6-20-2011

Different Worlds: Looking at Jehovah's Witnesses

Tim Bisha
The University of Western Ontario

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem
Part of the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol2/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact kmasha1@uwo.ca.
Different Worlds: Looking at Jehovah's Witnesses

Keywords
Jehovah's Witnesses, ethnography

Creative Commons License
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Different Worlds: Looking at Jehovah's Witnesses

Tim Bisha

PREFACE

This paper was written in 1994 for Anthropology 510, the graduate course in ethnography at the University of Western Ontario. It is based upon modest field research, which consisted of four home Bible study sessions and two visits to Kingdom Hall, the place of worship for Jehovah’s Witnesses. At that point two factors intervened to prevent further visits or contact. One was that such contact was to be applied to this paper, which came due. The other was that, while I sought to observe the organization and to understand its people, I did not search for faith. In the exposure I had, a balance was reached between fairness in understanding them on one hand and fairness in not misleading them on the other. It was time to stop.

Much must remain hidden after only six episodes. I have tried to bear this in mind throughout and to conclude only where I can; I did not shun the various working essentialisms of ethnography, just as I took care not to employ them without due reflection. There is a safeguard as well: careful readers will question the conclusions of others, leaving room for the higher authority of personal experience.

Throughout this study, quotations from The Watchtower are followed by a formula of three numbers corresponding to the month, day, and year of publication, which is followed in turn by the page number. Other quotations are self-explanatory.

INTRODUCTION

My first encounter with Jehovah’s Witnesses was memorable. I was eleven. My dad, who was giving a recital the next day, was trying to put the polish on the final movement of Bach’s Suite no. 1 for cello.

Meanwhile the house was caving in around him. My brother, lost in conversation on the telephone, forgot about the oil heating on the stove for pancakes. Although he had the smoking pan out in the snow before dad arrived in the kitchen, confrontation was swift and sharp.

Next it was the cat, who had just peed beside the litter box. Again. I remembered dad saying that the cat would really get it next time this happened, so I went to inform him. What a thrill! The cat wailed and bawled, then described an arc into the snowdrift, and I was so caught up that I got mad at her too. Bad, bad cat! Next time, I’ll—oooh! there’d better not be a next time!

Bach was sounding once more when the doorbell rang. Through the lace curtain I saw two nice looking ladies. Young and pretty. I opened the door—no need to disturb dad again.

Then they started talking to me about God. God! How is an eleven year old, whose world view consisted of soccer and girls and Dungeons and Dragons, supposed to talk about God? The more questions they asked the more nervous and confused I got.

Then they asked if I would like them to show me some books.

I ran to get dad.

And those two nice ladies never returned. For all I know they dropped religion altogether. But even if I understood nothing at the time, the image remained and later became my awareness of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Indeed, I would encounter them again through the years, and who hasn’t? They seem to be everywhere, always in pairs, on your doorstep, ready to talk to you about God.

But had I seen them? Educated only by the stigma attached to them by others, I learned to dismiss them out of hand. I would remember my dad’s fury and laugh at them. I thus denied myself the possibility of finding out who they really were. Anthropology calls this colonialism. And this class offered the chance to overthrow one of its holdings.

So one day, in late January, I noticed two ladies going door to door. I stopped, and we started to chat...

THE FIRST SESSION

Their names were Amy and Elizabeth. Both spoke freely to me, but Amy seemed to be the leader; it was she who had rung the bell just before I approached them, and she had stood slightly ahead of Elizabeth on the doorstep, ready to speak first to whoever answered. (‘... and Jesus sent them forth, two by two, to spread the good tidings to others”, I recalled from Matthew.)

After a short chat I suggested that we might meet and talk further. Pouncing like cats would not win them converts, of course, so they negotiated their schedules, each asking the other whether, indeed, time could be found, and when, then where. What resulted was nothing short of a plan: my place tomorrow evening. The conversation would be about God and the Bible, of course, so I set myself the task of digesting as many bits of scripture as possible from my Thompson Chain NIV edition, which allowed for easy comparison of related passages. If I could follow an idea through several passages, I thought, and keep the conversation on track, I would be less overwhelmed.

Exactly on time they arrived. Pleasantries were exchanged, during which both of them commended me for my interest in seeking the truth.

“In fact”, Amy said, “there’s a passage on that I’d like to share with you...”. The segue was effortless. And as I was to learn, everything is a segue to scripture, for the good reason that for the Jehovah’s Witness everything is according to scripture. I followed her argument for a while and was soon amazed at her proficiency with quotations. This woman was a virtuoso! There was nothing I could say that she could not meet with an entire army of proof texts, either for or against.

In the course of things she quoted 2 Timothy 3:15-16, which I had come across in my ramblings. It says that the Bible passages are “holy writings able to make you wise for salvation”, and are “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting,
and training in righteousness". Finally, something I recognized! I continued with verse 17, which asserts that the Bible is also sufficient to make one "thoroughly equipped for every good work". I did not expect that she would correct me.

"The Bible", she explained, "is inspired, and also correct in every way, but it is not enough."

I read the passage again, unsure who was misreading it. I decided that she was but for the moment I kept quiet. Soon I was confronted again. I had also skimmed through Revelations, mainly because it is so weird. And out of that weirdness I recalled that at the time of Armageddon, the "great multitude" would be assembled in heaven. Amy informed me that it would be assembled on earth. When I questioned this, she referred me to 7:9. The passage is a little vague, although it seemed to me to imply heaven. But I recalled 19:1, which leaves nothing to doubt: it speaks plainly about the "great multitude in heaven". I asked her to read it.

"You mean that the great multitude is on earth?" I asked.

"Yes", she replied. I read it to myself, muttered the word "heaven", then wondered out loud where the great multitude was.

"On earth." This time I asked her to read it out loud. When she came to the word "heaven" I stopped her, and asked once more where the multitude was.

"On earth", she insisted. Only with excruciating effort did I get her to admit that she had read the word "heaven".

"You see, it says heaven, but it means earth."

It was like pelting a castle with nerf balls. Let us be clear: Amy was obviously bright, so she was not being fooled by the print any more than I was. As I fumbled to make sense of the exchange, she went on to explain that careful Bible study would make it clear. And with that she pulled out a pamphlet called The Watchtower.1 I struck me then that each of us was reading a different book, and that the difference had been masked by sameness of words. I had heard that Jehovah's Witnesses use their own translation of the Bible, called the New World Translation, so I had been on the lookout for differences of text. But I had not thought to look deeper and altered was hers that she could literally look at the word "heaven" and see the word "earth" — just as, for her, I was the one who could not see.

In short, each of us was looking at a different world, and I knew that I would never comprehend her or any of her kin until I found a way to see something of what they saw. I was not even sure this was possible. It was increasingly obvious, however, that the place to start was not the Bible but their own literature. That was what they usually quoted from, and what they distributed to others.

THE WATCHTOWER

With Amy's help I gained access to back issues of The Watchtower since 1910, and then set about searching them for clues. Soon I found something:

... not only do we find that people cannot see the divine plan in studying the Bible by itself, but we see, also, that if anyone lays the SCRIPTURE STUDIES aside and goes to the Bible alone, although 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 the two years. (The Watchtower, 9/15/10, pg. 298.)

But Jehovah God has also provided for a visible organization of "faithful and discreet slaves," and unless we are in touch with this channel of communication, we will not progress along the road to life, no matter how much Bible reading we do. (The Watchtower, 12/1/81, pg. 27.)

They say that it is sufficient to read the Bible exclusively, either alone or in small groups at home. But, strangely, through such 'Bible reading,' they have reverted right back to the apostate doctrines that commentaries by Christendom's clergy were teaching 100 years ago . . . (The Watchtower, 8/15/81, pg. 28-29).

Despite all appearances and even their own claims, the Bible seems not, in practice, to be their highest authority. How can this radical shift in authority be reconciled with a claim that Jehovah's Witnesses are Christians?

The danger in such a reconciliation is observed by Ricoeur. By being written, a message becomes a text, frozen in form and independent of its author (1981:197-221). To the extent that a message is constituted in the organization of words, this freezing would not support a claim that Jehovah's Witnesses use a different book. What Ricoeur also argues, however, and what appeared dramatically in the case of the "multitude" above, is that the text is only a message when voiced within the mind of a reader, and that an unvoiced text is entirely inconsequential. Given that voice arises out of the meeting of text and mind, and that minds are diverse, it follows that a diversity of voices may arise from a single text. What had it mattered to Amy that she had read "heaven"? Clearly, it said "earth".

Text lives and breathes only at the level of voice; hence, the oneness of a text giving rise to competing interpretations is illusory. And if the identity of the book used among both orthodox and fringe Christians is illusory, then subsuming both under the umbrella of "Christianity" is misleading for present purposes: being related historically does not mean they are of one kind, and the subordination of the Bible to The Watchtower suggests further that they are not.

But what are we to make of the Jehovah's Witness's own claim to be Christian . . .

There can be no doubt as to who were practicing true religion in the first century. It was the followers of Jesus Christ. These all belonged to the Christian organization. What about today? What is the central teaching of God's true Christian organization? (Live Forever, pg. 184.)

... and to follow the Bible?

---

1Two main publications are distributed by Jehovah's Witnesses. The Watchtower focuses on internal, spiritual issues; its companion piece, Awake!, deals with world events and how to interpret them according to scripture.
It is of vital importance to Jehovah’s Witnesses that their beliefs be based on the Bible and not on mere human speculations or religious creeds. (Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Twentieth Century, pg. 3.)

Again, since the two positions — Christian and Jehovah’s Witness — imply different voices, terms such as “Bible” and “Christian” do not mean the same for each. Only the words are the same.

Thereafter, my study proceeded according to the following working assumption: Jehovah’s Witnesses do not read the Bible any more than Christians read the Qu’ran. They read their own sacred text, one that happens to look and sound a lot like the Christian Bible. This is crucial, and it means that any charge that Jehovah’s Witnesses misuse or misquote the Bible is fundamentally mistaken. The assumption, perhaps more than anything else, helped me to see Jehovah’s Witnesses on their own terms.

Three more home study sessions followed. Each time, this difference in world view manifested itself, the more so because I knew now to look for it. And each time, my attention was drawn more and more to The Watchtower.

No amount of reading prepared me for the pride of place it received at Kingdom Hall.

**Kingdom Hall**

I met Amy and Elizabeth for the first time on a Tuesday. One week from the following Sunday, I decided to attend the worship service at Kingdom Hall on Medway Crescent.

I had decided several days in advance that I would attend. Then I faltered. I had long scorned these people, judging their teaching to be offensive and intrusive, even malevolent. Now I was going to their worship service. What nature of class assignment called for this? I had talked with them, even had them in my house (and served them tea). Now I could return to school and write. The days grew heavier. With the moment at hand I decided I would call them back and confess the onset of a flu. But too late: Amy and Elizabeth were at the door.

Then I faltered. I had long scorned these people, judging their teaching to be offensive and intrusive, even malevolent. Now I was going to their worship service. What nature of class assignment called for this? I had talked with them, even had them in my house (and served them tea). Now I could return to school and write. The days grew heavier. With the moment at hand I decided I would call them back and confess the onset of a flu. But too late: Amy and Elizabeth were at the door.

Three more home study sessions followed. Each time, this difference in world view manifested itself, the more so because I knew now to look for it. And each time, my attention was drawn more and more to The Watchtower.

No amount of reading prepared me for the pride of place it received at Kingdom Hall.

“Tim is new to the faith and still has many questions”, said Amy, explaining, “He has been with us three times now for Bible study. Now he wants to attend our service.” Amy looked proud, and suddenly I felt cheap about the investigation I was doing. She had every reason and right to feel hopeful and I was misleading her. Whatever my opinions of Jehovah’s Witnesses had been (and I didn’t know what they were at that moment), she was an honest person who, unlike me, had found herself and was following her truth. Is this not what we all hope for? I defused the crisis by noting that she, too, had an agenda, one perhaps even more potent than mine, and that understanding was fairness. At least for now.

Amidst greetings and handshakes we proceeded inside, where the simple decor provided no distraction from the purpose of the meeting. Quite offhand, it struck me that none of the men wore beards. What is more, none wore hair over their ears. I thought back to all the pictures in the Jehovah’s Witnesses literature, and searched my memory of all past encounters. No beards, short hair. Too much for coincidence, I thought. But I saved the question for later. An attendant was handing out the worship brochure, and in our turn we approached.

It was The Watchtower! Elizabeth saw my amazement and explained that The Watchtower is itself the service handbook for the second half. It contains the sermon and responsorials for each of two consecutive weeks. Then the congregation moves on to the next issue. What is more, Amy added, congregations all across the world are in synch: on any given week a congregation in Japan or Africa will read the same issue that is read in Canada. I was too shocked to respond. For the moment I could only wonder, *Who wrote The Watchtower?*

Amy, Elizabeth, and I seated ourselves toward the back. Soon afterward, part one of the service began with a sequence of songs and prayers praising Jehovah and pledging allegiance as his followers. Then someone from the congregation assumed the podium and, after greeting his brethren, announced the theme for that week’s discussion. This theme, Elizabeth told me, always deals with issues of current interest, either in the world or in the community. (In other words, *Awake!* is to *The Watchtower* as the first part of the service is to the second.) Then came announcements, and then a short break during which those who could not stay were able to go. Two members left at that time.

Then another fellow, whom Amy called an Elder, began to read the sermon. Now at the bottom of each page in *The Watchtower* are several questions which crystallize the main points in the paragraphs above. I had assumed that these simple aids were for the benefit of readers at home. But as soon as the relevant passage was read by the Elder, someone — anyone, it seemed — would ask the question out loud. Then someone else would answer, and the whole congregation would exclaim: “Praise Jehovah!” “You said it, brother!” and the like. It was the same tactic I had encountered in grade school, where the teacher would improve our memories by forcing us to participate. Except, of course, there was no force here.

The sermon ended. There were more songs and prayer, followed by a reminder about the Witnesses’ meeting on Tuesday. Perhaps for my benefit (I don’t know if other newcomers were there) the Elder emphasized that Tuesday’s meeting was open to the public. I had already planned to attend. After this announcement, the congregation disbanded into informal fellowship.
Elizabeth was soon waylaid by conversation with others but Amy never left my side. On one hand she gave me security amidst so much strangeness. On the other, I was not free to play dumb about things she had already been told me, in the hopes of eliciting more information. But two topics in particular proved fruitful. First I inquired about the beardless, short-haired look among males. One older fellow referred to this in passing as the “theocratic” look. The purpose is to make Jehovah’s Witnesses look respectable, just as a salesperson would not ring doorbells in patches and rags. It is only a requirement, he said, in as much as a Witness will naturally want to follow the ways of God. Even when pressed, neither he nor anyone else would confirm that it was required in any judicial sense, and this reticence itself made me suspect that it might be. Especially with Amy present, I could not appear to press the issue too hard.

Next I tried to find out who writes The Watchtower. “It is edited by the Board of Governors in Brooklyn”, I was told. “Activities worldwide are coordinated by the Board. Our main printing press is in Brooklyn, too, and the Board oversees the distribution of its publications, and so on. Local needs are met by local congregations and Boards, but the Governing Board makes them all work together.”

“Who actually writes The Watchtower? I pressed. Defenses went up all around and I felt that caution was in order. “The Watchtower merely transmits the word of the Bible. The Bible, of course, is the word of God.” I didn’t pursue this. Later, on another trip through back issues, I would find that the restraint was justified.

“Right”, I agreed. In the course of a few more introductions, I volunteered that I was a student at Western. Only because I mentioned this more than once did I notice that discussion would quickly develop away from what I had said. Now alerted, I tried to keep my next two listeners on track by talking about the Masters program in anthropology. The air grew strained, though they remained polite. Finally the subject was changed for me, politely but firmly, in a way that made it clear it was not to be raised again. Even Amy looked uncomfortable. But I needed to know, so when we left the building to walk to her car I asked her bluntly what was wrong.

“There’s a lot that’s new for you here”, she said, genuinely sympathetic. “Don’t worry about things too much at the beginning. The basic thing to remember is that everything we do is according to the Bible.”

“But why was everyone so reluctant to talk about my studies?” It occurred to me then that in her several introductions, Amy, too, had not mentioned that I was a student.

She searched for words, then said, “Everyone who finds Jehovah does it in his own way and in his own time. If it was your classes that led you to us, nobody will challenge that. You will learn to deal with these and all other things as the Bible teaches you, and that is nothing to worry about.”

Those words stayed with me, and I wrote them down as if a label were all one needed in order to summarize and then dismiss them. “Are you two going to the meeting Tuesday?” I asked. They were, of course. And they would pick me up.

**SOME ISSUES**

Returning to The Watchtower, I began to search for explanations for the suspicion I had encountered toward higher education. Now aware of the centrality of the pamphlet, I was sure the answer lay within. I was therefore disappointed at finding nothing. In fact, I was sure I had simply missed the relevant passages; it just wasn’t possible for me to study all of the issues at hand.

But the search was fruitful in other ways. In an issue from 1917, for example, I found the following description:

> The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society is the greatest corporation in the world, because from the time of its organization until now the Lord has used it as his channel through which to make known the glad tidings ... (The Watchtower, 1/15/17, pg. 22).

Then on page 749 of issue 12/15/71 I found an illustration of the organization. It was in the style of a corporate tree with Jehovah as chairman of the board, Jesus as his CEO, and below him the Governing Body in Brooklyn, then the Elders, then the ministerial servants. With Jehovah as chairman, do corporate decrees and prohibitions not become sacrosanct? And would disregard for these not be tantamount to sin? If so, Jehovah’s Witnesses have avoided sin since the mid 1940’s by denying themselves blood transfusions, however vital these may have been to physical survival. Similarly, between 1967 and 1980, organ transplants were prohibited. The revised policy of 1980 hints at the punitive measures that had been in place:

... there is no Biblical command pointedly forbidding the taking in of other human tissue ... It is a matter for personal decision. (Gal. 6:5) The congregation judicial committee would not take disciplinary action if someone accepted an organ transplant ... (The Watchtower, 3/15/80, pg. 31).

This is a specific case. But the warning against a disregard for authority is also general:

... avoid independent thinking. How is such independent thinking manifested? A common way is by questioning the counsel that is provided by God’s visible organization. (The Watchtower, 1/15/83, pg. 22.)

As we have seen, such counsel was believed to be merely a channel for God’s inerrant word. The distinction between this and the false counsel of other groups is emphasized when, referring to others, *The Watchtower* says

---

1 I have since been informed that beards and moustaches are worn by some Jehovah’s Witnesses. I got no clear answer as to whether it was always so, or whether the practice represents a reversal of Witness doctrine.
It is a serious matter to represent God and Christ in one way, then find that our understanding of the major teachings and fundamental doctrines of the Scriptures was in error, and then after that, to go back to the very doctrines that, by years of study, we had thoroughly determined to be in error. Christians cannot be vacillating - "wishy-washy" - about such fundamental teachings. What confidence can one put in the sincerity or judgment of such persons? (The Watchtower, 5/15/76, pg. 298.)

Persons, for example, who falsely predict the end of the world for 1914, 1918, 1925, and 1975; who claim that the pyramids at Gizeh are messages from God, then that they are Satan's handiwork, and so too anyone who believes otherwise; who insist that God lives in the Pleiades, then that he doesn't; who claim that transplants are cannibalism, then that they aren't, without regard or apology for those who might have suffered or died by following such prohibitions. Later, aware that their words appear prophetic. And the message, Witness doctrine with doses of common sense, the "prediction" now justified, is repeated: (The Watchtower, 12/1/81, pg. 27.)

It seems that either one accepts these and other words as coming from God, in which case waftling and hypocrisy are merely functions of an outsider's myopia, or else they are not. And if the latter suggestion is made?

You can be sure that Satan the Devil does not want you to have this knowledge, and that he will do all in his power to stop you from getting it. How will he do this? One way is by seeing to it that you receive opposition, perhaps in the form of ridicule. By maneuvering 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. (The Watchtower, 5/15/76, pg. 298.)

This all proceeds under the tender and doting care of experienced Witnesses who have seen it all. Indoctrination is skillfully controlled by giving out only as much as the candidate can handle — by neatly sidestepping questions about school and haircut and authorship, for example. Although I had not seen it in action, I easily imagined how, despite glaring contradictions and absurdities in the literature, a new candidate might be converted.

A CHAT

Amy and Elizabeth arrived an hour and a half early on Tuesday so that we could have one more study session before the meeting. I used up nearly half of that time inquiring about what was involved in witnessing.

Now exposed to the people and the literature, I was learning the utility of playing dumb. If you want them to think or talk about something, even if it is otherwise taboo, seek their "wisdom", their "guidance". You are confused and desire only that they teach you, and teach you they certainly will — that is their mission. And in teaching you, they expose themselves. In so proceeding, however, one might easily get carried away and underestimate them: if Amy and Elizabeth are any indication, Jehovah's Witnesses are highly trained in conversation and clever at reading people.

I was an empty vessel, eager to be filled with the truth about witnessing activities, and they were no less eager to keep filling me. I was not looking for anything in particular, but when Elizabeth mentioned in passing that witnessing is not always easy, I joined in. After all, I knew quite a lot about abusing Witnesses at the door.

"I know what you mean", I confirmed. "As I told you, I used to be one of your darker nightmares. I think I even enjoyed it."

"And now the prodigal son returns", Amy quipped. "People are receptive more often than you probably think, but I won't deny that there are problems too. Usually, what we encounter is just impatience or bad temper, or bad disposition. But there are those, especially those who fall out with the Bible, who would do harm, who would attack your faith. Obviously, you would not stand against them alone. That is one reason we like to go out in pairs. But the organization itself is extremely supportive and strong so there is never really much danger."

"One stream of current anthropology is obsessed with ideas about how to be fair to others, whether that other is an individual, an ethnic or religious group, or a society or culture. And yet there is still such a dismissal of certain radical groups, especially those that involve themselves in the beliefs of others. It seems hard for many to really accept that such involvement is a calling, and to see the calling as a right equal to their own."

"Intolerance and conflict are taught around the globe. And the way out of it is to follow the Bible. Tolerance, love, understanding, fairness: these are what Jesus taught. Imagine if everyone followed his example! That day will come soon; that's what God's new government is all about. And that is all we are really teaching."

I dwelled for a moment on her words. Yes, if every Witness talked like Amy, their numbers would be assured. She had told me, without telling me, why higher education was a problem, and meanwhile assured me that I didn't have to do
anything about it. I didn’t have to agree with her. I was still comforted.

Then we looked at 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, the famous definition of Love. After that we departed for Kingdom Hall.

**WITNESS SERVICE**

We were already seated. Responding to my question, Elizabeth told me that almost everyone in attendance was involved in Witnessing. A few had yet to be baptized, and although this is not a prerequisite for missionary activity, they were not yet confident enough. Once again there were songs and prayers, but the atmosphere seemed a little less formal than during the service on Sunday. After the preliminaries, an Elder — a different one — assumed the podium and gave a brief pep talk, quoting from both *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* The message stressed the virtues of patience, control, confidence and faith in Jehovah, and courage.

Then the meeting became a discussion in which the individual concerns of Witnesses were dealt with, and various techniques were reinforced through discussion and occasionally through example: techniques on how and when to offer scripture, and on when and when not to offer home Bible study; techniques of comportment; how to read signs of interest and disinterest; how to avoid overwhelming people; how to follow up. The meeting concluded with prayer. I asked Elizabeth to point out the neophytes she had mentioned, and when she did I saw that they were already leaving. So much for getting their tender angle on things. I made no interesting headway in a brief conversation, then the three of us left.

I was feeling rather deflated. Perhaps I had expected something, or perhaps so much had happened over the past several days that my senses were taking a rest. During the drive home, the moral crisis I had encountered before the service on Sunday descended again without warning, this time more powerfully. In a flash I knew that things with Amy and Elizabeth had gone far enough. Amy had spoken eloquently about fairness and understanding, and now I felt convicted by her words.

Here was a dilemma. When I first met them, I figured I was just another candidate for conversion. I soon found them incapable of such a mechanical attitude. Whatever their agenda, I saw that they really did care. Perhaps I couldn’t know what form the caring ultimately took since they were on one side of faith and I was on the other; I could only guess at the implications of that faith. And why did these matter so? Because on my side of the gulf I was discovering real people, and the surprise was disarming.

But I was still misleading them. It was therefore time to break it off, although I had no idea then how I would do it. I only knew that we would not meet like this again. Genuinely despondent, I fell into silent contemplation under the gentle pulse of streetlights.

**CONCLUSION**

Amy and Elizabeth returned, and each time they tried to arrange further study. They invited me to more services and meetings. They saw that something was wrong. I tried pleading indecision and a need for space. Still they came. Finally I told them the simple truth, that although I respected the Jehovah’s Witnesses in a way I had never done before, I knew I did not believe what they did and that there was no further use in trying to convert me. They have not been around since. I am relieved to be free of the religion but I shall miss the two of them.

What about the religion? Clearly, it is not for everyone, and many outsiders seem suspicious both of what they see and of what they are sure lies hidden. Ex-Jehovah’s Witnesses, especially, seem to have nothing good to say about the religion. Some are so hostile they write books, which are sure to be prohibited reading among the faithful.1 And we have seen some clues as to why. There is apparently another problem, whose nature I deduce from occasional hints, and that is the coercive nature of their judicial system, quite contrary to the idea of free choice presented to me. How can a member, whose conscience rules in favor of quitting the Jehovah’s Witnesses, feel free to come or go, to make up her own mind, when threatened with the break-up of her family, or with being ostracized by friends, not to mention the judicial hearings themselves?

It is difficult to remain detached about issues that lie so deep. It is hard to remain unmoved by convictions about what others should do when their ideas violate so strongly one’s own sense of right and wrong. And the challenge is meanwhile to uphold their right to be equally individual, even to give up their own freedom if they choose. It is the challenge not only of anthropology but of human communication and understanding. Here is the Other. Now what do we do?

It was argued that to see Jehovah’s Witnesses at all they must be taken on their own terms. In particular, the problem with calling them “Christian” was described: Christians and Jehovah’s Witnesses battle for possession of the term, and the battle itself constitutes their identities as opposed to each other. An umbrella term that would unite them, while useful if those identities are not the issue, is otherwise misleading to the extent that commonality is favored above uniqueness. We observed that both groups call their text “The Bible”, and how the word refers to two sources, not one.

I described how the Witnesses I encountered soon became real people, whereupon labels and categories grew insubstantial. If I cannot generalize on the basis of six encounters, I can observe what I saw: Amy and Elizabeth were not just happy. They were inspired. For that matter they also inspired me; their life had a powerful meaning, and the fact of that meaning made them entirely human.

Amy mentioned that the organization is extremely supportive of its members, and a glimpse at the structure of interactions shows how. Given the stigma commonly attached to the Jehovah’s Witnesses and to proselytizing, reacting against Witnesses comes naturally. What such reaction does, however, is solidify the organization: in being set apart it is crystallize identity through opposition. If a Witness disregards the threat or otherwise falls into apostasy, the same

---

1Probably the most famous of these is *Crisis of Conscience* by Raymond Franz, who was for nine years a member of the Elite Governing Body in Brooklyn, which hands down prohibitions, edits *The Watchtower*, and thus decides the tenets of living for millions.
crystallization occurs within the organization: the deviant one becomes an example of what others are not.

Credence is given to that identity by predictions about how others will act towards believers, and this credence acts as armor for the beliefs themselves. When beliefs are challenged, the logic of the challenge will go unheard to the extent that its mouthpiece is seen as a critic of the organization; the more powerful the challenge, the more obvious the fact of criticism becomes. The potency of such armor is even more apparent when we realize that crystallisations of identity are rooted in action, not in belief. It is not in a mere opposition of beliefs, but in the intensity of struggle between believers, that their differences are illuminated for participants. Struggle itself brings into focus what is being fought over, and so also the opposing stakes in that prize. It should follow that oppositional strength will be highest among radical groups since their interactions with others are more intense. It does not follow that the Jehovah’s Witnesses are unchanging, only that they resist change. But just as stability implies resistance, so engagement means that change is inevitable. No system is completely closed, which is to say that the world beyond evolves; so, therefore, do engagements with it. Given that one must adapt to survive, it is hardly surprising to see Witnesses “tacking”.

I would conclude that it has not been my purpose to judge the Jehovah’s Witnesses, but that cannot be completely true since evaluation is at the heart of everything we do. I hope the judgements have been fair.

REFERENCES

Books


Other Sources

