
The Apocalypticism of the Jehovah's Witnesses

Lois Randle

The Jehovah's Witnesses are a tightly knit authoritarian apocalyptic sect with two and a half million members. They see themselves as followers of "the true religion" and as the only survivors of the imminent Battle of Armageddon. They base their doctrines entirely on the Bible, which they believe is a divinely inspired, perfect, and completely consistent book; they view themselves as the Bible's only valid expositors. Now in its second century, the sect is flourishing under Fred Franz, its fourth president. Each of his predecessors died cheated of the fulfillment of his confident expectation of overseeing the Millennium.

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society began as one of the offshoots of nineteenth-century American millenarian enthusiasm, and, in its early days, was guided by founder and first president Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916). Under leaders like William Miller (1782–1849), various Second Adventist groups declared that God had preordained the date of Jesus' Second Coming, secretly encoded it in the Bible, and then belatedly revealed it to them. They preached through the years, that the Apocalypse was assuredly to arrive in 1844—or rather 1874, or 1914, or 1975—well, very soon anyway.

Jehovah's Witnesses, along with other millenarian and apocalyptic groups, share the delusion of first-century Christians

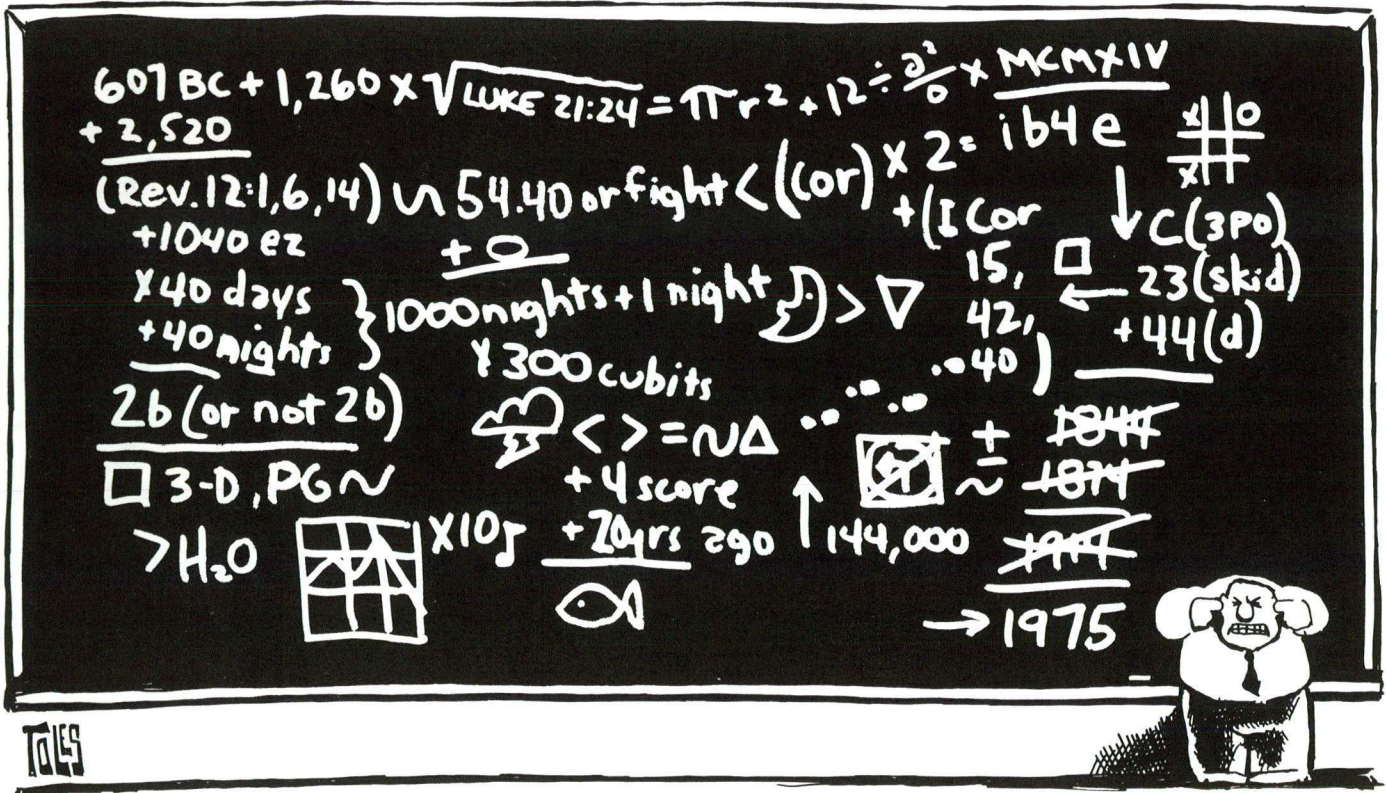
that their own time is the end-time. There has, of course, never been a generation in which many Christians did *not* believe this, but the Witnesses suffer from a particularly virulent form of the delusion.

There can be no doubt that early Christians truly, and very wrongly, believed they lived in the last days. The author of 1 John wrote: "Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know that this is the last hour" (1 John 2:18 NEB). Paul clearly expected to live until the Second Coming (1 Thess. 4:15): The saddest of all failed prophecies is on the last page of the Bible, a speech put on the lips of the risen Jesus: "Yes, I am coming soon" (Rev. 22:20).

This apocalyptic delusion regularly becomes epidemic among Christians, and indeed is basic to one strand of the religion: that is the envisioning of a God who has periodized history with a time-table. The author of Matthew, for example, declared that there had been fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the deportation of the Jews to Babylon, and fourteen from the deportation to Christ (Matt. 1:17)—even though he could only find thirteen names for his third genealogical list and had to excise several entire generations in order to shrink his second list to fourteen names (compare Matt. 1:7–11 with 1 Chron. 3:1–20). Matthew probably contracted his arithmetical enthusiasm from the author of Daniel, who predicted that from the restoration of Jerusalem to the Messiah there would be seventy weeks of years (Dan. 9:24).

Although Daniel was wrong and Matthew's list dishonest,

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the infection persists, perhaps in its most fantastic form in Jehovah's Witnesses' own theology. Their apocalypticism gloats over the coming destruction, as in a recent publication, *From Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained*, published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society in 1958. After quoting Zechariah 14:12 to the effect that the flesh of the wicked shall, on the last day, "rot while they are still on their feet," the author rhapsodizes:

Eaten up will be the tongues of those who scoffed and laughed at the warning of Armageddon! Eaten up will be the eyes of those who refused to see the sign of the "time of the end"! Eaten up will be the flesh of those who would not learn that the living and true God is named Jehovah!

The Witnesses compute the time of the end with their own variant of Daniel's periodization of history by divine arithmetic, using an amazing conflation of unrelated biblical texts. William Miller predicted that Christ's Second Coming would occur in 1844. After that hope failed, Charles Taze Russell, using different figures, named 1874. That year passed uneventfully, so Russell recomputed and came up with 1914. To this day, Jehovah's Witnesses insist that the Second Coming really did happen in 1914—the world just hasn't realized it yet!

Here, in brief, are Russell's computations. The prophet Daniel told King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon that "seven times shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men" (Dan. 4:25). In the context, this meant that Nebuchadnezzar would be insane for seven years before admitting that the Jews' God rules the whole earth. But the Witnesses insist that the "seven times" are really Luke's "times of the

Gentiles" during which Jerusalem would be "trodden down by the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24). Why the Babylonian king's times should be the same as Jerusalem's is not made clear. The "times of the Gentiles" began, say the Witnesses, when Jerusalem and the Davidic monarchy were destroyed by Babylon. Historians say this happened in 586 B.C.E., though the Witnesses insist that the historians are wrong and the date really was 607 B.C.E. They do so because they are committed not to the facts of history but to the year 1914, having arrived at that year this way: The Book of Revelation says that a certain "woman clothed with the sun" would be protected from a "great red dragon" for "one thousand two hundred and sixty days," a period defined as equivalent to "a time, [two] times, and half a time" (Rev. 12:1, 6, 14). If three and one-half times is 1,260 days, then seven times is 2,520 days. And since Ezekiel had been told to lie on his right side for forty days to symbolize the number of years of Jerusalem's punishment, "a day for each year" (Ezek. 4:6), Jehovah's Witnesses focus on the phrase "a day for each year" (Ignoring the forty years, had not Daniel said seven times?), apply that formula to Revelation's seven times equalling 2,520 days, count forward 2,520 years from 607 B.C.E. and conclude that the Messiah's Kingdom began in 1914. I do not jest; this is the formal teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses that was first promulgated by Charles Taze Russell in the late nineteenth century.

Of course Russell believed that 1914 would see not only the Second Coming but also the end of the Gentile world and the restoration of Christ's rule on earth. As he wrote in *Studies in the Scriptures* (1886), the "Day of Vengeance of our God" would arrive when the "wage-earning masses, beginning to think

that laws and governments were designed to aid the wealthy and to restrain the poor” would be drawn “toward Communism and Anarchy. . . . Many Scriptures clearly show that this will be the character of the trouble under which present civil, social and religious systems will pass away. . . .” He continued:

Then law and order will be swept away—the mountains will be swallowed up in that stormy sea. Thus the social earth will melt, and the governmental heavens (church and state) will pass away.

When 1914 failed to see the mountains swallowed up, Russell revised his view, according to *The Watchtower* of November 1, 1914: “Should we expect that the Lord would reveal Himself the very moment the Gentile Times ended? No . . . just how long after the Gentile Times closed will be the revealment in ‘flaming fire’ we do not know.”

As 1914 receded into the past, Jehovah’s Witnesses turned to different computations to predict the end. Their most recent effort (and failure) involved the year 1975 and is strangely reminiscent of one of Russell’s earlier misguided predictions. In 1966 a Witness publication, *Life Everlasting in Freedom of the Sons of God*, portentously announced:

Six thousand years from man’s creation will end in 1975, and the seventh period of a thousand years of human history will begin in the fall of 1975 C.E. . . . It would not be by mere chance or accident . . . for the reign of Jesus Christ . . . to run parallel with the seventh millennium of man’s existence.

Almost a hundred years before, in *Studies in the Scriptures* (1888), Charles Taze Russell had written that:

Six thousand years from the creation of Adam were complete with A.D. 1872; and hence that, since A.D. 1872 we are chronologically entered upon the seventh thousand or the Millennium. . . . And though the Bible contains no direct statement that the seventh thousand will be the epoch of Christ’s reign, the great Sabbath Day of restitution to the world, yet the venerable tradition is not without a reasonable foundation.

The Witnesses merely changed the date. The only striking difference between the two statements is the more honest tentative nature of Russell’s.

If Jehovah’s Witnesses were no more than crackbrained doom-criers whose predictions invariably failed they would be of little further interest; but anyone who has conversed with one of them at his or her front door on a Sunday morning (And who has not?) knows that they are calm and at least outwardly rational persons who can impressively articulate their religious views. There is much more to them than apocalypticism; and again, those beliefs stem from the Bible according to the Witnesses’ unique interpretation.

Although Russell’s divine arithmetic invariably proved erroneous, he also extracted from the Bible a set of doctrines that caused horror to nineteenth-century orthodox followers, but are more attractive in the theological atmosphere of the

twentieth century, at least to some of the “liberals” whom the Witnesses deprecate. The early “Bible Students,” as they were called before they adopted the beliefs of the Jehovah’s Witnesses (from Isa. 43:10) in 1931, jettisoned many a hoary traditional Christian doctrine and entered the new century lightened of much theological baggage. They began by chucking the threat

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of hell-fire, declaring that only “false religion teaches that hell is a place where the wicked suffer (*Make Sure of All Things*).” In one blow they overcame (although they were not by any means the first) Christianity’s most odious legacy: the debasing doctrine that most human souls will suffer dreadful torment for all eternity because their first ancestor ate a piece of fruit. This they did by reviving the old heterodox idea known to theologians as “mortalism.” It holds that the human soul is mortal and dies with the body. According to the admirable teaching of the Witnesses in the 1953 publication, death is the “utter cessation of conscious, intellectual or physical activity.” They draw this conclusion from three verses in the Old Testament: the idea in Genesis 2:7 that a soul is merely a breathing body, the blunt statement in Ezekiel 18:4 that “the soul that sins shall die,” and the eloquent counsel of Ecclesiastes 9:4-5, 9:

He who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing. . . . Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol [the place of the dead], to which you are going.

Their plain notion that the worst that can happen is annihilation or eternal sleep has improved the mental health of the community by combating the fear of hell and irrational terrors about death.

Jehovah’s Witnesses’ doctrine of God is as heterodox as their doctrine of man, and again assaults an ancient, and irrational, Christian mystery—the Trinity. What the *Catholic Encyclopedia* calls the “central doctrine of the Christian religion—that in the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” is to the Witnesses a “false, unbiblical doctrine,” according to *Make Sure of All Things*. They have revived an ancient heterodox opinion, that of their fourth-century hero, the heresiarch Arius, who held that the Son is a divine being formed by the Father as his first act of creation. The Witnesses go even further and insist that the Holy Spirit is “not a person” at all, but is “subject to God” as his “active force.” Whatever one thinks about God,

the Witnesses' arithmetic at least is unimpeachable, as one cannot say for more orthodox Christians. Having, however, rejected the disguised tritheism of the orthodox view, the Witnesses have become bitheists, giving the titles "God" to the Father and "a god" to the Son. Their own version of the Bible, the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, renders John 1:1 this way: "Originally the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god." Of course the New Testament's insistence on the deity of Jesus means that Christianity has never been in any real sense monotheistic, but the Witnesses have been more forthright than the orthodox in their abandonment of Yahweh's Old-Testament pronouncement that "there is no god but me" (Isa. 44:6).

"[The Witnesses] have divided humanity into three groups: the 'heavenly class' of 144,000 (most of whom have already gone to their reward), the remainder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, who hope to live forever in the flesh on earth, and everyone else, who will soon die horribly in Armageddon."

Just as the Witnesses have broken the Trinity into "God," "a god," and "God's impersonal active force," they have also divided humanity into three groups: the "heavenly class" of 144,000 (most of whom have already gone to their reward), the remainder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, who hope to live forever in the flesh on earth, and everyone else, who will soon die horribly in Armageddon. Witnesses will have no dealings with other Christian groups, who are not in their view "Christian" at all but are part of that "Christendom [which] practices false religion." Since they themselves have the "One True Religion," efforts at cooperation with anyone else are anathema, as their crisp definition of "Interfaith" in *Make Sure of All Things* makes clear:

Belief in the "Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man," that all men are God's children and therefore have a common bond and union in Him however differently they may conceive Him. The doctrine that any belief in God is acceptable to Him if practiced sincerely; and, therefore, organizations having different creeds can unite in order to accomplish a common purpose. *A false, misleading conception.*

Not only are there true Christians and false Christians, there are two different classes of true Christians—those who expect a spiritual life in heaven and (the great majority) those who hope to live forever on earth. Strangely, the Witnesses' doctrine makes inapplicable the New Testament's promises of a future life to more than 99 percent of their number. This is the hope of the Christian as expressed by Paul:

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. . . . It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. . . . I tell you then, brethren, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,

in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. [1 Cor. 15:42, 44, 50-52]

But according to the Witnesses, Paul does not really mean "all." And when the author of 1 Peter wrote that "we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you" (1 Pet. 1:3-4), he did not really mean "you Christians" but only 144,000 of all the ("true") Christians who have ever lived. Witnesses arrive at this notion by way of a strange interpretation of certain passages in Revelation:

And I heard the number of the sealed, a hundred and forty-four thousand sealed, out of every tribe of the sons of Israel, twelve thousand sealed out of the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand of the tribe of Reuben, twelve thousand of the tribe of Gad [and so on] . . .

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and people and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. [Rev. 7:4-5, 9]

Only the former group are those who will be changed into spiritual bodies, say the Witnesses, while the latter are those who will inherit the earth for an eternal physical life. Though the Witnesses insist that the number 144,000 is to be taken literally, their origin in the twelve tribes of Israel is only figurative. However, we must again reverse the interpretive method in verse 9 and return to the literal, so that the "great multitude" does indeed come from "every nation." The same kind of sinuous interpretation applies to Revelation 14:3-4:

No one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been redeemed from the earth. It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins.

Again, though the number is literal, the reference to "virgins" is not.

Of the two and one-half million Jehovah's Witnesses, only a small fraction of 1 percent regard themselves as being among the 144,000, the rest of that number having been promoted to glory in years past. Half a century ago, however, nearly 40,000 Witnesses were counted among those symbolic virgins, leaving a painfully small number for the previous nineteen hundred years. In fact, the Witnesses hold that immediately after the deaths of the Apostles, real Christianity disappeared, and "Christendom began with great falling away from true religion" (*Make Sure of All Things*). Thus the only times when there were more than a handful of true Christians with any hope of heaven were in the early first and early twentieth centuries. Eighteen hundred years of Christendom gave false hope to hundreds of millions of the deluded, for "Christendom practices false religion."

Strangely, therefore, all the rest of the two and a half million Jehovah's Witnesses are not "Born-Again Christians," for this title refers only to the 144,000: " 'Born again' means a

birthlike realization of prospects and hopes for spirit life by resurrection to heaven.” Thus when Jesus reportedly said “You must be born again” (John 3:3), those words were really directed only to a fraction of a percent of “true” Christians. All other Jehovah’s Witnesses’, who are taught to regard themselves as a second class of Christians, hopes are delineated only in the last book of the Bible; they will live in the “new earth” when “death shall be no more” (Rev. 21:1, 4).

That there are first- and second-class Christians with regard to their eternal reward parallels another type of layering of persons in Witness theology: Except in those where there is a total absence of adult males, there is not a single woman in the governing body of any congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses. In the words of a major Witness publication, *Let God Be True* (1946), “Woman is merely a lowly creature whom God created for man as man’s helper.” Of course Witnesses find a biblical basis for this situation as for all others: Paul commanded that “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord; for the man is head of the woman, just as Christ is also the head of the church” (Eph. 5:22–23).

Jehovah’s Witnesses’ use of the Bible clearly demands further attention. On the surface, Scripture seems central to all that Witnesses think and do; they will quote proof-texts with great skill on virtually any subject and insist that “God . . . himself” is the “Author of the Bible.” Their concern to know “as accurately as possible” the “thoughts and declarations” of the Bible’s “divine Author” has led them to produce their own translation, and their determination to be slavishly literal—their conviction that Scripture was written in “easily-understandable, down-to-earth terms” makes the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* what may be the most inept and inelegant version ever printed in English. Here are some typical verses from what is intended to be the Bible read forever in the New Order after Armageddon:

Everything he has made pretty in its time. [Ecc. 3:11 NWT]

Blooms themselves have appeared in the land, the very time of vine trimming has arrived, and the voice of the turtle dove itself has been heard in our land. As for the fig tree, it has gained a mature color for its early figs; and the vines are abloom, they have given their fragrance. Rise up, come, O girl companion of mine. . . . [Song of Solomon 2:12-13 NWT]

Jehovah himself has become king. Let the peoples be agitated. He is sitting upon the cherubs. [Ps. 99:1 NWT]

Such renderings speak volumes about the intellectual level of this movement. Yet they may say even more: Perhaps the Witnesses’ lack of regard for the beauty of biblical language is an implicit indicator that they really do not care as much for Scripture as they like to think. From the beginning, the Bible has been, though seemingly central, actually peripheral to their doctrines. The word of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society is what Jehovah’s Witnesses take to be infallible and divine. A statement by Pastor Russell in *The Watchtower* of September 15, 1910 remains a valid expression of the Society’s position:

If anyone lays the “Scripture Studies” [Russell’s works] aside, even after he has . . . read them for ten years—if he then lays them aside and ignores them and goes to the Bible alone, though he has understood his Bible for ten years, our experience shows that within two years he goes into darkness. On the other hand, if he had merely read the “Scripture Studies” with their references and had not read a page of the Bible as such, he would be in the light at the end of two years.

The arrogance of such thinking has its consequences. Since, in their view, ancient witnesses of Jehovah wrote the Bible under His guidance, modern-day Witnesses may treat it with a cavalier and proprietary air, secure in the support of Him “whose spirit we have trusted to co-operate with us in their worthy work,” as the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* declared. Thus they have, for example, seen fit to correct the New Testament by changing, 237 times, the Greek word *kyrios* (Lord) to *Jehovah*, a word never found in the Greek New Testament. And to give the Old and New Testaments a factitious unity, they have corrected the New Testament’s quotations of the Old Testament (which usually come from the often inaccurate Septuagint), “harmonizing [them] with the original Hebrew readings.” Jehovah’s Witnesses have had to remake the Bible in their own image, and Russell’s mistrust of even the Bible’s ability to keep his followers in the light carries over into what, according to a 1972 publication *Kingdom Ministry*, the Watchtower Society recommends should be kept in the libraries of their meetinghouses, the Kingdom Halls.

“Watchtower” and “Awake!” bound volumes from past years and older publications of the Society. . . . Encyclopedias, atlases, or books on grammar may be useful, but we do not recommend purchasing them. It is not necessary to include books on health, genetics, politics, science, mathematics, etc. . . . It is inadvisable to have books on spiritism, mysticism, higher criticism, evolution or fiction.

Since they are scarcely advised to read the Bible in a serious way, and strongly urged to flee with alacrity from any honest biblical criticism, Witnesses are therefore convinced that “Absolute inerrancy is to be attributed to the word of God,” as their *Aid to Bible Understanding* teaches; even the primitive



parts of it are to be taken as from the Almighty himself. If the Bible says there are demons and that they possess people, it must be so: "Often the wild and uncontrollable conduct of mentally unbalanced persons is due to direct obsession by these invisible minions of Satan." The most trivial things can be fraught with demonic power—even a gift from an acquaintance who believes in astrology—as described in this passage from the article "Is There Danger in Occult Charms?" in the December 1, 1974, *The Watchtower*.

In modern times many persons have been seriously harassed by the demons because of taking these things into their homes. . . . A middle-aged woman in New York suddenly suffered occasional seizures of paralysis. She would lie in bed stiff, rigid and cold. . . . She was visited by two elders of the congregation. They recognized it as a possible case of demon harassment, and questioned the woman closely as to whether she had any association with any person connected with spiritism. She recalled having worked alongside such a person in a factory. . . . The spiritistic woman had given her a pair of gloves and a string of beads. These were then hunted out and thrown into the incinerator. Immediately the woman recovered fully and has not had such an attack since.

This sort of thing would be amusing if it were not that Jehovah's Witnesses are "more likely to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital than the general population, . . . three times more likely to be diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia and four times more likely from paranoid schizophrenia than the rest of the population," according to mental-health researcher John Spencer. He suggested in a June 1975 article for the *British Journal of Psychiatry* that "either the Jehovah's Witnesses sect tends to attract an excess of pre-psychotic individuals who may then break down, or else being a Jehovah's Witness is itself a stress that may precipitate psychosis. Possibly both of these factors may operate together." Witnesses who become ill in this way are thus more apt to be shunned by their associates as possessed rather than encouraged to find appropriate medical care.

With regard to medicine, the most notorious aspect of the Witnesses' theology is their refusal to accept blood transfusions, even in the face of death. They transform the biblical taboo against eating blood into a prohibition against a life-saving medical treatment:

I have forbidden the Israelites to eat the blood of any creature, because the life of every creature is its blood; every man who eats it shall be cut off. [Lev. 17:14]

Of course the ancient Hebrews' horror of blood touched other aspects of life: "You shall not approach a woman to have intercourse with her during her period of menstruation. . . . Anyone who does any of these abominable things shall be cut off from his people" (Lev. 18:19, 29). The Witnesses' answer to the charge that they are selective in the biblical taboos they choose to honor is that they feel bound only by those prohibitions in the Old Testament that are repeated in the New; thus they point to Acts, Chapter 15:

It is the decision of the Holy Spirit, and our decision, to lay no further burden upon you beyond these essentials: you are to abstain from meat that has been sacrificed to idols, from blood, from anything that has been strangled, and from fornication. [Acts 15:28-29]

This passage is central to Witness theology, not only for its concern with blood, but also for its horror of sexual irregularity. Jehovah's Witnesses are impatient with human sexuality; each year, as many as 2 percent of their number are "disfellowshipped"—excommunicated—from their congregations, mostly

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for sexual offenses, according to James A. Beckford in *The Trumpet of Prophecy: A Sociological Study of Jehovah's Witnesses* (1975). This unbending attitude toward human frailty is probably a major aspect of the "complaint frequently voiced by ex-Jehovah's Witnesses that congregations are rarely warm or friendly enough to prevent some members from feeling lonely or dispirited. . . . The highly affective quality of the bonds uniting members of other minority religious groups is patently lacking," writes Beckford. Witnesses' meetings in their Kingdom Halls are characteristically rational and coldly mechanical exercises in studying a Watchtower publication—the answering of numbered preprinted questions by quoting from the appropriate numbered paragraph. Witnesses do pray and sing at their meetings, but the prayer is always a rote recitation by an appointed adult male (no ecstatic ejaculations allowed), and the songs are well represented by the following example from their hymnal, *Singing and Accompanying Yourselves with Music in Your Hearts* (1966):

Hail the good news of the Kingdom rule that Jesus Christ foretold!
This good news of the Kingdom let us preach! And in preaching this good news let's be courageous, firm and bold.
This good news of the Kingdom let us preach! Preach the good news of the Kingdom on the streets, from door to door;
Preach this good news with the printed page all nations o'er.
Preach with skill and preach with kindness, with more zeal than e'er before.
This good news of the Kingdom let us preach.

Congregational song and prayer are not, under such conditions, deep emotional or aesthetic experiences.

The emotional, intellectual, and spiritual tone of this movement perhaps best is summed up in the following narrative. It is the personal account of a former Witness named Vera, a young woman who had earlier fled home and college for

Mexico, where she had joined a group of "Jesus freaks." Though convinced that praying and speaking in tongues were "good substitutes for acid," she soon found her new religion "all too simplistic . . . too easy." She wanted an "intellectual exploration of religion." Chastened, she returned home, and was soon introduced to some neighbors who were Jehovah's Witnesses: "The first question they asked me was Do you read the Bible? I wanted to embrace them! *They* loved God too! I felt as if I were starving and they were offering me food." Vera was delighted to find that the Witnesses weren't just saying "Praise the Lord"—"They were approaching the Bible (I thought) rationally." She joined Jehovah's Witnesses and felt renewed, "as if I'd found the fountain of living waters."

But pretty soon I understood that some of the Witnesses thought I was a prize . . . an example of an educated upper-class hippie who'd doped and slept around. . . . They made me testify at conventions about my former life; and I felt I was being used.

Still she stuck with her new faith, informing her boyfriend, David, that she "could never sleep with him again, though I still loved him, because intercourse was sinful." At her (non-Witness) parents' insistence, she had returned to the university, but soon she was "getting a lot of pressure from my local congregation elders to leave college and go into the full-time preaching work." Her disillusionment beginning to grow, she decided to marry David, even though he had admitted he "just couldn't believe" in the Witnesses' teachings. To salve her conscience, however, she confessed to the elders that "we'd made love" before being married.

I was put on "public reproof." It was announced at the meeting in the Kingdom Hall that I'd committed fornication; and there were fifteen minutes of graphic description of what we'd done.

The result was that "I began to lose something. I couldn't talk honestly to the Witnesses any more. . . . They asked me if I practiced fellatio and cunnilingus with David." She soon began asking herself troubling questions: "What if Voltaire and Diderot came back to the New World? Wouldn't they hate it? A suburban paradise?" She wanted to leave the movement but was warned that "if she left she would have no friends. But she did indeed find "worldly" people who were "good and kind and helpful. "How awful that I should be surprised . . . that people are kind!" she said. Vera's last experience at a large convention of Witnesses, recorded by Barbara Grizutti Harrison in *Visions of Glory: A History and Memory of Jehovah's Witnesses* (1978), sealed her decision to leave:

There was this black woman there with a little baby on her back and her babypack was slipping off and she was having a hard time with it, and I was trying to help her. And she immediately told me she was disfellowshipped, as if she were warning me off her, as if she were a leper, not clean, not good enough to talk to. And I felt, out of all the people there, she was the only one who was really my sister.

Despite experiences like Vera's, the Jehovah's Witnesses continue to grow apace. They are careful record-keepers and obsessed with numbers. We are told, for example, that their missionary effort in 1983 consumed \$20,084,260.82, while the total body of the membership, 2,501,722 persons, spent 436,720,991 hours preaching in 190 languages. Having printed 460,072,255 copies of *Watchtower* and *Awake* and 53,517,808 bound books and Bibles, they needed to stay busy circulating them. "It was thrilling," says the 1984 *Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses*, "to see the number of those baptized, 161,896, which represents a 16.9 percent increase over 1982.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been in the past a mostly American phenomenon; even now, 650,000 of the 2.5 million Witnesses are from this country. Third-world nations most hospitable to the Witnesses are those with strong colonial or some other ties to the West or those already largely Christianized, such as Nigeria with 100,000, the Philippines with 70,000, and Mexico with 130,000. Witnesses have had virtually no success in the Muslim world (18 members in Libya, 20 in Bangladesh) or in India (5,482), which has of course never been attracted to any form of Christianity. The 1984 *Yearbook* has no report from the Soviet Union or China, although a footnote lists a quarter of a million Witnesses in "28 other countries" where their work was banned and their reports incomplete.

The busy missionary work of the Jehovah's Witnesses portends continued success, at least in certain parts of the world. It looks as if almost no one will survive Armageddon in Islamic or Marxist countries. In the Bible-reading world their growth seems assured. Who will live through the imminent destruction remains a paramount concern among Jehovah's Witnesses, for according to the *Yearbook* "they hope that millions now living will never die but will survive with them as a distinct people through the war of the great day of God the Almighty." •

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