Department of Sociology

LANCASTER UNIVERSITY

Publication Details

This web page was last revised on 29th November 2003; the paper was previously published at http://comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/ soc114ajw.htm in 2002

Cavorting With the Devil: Jehovah's Witnesses Who Abandon Their Faith

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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 major causes and consequences of defection. Personal testimonies from unstructured interviews with former members reveal that leaving the movement is characterised by emotional trauma and existential insecurity. The data also suggest that defectors often come to replace their Witness weltanschauung with a new religious identity that enables them to renegotiate their relationship with the modern world. The paper advances the argument, however, that these alternative systems of belief do not represent a fundamentally different reality and tend to affirm the basic view that modern secular society is soulless and hostile.

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

to the New Kingdom which they believe will be inaugurated by Jehovah at Armageddon.[i] The Society boasts huge international success. Its worldwide membership rose from a mere 44,080 in 1928 to an impressive 6,035,564 in 2000, making an annual net growth of around 5 per cent (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001).[ii] 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 success to the fulfilment of the prophecy of Matthew 24 which states that the gospel of the Kingdom will be preached to the ends of the earth.

Despite its expansion, 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. But people who convert to the Watch Tower movement defer unquestioningly to the authority of its Governing Body (a small number of presidential officials in Brooklyn) and every member must continue to contribute to the recruitment effort. The Witnesses espouse an exclusive message which declares that while a great multitude of righteous people (including those who do not necessarily share their faith), will be granted eternal life on earth, only 144,000 members of their own community (the figure mentioned in Revelation 14:3) will enter heaven. Moreover, their heterodox purity code which prohibits among other things blood transfusions, Christmas celebrations and all political activities means that they are highly unlikely, despite their worldwide ministry, to recruit anything other than a small number of enthusiasts. The movement rejects all other religious creeds as heresy and uses biblical texts and Watch Tower publications to substantiate its narrative of past, present and future. Devotees make extensive use of these textual aids when delivering their doorstep sermons on the Last Days. By attributing world events to biblical prophecy, they aim to persuade all those to whom they minister of Satan's wickedness and to make them a promise of an imminent utopia.

The Society (to which devotees refer as the truth) is fundamentally a rational, rather than a mystical one. It is a religion of disenchantment and serious study of the Bible and Watch Tower publications of which prospective members must demonstrate their knowledge before they can be baptised. Spiritual activities comprise a series of weekly meetings at the local Kingdom Hall (the official name for the Witnesses' place of worship) and aggressive door-to-door evangelism. Though they do not detach themselves completely from the outside world, devotees are discouraged from associating unnecessary with non-members. In so doing, they are able to offer those who are willing to accept their millenarian message a plausible weltanschauung and the security of a tightly knit community. In a modern secular world in which all manner of life options are available, the Witnesses stand out as calculating, conservative and authoritarian. The movement's demand of unquestioning loyalty means that those who violate its moral or doctrinal code risk disfellowship. To the sceptical outsider, this is a movement that bears all the hallmarks of a totalitarian regime.

Within any religious movement of this size, there will always be a percentage of people who decide, for one reason or another, to terminate their membership. From the Society's own perspective, however, there is never any valid reason for defection. Its monopoly over truth does not allow devotees to claim that their search for salvation is causing them to seek new pastures or that their spiritual hunger has not been satisfied. Defection is the ultimate betrayal since it signifies the individual voluntarily entering the world of Satan. This paper offers an examination of why some members leave the movement of their own accord - an issue that has been neglected by scholars. While there are a small number of empirical studies on the movement (Beckford 1975a, 1975b, 1976, Wilson 1974, 1978, 1990 and Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980), most academic researchers have focussed their attention on the issues of conversion, recruitment and tension between devotees and secular authorities. Search as I may in the sociological and anthropological literature, I find nothing other than scant reference to defection. There is no shortage, however, of autobiographies of former members who lament the years of personal turmoil they claim they felt when they realised they could no longer accept the movement's teachings, or that the conflicts that arose

between everyday life and the Witnesses' theology became overwhelming.[v] It is also worth noting that at the time of writing, several websites have been established both by lapsed members who seek the support of those who claim to be equally traumatised, and by those still in practise who fear the consequences of defection. Needless to say, data of this nature need handling with caution. Like new converts, defectors 'rehearse' their confessions and testify to anyone who is willing to listen. More seriously (at least as far as validity is concerned), these accounts often contain the kind of rhetoric adopted by anti-cultists who are on a mission to protect so-called vulnerable people from the seductive powers of religious extremists. Notwithstanding these caveats, sociologists of religion cannot afford to ignore defectors' testimonies. For one thing, these accounts contain rich data that convey first hand the poignant experiences of the disaffected devotee, and for another, they represent the main primary source on which academics are dependent in the pursuit of objective research.

There is little doubt that the Witnesses have many defectors. This is clear from the movement's own annual statistics which indicate year on year that the 'peak' number of active devotees outweighs the 'average' number. Moreover, the aggregate number of baptisms over a given period soon surpasses the reported increase in the number of members. But a high drop-out rate does not mean that the movement is dwindling or that its beliefs are weakening. An annual growth rate of 5 per cent is impressive by anyone's standards and can be seen as evidence of a community that is successful in replacing apathetic members with committed ones. None the less, the figures also suggest that people leave of their own accord. Close examination of autobiographical testimonies reveals that defection comes in various forms. For example, there are those who undertake Bible studies with the Witnesses and attend their meetings for several months, but never reach the point of baptism. Others are baptised members who, for one reason or another, stop attending meetings and lapse for while, only to return at a later stage. Some of these may even have been disfellowshipped several years earlier. Then there is a third group comprising fully baptised Witnesses who have been active in the movement a considerable period of time and leave never to return. It is to these defectors that most of this paper applies. What follows is an analysis of the testimonies of six former Jehovah's Witnesses who were contacted through an advertisement in the local press. The fieldwork was carried out as part of a recent ethnographic study of the movement in the North West of England.

Suppressing ambivalence

The Society has an extensive history of prophecy failure that has played no small part in defection. Devotees expected the invisible return of Christ in 1874 (which was later changed to 1914 - the original date for Armageddon), the destruction of Christendom in 1918 and the return of the Old Testament prophets Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in 1925 (Barnes 1984, Quick 1989 and Reed 1989a, 1989b). But it was the failure of the arrival of Armageddon in 1975 that caused over 1 million members to abandon their faith between 1976 and 1981. The anticipation of this event had featured in the movement's publications since the mid-1960s:

> This seventh day, God's rest day, has progressed nearly 6,000 years, and there is still the 1,000-year reign of Christ to go before its end (Rev. 20:3, 7). This seventh 1,000-year period of human existence could well be likened to a great sabbath day … In what year, then, would the first 6,000 years of man's existence and also the first 6,000 years of God's rest day come to an end? The year 1975. (Awake! October 8 1966:19)

One man who had been in the movement since the early 1970s, explained how the 1975 prophecy failure made it impossible for him to remain an active member.[vi] In a detailed testimony of how the prophecy governed his life in his former years as an active member, he told me:

> Our main teaching book was called The Truth Book and there was a little graph in there which ended in 1975. I said it from the platform! We told everyone the end was near. When I became a Witness I gave up my insurance policies, I cancelled all my insurance endowments, I never bought a house because I knew I wouldn't need one, we didn't even want to put the kids' names down for school.

This defector went on to explain how some of his closest friends who were also active members during the critical years leading up to 1975 decided to stop having children. So certain was he that the thousand-year reign of Christ would begin in 1975 that its failure to happen triggered serious doubts about the authority of the Governing Body. When the autumn of 1975 came and went, millions of Witnesses became disillusioned. It was then that the Governing Body began to reinterpret the Books of Daniel and Revelation and produced a new chronology premised on the notion that Armageddon should have been calculated from Eve's creation rather than Adam's.[vii] It was this new chronology that saved the movement from dissolution. Meanwhile, Raymond Franz, who was to become President in 1977, managed to preserve the Society's spiritual legitimacy in his speech to a huge audience of Witnesses in 1976. In attempting to explain why the prophecy had failed, he declared 'It was because you expected something to happen' (Penton 1997:100). According to Franz, because Jesus had stated that no one knew the day or the hour of the Messianic Age, devotees had been wrong to pin all their hopes on the establishment of the New Kingdom in 1975.[viii] In 1981, the Governing Body made a further attempt to contain the crisis in the following article:

> At times explanations given by Jehovah's visible organization have shown adjustments, seemingly to previous points of view. But this has not actually been the case. This might be compared to what is known in navigational circles as "tacking". By manoeuvring the sails, the sailors can cause a ship to go from right to left, back and forth, but all the time making progress toward their destination in spite of contrary winds ... (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1981:27)

In support of this denial of any adjustment to prophecy, the article featured an illustration of a boat tacking into the wind and travelling in a zigzag direction. To thousands, even millions of devotees for whom defection would lead to existential crisis, the attempt met with success. In the early 1980s, environmental pollution, increases in crime, scientific developments, earthquakes and wars events seemed to persuade those who might otherwise have questioned Watch Tower teachings that the predictions set out clearly in Matthew 24 were coming to pass, and that the movement was still Jehovah's theocratic organisation. The Witnesses now claim that we are approaching the end of what they call 'extra time'; hence, prophecy failure has not brought about the abandonment of belief in the way one might expect. The strategies employed by the Governing Body to eliminate scepticism have been documented by one of the best known Watch Tower critics, Edmund Gruss. Gruss, himself a former member, is an anti-Witness polemicist who has produced a detailed critique of the movement's date setting eschatology. He suggests that the Governing Body has distorted its own history and indeed the Bible itself in order to validate its authority. Gruss's work is concerned with both the presentation of historical evidence and a critical analysis of the Witnesses' eschatological methodology. Moreover, he comments on how, since 1975, the movement has cajoled its members into accepting its pronouncements by intensifying the threat of eternal damnation (Gruss 1972:94-103). To this day, Watch Tower literature continues to depict all other systems of belief as Babylon the Great, the world empire of false religion, and warns devotees of the dangers of apostasy. Simple as it might seem, what sceptics regard as failure, zealous adherents regard as a test of faith.

It is unlikely that those who have joined the movement within the last two decades are aware either of the expectation of Armageddon in 1975 or of the previous eschatological errors. In all the Watch Tower literature that has been published since 1975, there has been no mention of these prophecies, except for the invisible return of Christ in 1914. The information presented to devotees is vetted in a way that typifies a totalitarian organisation. On current calculation, more than 60 per cent of Jehovah's Witnesses in the world today converted after 1975, which means that the Governing Body has no reason to raise the credulity of its previous doctrines. The suppression of the 1975 prophecy failure by those who were active at the time but who have nevertheless remained in membership suggests an unusual degree of complicity. More importantly, it challenges the notion that millenarian movements are unable to survive empirical disconfirmations.

The evidence from my fieldwork suggests that remaining in a community that offers strong fellowship is, for many people, less traumatic than defection. Devotees who do question the movement's teachings find ways of suppressing their doubts. One former member in her late-twenties explained:

> Some of them seemed to know it was wrong. There are people in there who know it's not right. There are people who read apostate literature, but their excuse is that they're just checking up, but you're not telling me they're not aware of all the discrepancies.[ix]

Another defector explained how, not long after he had decided to dissociate himself from his local congregation, some of his former brethren contacted him and explained to him that they had harboured concerns about the movement's beliefs for a very long time, but were too afraid to leave the community for fear of losing their friends and relatives. The people I interviewed all relayed accounts of how they were rejected by others who were equally disaffected, but too afraid to voice their concerns for fear of estranging their families. Deference of this kind makes empirical measurement of religious scepticism impossible. When Watch Tower doctrines fail to hold good, totalitarian forces are able to compensate, if only because life beyond the movement is impossible to imagine. The following story demonstrates the anxiety experienced by those who contemplate defection:

> More and more I began to discover things which caused me to become disillusioned and to be upset and to realise that there was something seriously wrong but I didn't know what it was … and also, there was nowhere else to go because this was the truth! I knew a number of other people who were likewise disillusioned and upset but they couldn't speak about it. Occasionally in conversation they would let a little bit out but they would soon pull themselves in. It was as if they couldn't openly discuss it. I knew a couple who were long-term Jehovah's Witnesses in the 1930s and '40s, they never had children in fact, and eventually he died and I used to go and visit his wife, she was a lovely old lady and she was drinking heavily at the time, and when I went to visit her, her defences would come down and she suddenly started criticising the organisation and saying 'This is nothing new, what's happening now has happened before', but then she would pull herself together and say 'Oh but it is the truth though, where else can I go?', and she was a very sad, disillusioned person, but where else could she go?

It is not uncommon for Witnesses who experience doubts about the movement's teachings to talk of having 'nowhere to go', and this reveals as much about attitudes towards the outside world as it does doctrinal dissatisfaction. While the Governing Body's revised eschatology has no doubt been successful in retaining some people who may previously have considered leaving, it is the powerful combination of the individual's affective bond with other devotees and his/her fear of the outside world that secure loyalty. Reluctance to air objections forces devotees either to remain silent or to terminate their membership. For many, the latter would not only mean rejection from close friends and relatives, it would also involve abandoning a community that has offered them emotional security for the biggest part of their lives.[x] Though the inside may be fallible, the outside is potentially much worse. In his well known monograph The Fear of Freedom (1960), Erich Fromm suggests that this kind of submission to an all-powerful closed system is one way of escaping the problems of so-called liberal democracies. Although Fromm writes from a psycho-analytical perspective, the root causes of anxiety in the modern world are, he suggests, social. Fromm argues that the collapse of medieval tradition and the development of modern capitalism, both of which ostensibly produced freedom, created isolation, doubt and emotional dependency.[xi] In this sense, escaping freedom is a form of psychological liberation. Liberation from choice can lead to far greater security than liberation as choice. Fromm suggests that the rise of fascism in Germany in the twentieth century, for example, can be seen as a longing for the return to the authoritarianism of pre-individualistic society. For Fromm, withdrawal from the world and the destruction of others are mechanisms of escape and symptomatic of the need for certainty. Whatever doubts individuals might have of the Watch Tower community, it is most unlikely that they would experience life outside as better. When devotees suppress their ambivalence,

they suppress the ambiguities of the modern world. The aversion of secular society with all its uncertainties is well worth the sacrifice of what others in their folly call 'freedom'. If this analysis is correct, it would appear that the forces that lure people into millenarian group membership are the same forces that prevent them from leaving. This notion that freedom exists within the movement was endorsed by a long-standing member who shared with me her perceptions of life outside:

> 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 oppressive forces of totalitarian control can be subjectively experienced as gratifying. Though they may doubt, Witnesses who continue to support the Watch Tower regime are removing the uncertainties that would otherwise disempower them. Suppressing ambivalence may be the only way in which they are able to resist the problems that the twenty-first century life poses. Multiple options and individual choice are fertile soil for the restoration of moral authority. In short, the paradox (indeed, one of the many paradoxes) of the modern world is that the freedom it promises is the freedom that is feared.

Breaking away: a new beginning?

Difficult though it is, there are some individuals who do leave the Watch Tower movement. In studying the autobiographical accounts of ex-members and the interview data, it is clear that one of the most significant catalysts in defection is something the majority of Witnesses never succeed in doing (not least because it is forbidden by the Governing Body) - studying the Bible without Watch Tower guidance. Officially, the Watch Tower leadership claims that its doctrines are based solely on the Bible, while its programme of meetings at the Kingdom Hall prepare the members for ministry. In practise, however, independent reading of the Bible is never possible, since the material recommended for worship serves a different purpose. In addition to studying the monthly bulletin Kingdom Ministry for midweek meetings, Witnesses worldwide are compelled to read the Society's Yearbook and to study the contents of Watchtower magazines in preparation for Sunday services. This means that although most of the material is packed with scriptural references, the Bible is seldom used systematically and meditatively. All biblical interpretation is presented to the Witnesses by 'the faithful and discreet slave' (that is, the Governing Body par excellence), and this prevents them from engaging in individual Bible study. The Governing Body strongly discourages personal study in favour of 'guidelines', which critics argue enable the movement's expositors to align scriptural texts with current Watch Tower thinking. Academic theologians trained in biblical scholarship have expressed concern at what they claim are inaccuracies in all the movement's materials, including its own version of the scriptures (see, for example, Sire 1980, Franz 1983, Hoekema 1984, Reed 1986, Bowman 1991 and Wijngaards 1998). Any member known to be reading literature that attacks Watch Tower theology risks disfellowship; but those who pursue their own study of an orthodox Bible such as the King James version claim they become aware of inconsistencies. Confessions of bewilderment at the time of personal Bible study are common among defectors. This is the point at which Watch Tower doctrines start to be questioned. According to those I interviewed, it was their burning quest for truth that caused them to study of the Bible without the aid of the movement's literature. This suggests that people who undertake their own biblical research must initially be experiencing feelings of confusion or dissatisfaction with Watch Tower theology; but it is only when they begin to doubt fundamental doctrines that they are likely to do this.[xii]

One of the most significant findings from the study, and one that is certainly echoed in autobiographies, is the tendency for defectors to embrace some form of evangelical Christianity. It is no coincidence that devotees who undertake an independent study of the scriptures should elect this particular option, since non-conformist Christianity also uses the Bible as its fundamental source of authority.[xiii] The fundamental differences between the Witnesses' theology and that of orthodox Christianity stem from the interpretation of scriptural texts. Once defectors claim to have discovered the flaws in Watch Tower teachings, a new weltanschauung replaces the old one. Many previously cherished beliefs are immediately called into question, none more seriously than the doctrine of salvation. For Christians more orthodox than the Witnesses, Christ's deity means that entry into heaven is available to the whole of humanity with faith as the only necessary requisite. This means that works such as delivering doorstep sermons, disseminating religious literature and attending weekly meetings are largely redundant. Defectors' accounts make constant reference to the feeling of never being able to do enough to secure everlasting life.[xiv] Former Witnesses often regret the many hours they had previously spent studying tracts, ministering and generally working for an organisation that they claim had a purely pragmatic mission. Evangelical Christian references to spiritual gifts, miracles and speaking in tongues contrast sharply with the Witnesses' more rational concepts of 'truth', 'studying' and 'ministry'. The defectors with whom I spoke claimed that their new-found faith released them from what they described as 'slavery'. Charismatic worship and healing services replaced Kingdom Hall meetings and the endless study of Watch Tower literature.[xv] This recognition of the superiority of faith over ministerial duties was part of their new belief that truth is a spiritual rather than an intellectual discovery. Although they still regarded the world as sinister, the departing Witnesses were in a position to enter into new negotiations with it. None the less, their defection was hindered by emotional factors that added to the stress of the experience. The following excerpt is taken from an interview with a man who described to me the reactions of his friends when he informed them of his decision to bid the community farewell:

> I visited most of my closest friends within the Watch Tower and I said 'Look, I'm going to be resigning and I know that when I do you'll never speak to me again.' Some of the people shut the door. Some of the people I explained to why I was leaving cried. They said 'Once you've gone, we'll never be able to speak to you again.' Others got so annoyed that they threw me out of the house!

The man went on to explain how all his associates outside work were Witnesses. He knew that once he decided to leave the community, these friendships would be severed and he would be condemned. All the former members with whom I spoke told me how they had been cut off by friends and family who refused to visit them, attend their weddings or even acknowledge them in public venues.[xvi] It appears that those who make the easiest transition are people who have managed to find an alternative belief system or have non-Witness friends who are able to distract them from the movement's milieu. But finding alternatives is far from easy given the years of constraint placed on devotees to limit their contact with the outside world and to refrain from reading apostate literature. Those who do eventually break free are seldom allowed a dignified exit. Not only are they officially disfellowshipped by the elders at the Kingdom Hall, they are also pronounced spiritually diseased.

Curiously enough, some people who leave the movement continue to pledge their allegiance to it until they have managed to rid themselves of the psychological effects of its teachings. Once the process of breaking away has begun, defectors often find themselves torn between the need to develop a new identity on the one hand, and the fear of relinquishing the doctrines they have held so dear on the other. These two positions may be irreconcilable for some considerable time, as this former member explained:

> I went and looked up a few of my old school friends to see what they'd done with their lives. We had a drink and a chat and they would say things to me like, 'We heard you'd gone a bit weird and become a Jehovah's Witness', and even then I found myself defending the Watch Tower and when I came away I'd think, 'Why did you do that?' It still had a grip on me!

Espousing Watch Tower beliefs can thus be symptomatic of a person's struggle to break free. The inability of disaffected Witnesses to renounce their former creed is part and parcel of the dilemma in which they are caught. Though they are certain that the Watch Tower reality is distorted, they cannot imagine life without it. Those who do reach the point of departure often experience a crisis of religious identity which may be manifest in their subconscious search for a different faith:

> I drove to this church and I couldn't go in. I just couldn't go in the building because it was still in my mind that it was Satan's Temple. I walked around outside. It was pure turmoil. When I finally went in, the service had almost ended. I sneaked through the door and I did meet one girl who said to me 'Are you a Christian?', which didn't impress me at all; but they presented a very simple Christian gospel.

For this lapsed member, the balance between returning to the movement and deconstructing the process that caused him to internalise its beliefs in the first place was so fine that the scales could have been tipped either way.[xvii] Needless to say, total defection is a lengthy and challenging process. Autobiographies that extol 'a new freedom in Christ' are misleading, since few of them offer details of how long it took to adjust to a new way of life or exactly how this was achieved. It is also impossible to ascertain from these sources the effects of the Witnesses' worldview in the longer term. All the former members with whom I spoke expressed disdain for congregational officials on the one hand and genuine affection for their former brothers and sisters who were forbidden to associate with them on the other. Two defectors claimed to be experiencing some difficulty in establishing a new way of life, despite their departure three years previously. These two people were suspicious of any reading material other than the Bible and, although they had started to attend their local Baptist church, their approach to institutional religion was circumspect. Like nomads, they had drifted from church to church in the hope of finding alternative beliefs, but were wary of anyone who propounded a monosemic worldview.

To offer a complete examination of how former Witnesses replace Watch Tower doctrines with a new worldview would, of course, require extensive research over a very long period of time, but it is clear both from my own fieldwork, from internet sources and from published materials that many continue their search for existential security. Once they decide to abandon the Watch Tower regime, the ethical and cultural practises they had eschewed for so long (annual celebrations, blood transfusions and the like) need to be renegotiated. Responses to these issues vary from individual to individual. Voluntary defection implies that the individual is amenable to change, but abandoning a totalitarian regime also produces pangs of guilt and betrayal. To a greater or lesser extent, the defectors I met continued to renounce the world. For some people, this meant imitating the Witnesses in abstaining from voting in general elections, while all but one defector remained opposed to the armed forces. This suggests that pacifism and anti-nationalism among lapsed members remain strong, although this could also be symptomatic of their conversion to orthodox Christianity which, like the Watch Tower Society, upholds the sanctity of life. In his description of how he gradually replaced Watch Tower theology with Baptist beliefs, one defector informed me:

> I've known some people leave the Watch Tower and move over to Baptist churches and take on board everything immediately. I couldn't do that. It might not all be wrong; but the basis was wrong - the basis of salvation. Over the years, I went through each doctrine bit by bit. Even when I became a Christian I had some difficulty with Christmas and birthdays, so we used to compromise. I said to my wife, 'You have this room and put all your Christmas decorations up and I'll have that room'. I don't have any problem with Christmas whatsoever now. There was one occasion when two Witnesses came to visit me - they were making a final attempt - and I took them into the front room which was all full of decorations and it was quite a joy to see these two guys standing there with their mouths open!

This respondent went on to explain how annual celebrations had become 'side issues' which he believed had little effect on a person's salvation, although he claimed it took him several years to reach this point. It seems both from this man's comments and those of his co-defectors that once the movement's prescription for salvation has been categorically (rather than tenuously) rejected, other doctrines become less problematic and the effects of the

regime start to diminish. Whatever their new reality, these people are then in a position to embrace ideas they had previously rejected. It is exactly this process that comes into play when former Witnesses start to reconsider what is probably the most emotive Watch Tower doctrine – the refusal of blood transfusions. Ironically, this doctrine elicited the most radical change in the defectors' responses. All were able to offer a new interpretation of biblical injunctions which challenged those most commonly cited by the Governing Body such as Acts 15:28-29 and Leviticus 17:10. The defectors claimed that after some considerable discussion with members of Christian churches, they were finally persuaded that the prohibition was one of many Jewish purity laws.

For all the differences between orthodox Christianity and the Witnesses' heterodox creed, it would be wrong to suggest that there were not also some similarities. When individuals renounce Watch Tower doctrines, they are taking a stand against the Governing Body's interpretation of biblical texts rather than its general worldview. Those who come to replace the Watch Tower beliefs with a Christian weltanschauung are unshaken in their belief that the world comprises good and evil forces, and that sin is the result of Satan's power to wreak havoc. The defectors' persistent condemnation of sexual impurity demonstrates their continued awareness of moral danger, despite their belief that absolution from sin could be achieved only by repentance and spiritual healing, rather than disfellowship and reinstatement. In other words, while sexual relationships outside Christian marriage, homosexuality, abortion and euthanasia continued to be scorned, all maintained that clean living and respect for the sanctity of life without faith in Christ's deity were not enough to achieve salvation. What they did share with the Witnesses was the mission to save as many sinners as possible before the impending Day of Judgement. These similarities show not only that there are parallels between the two systems of belief, but that millenarian tenets continued to play a central rôle in the lives of these individuals. Although they no longer saw the evangelisation of Armageddon as an essential part of their mission, they did retain their zeal for the repentance of sinners in anticipation of a Messianic Age; hence, their adherence to millenarian doctrines had far from disappeared.

Like their former brethren, the defectors never once stated that their present religious convictions prevented them from feeling free. Predictably, they claimed that this freedom had never been possible in the Watch Tower Society, whatever they might have said in their previous religious lives. Consider, for example, the following two declarations:

> You can be a Pentecostalist, you can be a Baptist, you can be a Roman Catholic, you can be an Anglican, but we all come under the same umbrella of one God. There's a church for every one of us to celebrate differently and we can all worship in the way we feel comfortable, which is wonderful, because with the Witnesses there just wasn't. I now have the freedom to disagree and come away and still be friends.
>
> I have a view of God that is a bit bigger than I had as a Witness. I see God as more magnanimous than this 'Jehovah' who will strike you dead if you go inside a Catholic church or a Jewish synagogue or a Hindu temple. I believe that ex-Witnesses have got something really special about them because of where they've been. They've suffered, they've been through the same thing, and they can relate to each other and it's wonderful. I have friends who are Jewish, most of my family are Roman Catholics … I have to acknowledge in my mind there's a wider picture that I don't fully understand, and I'm quite willing to leave it with God. God's bigger than all our churches. He can deal with all that. Through Him, we're free.

Although these testimonies still contain a concept of freedom that would appear restrictive to modern liberal thinkers, the defectors' references to choice and diversity bring them closer to the modern world than would previously have been the case. More significant, perhaps, is their willingness to jettison exclusive tenets for a universal message of religious tolerance that cannot allow any one system of belief to monopolise truth. Their adoption of orthodox Christianity can, however, be interpreted from a number of perspectives. From the Witnesses' point of view, it signifies turning away from Jehovah and mixing with apostates - an appalling act of defilement that jeopardises salvation. For the defectors themselves, it marks the beginning of a new life and an opportunity to discover real truth. These individuals are not merely narrating a story of how they came to leave a religious movement they found wanting;

they are setting the record straight. From a cultural perspective, however, their departure did not cause them to view the world in a fundamentally different way. What it did do was make them more tolerant of others who also follow a monotheistic code.

Conclusion

It is clear from the evidence presented in this paper that the struggle to adjust to the outside world is common to all former Jehovah's Witnesses who have published autobiographies or who have spent a certain length of time in the movement. Defectors claim that they have never been encouraged to think independently and are unable to leave the Watch Tower community without feeling disoriented. Not only does breaking away involve acquiring a new way of looking at the world, it also means changing one's lifestyle and forming new relationships. This is no mean feat for anyone who has lived by the principles of a closed system. If, however, sociologists like Peter Berger are right in their suggestion that the modern world is characterised by the weakening of tradition and the erosion of collective life, the defectors in this study were no more products of it than the people they left behind. Abandoning the Watch Tower movement did not seem to stop their yearning to belong to a community of like-minded others. But like Fromm, Berger also argues that modern identities are constructed around a concept of liberation that religious fundamentalists regard as anathema (Berger 1977:109-10). The defectors' firm adherence to moral boundaries and appeasement of supernatural forces continue to lure them away from modern secular society and cause them to renounce the world with as much passion as their former co-religionists. Whether or not the people I interviewed were typical of those who leave the movement is difficult to say, but what is clear is that they showed no more desire to embrace the modern world than when they were in regular attendance at the Kingdom Hall. Their defection signifies a rejection of one system that renounces the world and the adoption of another. Their need to defer to an authority far greater than themselves in a world they still regarded as morally reprehensible is indicative of their disdain for individual liberty.

The evidence suggests that lapsed Witnesses who embrace mainstream Christianity do not, therefore, enter into a significantly different relationship with secular society. Though they had become actively involved in Baptist, Congregationalist and other non-conformist denominations, they remained adamant in their belief that the Bible was the inerrant word of God. Their relentless condemnation of debauchery; especially sexual promiscuity, adultery and the excessive consumption of alcohol, means that their status in the world remains peripheral. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suggest that the defectors' transfer of allegiance would not be of interest to contemporary social theorists. Among other things, their departure from the Watch Tower regime allowed them greater social interaction with outsiders, political franchisement, freedom of speech and the freedom to read literature of their own choice. Whatever restrictions they may have imposed on themselves, these changes convey their willingness to embrace some aspects of modernity that they had previously renounced. Their continuous search for religious truth reveals as much about the modern world as it does their retreat from it. In the end, the certainty that can be obtained from a millenarian message is often far greater than the desire to enter a world that can make no promises.

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Endnotes

[i] The Witnesses always use the name Jehovah from the Hebrew translation Yahweh when referring to God. They regard this as a scriptural requisite. Armageddon is Jehovah's victory over Satan at the end of time.

[ii] This represents the 'peak' figure. The 'average' figure for 2000 was 120,592.

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

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

[v] Among the most compelling of these are Schnell (1956), Dencher (1966), Stevenson (1967), Tomsett (1971), Harrison (1980), Franz (1983), Botting and Botting (1984) and Penton (1997).

[vi] Sociologist Richard Singelenberg (1988) describes the period between 1967 and 1975 as 'the prophecy phase', during which there was a huge growth in membership in nearly every country in the world. In contrast, the period between 1976 and 1979 is what he calls 'the disconfirmation phase', which saw a sharp decline in both evangelism and recruitment.

[vii] Despite the organisation's previous teaching that Adam and Eve had been created in the same year!

[viii] Beckford (1975a:220) argues that one of the tactics adopted by the movement was the suggestion that a full understanding of Jehovah's plan would only become clear to the Witnesses in much later years.

[ix] 'Apostate' is a term used by the Witness when referring to those who hold religious beliefs contrary to the Watch Tower Society.

[x] All the defectors in my study claimed that they were too afraid to discuss their ambivalence with other members for fear of being reported to congregational officials. Some explained how bonds were weakened with those with whom they tried to share their anxieties.

[xi] This echoes Weber's concern that capitalist, bureaucratic society produces an 'iron cage' in which human freedom, creativity and ingenuity become trapped (see Bradley 1992:198).

[xii] It is, of course, difficult to know whether those who experience doubts but remain in membership ever reach the point of undertaking independent biblical research.

[xiii] At the same time, it is impossible to know how many defectors slip into agnosticism or fail to adopt an alternative system of religious belief.

[xiv] See, for example, Gruss (1974) for a collection of these testimonies.

[xv] Although references to ‘the living Jesus’ were common among the defectors I interviewed, most had in fact converted to Baptist churches in which worship was conducted by ordained ministers.

[xvi] Those who remain in membership are also forbidden to attend the funerals of those who have lapsed.

[xvii] Festinger (1957) defines this experience of conflicting or contradictory thoughts as cognitive dissonance. He argues that consonance can only be achieved by reducing or increasing the validity of either position. In the case of totalitarian organisations, however, loyalty can be nothing less than absolute.