Although the available literature confirms that their world-renouncing theology and adherence to millenarianism have been the sources of strain in terms of their liaison with secular bodies (particularly the legal system), the



Witnesses have still managed to gain converts at a time when other movements have collapsed. The passing of several years of turbulent disruption and military catastrophe both in Europe and the United States in the late-nineteenth century seemed for Russell to point towards the prophecies of Revelation. His strong disagreements with orthodox Christian explanations of the ills of American society provided the context for his new movement. 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 consignment of the wicked at Armageddon) differed from many of his Christian contemporaries; hence, the appeal of world-renouncing religion during this period lay in the hope it gave for social justice. But the Witnesses were by no means the only heterodox movement, nor the earliest, to be founded during this period. 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 significant 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.

To this day, the Witnesses see themselves not just as members of a religious movement, but one that monopolises the word of God. 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. This means that all Watch Tower teachings are scripturally supported and most, but not all, the Bible is interpreted literally. The exceptions are the recorded visions in the Books of Daniel and Revelation. The rest, the Witnesses regard as historically accurate, including the stories in the book of Genesis. 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. By attributing these events to biblical prophecies, devotees are able to support their promise of eternal bliss in a way that is missing in the esoteric doctrines of Christendom and thus validate their monosemic worldview.

The movement forbids its members to participate in annual events such as Christmas, Easter, birthdays and national festivals. It teaches that Jehovah does not acknowledge these events since, wherever they are cited in the scriptures, they are always in the context of sin or apostasy. According to the Witnesses, the only two birthday celebrations mentioned in the Bible involve people who were not true believers. These are a Pharaoh of Egypt and the Roman ruler Herod Antipas (Genesis 40:18-22; and Mark 6:21-28), whose celebrations ended in misery. Though they recognise that the birth of Christ is presented as a joyful occasion by the synoptic writers, devotees refuse to partake in the celebration on the grounds that we do not know the precise date of an event that has, in any case, become tainted with secular images such as lights, trees, tinsel and mistletoe. As far as Easter is concerned, the egg is historically a pagan symbol for the celebration of the return of spring and the rabbit was an emblem of fertility, neither of which are connected with the resurrection of Christ (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1989b:179). Furthermore, the movement associates annual celebrations with immodest behaviour and excessive alcohol-consumption - practises which it claims are contrary to biblical principles.

The movement objects both to jury and military service (on the grounds of pacifism and neutrality), and refuses to support local or national charities. Although some Witnesses join social and leisure clubs and progress to post-compulsory education, Watch Tower officials encourage Kingdom interests and forbid activities that detract from the movement's teachings. The Governing Body (that is, the board of elected officials based in Brooklyn) officially condemns behaviour that violates these teachings. This explains why, in addition to their eschatological beliefs, devotees adopt a puritanical lifestyle. The dualistic nature of Watch Tower theology means that in principle, Witnesses everywhere are expected to adhere to a strict fundamentalist code. Rules about physical and moral cleanliness are used to establish lines of demarcation between good and evil and thus 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 will live and with whom they will spend their time in the future. The Witnesses' allegiance to a puritanical



religious creed strengthens their pride in their ascetic community and helps to attract people who see the modern world as permissive.

Watch Tower teachings on sexual conduct provide one of the best examples of the usage of purity to combat the risk of contamination posed by modern liberal society. The Witnesses have never been able to accept sexual freedom as a basic human right. The belief that sex is a strictly heterosexual activity that should only be practised within marriage suggests that the Witnesses are heirs of an absolutist model of sexual morality rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. This approach regards sexual desire as morally dangerous 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 revile. 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 communities, it imparts a theology that embraces a large number of complex issues and each member has at his or her disposal several tracts containing hundreds of biblical references substantiating beliefs. In the last analysis, the Witnesses' loyalty is first and foremost to an organisation that secures their salvation.

Risk: the Watch Tower perspective

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, although these studies are now rather dated. Moreover, the movement seldom receives more than a brief mention in most of the key textbooks on the sociology of religion. Other than the small amount of literature that addresses Watch Tower conversion and recruitment, the best known works focus on tension of one form or another between the Witnesses and secular states. With the exception of the historical examples of persecution of Watch Tower evangelists (which was often a result of their own attacks on official authorities), this tension mainly derives from the Witnesses' refusal to participate in activities pertaining to citizenship. There is, however, a larger number of published 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 even these tend to be written from a macro perspective and fail to give the Witnesses themselves a voice. They also fail to examine the various ways in which devotees deal with the outside world in the various contexts of their daily lives. Where academics have attempted to address agency, it is usually in relation to conversion and/or continuation of membership.

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). The first three chapters of this book are devoted to the historical development of the movement. These chapters tell us about the movement's social composition and its post-war expansion in Britain and the USA. Beckford's work contains both quantitative and qualitative data collected from ten congregations representing the geographical divisions of England, Wales and the Scottish Lowlands. Although the book is largely empirical, Beckford offers some theoretical analysis of conversion that aids our understanding of the Witnesses' worldview.⁵ Whatever the strengths of Beckford's work, however, the fact remains that it is now more than twenty-five years old. There is a serious shortage of current material on the Witnesses that makes anything other than scant reference to the ways in which they protect their members from what they see as the dangers of modern secular forces. Search as I may in the sociological, anthropological and historical literature, I find no attempt to link the beliefs and activities of the Witnesses to the general characteristics of modern secular society. This is where I believe the concept of risk is useful. Testimonies of converts reveal that the movement attracts individuals who have had little instrumental success and who hold a pessimistic worldview. The Watch Tower idiom of modern society as risky is, I would suggest, one of the main catalysts for the Witnesses' international expansion.



The sociological literature on risk provides an appropriate starting point for an analysis of the movement. The Witnesses' literal interpretation of the Bible can be seen as a retreat to the certainties of fundamentalism by a people who are threatened by the loss of a stable sense of self. In the case of religious fundamentalism, sacred texts play an essential part in sealing beliefs and activities with the approval of divine authority. The belief that the inerrant word of God has been correctly translated from original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts has earned Watch Tower theologians a deference not unlike that of papal infallibility. As far as the Witnesses are concerned, religious conviction is not just about attending meetings at their local Kingdom Hall (the official name for their place of worship), or even believing in the existence of an omniscient being; it is about substantiating beliefs with tangible evidence. Scriptural literalism signifies a *revealed* truth that guards against polysemic beliefs by presenting a one true interpretation of the Bible that holds good for the whole of humanity. Polysemy would seriously undermine the exegeses of Watch Tower interpreters.⁶ The certainty that devotees construct from scriptural texts is a proverbial stick with which to beat the risks presented by the outside world.

Millenarian doctrines such as those of the Watch Tower Society are as significant in the twenty-first century as any other time in history. These doctrines convey something important about contemporary culture; or at least the Witnesses' perceptions of it. As a movement that stands in antithesis to modern times, the Watch Tower Society is a closed community of devotees who are in a constant mythical battle with secular forces. To put it another way, the Witnesses' deference to absolute authority is a solution to all perceived risks. No matter how hard cultural theorists try to persuade us that the world is now a safer place than ever before (at least, that is, if the figures for mortality and morbidity mean anything), public fear is a growth industry. The mass media constantly bombard us with stories of abhorrent violence, stranger danger, food contamination, sexually transmitted diseases, environmental disasters and a whole host of other catastrophes which threaten our well-being if not our entire planet. This anxiety about trends in the contemporary world is one of the reasons for the endurance of doomsday beliefs. Uncertainty about the future stems from our inability to predict the outcome of actions and events. The criticisms of modernity, particularly those associated with technological 'progress', leave even the most optimistic individuals with the feeling that they are living in a hi-tech purgatory - a place where risk is impossible to ascertain and where the future cannot be known. For the Witnesses, however, human misery is not a fearful possibility, it is a *fait accompli*. While the anticipation of an imminent paradise ostensibly gives them hope in a world which they claim is heading for disaster, it is actually a means by which they are able to combat their own uncertainty and consign their opponents to a future holocaust. In this respect, millenarianism is a form of resistance that strengthens the conviction of a group of people that many regard as strange or subversive. It provides devotees with the assurance that God will exact vengeance on evil. It is an exhortation to stand firm against adversity.

The Witnesses draw clear boundaries between themselves and non-members, establish strict entry criteria and keep their involvement with the wider society to a minimum. While other religions throughout the world are entering the public sphere in order to make themselves heard, the Watch Tower Society continues to resist denominational status and forbids its members to partake in many civil activities. In addition to their strong condemnation of the outside world, the Witnesses' millenarian orientation involves the rejection of all other faiths as errant. Any indications of disloyalty or failure to adhere to the movement's principles can lead to suspension or ostracism which, in terms of their own beliefs, could lead to exclusion from the utopian Kingdom to come. The 'freedom' offered by the modern world is anathema to the Witnesses. One does not need to be in their company for very long to realise that secular society is regarded as a place of moral contamination - a place where those who strive to do good are seduced by wicked forces.

Among the most influential writers to have developed sociological perspectives on risk are Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991), both of whom are concerned with the cultural changes which they suggest have led to crises of identity. Giddens points out that in late modern societies, individuals find themselves in a constant state of self-questioning as they learn that knowledge has no foundation. This means that we reflect on our behaviour more than ever before, with greater ability to choose new courses of action. Giddens refers to



this self-critical, self-questioning aspect of modern life as *reflexivity*. He compares people's constant awareness of many forms of knowledge within and across cultures to that of riding an uncontrollable juggernaut. Giddens argues that not only does reflexivity govern life choices, it is also the tool of modern epistemology (Giddens 1990). Similarly, Beck's work on reflexivity suggests that while scientific progress has brought about health and life risks, the individual has been freed from collective institutions and from tradition. Beck argues that societies have become *destabilised*; characterised by personal insecurity as more and more hazards become apparent. He maintains that in order for societies to progress, we must all now learn to adapt to the universal principles of progress and the impersonal nature of social institutions. Beck uses the term *modernisation* to describe the transitional period of Western societies that began in the nineteenth century and argues that these societies have undergone enormous changes in the relationship between social structures and agents. Actors have been freed from structural constraints and this marks the dissolution of industrial society and the beginning of a new period (Beck 1992:3). Giddens's work on reflexively organised life planning focuses more on the psychological aspects of insecurity with particular regard to attitudes of trust. An example of this might be the way in which people learn to trust governments and other organisations to deal as effectively as possible with environmental disaster and other such risks which have the potential to threaten life. According to Giddens, basic trust of this nature is a determining element in whether or not an individual is constantly plagued with anxiety (Giddens 1991).

In the risk societies described by Beck and Giddens, there can be little doubt that reflexivity undermines certainty. However, Giddens argues that systems are in place to ensure that possible events or issues are *bracketed-out* in order that the fear of risk and danger may be kept to a minimum (ibid.:181-3). This might involve strategies such as giving the fear to someone else to worry about, placing it in the hands of fate, diminishing its effects by adopting the belief that all will turn out well, or, for those who are religiously inclined, trusting some supernatural deity. Both Beck and Giddens provide a useful context for the study of millenarians like the Witnesses whose strategies for living centre around their puritanical beliefs and apocalyptic message. Watch Tower doctrines provide them with ontological security - a sense of continuity of events including those outside the perceptual environment of the individual that play a significant rôle in the construction of identity. The Witnesses' pessimistic view of humanity can be seen as symptomatic of their anxiety about the future.

The concept of risk is central to the Witnesses' interactions with the outside world; but it is risk as *moral danger* that is central to the present discussion. As far as the Witnesses are concerned, risky behaviour is that which threatens their salvation, and this has huge implications for how they deal with outsiders. Drawing on cultural theory, anthropologist Mary Douglas regards risk as part of *all* reality - not just the modern world. Like Beck and Giddens, Douglas sets risk in the context of danger, but her theory is more universal than theirs, since she offers a general analysis that can be applied to all cultures for all time. Although Douglas is interested in risk as a central concept in policy-making, she also examines its impact on closed communities in their attempts to achieve cultural homogeneity (Douglas 1992:38-54). In the case of small millenarian movements, this makes possible an analysis of *sin*; hence, we can examine the ways in which members conceptualise risk as well as their ways of dealing with it. In other words, while risk is part of the vocabulary of those who practise science and technology or who work in local government, it constitutes plain *danger* for millenarians who want to protect their sacred boundaries. Douglas argues that the only real difference between these two concepts is that risk affords the pretension of precise calculation attributed to science. Douglas's notion of risk as danger allows us to examine the Witnesses' behaviour from their own millenarian perspective. Throughout the 1970s and '80s, the Witnesses used the environmental threat of nuclear war as a topic of conversation for their door-to-door proselytising in order to win recruits; but this was by no means the only way in which their revulsion for humankind manifested itself. Their constant references to evil revealed much more about their attitude to risk than it did their fear of global catastrophe. Douglas's ideas support the suggestion that the Witnesses use their doctrines to fend off those aspects of secular life that threaten their *weltanschauung*. Douglas also aids our understanding of why, in an age of cultural fluidity and semiotic pastiche, some individuals defer to fundamentalist religion. Though there are essential differences between the



modernist concept of risk propounded by Beck and Giddens and Douglas's anthropological suggestion that risk serves to avert wrongdoing, all three writers contribute something useful to my analysis. However unambiguous the Witnesses' concept of sin might be, they must continue to uphold it in a world that is unsympathetic to their cause. If the Watch Tower movement is to continue to impart an ascetic creed, it must protect its members from secular forces that threaten it. At the same time, devotees must find some way of managing their fundamentalist beliefs in the various social settings in which they find themselves. A scholarly analysis of the Witnesses' perception of risk and of their strategies for averting it are long overdue.

The Witnesses' response to risk and ambiguity

The withdrawal of religious institutions from the economy over the last two or three centuries and the division of life into specialised units have had a considerable impact on modern consciousness. Traditional structures are being replaced not by others, but by a plurality of social forces with no single organising principle - a process which modernity theorists call *dislocation*.⁷ The increasing erosion of traditional authority unhinges the stable identity and leads to anxiety in the human condition. The ties that bind people to the past are unravelling, resulting in self-estrangement, isolation and emotional insecurity. The Watch Tower movement is clearly able to offer an affective bond to those whom secular society has abandoned. Large-scale commercial enterprise, urban development and the impact of globalisation have undermined the kind of community that the Witnesses have managed to maintain.⁸ Like never before, people are being forced to operate as free agents in a huge global economy, but this is a world in which not everyone can survive. The modern world is a world of anonymity in which whole societies become the locus of dislocated individuals and where social life is governed by rational systems. While some people celebrate the individual liberty that the twenty-first century offers, others renounce it and seek refuge in a movement that admits no ambiguity. For the Witnesses, the modern concept of liberty belongs to a world that places greater value on hedonism than on moral duty. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from a Watch Tower publication:

We have read in the Scriptures that 'fornication and uncleanness of every sort should not, with improper motive, even be mentioned among us.' (Eph. 5:3-5) But what if such themes are cleverly accompanied by music that has a pleasing melody, a catchy rhythm or an insistent beat? Might we even unconsciously start repeating lyrics that glorify sex without marriage, use of drugs for pleasure and much more? Or, while we know that we should not imitate the way of life of people who indulge in such things, do we tend to identify ourselves with them by imitating the way they dress, their hairstyle or their way of speaking? How crafty Satan is! How insidious the methods he uses to entice humans to conform to his own corrupted mind! (2 Cor. 4:3, 4) To keep from falling victim to his sly devices, we must avoid drifting along with the world. We need to keep in mind who the "world rulers of this darkness" are and earnestly be wrestling against their influence. (Eph. 6:12; 1 Pet. 5:8.) (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1983:67)

The Society's warnings of sexual impurity in this tract are accompanied by other forms of behaviour that are considered dangerous, including the lyrics of songs, the hedonistic use of drugs, the wearing of certain clothes and the style of one's hair. These warnings against the dangers of offensive bodily expression accentuate the dangers of the world outside and depict modern secular society as the great evil that represents the antithesis to salvation. The movement is thus able to offer devotees a religious value system at a time when free thought has shaken the foundations on which substantive values are built. For the Witnesses, the modern world is beset with the risk of moral contamination, the risk of physical harm, and ultimately, the risk of eternal damnation. Their monotheistic creed with its literal interpretation of scripture and non-negotiable prescription for salvation is the ultimate protection in a world where polysemic beliefs and absolutist cosmologies occupy the same stage. Only a movement as highly insulated as the Watch Tower would be able to enforce fundamentalist doctrines and a puritanical code of conduct with such a degree of uniformity. The outside world requires careful management on the part of the Witnesses who jeopardise their eternal salvation whenever they flout Watch Tower edicts.



Though he does not analyse his fieldwork data from a risk perspective, Beckford (op cit 1975a) does suggest that Witness converts tend to be rather isolated individuals who respond positively to communities that are able to offer direction and support. If prospective recruits are people who are prone to feeling that the world is in a state of crisis and that the Witnesses can offer a way forward, it may well be that the Watch Tower movement is providing solutions to the 'ills' of modern life. But such a hypothesis is altogether too simple, firstly because it fails to address the specific modern conditions that are causing these individuals anxiety, and secondly because it does not explain why people become Witnesses rather than members of say, Greenpeace or the Socialist Workers' Party. While a detailed examination of other religious, social and political movements would detract from the main focus of this paper, an empirical analysis of the worldview of Witness devotees does help to explain the appeal of the Watch Tower recruitment at this particular period in history.

Given the world-renouncing nature of the Watch Tower community, it is not surprising that the Witnesses' perception of risk manifests itself in a dualistic worldview; that is, the belief that humanity is divided into the warring forces of good and evil. This is frequently conveyed in the testimonies of recent converts who talk about what miserable sinners they were in their former lives. One young man explained:

Friday and Saturday nights I used to go round town with the lads and I'd be paralytic. We used to go round the nightclubs ... ten of us went away on holiday, but their thinking was totally different from my own. We used to get drunk, pick women up, and then one night I only drank a couple of pints and then I started drinking coke and my mates said 'What's up with you?', and I explained that the Bible says that you're not supposed to get drunk, and from then on I lost interest in those things; so when they said 'Are you coming out?', I just said 'No'.

Another convert talked of how biblical texts helped him to distance himself from his former friends and to make sense of social division:

The scriptures tell us that we are tenants on a planet. Things are happening on an unprecedented scale now, not just worldwide but closer to home such as break up in families and the increase in lawlessness which are all part of a sign that Jesus talked about that when you see these things happening on an unprecedented scale. You see, so many people are divided against each other in so many ways and yet they are united in their opposition to Jehovah's Witnesses, which was why I thought 'Well these people must have something'. If you look in the scriptures, Jesus said 'You will be hated on account of my name, all the nations will hate you'. So, the political system and the quasi, false religious system are all wrapped up together, and there's one on the outside. But a friend from school got engaged and we used to go out for a drink. Once I started studying with the Witnesses he thought it was a bit strange, but our friendship went back a long way, so we still went out once a week, but as I became more involved with the truth, my drinking became less and less and for years and years he'd been trying to get me to do this, but he went the opposite - he started drinking more and more and he started saying 'Come on, have a drink', but eventually we just drifted away and I don't have any contact with those friends now.

Like most new converts, these two respondents expressed difficulty in keeping a foot in both camps once they had begun to internalise the movement's beliefs. The opposition they experienced from the outside world seemed only to validate their monolithic *weltanschauung* and reaffirm their dualistic concept of boundaries. Demonising the world (as well as former friends) enables devotees to construct a unique version of risk from which they believe, by virtue of their membership of the movement, they are protected. Reading the Society's literature is one of the main ways in which devotees learn that Satan has misled the whole of humankind and that they are involved in a cosmic struggle for salvation by siding with good forces.⁹ Their belief that the world is becoming increasingly worse contrasts sharply with the rationalism of scientific and academic communities which explain crises such as global warming, toxic residues in food, AIDS and HIV, family tension and the breakdown of law and order in secular terms. While theorists such as Beck and Giddens regard the heightened



consciousness of risk as a response to modern living, the Witnesses see it as evidence of the tragic consequences of original sin in a world on the brink of chaos.

The ways in which devotees demarcate 'the truth' from 'the world' inadvertently draws attention to their ability to protect their community from moral contamination. When the Witnesses refer to outsiders as 'goats' and 'devil worshippers', they exaggerate the unworthiness of non-members and present their own belief system as harmonious. Living within boundaries is conceived as release from bondage. The 'truth as safety' metaphor can be illustrated in a conversation I had early on in my fieldwork with a woman who explained that living as a true Witness was like being at the very centre of a roundabout which was rotating at great speed. The edge of the roundabout, she argued, must be avoided at all costs, since it was here that the individual was most likely to be injured. Only the centre was absolutely safe. For this woman, the edge of the roundabout was the space occupied by people who were not living as faithful Witnesses, whether these be baptised members with lukewarm conviction or outsiders. She believed that by attending meetings regularly, ministering to others faithfully and accepting the movement's injunctions, one's place at the centre of the roundabout was secure. This notion that freedom exists *within* the Watch Tower community was shared by one of her closest friends who had been an active member for over twenty-five years:

Some people look at Jehovah's Witnesses and think that the boundaries are incredibly tight, but I don't think they are personally. I think it gives you more freedom than somebody out there. You're free from a morbid fear of what might happen to you by going against God's laws, you don't believe you're going to be tormented by a fiery hell, you're free to think that God is a God of love and he wouldn't do something like that. I think you're free from being enslaved to a lot of superstition, whereas people will let themselves be ruled by all sorts of silly things like walking under ladders, or if they see a black cat, or how many magpies; it's amazing ... and people who feel that their lives are ruled by the stars and they won't do a certain thing because their horoscope tells them not to do. So you're free from that. You're free because today's morals are so liberal and anything goes, because you stick within Jehovah's moral guidelines, you're free from outside immorality.

What appears from the outside to be a highly restrictive way of life is, from the inside, one of security and liberation. The authoritarian forces of what many would regard as totalitarian control can be subjectively experienced as gratifying. Witnesses who continue to pledge their allegiance to the movement are removing the uncertainties that cause them anxiety. The multiple options that are available in the modern world are fertile soil for the restoration of moral authority. The paradox (indeed, one of the many paradoxes) of the modern world is that for those who are drawn towards millenarian religion, the freedom it promises is the freedom that is feared.

The psychological effects of an ascetic worldview are best demonstrated in scenarios that involve social interaction between Witnesses and non-Witnesses. Although *some* contact with the outsiders is permitted, devotees are advised to err on the side of caution when forming associations with those who do not share their beliefs. While certain behaviour may not necessarily violate Watch Tower principles, it may still be viewed with suspicion. Be this as it may, there is no real consensus about where the lines should be drawn to determine with whom in the outside world it is safe to associate, in what capacity and for how long. It is here that risk is most salient. When Witnesses allow ideas contrary to those of the Watch Tower regime to influence their actions, they are entering forbidden territory. This supports Douglas's contention that people who cross 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)

Where rules are clearly laid down by the movement's Governing Body, 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. In an in-depth interview with a middle-aged woman who came from a family of Witnesses, I learned:

Several years ago I was at a very low ebb spiritually because I'd been undergoing some personal problems within my marriage and I'd let my spirituality slip by attending less meetings, not praying as I should and relying on Jehovah and not studying - if you don't continue with these three things, your spirituality is going to ebb away. I did start doing things I shouldn't have done. I started going out enjoying myself up nightclubs and things like that with my sister. I came very close to needing some strong counselling then, but I thought 'Blow it, I'm going out there to enjoy myself because I've had enough', because at that time I didn't care if my marriage survived or not. I felt like I was completely taken for granted. My husband was very up and down with his spirituality. I really felt for a lot of years that he didn't have hold of Jehovah at all. I can't say I gravitated to what we term as 'worldly people', and when I went out I couldn't fully throw myself into it because I kept saying to myself 'You shouldn't be doing this, this isn't going to help you', but I just wanted an escape from the pressure and neglect I felt at home. I thought 'Well, John has had a slice of the cake, why shouldn't I?'

While this woman's actions are not strictly forbidden by the movement, her feelings of vulnerability in what she considered to be a place of ill repute exemplify the psychological effects of her religious beliefs and their impact on risk perception. At best, unnecessary association with the outside world is considered unfavourable; at worst, it pollutes both the individual and the community. It is here that Douglas's ideas of pollution come into play. Risk plays a large part in controlling the Witnesses' relations with the outside world, if only because it serves to validate the Watch Tower worldview.

The effort expended by the Witnesses on keeping purity within and risk without suggests that they are living as though they are already *in* the post-Armageddon world they so eagerly await.¹⁰ By presenting themselves as Jehovah's faithful people both in their ministry work and at their own place of worship, they enhance their recruitment prospects and affirm the view that they are different from the rest of humanity. In addition to their world-renouncing theology, their adherence to the belief that the risks presented by secular society can only be averted by Watch Tower membership is indicative of a movement that claims to be *in* but not *of* the world. While most devotees maintain that the validity of the movement's doctrines is the real reason for their membership, references to the world's wickedness help to sustain their millenarian *weltanschauung* and strengthen the boundaries that serve to protect the faithful. But it is the movement's image of an unblemished community that helps sustain its plausibility as a theocracy – an image that is authenticated at Watch Tower meetings and at the movement's annual events. Here are the comments of a man who described to me his first impression of the movement:

I remember going to my first Witness convention many years ago and everybody was clean and well behaved. There was only one policeman and one policewoman on duty that day. The policing of the car park was done by the brothers. The organisation really impressed me. Everybody called each other 'brother' and 'sister', which I could relate to, but the thing that really stuck in my mind was the fact that there wasn't one scrap of paper on the floor. No one was smoking. The Witnesses cleaned the entire stadium; even to picking the grass out of the nicks on the terraces and in the gutters. They painted over the graffiti in the toilets and laid extra drains so that they could put more toilets in and I thought 'Wow, if there was going to be a new world society then this would be the nucleus of it'. If anyone accidentally dropped something, someone else would pick it up and put it in their bag or their pocket. I was so amazed that I even brought my niece to come and have a look. The organisation has never ceased to amaze me ever since. We class ourselves as a nation out of nations.

This account reveals how the Witnesses' extraordinary attention to detail is a powerful means of persuading prospective recruits that the movement is the nearest thing to earthly perfection, and that loyalty to the Governing Body is the only step necessary for entry into the New Kingdom. This man's description of the order that characterises Watch Tower conventions compliments the Witnesses' physical appearance. Male Witnesses are renowned



for keeping their hair clean and short. At meetings and on their door-to-door ministry, they present themselves in tailored suits, formal shirts and ties and polished shoes. Their female counterparts are equally well groomed either in suits or in formal skirts, blouses and jackets. Though women rarely wear head coverings, their hair is always tidy and nails well manicured. Witnesses believe that to be slovenly in dress is to disrespect Jehovah. Smart appearance is symbolic of cleanliness - a virtue attributed to Godliness. Physical appearance is a symbolic expression of the pristine community to which the Witnesses pledge their loyalty. Their symbolic construction of an Eden-like realm is a seductive invitation to those whom secular society has abandoned. If, as I have already suggested, the lives of prospective recruits have been affected by the forces of dislocation, it is reasonable to suggest that a new identity can be created by the kind of community millenarian movements are able to offer.

Conclusion

The Witnesses' resistance to outside forces can be seen as a means, conscious or subconscious, of deflecting the problems of the modern world. While the rest of humanity must find its own way of dealing with the uncertainties and ambiguities of the modern world and the various crises to which they give rise, the Witnesses are able to avert these problems through the provision of a protective community. The difficulties in constructing a meaningful identity in a dislocated and pluralistic society are made much easier in totalitarian communities. This option denies all ambiguity and releases the individual from what sociologist Peter Berger describes as 'the terror of chaos' (Berger 1977:109). The data presented in this paper suggest that one of the key means by which the Watch Tower movement is able to prevent the undesirable influences of the outside world from threatening its doctrines is to heighten the Witnesses' awareness of risk. I have shown how the primary purpose of this concept is to establish moral parameters for the demarcation of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in order to ensure that the daily conduct of devotees is consistent with the movement's principles. In the end, exposure to risk carries penalties that jeopardise salvation. The antithetical concept of *safety* (or in this case, 'truth') blames all perceived ills of the modern world on the devil, to which only those who have refused to secure their place in the New Kingdom must find the solution. This is why devotees who transgress the movement's prescriptive boundaries gamble with eternal life. The movement's version of risk, sin and certainty along with its firm forecast of future events enable it to exercise a high degree of control over those who defer to its ascetic tenets. These are strong theological weapons that the Witnesses have used to fend off undesirable forces and which have helped them to maintain their position on the periphery of the modern world.

The rapid evolution of the so-called pluralistic society in which people are free to select from a number of life options has failed to undermine the Watch Tower Society, which still manages to recruit those who are searching for absolute truth. The movement's relentless adherence to biblical literalism poses a serious challenge to the sociologist's claim that as societies move towards secularisation, religious movements may adopt a 'this-worldly' orientation. There is little or no evidence that Watch Tower doctrines are compatible with a world in which the sacred is in decline.¹¹ The Witnesses' condemnation of all forms of ecumenicalism and of what they see as the satanic corruption of every other religious institution is indicative of their determination to prevent secular forces from eroding their rituals and beliefs. The movement's exclusivity is a powerful armoury for protecting its members from a pluralistic and atomised world. Its millenarian beliefs and strong rules of purity are its real resources for integrating recruits into a new way of life. These resources enable the Witnesses to impart a dualistic view of the world - that is, a view that glorifies their own community and condemns those aspects of the outside world of which they disapprove. This system of classification protects new members by means of regular association with like-minded others and the enforcement of taboos that prohibit a whole series of unacceptable activities. The movement provides a haven for those who are haunted by ambiguity. When devotees ask each other 'How long have you been in the truth?', they assume absolute conviction based on a revealed message from Jehovah who does not allow multiple interpretations of scriptural texts. The 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. It is this that enables the Witnesses to make sense of the world in its present state. To them, the outside world is repugnant - a place of moral contamination which has allowed sin to



become a perfectly respectable feature of everyday life - hence, whenever individual members take issue with their adversaries, they are, in fact, securing their own salvation. The freedom brought about by modernity is not something they are able to celebrate in the sense in which it is theorised.

From the Witnesses' point of view, the way of life prescribed by their Governing Body provides them with a ticket for entry into Paradise, and in this way, the millenarian dream is kept alive. From a risk perspective, Watch Tower membership can be seen as one of many options in a world in which people continue to battle against a huge number of forces that threaten their identity. The modern world is a world in which there are no dominant authorities. Dislocation and the absence of unambiguous moral guidelines lead to confusion, powerlessness and loss of meaning. For the Witnesses, this weakens the prospect of salvation. It is not surprising, therefore, that their millenarian worldview appeals to those who are inclined towards pessimism. Indeed, the movement's vision of the future reinforces the pessimistic orientation in its presentation as the perfect antidote to the worst conditions of secularization. This contrast of repugnance and splendour is a dominant feature of Watch Tower theology that appeals to those who are susceptible to membership. Wherever there is ambiguity, there is danger. While the rest of the world drowns in a sea of uncertainty, the Watch Tower movement provides a meaningful way of life for those who yearn to belong.

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Endnotes

- 1 This represents the 'peak' figure. The 'average' figure for 2000 was 120,592.
- 2 The annual membership statistics are published in the 1 January copy of *The Watchtower*.
- 3 This is based on a projected growth rate of 4 per cent.
- 4 *Armageddon* is the battle at which God will defeat Satan at the end of time.



5 This provides the basis for Beckford's later work (1976) in which his theoretical contribution is made more explicit.

6 Harris (1994) offers an excellent account of the importance of the monosemic text in his discussion of Jewish fundamentalism.

7 See, for example, Laclau (1990).

8¹ Lash and Urry (1987) equate the conventional account of community and its dissolution with the shift from *organized* to *disorganized* capitalism. They argue that the loosening of spatial and class affiliations in the late-twentieth century has eroded mutual trust and reciprocity.

9 According to the Society, Satan is 'The spirit creature who is the chief adversary of Jehovah God and of all who worship the true God' (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1989:361).

10 For a more detailed discussion of the Witnesses' preparation for the post-Armageddon Kingdom, see Holden 2002.

11¹ On the other hand, the fact that the Witnesses have steadily gained recruits does not necessarily mean that religious thinking, practice and institutions are losing social significance (Wilson 1966:xiv). It could be that heterodox religious movements are able to resist secularising influences and prosper at a time when orthodox Christianity has weakened.