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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 Witnesses are zealous proselytisers who have expanded rapidly over the past 130 years and there are now more than 6 million devotees worldwide. This paper examines the socialisation of second and subsequent generation members and describes how the movement deals with those who refuse to comply with its regime. Extracts are presented from interviews with young members who recall their childhood memories of growing up in the movement and explain what happened when they rebelled against its quasi-totalitarian doctrines. The main argument advanced in the paper is that parents who socialise their children in accordance with this particular creed are protecting them from a modern world of relativism and uncertainty.

Jehovah's Witnesses are members of a world-renouncing religious movement officially known as the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. The Society was founded by Charles Taze Russell in 1872 and claims to monopolise the word of God. Since the foundation of the movement, devotees have maintained that we are living in the Final Days. Their eschatology is based on a literal interpretation of the Bible and almost all the movement's literature makes reference to the New Kingdom which the Witnesses believe will be inaugurated by Jehovah at *Armageddon*.¹ The Society's worldwide membership rose from a mere 44,080 in 1928 to an impressive 6,035,564 in 2000, making an annual net growth of around 5 per cent (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001).² 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).³ The Witnesses attribute their international success to the fulfilment of the prophecy of Matthew 24 which states that the gospel of the Kingdom will be preached to the ends of the earth. They espouse an exclusive message which declares that while a great multitude of righteous people (including those who do not necessarily share their faith), will be granted eternal life *on earth*, only 144,000 members of their own community (the figure mentioned in Revelation 14:3) will enter heaven. Their heterodox purity code which prohibits, among other things, sexual relationships outside marriage, blood transfusions, annual celebrations (including Christmas, Easter, birthdays and national festivals) and involvement in all political affairs means that they are highly unlikely, despite their worldwide ministry, to recruit anything other than a small number of zealous members. The Society (to which the Witnesses themselves refer as *the truth*) rejects all other religious creeds as heresy and supports its doctrines with biblical texts. The movement is fundamentally a rational, rather than a mystical one. It is a religion of disenchantment and serious study of the Bible and Watch Tower publications, of which prospective recruits must demonstrate their knowledge before they can be baptised. Spiritual activities comprise a series of weekly meetings at the local Kingdom Hall (the official name for the Witnesses' place of worship) and aggressive door-to-door evangelism. The movement discourages devotees from associating unnecessarily with non-members and are thus able to offer those who are willing to accept its millenarian message a plausible *weltanschauung* and the security of a tightly knit community. In a modern secular world in which all manner of life options are available, the Witnesses stand out as calculating, conservative and authoritarian. The movement's demand of unquestioning loyalty means that those who violate its moral or doctrinal code risk disfellowship. To the sceptical outsider, this is a movement that bears all the hallmarks of a totalitarian regime.

Despite their successful evangelistic mission, there is a dearth of academic literature on the Witnesses. Beckford (1975a, 1975b, 1976), Wilson (1974, 1978, 1990) and Dobbelaere and Wilson (1980) have carried out the most extensive research, but these studies are now rather dated. Moreover, the Witnesses seldom receive more than a brief mention in most of the key textbooks on the sociology of religion. There is, however, a larger number of published articles on the Watch Tower movement in journals such as *Social Compass*, *Sociological Analysis*, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* and *The British Journal of Sociology*, but even these tend to be written from a macro perspective and fail to give devotees themselves a voice. Where academics have addressed agency, it is usually in relation to conversion and/or continuation of membership. Search as I may in the sociological and anthropological literature on the movement, I find little discussion of the effects of Watch Tower teachings either on the Witnesses themselves or on their children. This paper addresses these caveats. Not surprisingly, most Witness couples introduce their children to Watch Tower principles very early on in life in the hope that this will result in baptism when the child reaches his or her late-teens. From the Witnesses' point of view, involving children in worship serves two essential purposes. Firstly, it is an easy way of recruiting new members to the Society, thereby enhancing conversion statistics for the future and, secondly, it is a means of protecting what are arguably society's most vulnerable people from the snares of the devil. What follows is an examination of the various ways in which second and subsequent generation Witnesses are socialised into the Watch Tower regime and what happens to those who rebel against it. I write as a sociologist with an interest in what the movement means to adult members who endorse its doctrines and to youngsters who defect. The data were collected in a recent ethnographic study in the North West of England and include extracts from a series of unstructured interviews. The interview method was chosen in order that devotees and their disaffected children might tell their own stories.



Nurturing the innocent

From the moment of their foundation, Jehovah's Witnesses have remained emphatic in their claim that they are in but not of the world, and they devote the whole of their religious ministry preparing for a Messianic Kingdom. Unlike other separatists such as the Amish, the Hutterites and the Plymouth Brethren, however, the Witnesses live in ordinary neighbourhoods, are employed in mainstream occupations and even occupy the same households as those who do not share their faith. This means that in the course of their everyday lives, they must manage their social relations in a way that enables them to live and work among outsiders and at the same time, remain true to their strict ascetic beliefs. The caution with which the Witnesses approach modern secular society can be seen in how they socialise second and subsequent generation members. Year on year, the movement circulates millions of tracts for young people containing advice about faith, morality, dating, marriage, personal happiness and much more. There is also a substantial amount of material for parents who are worried about how to bring up their children in what is regarded as a troubled and hostile world. The movement's teachings on childhood and parenting provide the ethnographer with rich information for the analysis of millenarian religion.

The Witnesses are zealous people who regard young people as a crucial resource. It would be wrong to suggest, however, that there is a uniform approach to parenting. Devotees deal differently with tensions between personal feelings and ascetic principles, and that there is no stereotypical Jehovah's Witness response to life in the twenty-first century. This also applies to the nurturing of children. While all Witness parents hope that their sons and daughters will continue to fight the Watch Tower cause long in to the future, there are significant differences in parents' views on matters such as discipline, association with non-members and, perhaps most surprisingly, involvement in religious activities.⁴ The socialisation of children into the milieu of the Society occurs at both macro and micro levels. The macro level concerns the official precepts that are issued by the movement and communicated from top downwards, mainly in the form of tracts and magazines.⁵ Some of these are written specifically for children and contain advice about how best to achieve happiness in a world that is to all intents and purposes, secular. Others are aimed at parents, offering support and encouragement in times of trial and tribulation. Micro socialisation, on the other hand, is about everyday parenting and the scenarios to which this gives rise at grass-roots level. The Governing Body propounds the view that well-mannered children are the products of good adult example, and this means the constant monitoring and surveillance of their behaviour. Responsibility for this is considered to rest with parents. The nature of children's activities and the dynamics of parent-child interaction are the empirical measures against which the effectiveness of micro socialisation can be judged.

Respect for adults, particularly for parents, is one issue about which the Witnesses have a great deal to say. The movement stresses the importance of child subservience even in cases where the example set by parents leaves much to be desired. This reveals something important about the Witnesses' concept of childhood. Although it would be wrong to suggest that the movement adopts the Victorian view that children should be seen and not heard (Witness children are, after all, encouraged to take part in door-to-door proselytising), it is clear that it does not welcome dissidence or even mild questioning. This makes it difficult for young Witnesses, especially those under the age of 16, to refuse to undertake Bible study or to attend meetings with their parents at the Kingdom Hall. On the whole, youngsters display an extraordinary degree of politeness towards adults and a profound respect for the movement's theology. Only those who lapse in later life tend to confess that they found 'studying' laborious, but claim they had had little other choice than to acquiesce during childhood. Children's involvement at meetings cannot go unnoticed. Those as young as 4 or 5 years of age can be seen contributing to some of the discussions, but more active involvement increases as children reach teenage years. Long before they are baptised, children partake in the rôle-play sessions (usually with adults) where they rehearse doorstep sermons. Adult members of the congregation usually accompany the child in door to door evangelism. Parents, aunts and uncles are the driving force behind children's participation, but like most millenarian communities, the strong emotional bonds that exist between devotees help to sustain



motivation. Studying is, by and large, a family affair. The role of adult members is crucial if children are to be effectively socialised into the Watch Tower regime and if the movement is to survive in the longer term. In the short term, subjecting children to the study of Watch Tower tracts and the never ending programme of activities at the Kingdom Hall enables devotees to exercise control in a remarkably different way to that of other parents. Witnesses are, to all intents and purposes, strict disciplinarians who do not allow misdemeanours to go uncontested or their authority to be challenged. It is not uncommon to see children who step out of line at Watch Tower meetings being verbally and sometimes physically chastised. One former member told me how, in his former years as a congregational elder, he had taken his two sons outside the Kingdom Hall and beaten them when they had allowed their minds to wander off a sermon. At the micro level of socialisation, devotees go to considerable lengths to screen out undesirable associates by arranging activities for junior members. Large groups of Witness children are often taken to tenpin bowling allies, ice-skating rinks and the cinema. These pursuits usually take place at weekends and are arranged by parents who devise a supervision rota. Although teenagers are never allowed to go away on holiday alone with a boyfriend or girlfriend, they are generally free to join other Witness families on trips abroad with adults acting as chaperones. Consequently, young Witnesses form their closest ties with their siblings, cousins and friends of a similar age.

Children's leisure is not the only thing Witness parents like to vet. The movement's Governing Body is all too aware that once young children learn to read, the world is their oyster. Parents take great care in ensuring that where possible, reading materials, television programmes and more recently, data that can be downloaded on computers meet the approval of officials. From an early age, children are weaned on infant reading schemes that reinforce the movement's perspective on existential issues such as creation, the purpose of life, the path to salvation, the causes of suffering and what happens to us when we die. As one might expect, these books contain biblical stories, illustrations, puzzles and simple questions, all of which are designed to make children aware of the errancy of other belief systems and the presence of evil in the world. But perhaps the most subtle characteristic of Watch Tower literature for small children is the absence of conventional make-believe. One mother explained how she would not allow her seven year old son to read books that contained references to witches, fairies or magicians because of the movement's rejection of superstition. Moreover, the Witnesses' refusal to celebrate Christmas means that children are aware that Santa Claus is a fictitious character and cannot, therefore, bring presents. While there is no knowing whether all devotees are as painstaking as this in their efforts to safeguard their children against surrealism, one could be forgiven for thinking that if the tenets of the Watch Tower are to be fundamentally upheld, no Witness child would ever encounter the vast array of nursery rhymes and adventure stories that are embedded in modern culture. It is only because fiction pervades the public sphere that parents cannot completely censor their children's reading materials.

Older children, because they are generally allowed more freedom and are exposed to secular adolescent culture (particularly at school), soon become aware of adult literature. There is nothing more alarming to Witness parents than an inquisitive 13 or 14 year old with a desire to explore a world in which traditional authority and moral boundaries have weakened. At the same time, preventing children from hanging around on street corners does not necessarily avert their interest in teenage magazines, romantic novels and a whole host of other publications that the Governing Body deems inappropriate. Whatever steps parents might take to safeguard their children, literature of this nature is available in libraries and bookshops. In its concern about the so-called dangers of these sources and the relative ease with which they can be obtained, the movement has little other option than to appeal to the moral integrity of children who might be tempted to read it.

There is, however, one resource that has given children more freedom than ever before to access written and visual text - the worldwide web. This revolutionary technology has enabled young and old alike to search for information ranging from gardening to pornography, and this is a prospect that fills every Witness parent with horror. The movement's response to the internet is ambivalent to say the least. At its most sanguine, Watch Tower literature has applauded international electronic communication since this is a facility from which the Society has itself benefited. The net not only provides devotees with a means of proselytising,



it also enables them to e-mail their co-religionists and to keep abreast of what is happening thousands of miles away. On the other hand, at no other period in history has there been so much electronic data available and so little control over what can be downloaded. At present, there is little to prevent anyone from establishing their own website and from supplying potential browsers with whatever information they want. For this reason, surfing the net is dangerous business. This is one activity that parents are unable to police, and any attempt to do so might arouse a child's curiosity. Needless to say, this versatile technology continues to be a source of concern for the movement's Governing Body.

Despite the large amount of reading involved in Watch Tower membership, it would be a mistake to assume that Witness children are high academic achievers. There are two reasons why this is not generally the case. Firstly, the passive 'learning' that takes place in the Kingdom Hall and at *Book Study* meetings fails to procure the critical thinking, less still the analytical skills, required for high level academic performance; and secondly, the Society's unequivocal millenarian perspective means that whatever the academic potential of its younger members, evangelistic activities take priority over educational success. Young Witnesses who intend to undergo baptism rarely progress to college or university. This can be a source of regret in subsequent years among those who later defect. One former member told me:

Witnesses don't push you with school work. If you're a Witness, education just doesn't seem to be an issue. Although my mum and dad always wanted me to do well, they didn't show a great deal of interest in my school work because as far as the Witnesses are concerned, you're going to become a pioneer when you leave school and work part-time. You can't have a career because your 'career' is going to be in the Witness organisation. I started off at school with the best of intentions and I'd have liked to have done a lot better, but my parents never pushed me so I stopped trying. My sister who never questioned anything the Witnesses did went on to become a pioneer, worked part-time on a fruit and veg stall, has no direction, doesn't own her own house and doesn't have a pension scheme! I've been back to college since and done NVQs in Business Management and Administration.

This young woman's comments suggest that the Witnesses pay lip-service to compulsory education and fail to use it as an avenue for upward social mobility.⁶ While the Governing Body wants its younger members to attain an adequate level of literacy, (if only to enhance their ministerial skills), it continues to worry that education for the pursuit of career success and material wealth might lead to the pursuit of personal interests at the expense of spiritual well-being. To this day, Witness children abstain from all forms of non-Witness worship, school politics, nationalistic practices such as saluting flags and singing anthems and curricular and extracurricular activities for Christmas and Easter. Parents are requested to monitor the school curriculum (particularly performing arts and media programmes) in order to ensure that their children are protected from 'unwholesome associations'.⁷ While the Society has no objection to Religious Studies syllabuses that contain factual information about world faiths, participation in worship is still strictly forbidden. This means that like the Muslim community, the Witnesses may choose to withdraw their children from school assemblies that include Christian prayers and/or hymn singing, although it is becoming increasingly common for Witness children to attend religious assemblies without partaking in rituals. Participation in after-school clubs continues to be discouraged because it is feared that it will leave less time for Witnessing activities and could lead to wayward behaviour. Witness parents, perhaps more than any others, find themselves in constant dialogue with governors, teachers and other educational administrators who work within a system that does not always operate in accordance with Watch Tower doctrines. Although a child from *any* background might wish to refrain from certain school activities, the larger than average number of objections made by the movement's Governing Body means that it is difficult for young members to experience an education that is completely free from tension with school authorities. Although Witness pupils who attend non-denominational schools are usually spared from having to conscientiously object to religious worship, they must continue to jettison those aspects of school culture that contravene the Watch Tower code.⁸ The fact that the education system accommodates the Witnesses is, however, indicative of a pluralistic society that protects people's citizenship rights.



It would be remiss of me to end this section without commenting on how parents deal with children who begin to express an interest in the opposite sex. Naturally, Witnesses in their mid to late-teens often form an attraction for someone of a similar age either in or outside the movement. But unlike many of their counterparts in *the world*, these young millenarians are not given the approval of adults. The Governing Body is critical of parents who allow children unlimited freedom, and premarital sex is forbidden. In turn, parents have strong reservations about nightclubs, town-centre pubs and other social arenas with which the movement associates hedonism. The Witnesses' approach to romance resonates with what many would regard as a bygone age. Dating while still at school is discouraged, not only because of its possible effects on educational attainment, but also because those of school age are considered too young to enter into relationships. While the Watch Tower authorities have no objection to platonic friendships between young people, sexual activity is strictly forbidden. Parents who are worried that this might happen are advised to keep a watchful eye on proceedings.

Notwithstanding the Society's objection to unsupervised romance, it would be more than a little surprising if the Governing Body were to issue an official age at which serious dating could commence. Generally speaking, young couples in their late teens are free to date each other without a chaperone. By this age, the tacit rules of courting are the same as for anyone else. But courting couples have a moral responsibility to show the rest of the world that chastity is not dead; hence, while they are free to meet each other in public, they are not usually allowed to meet in private. Watch Tower guidelines for young people stress the importance of sexual purity and urge those in relationships to resist situations that may cause them to sin. Devotees in romantic relationships, including those engaged to be married, can face serious disciplinary action if there is any reason to suspect that they may be involved either in sexual activity or in immodest behaviour such as heavy petting or kissing. Engaged couples who buy houses in preparation for marriage must ensure that should they need to carry out repairs, a third party is always present. Though reminiscent of a bygone age, chivalry of this kind is an outward sign of clean living. The large body of Watch Tower literature with its persistent stress on the importance of celibacy outside and fidelity within marriage approaches sexual issues from a moral perspective that does not allow for deviation. Although some of this literature refers to issues such as puberty and hormonal changes, there is rarely any mention of birth control. Some parents with whom I spoke were vehemently opposed to sex education in schools on the grounds that it would encourage more teenage pregnancies, the rate of which they already deplored.⁹ The Witnesses' unabated attacks on homosexuality and adultery serve to remind children that restrained heterosexual sex between married couples is the only acceptable form of sexual expression.¹⁰ In the meantime, it would take a courageous child to argue.

Growing up in the Watch Tower Society is something few non-Witness children would envy. While the effects of socialisation vary from one individual to another, there is little doubt that the Witnesses' *weltanschauung* has a huge impact on the reality of second generation members. This may also be true of mainstream Christianity and other systems of belief, but a sizeable number of children reared in the Watch Tower community from a very young age often claim that their religion made them feel different from their non-Witness peers. This is seldom something Catholic, Anglican or even Muslim children experience, not only because there are many more of them in schools and local communities, but also because their beliefs do not prevent them from taking part in activities in which most other children engage. This is not to say that Witness parents do not buy their children toys, games and learning aids, but I have offered several examples of how the movement's heterodox beliefs conflict with conventional concepts childhood. Wherever one might stand on this issue, Witness children have little other option than to honour their fathers and their mothers.

The ones who say 'No'

Continued membership of a totalitarian organisation is never unconditional. When Russell founded the Watch Tower Society in the late-nineteenth century, his intention was to offer an alternative belief-system to mainstream Christianity, and one (the *only* one) that represented the revealed word of God. From the time of its inception, the movement was indisputably sectarian - it was small, it was intense, it claimed monopoly over truth; and consequently, its



members felt exclusive. Communities like this are dependent on those born into them for long-term survival. The movement owes much of its international expansion to horizontal and vertical recruitment. Mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, cousins, in-laws, grandparents and grandchildren are all prime candidates for baptism - a rite of passage that boosts the annual membership statistics. Were it not for the significance of kinship, the Witnesses would not have had anything like the amount of success they have either in recruitment or retention. But what about children who express disdain for a mission they have been brought up to believe is so sacrosanct? What do the parents do *then*?

In a world in which people are allegedly free to choose from a whole range of options, children's acquiescence matters to the movement like never before. The available research suggests that the Witnesses are successful in retaining their children. For example, Beckford (1975a) discovered that around two-thirds of second generation Witnesses over 16 remained active members. This corresponds with the General Social Survey of 1994 which showed a retention rate of around 70 per cent.¹¹ The Witnesses nurture their young in accordance with Watch Tower doctrines because they believe it is the right thing to do, and as far as they are concerned, that is the end of the matter. At the macro level, the Governing Body has a responsibility to ensure that parents in every congregation are supported to the *nth* degree, not only because it shares the same spiritual objectives, but because it must consider long-term survival. So long as children tow the line, all should be well; but those who refuse baptism do damage to the membership statistics. Children are the movement's bread and butter. Only a parent lacking in foresight would allow a child to miss Kingdom Hall meetings or to question the principles on which the theology is based. Only a foolish one would encourage excessive contact with the outside world or turn a blind eye to issues that could have serious implications. For the Witnesses, an expedient parent is a forbidding parent. It is someone who is able to recognise the seductive forces that will lead their child astray and who drives them away before they are able to strike. It is also someone who is aware that even the nicest outsider who appears to be kind to children may be a wolf in sheep's clothing; skilled at making something sinister look glamorous. Witness parents everywhere must be on their guard.

Rebellion within the Watch Tower community can take a number of forms, all of which are worthy of sociological analysis, but space dictates that I be selective. The following account is not about feckless youngsters who go missing on a warm summer evening twenty minutes before they are due to set off with their parents to the Kingdom Hall, or those who ignore the elder's request for silence when a meeting is about to commence. Nor is it about children who fail to take seriously the words of an angry parent when their preparation for a *Book Study* has been found wanting. Even for disciplinarians like the Witnesses, minor misdemeanours such as these constitute little more than naughtiness and present no real threat to the community. Instead, I have decided to focus on children of around 15 upwards who have decided, without reservation, that Watch Tower life is no longer for them. These dissidents are the Society's *bête noire*. Their behaviour poses a more serious challenge and has graver long term implications. A child who is unwilling to partake in worship is not like a child who does not want to go to bed. Children who wish to terminate their membership are raising a *spiritual* objection, the effects of which are catastrophic. Congregational elders hope that by the age of about 16, a young person who has received a Witness upbringing will make the decision to become an official evangelist, for which baptism is the appropriate requisite. But this is also the age at which children have reached legal independence, and there is nothing to prevent them from leaving home. As far as the Witnesses are concerned, this is not the issue. Those who abandon the Society, whatever their legal rights, are playing with fire; far more than those in the outside world who at least can be excused on the grounds that they know no better. In this respect, voluntary defection is like involuntary expulsion; the first step to mayhem, perhaps even to annihilation.

Whatever else might happen, the kind of rebellion to which I am referring begins or ends with the refusal to attend Watch Tower meetings. Although this is never well received either by loved ones or by other devotees, it can happen for a number of reasons. Some individuals may feel anxious about having to stand on a platform and rehearse doorstep sermons in front of the whole congregation; hardly an easy feat even for the most confident youngster. Others may be



aware of events that are taking place elsewhere on the evenings when meetings are held, be it a game of football or an extracurricular activity at school. Or, less commonly, there could be an unbelieving relative at home (as in the case of mixed marriages) who has the luxury of staying in and watching television while the rest of the family is engaged in worship. Whatever the reason, the alternatives to studying religious texts and listening to what seem like endless monologues can be very attractive indeed to someone for whom studying is an altogether too demanding way of life. This is not to say that second generation members who turn away from the movement necessarily renounce its *principles*. For all their objections, it would be surprising if these youngsters did not endorse some of the values that they had had their whole lives to internalise. In this respect, lapsed Witnesses are no different from lapsed Catholics or lapsed Methodists in that their defection usually signifies a rejection of the movement's rituals and doctrines rather than its values of honesty, charity and integrity. The following excerpt is from an interview with Laura, a 25 year old former member who, after several years of squabbling with her parents, left the community at the age of 16:

My earliest memories of childhood are of being dragged to meetings so often; it was the absolute centre of my life for two hours at a time, three times a week. By the time I was about 8 or 9, I started thinking 'This is a bind. I'm not enjoying this'. You see, *the truth* makes parents stricter than parents who aren't Witnesses; it keeps you in this little circle of people that you never go outside of, except when you're at school. ... But leaving aside their religion, my parents are two very loving people who would give their best at all times. Most of what they say is true and I do believe it, I just can't follow it ... but being brought up a Witness has given me a good steady base. I know I'm a responsible person; I think about things before I do them, I take other people's feelings into consideration ... all sorts of things the Witnesses are, they've passed down to me.

Laura's disdain for Watch Tower meetings is tempered with what seems like an apology for her defection. While it is difficult to ascertain how much of the movement's theology former members like Laura accept, there was certainly a desire among the young people I interviewed to remain close to their parents for whom they expressed much affection. Whatever grudges against the movement these individuals might have held, I found no evidence of permanent estrangement from loved ones. For one thing, teenage defectors are likely to be living in their parents' home during the initial stages of their defection (a situation that requires tolerance from all parties if the lid is to be kept on a simmering pot), and for another, the strong kinship ties for which the Witnesses are renowned cannot easily be severed between parents and children, whatever their grievances. But these might be the only factors that prevent a Witness family from falling apart in the short-term. Some of the 'rebels' I met regaled me with stories of how, in their bid for freedom, they would climb out of their bedroom windows in the evenings to be with their friends, smuggle alcohol and cigarettes into the house, take public transport to forbidden venues and, in some cases, engage in sexual activities. Tammy's story echoes some of this:

When I was about fifteen, I had a large circle of Witness friends and we were *all* doing things we shouldn't have been doing ... we were all smoking, we were all drinking, we were all going out with the opposite sex, we all used to go home late. I remember one night, we were supposed to be going ice-skating and Martin, my cousin, had sneaked some Special Brew under his coat and we drank it together in the park ... on that occasion, we got the bus back to his house cos we weren't being picked up ... I'd say a good half of us have now left *the truth*.

Tammy's reminiscence of her deviant past suggests that second-generation dissidence among the Witnesses may be more widespread than parents realise. Regardless of whether they remain in membership, youngsters like Tammy are no different from most other teenagers in pursuit of adventure. Tammy's rebellion is a response not merely to authority, but to her parents' *brand* of authority; that is, to a value system that is governed by strict religious edicts. She was adamant that the conflict with her parents could have been greatly reduced had they been more liberal:

By the time I was at secondary school, I started thinking to myself 'I could be going out with my friends tonight to the park, just messing about doing this and doing that,



not to do anything wrong, but just to go out to the youth club and things like that; but instead I've got to go to a meeting for two hours, and by the time I get home it'll be too late.' When I was about 13, my parents wanted to mould me and limit my association with certain people. Even when I was older and I was allowed out, there was always a curfew of half past eight; everybody else was going home at ten ... mind you, other Witness children weren't allowed *any* association with any non-Witnesses apart from at school, so I suppose I had a lot of freedom! By the time I was in my final year at school, I was spending most of my time fighting my parents and at that point, I decided I wasn't going to any more meetings. They were trying to control me and I didn't want to be controlled; they weren't willing to bend at all. If I'd just been left to do my own thing for a while with guidance rather than strict guidelines, I might still be a Witness now.

The lengths to which Tammy's parents were prepared to go to ensure that she remained within the parameters of the Watch Tower - their insistence that she attend all meetings, the limited amount of time she was allowed to spend with her non-Witness friends and the curfews by which she had to abide - confirm their disdain for the secular world. This is the consequence of no ordinary generation gap. A great many parents who live in the modern West make the claim that when they were teenagers, things were different; that it was safe to walk the streets without fear of attack, that they could leave their homes unlocked and know that they would not be burgled and that there was never any sex before marriage. But unless, like the Witnesses, they hold fundamentalist religious beliefs, their nostalgic memories do not generally cause them to impose anything like the same constraints on their children as those to which Tammy was subjected. It would be wrong to assume from this, however, that Tammy and her Witness friends are indifferent to religious matters. Rather, they see themselves as products of a system that views the world with far deeper suspicion than is justified - one that is premised on the belief that children who have too much contact with secular influences tumble interminably into some vortex of depravity. Witness children who show affinity with the mores of the present day fill their parents with anxiety. It is a sociological axiom that millenarian theologies thrive on the notion of things becoming progressively worse. Demonising the modern world enables the movement to affirm its exclusivity.

Tammy's acts of defiance in her younger years - smoking tobacco, drinking alcohol and arranging illicit meetings with her friends in the park - are, however, minor aberrations compared with those of Natasha. Like Tammy, Natasha bickered constantly with her parents throughout her school years as a result of being made to attend Watch Tower meetings; but Natasha's story is much more dramatic. She terminated her membership one evening after a violent quarrel with her mother at the Kingdom Hall. This was triggered by Natasha's resistance to taking part a rôle-play session on the platform:

If you know anything about the Witnesses, you'll know that we have what we call the *Ministry School* where we do little household talks on the platform. Anyway, this particular lady from the congregation, I was her 'householder' and I'd been round and practised it the previous week, and I wasn't happy about it because of my age; I was quite self-conscious and I didn't want to appear a fool. Anyway, it came to the actual night, and just before I was about to walk on to the platform, I had a massive outburst and I just ran off to the toilets and I said 'I'm not doing it, I'm NOT doing it, and I'm not coming again!' and my mum came running after me and she said 'Oh yes you are!' and all hell broke loose, but I'd got it into my head that I was sixteen and that if I didn't want to go any more, I wouldn't. I never went to another meeting after that.

Although both Natasha's parents practised their faith earnestly, it was, in fact, her mother who claimed responsibility for ensuring that Natasha and her older sister completed their weekly Bible studies and door-to-door service work. Natasha's father was, it seems, less authoritarian than his wife (an unusual scenario considering the patriarchal nature of the movement) which explains why it was with her mother that Natasha most frequently remonstrated:

Mum and I were at each other's throats endlessly and it was a real hassle for my dad ... he didn't want to get involved really. I remember one night when we were having tea, my mum and I were at it hammer and tongues, and he just picked up his plate



and smashed it on the floor and he yelled 'I've had enough of this!' He'd got to the point where he didn't know what to do next. My mum was so intense about things and he wasn't. She just kept pushing and pushing and pushing.

For the next two years, Natasha formed a steady relationship with her boyfriend, Dominic, a lapsed Catholic who was four years older than she, and who was, to Natasha's relief, indifferent to religion. Not surprisingly, Natasha's parents disapproved of the relationship and insisted that while Natasha remained living with them, she came home every night and invite Dominic to the house only when they were present. They also forbade Dominic and Natasha from going away together on holiday. Natasha's relationship with her parents finally reached an impasse when, a few weeks before her nineteenth birthday, she fell pregnant - a moral violation for which Natasha knew she would be evicted. With much foreboding, Natasha broke the news to her parents and went to live with Dominic's sister. By the time Natasha had given birth to their baby girl, the couple had moved into their own home and planned to marry the following year. Meanwhile, Natasha's mother, who was probably at her lowest point in the crisis, told me:

The problems we have had recently have taken their toll. This situation with Natasha has absolutely floored me. It all began when she said she didn't believe Armageddon's coming. We arranged for the elders from the congregation to come and talk to her, and since then, things went from bad to worse. She's gone living with her boyfriend now which obviously we don't approve of. She's even said that she's prepared to get married in a Catholic church and the thoughts of that just smashes my mind to bits! I mean, there's no way we'd be able to go the wedding ... I've felt at times like I've been going demented. I've even considered going and speaking to a psychologist. I got books from the library on how to deal with teenagers. I've gone wrong somewhere! I feel like I've bent over backwards to show her loving kindness and I've kept getting slapped down. I find it very hard to talk about. Our theory is that it's the devil turning people away from doing what's right.

This whole family scenario warrants consideration for a number of reasons. Here, we have a teenager who does not only break away from the Watch Tower community, but falls pregnant by and cohabits with someone who does not uphold its tenets - a bitter pill indeed for her parents to swallow. Natasha's behaviour epitomises everything the Witnesses deplore. Her family life from start to finish shows how, even compared with other world-renouncing sectarians, the Witnesses have no mechanism for dealing with children who break the movement's ascetic rules. Though there are many wilful teenagers in the world, those who have grown up in a world-renouncing movement offend their parents in a very different way than those who have not. The austerity of Watch Tower tenets allows little scope for children to embrace teenage culture without being considered at risk. To those who do not understand the Witnesses' worldview, this 'risk' has been constructed (and exaggerated) by a group of religious fundamentalists whose beliefs make it impossible for teenagers to experience normal adolescence. From this point of view, rebellion is more about unrealistic parental expectations than serious defiance.

As far as the movement itself is concerned, second generation defectors are not treated with anything like the same contempt as Witnesses who are disfellowshipped. Rather, Watch Tower literature appeals to parents to accept their 'prodigal' child's decision to leave the community and to wait in hope for his/her return. *The Watchtower* (the movement's most widely circulated magazine) periodically features stories of young people who defect from *the truth* and who return at some later stage. Defectors are depicted as frivolous, impressionable people who have taken leave of their senses, while those who are reinstated are portrayed as having learned a hard lesson in discernment. These stories are often accompanied by personal testimonies of ex-members who reflect on how their craving for excitement led them into lives of debauchery, but how, by virtue of their former wisdom, they saw the error of their ways and returned remorsefully to the fold. Parents, on the other hand, are presented as God-fearing people for whom their child's departure is a devastating blow that affects them in much the same way as bereavement. It is not uncommon for parents to adopt a kamikaze approach to their child's obstinacy by calling on the support of other members as well as congregational officials. Elders and relatives use Watch Tower aids, particularly tracts that



contain biblical references, in an attempt to steer the offender back on course - a strategy that rarely produces success with those who feel they have had more than their fair share of indoctrination. Second generation Witnesses who do break away from the community usually manage to establish sufficient relations with the outside world to compensate for loss of contact with devotees. These defectors are likely to have formed close friendships with non-Witnesses at school or, like Natasha, they may be dating an unbelieving partner. Unlike many of their older relatives, and probably even their parents, they have not entered the movement as enthusiastic converts (see Holden 2002). These are youngsters whose defiant behaviour enables them to see that the outside world, for all its shortfalls, offers an alternative way of life.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that children who violate Watch Tower principles are children who are struggling to express their frustration with authority. Whatever one might think about the Witnesses' *weltanschauung*, few would deny that rebels are courageous individuals. The testimonies presented in this paper are of young people who dare to express their independence of thought; people who share with us their stories of what sympathetic onlookers would see as a recoil from an oppressive regime. But it is also clear that relationships are as volatile in Witness households as any other, especially where dissident children are at loggerheads with parents. While levels of parental discipline vary, the effective socialisation of second generation members is crucial if the movement is to continue to recruit. As far as parents are concerned, children who transgress ascetic boundaries cavort with the devil and thus lose the impetus to bequeath the movement's sacred legacy to subsequent generations.

The strict milieu into which the Witnesses socialise their children can be seen as a means, conscious or subconscious, of deflecting the perceived problems of a modern world. While the rest of humanity struggles with the ambiguities that the twenty-first century presents, 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 world are made 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 Witnesses' relentless adherence to biblical literalism poses a serious challenge to the claim that as societies move towards secularisation, religious movements may adopt a 'this-worldly' orientation. To the disappointment of the children I have quoted and many others like them, there is little or no evidence that this was happening in their own religion.¹² Parents continue to use anachronistic language when bemoaning the current state of the world, and their persistent resistance to ecumenicalism shows that they are as determined as ever to prevent external forces, sacred or secular, from invading their rituals and beliefs. The movement's exclusivity is a powerful armoury for protecting its children from the moral dangers of a pluralistic and atomised society.

By offering a glimpse into the lives of Witness children, I have highlighted some of the general dilemmas that the modern world poses for the movement at both macro and micro levels. The available evidence exposes all the difficulties of belonging to a movement that espouses heterodox beliefs at the beginning of the twenty-first century. There is little reason to think that the Witnesses will become more liberal as the new millennium evolves. For all its conservatism, orthodox Christianity is better equipped than the Watch Tower community to respond to these changes, particularly where children are concerned. Catholic, Anglican and other church leaders are acutely aware of the difficulties they face in encouraging young people into their parishes, and most recognise that teenage culture has changed remarkably over the past few decades. At a time when mainstream churches have begun to provide drop-in centres for drug users, temporary accommodation for homeless adolescents, pastoral support for unmarried mothers, help lines for gays and lesbians, health advisory clinics for pregnant schoolgirls and a whole host of confidential counselling services for young people living on the margins of society, the Witnesses hold fast to a monosemic theology that they insist holds good for all people and for all time. As the world becomes increasingly fragmented, the Watch Tower movement shows little sign of relaxing either its fundamentalist doctrines or its demand for absolute loyalty. Its greatest challenge is to prevent the enemy without from becoming the enemy within.



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Endnotes

1 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.

2 This represents the 'peak' figure. The 'average' figure for 2000 was 120,592.

3 This is based on a projected growth rate of 4 per cent.

4 For example, children who are reared in families in which only one parent is a member of the movement generally attend fewer meetings and spend less time in ministerial activities than children who are not.

5 At present, there is also a section for children entitled *Young People Ask ...* in the movement's magazine *Awake!*

6 Since so few adult Witnesses are employed in professional occupations, their failure to encourage their children to remain in education beyond the statutory leaving age corresponds with lower socio-economic groups in general.

7 One young Witness explained how her parents disapproved of her studying sociology at school because it addressed 'worldly' issues.

8 The movement's objection to religious worship in schools means that most Witness parents select non-denominational state education for their children.

9 Attitudes towards school sex education programmes vary among Witness parents. While few object to the teaching of human reproduction and pregnancy in biology classes, most regard sex education as a matter for the family and exercise their legal right to withdraw their children from classes that include discussions of birth control and sexually transmitted diseases.

10 Adultery and sexual relations outside marriage are among the most common reasons for disfellowship.

11 Moreover, the American National Survey of Religious Identification found in the early 1990s that American Witnesses are more likely than other members of the general population to be married and to have large families. Around one third of married Witnesses have four or more children.

12 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.