

The Center Holds Quite Well: An Ethnographic Study of Social Structure and Control in Jehovah's Witness Religious Organization

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Abstract: Religion has long occupied a singularly prominent position among the various institutions of social control. Evidence suggests, however, that the American religious milieu has changed in recent decades. Several historically fringe religions have grown in terms of power and influence while traditionally dominant religious institutions have deteriorated. One of the fastest growing religious organizations is Jehovah's Witness. Despite its increasingly powerful role in American society, we know very little about how Jehovah's Witness operates as a system of social control. This paper presents the findings of an ethnographic study of the mechanisms with which Jehovah's Witness' construct and control deviance. The results demonstrate that Jehovah's Witness operates according to the principles of functional systems theory. Witnesses are isolated from other social systems, which are deemed evil, and those who stray are shamed and labeled. Growth is maintained through careful evangelism processes that minimize threats to the organization and socialize core values to willing participants.

Keywords: Religion, deviance, social control.

Throughout much of human history, religion has occupied a singularly prominent position among the various institutions of social control. Studies have shown a consistent inverse relationship between religion and various forms of deviant behavior (Benda & Corwyn, 1997). People who harbor religious beliefs are less likely to commit suicide and engage in substance abuse (Johnson, 2002). Baier and Wright (2001:12) conducted a meta-analysis of sixty studies on religion and delinquency and concluded that "religious behavior and beliefs exert a significant, moderate effect on individuals' criminal behavior."

Despite these findings, evidence suggests that Americans are becoming increasingly less religious. The American Religious Identification Survey's time series analysis showed that the percentage of the population that self-identifies as non-religious has grown from 8.2% in 1990 to 15% in 2008¹. During this period of time, almost all religious traditions saw their representation among the American populace decline. However, not all of the change in American's religiosity has been toward atheism and agnosticism. Several historically fringe religions have grown over the past several decades. One of the traditions that experienced the greatest increase in membership is Jehovah's

Witness. During this same period of time, 1990 to 2008, membership among Jehovah's Witnesses increased approximately 38% in the United States (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009)². Although this religious institution is gaining power during a time when others are deteriorating, we know very little about how it operates as a system of social control. This paper presents the findings of an ethnographic study of the mechanisms with which Jehovah's Witness constructs and controls deviance.

SOCIAL SYSTEMS

The most prominent theoretical model on how social systems define and control deviant behavior derives from the work of Durkheim (1964; 1971), Parsons (1951; 1968), and Douglas (1966; 1994). They argue that the most advantageous approach to understanding social systems and their functionality is through an investigation of transgression. This argument is based upon the notion that socio-cultural norms – their substance, power, and importance – are often subtle and therefore difficult to identify and explicate. However, what comes to be defined as transgression and how it is handled can provide insight into the bonds upon which the system in question is based. By understanding what the system perceives as threatening one can begin to identify what it holds sacred. Put simply, the inverse of transgression points to the basic foundation of the system and what it values.

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¹"Non-religious" includes respondents who indicated no religious preference, atheist, or agnostic.

²Surveys show that the rate of growth among Jehovah's Witnesses is even more dramatic worldwide (Lawson & Cragun, 2012) and has persisted steadily since the late 1920s (Holden, 2002).

All institutions socialize members into their respective norms and cultures and contain self-maintenance mechanisms. There exist many different social systems operating simultaneously in the everyday lives of people, contextually proscribing and prescribing certain types of behavior. Virtually all of these systems are contained within boundaries that maintain and/or justify their fundamental ideology and the behavior of their subscribers. Mainstream scholars often argue, however, that “subcultures” and their normative codes do not necessarily constitute social systems. The principle demarcation between subculture and system is that the later includes highly sophisticated self-maintenance mechanisms and is relatively autonomous. In contrast, subcultures rely heavily on the self-maintenance mechanisms of larger structures. For example, if Jehovah’s Witness is merely a subculture, the mechanisms it utilizes to control its members and protect against threats will resemble (or be directly borrowed from) those of larger religious structures. However, if it constitutes a social system, these mechanisms should work in the opposite direction – to isolate itself from larger structures (Jenks, 2003).

The Inside

Durkheim (1964; 1971), Parsons (1951; 1968), and Douglas (1966; 1994) offered a model of social systems as comprised of a center and a boundary. In essence, the center is the foundation of the system and the boundary is its framework. At the center lies the fundamental ideology of the system, or what Durkheim calls the “sacred.” It represents social interests and both stems from and recreates public knowledge. These interests and knowledge that occupy central positions combine and form a governing normative code. This code is the vehicle through which meaning is assigned to behavior and people and from which social order and hierarchy result. These norms also provide a source of “identity” between the individual and the complete system. Values and norms at the center become inherently and unquestionably valid simply by virtue of occupying this position. Therefore, those who subscribe to these values and norms, and who do not threaten their position, are held in high esteem.

This has interesting implications for consensus theory. Although Douglas, for example, maintained that the center results from consensus among its residents, Durkheim showed how this temporal priority is problematic. He agreed that the center is grounded in

collectivity, but argued that consensus does not necessarily arise prior to the construction of the center. Rather, the center itself can create collectivity. According to Durkheim, the moral imperative of the system is a demand for obligation. In order to participate in the system, one must be unwavering in allegiance and never (overtly) question what lies at the center. Parsons likewise argued that the center evolves from the top down. The construction of the center begins from a presumption of binding central consensus, which then trickles down to individual personalities.

The center can be typified through three characteristics. First, the norms that govern the system from its center are external in the sense that their existence is not dependent upon any individual. These norms are not realized or materialized by any member(s) and in fact often predate any individual. Second, the normative codes in the center are general. They (come to) represent normal, typical, and/or average behavior and are thus defined as morally good. Such behavior is perceived by virtue of the code as maintaining collective life, as the fabric of the system. Third, the center constrains and controls behavior. Social conduct that falls within the conventions of the center functions to manifest and support its normative validity. In contrast, behavior that transgresses the implicit and explicit rule structure invokes constraint (Jenks, 2003).

The center of a social system also functions to maintain an internal equilibrium. It controls its own members and minimizes the frequency and effects of transgression that occurs within its boundaries. The norms at the center achieve this goal by undermining the autonomy of the individual and any subsequent expressions of difference. Difference must be merged into communality. Those who continue to maintain their individual consciousness are often “thrown out” of the system so that they do not endanger the system and its members. Every social system not only has to control threats from within but also the risks that other systems and individuals outside its boundaries pose.

Beyond Boundaries

If the center – the fundamental values and norms upon which any given system is based – represents the foundation of the system, the boundaries constructed around the center act as a framework to protect the system from external threats. Parsons argued that boundaries pronounce the system’s difference from

other systems and protect against transgressions that might occur from without. This is not to say that boundaries necessarily prevent others from entering into the system. Because systems are dependent upon the capture and assimilation of individuals in order to maintain and grow, they are willing to allow new members so long as they are non-threatening.

Douglas posited that virtually all social systems have mechanisms through which they resolve or come to terms with anomies that would otherwise disrupt or defy their fundamental position. As such, the sense of order within social systems is based not on the presence of stability, but the absence of risk. Risk, however, is not "real" nor does it have to be personified, but is a perception that sustains the fragility of the bonds that hold the center together. Similar to the "politics of fear," those at the center will unquestioningly defend their norms and bonds as long as danger is perceived to be omnipresent. As Douglas (1994:46) stated:

The very word "risk" could be dropped from politics. "Danger" would do the work just as well. When "risk" enters as a concept in political debate, it becomes a menacing thing, like a flood, an earthquake, or a thrown brick. But it is not a thing, it is a way of thinking, and a highly artificial contrivance at that.

Durkheim argued that behavior that promotes solidarity and/or continuity of the central norms will be perceived as "normal." In contrast, threatening behavior is that which fosters individualization, fragmentation, and interruption. Because the maintenance of the center is dependent upon the collective's unquestioning allegiance, individuality and difference must be minimized. Personalities are constructed in terms of the features they display or offer that are pertinent to their functioning in the wider context, not those that may be relevant to their difference and individuality. It is their qualities as cogs in the machine that are accentuated and prioritized.

When individuals are not already part of the social system – when they exist outside rather than inside the boundaries of the system – they are often prevented from crossing the boundaries and entering the system. Parsons (1951:42) calls social systems "perfect regulatory mechanisms." In their perfection, they engage in these preventative mechanisms at the borders in an effort to prevent the threats from having

any detrimental impact on the system whatsoever. The specific mechanisms that systems use to block threats vary according to their specific context and function. However, one identifying characteristic shared between all these specific mechanisms is that they not only block threats, but by doing so also strengthen the center.

The righteousness of the collective and their beliefs are constantly reaffirmed by banishing and/or punishing individuals and alternatives. This is an almost universal quality of ostracism. The specific boundary maintenance mechanisms of complex systems, however, are constructed with features that reaffirm the status quo above and beyond these inherent effects. The boundaries built around the center not only demonize their antithesis, but often contain transcripts that support their norms as pro-social. Boundaries are most effective at simultaneously constructing alternatives and individuals as threatening and maintaining the integrity of the center by their "declaration of difference" (Durkheim, 1964:110).

Although the center must merge the individual differences of those within the boundaries, the boundaries themselves must serve as a point of demarcation between those at the center and those beyond its reaches. Any system, therefore, must construct a perception of reality among its residents that they are all the same as each other, but, in their similarity, are strikingly different from those outside their system. This phenomenon is not relegated to the people that comprise the system, but the normative foundation of the system itself. This is perhaps most evident in the political realm where the similarities between, for example, political parties are ignored in favor of their differences. As Durkheim argued, the collective at the center of any system is most effectively controlled if they are led to believe that striking and unknown differences lay beyond the borders of their system. In this scenario, it is unlikely that those at the center will "leave" or challenge the system's norms. Although these boundaries are entirely virtual, they perform the same functions as geographic boundaries by keeping social facts, culture, and meaning as separate as possible (Jenks, 2003).

RELIGION AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Studies suggest that the religious organizations are among the most effective social systems at constructing and controlling deviance according to these theoretical processes. Stark (1996) found that

cohesive religious organizations, compared to more diffuse ones, significantly increase the likelihood that adherents integrate religious norms into their social lives. Consequently, they are less likely to engage in delinquent behavior that violates these norms. The primary factor that determines whether organizations are cohesive and thus “effective” at clearly constructing and controlling deviance is the degree to which membership in the religious organization is prominent in any given community and the extent to which individuals restrict their social networks (primarily close friendships) to other believers. These variables, often referred to as “context factors” (see Sloane & Potvin, 1986), closely resemble the defining features of an insulated functional system noted above.

The utility of functional social systems theory have been explored in other empirical and theoretical literature on religious organizations and social control. Kelley (1972) first articulated five points of distinction between “strong” and “weak” churches³. Strong churches:

- 1) Require higher levels of organizational commitment and social solidarity than weak churches;
- 2) Demand distinctive lifestyles and behavioral conformity;
- 3) Focus primarily on encouraging personal spiritual growth rather than on collective campaigns for social justice;
- 4) Foster absolutism and ideological closure rather than pluralism and tolerance;
- 5) Are more effective than weaker churches in sustaining coherent systems of religious meaning (quoted from Ellison, 1991:82).

These factors, which focus on concepts such as solidarity, distinctiveness, absolutism, and coherence, are essentially describing the same features of functional systems articulated by Durheim, Parsons, and Douglas. Subsequent research has found support for the notion that these factors indeed impact various aspects related to the well-being of organizational members, including reduced interpersonal conflicts (see Ellison, 1991).

Past research suggests that these defining characteristics of functional social systems are central and prominent feature of Jehovah’s Witnesses’ religious organization. Throughout much of their history, Witnesses have been characterized by severe tensions with the various governments and societies in which they resided, including other churches whom they referred to as “the whore of Babylon” (Lawson, 1995:352). This tension increased overtime and Witnesses occasionally engaged in harsh conflicts with, and were subjected to persecution by, some governments⁴. This exacerbated Witnesses literal and symbolic isolation from the communities and societies in which they have lived. For instance, Witnesses are prohibited from engaging in political processes. They do not vote in elections, salute the flag, or recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Members are taught that they have no obligation to obey societies’ laws unless they are also prescribed by God (see Penton, 1985). These mores suggest that Jehovah’s Witnesses religious organization resembles Durkheim, Parsons, and Douglas’s social system. They characterize the organization as having strong boundaries that keep them isolated from other normative structures and maintain their cohesion around central values. Indeed, Charles Russell, the founder of the Witnesses faith, taught his followers keep themselves “separate from the world” (Penton, 1985:138). The purpose of the study presented here was to determine whether and how Jehovah’s Witnesses’ religious organization operates as a social system.

DATA AND METHODS

The primary goal of this research was to identify whether the Jehovah’s Witnesses religious organization constitutes a social system and, if so, describe its mechanisms for the construction and control of deviance. In order to explore this issue, I conducted an ethnographic study. The fieldwork for this project took place over a period of three months. During this time, I attended both formal and informal meetings at one congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Each week I attended three formal group meetings held by the congregation and one one-on-one informal meeting with an “elder” who guided me through my fieldwork. By the time my research had concluded, I had logged approximately 90 hours of fieldwork. These meeting served as the primary source of data.

³Kelley (1972) uses the terms “strong” and “weak” refer to the organization’s abilities to affect their members’ psychosocial well-being.

⁴For a thorough historical account of Jehovah’s Witnesses, see Lawson (1995) and Holden (2002).

A second supplementary source of data I was able to obtain derived from literature provided to me by the Witnesses. This literature is published by the Watchtower Society – the centralized governing body of the Witnesses' faith. This data source is comprised of six different pieces of literature. Each piece of literature used by the Witnesses serves a specific but interrelated purpose. The literature passed down to the congregation from the Watchtower Society is used to guide both what they believe and how they practice their faith. For example, the substance and structure of the meetings mentioned above were based entirely on this literature. Because the meetings and texts were largely indistinguishable in terms of substance and structure, I will discuss them below as intersecting and interdependent.

Data

The Witnesses hold three separate group meetings each week that ostensibly all the active members of the congregation attend. On Sunday mornings, the Witnesses attend what they call their public meeting. These meetings, however, actually consist of two sub-meetings, the first of which lasts approximately one hour. During this time, an elder speaks to the congregation about a specific topic of their faith. This topic is always borrowed from the focus of the periodical that they receive bi-monthly from the Watchtower Society. The second hour of the public meeting is spent reading and reviewing an article published in this periodical. An elder asks individual members to read a paragraph at a time from one of these articles. At the end of each paragraph, the elder asks study questions that appear as footnotes in the article. Members raise their hands and answer these questions, often quoting straight from the article itself. The public meetings then address a general topic raised by the Watchtower periodical and review a more specific sub-topic discussed in one of the articles.

On Wednesday evenings, the Witnesses hold a "bible study" meeting which lasts approximately one and one-half hours. The congregation is divided up into several small groups, each of which is led by an elder. These groups retire to different rooms in the Hall and engage in a highly structured study of a specific section of the King James Bible. During these studies, the elder in each group asks members to read from a booklet that is published by the Watchtower Society for the purpose of guiding these meetings. At the end of each paragraph, the elder then asks members questions that, much like in their periodical, appear as

footnotes below the text. These questions also ask members to recall a specific idea or example raised in the text. Members again often quote directly from the text itself. During the time of my fieldwork, the congregation was studying the Book of Daniel. The studies I attended, which were guided in a strict fashion by the governing text, discussed the prophecies contained in this Book, the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany, and WWII. Essentially, the meetings and text posited that Hitler and political regime were the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecies.

The last meeting of each week held by the congregation is the "ministry school." Evangelism is a central, defining characteristic of the Witnesses' faith. Each member is required by the congregation to conduct door-to-door ministries every month where they attempt to recruit new members. In order to maximize the potential of their field ministry, the Witnesses meet each Thursday evening for several hours to be taught the techniques of effective evangelism. The ministry school is also led by an elder and is strictly guided by governing literature published by the Watchtower Society. The lead elder chooses a certain topic in their *Benefit from Theocratic Ministry School Education* text and asks members to read aloud from that section. At the end of the section, members conduct exercises designed to put their newly acquired skills into practice. These exercises are borrowed directly from the text.

I also attended an informal, one-on-one meeting each week with the elder who acted as my guide. These meetings arose out of my desire to understand their evangelism processes. Because I was not allowed to accompany Witnesses during their field ministry, an elder would conduct this process with me each week during these meetings. He explained at the end of my fieldwork that what had transpired during our informal meetings was topically and methodologically identical to their field ministry. These meetings were guided by two pieces of literature, both of which are published by the Watchtower Society. The first, *What Does the Bible Really Teach?*, is essentially their field ministry "bible." Each chapter of this book addresses different common questions many people have regarding God or religion (e.g., why does God allow suffering?) and explains how the Witnesses come to terms with them in the context of their faith. The majority of our time during these meetings was spent reading and answering questions from this book in much the same manner as discussed in the paragraphs above. The second piece of literature that guided these meetings was a small pamphlet

entitled *Jehovah's Witnesses: Who Are They? What Do They Believe?* Whereas the previous text addressed substantive philosophical issues of faith, the pamphlet was more directed toward explaining the Witnesses' frameworks or practices – how they put their fundamental orientation into specific “real world” contexts and practices. We typically only referred to this pamphlet when I asked questions that pertained to their formal structure and belief system⁵.

Analysis

Social systems are in essence comprised of a *what* and a *how*. That is, at their core are substantive moral norms that provide meaning to what they are, and surrounding this core are mechanisms for advancing and defending this substance, i.e., how their system functions. However, it is the latter – the self-maintenance mechanisms and boundaries – that truly signal the presence of a system. Virtually every individual and/or group has guiding, fundamental perspectives, but may not have readily established control and defense processes. It is the simultaneous presence of both, and their interdependency, that is the defining characteristic of a system.

A combination of thematic and narrative analysis was used to determine the substance and method of the Witnesses' religion. Prior to conducting the analysis, however, field notes were combined with the guiding literature to construct a thematic profile of each meeting. From there, the general theme of each meeting as well as pronounced sub-topical themes were discerned. These themes generally reflected the substance of their core beliefs and therefore represent the *what*. Next, the subtext of the narratives that emerged in each meeting and the relevant literature were analyzed to ascertain whether these core themes were supported by maintenance techniques. According to Danesi and Perron (1999), subtext is an implicit narrative within the text that is not immediately accessible to interpretation. Subtexts are, in other words, a latent message that acts as a contextual framework for the more overt main text. For example, much of the literature the Witnesses use during their field ministry contains an underlying tone of immediacy. That is, it subtly implies to the reader that time is running out. The primary overt message is thus cloaked in a sense of urgency.

RESULTS

The results of the analysis suggest that the Jehovah's Witnesses are engaged in a social system as described by Durkheim, Douglas, and Parsons. Although their beliefs and activities are designed to serve a variety of purposes, the maintenance of their system is at the heart of virtually all aspects of their faith. What they believe and how they practice these beliefs were often, as predicted by theory, intertwined and interdependent. They often construct the substance of their beliefs, as well as their activities, in a way that makes them seemingly impenetrable to critique and maintains their internal equilibrium.

Holding the Center

At the most fundamental level, many of the Witnesses beliefs resemble those of other Christian religions. They believe, for example, that Jesus is the savior of mankind and draw heavily from the King James Bible. However, these categorical ideologies are not enough to sustain this or any other religion. The Witnesses have developed their core beliefs into a strong, self-affirming fundamental code.

The theoretical model employed here argues that the center of the system must control its residents. This control is achieved, among other ways, by undermining the autonomy of the individual. The Jehovah's Witnesses exercise this form of control in several ways. First, their organization is, from their perspective, non-hierarchical. They believe that no member or group of members should have authority over any other. There is no “priest” or “pastor” who leads the congregation. Although each member is assigned a particular role (e.g., finance, maintenance, etc.), these roles are seemingly equal in terms of power and harmonious in terms of function. The Witnesses' perception that theirs is an egalitarian system is inaccurate, however; they do have a hierarchy at the center. Elders, for example, enjoy more respect and autonomy. They hold more powerful roles both within the system and over other members. This manifested in several ways. First, it was explained that council of elders make all decisions regarding church activities, the allocation of church resources, and seemingly all other issues. Second, elders led all meetings and, during the period of data collection, were never questioned in any manner. That is, the meetings were not only devoid of critical questions, but also questions that might indicate confusion or misunderstanding regarding the material being conveyed. Women are never elders, rarely are

⁵I was unable to obtain data regarding the members themselves, such as demographic characteristics, length of membership, or personal histories. Other than short informal interactions, my access to members was restricted to the elder who guided me through my fieldwork.

younger and less affluent men. It is, however, relatively unimportant whether there is, in actuality, a hierarchical structure at the center. Those who occupy the center – the Witnesses themselves – are entirely convinced that they are each the same. The Witnesses with whom I spoke, most notably the elder who acted as my guide, stated on several occasions that there is no power structure (i.e., that all members have equal input and influence). Furthermore, they value their system for its group cohesion and subsequent lack of individuality.

They believe that individuality is disruptive to their ultimate goal of serving the system itself. I witnessed on several occasions, particularly during the ministry school, expressions of what I came to call “symbolic martyrdom.” These were typically lengthy narratives where the speaker or author of the text would describe the purpose of life as servitude. It is important to mention here that the Witnesses’ believe that their system and God are entirely indistinguishable – their system is God’s system, its goals are God’s goals, and its methods are God’s way. Therefore, by serving their system they are literally serving God. The expressions of symbolic martyrdom always involved two sub-textual messages: that (1) the individual was entirely unimportant and individuality was sinful; and (2) individual persons were only valuable if and to the extent that they serve the means and goals of the system. Through this process, each person loses individual identity and gains meaning only through their role as cogs in the machine.

Durkheim argued that, in order to survive, centers must be constructed in such a way that they demand obligation and unquestioning allegiance from their members. The center of the Witnesses’ faith contains several measures used to create a community of uncritical subscribers. First, the Witnesses’ core beliefs are presented as factual. They often use the term “bible truths” to describe the claims made in their literature and meetings. Accepting these claims and following any implications they may contain are imperatives. For example, the general theme contained in their group bible studies claimed that the rise of the Nazi regime was the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy. At no time during my fieldwork did any member question the validity of this or any other claim.

The Witnesses supplement their core beliefs with the notion that we are living in the “last days.” According to their perspective, the prophecies contained in the Book of Revelations have already begun to be fulfilled. Several members stated that the

end of the world will happen in no less than five years. They also believe that theirs is the only true faith and, because so, they are the only people who will ascend to heaven while all others will be cast into hell. Thus, straying from the center is essentially the path to hell and judgment is coming soon.

Lastly, the center of their system is constructed in stark contrast to other systems. Although this issue is more salient to the subsequent sections on boundaries, it has important implications for the control of those at the center. The core of the Witnesses’ faith is based upon a notion that the devil is the master of this world. As such, everything in and of this world is evil. The only thing that is not of this world is the Watchtower Society, which is the voice of God. Witnesses are not allowed to participate in political, cultural, economic, or any alternative religious systems. Participation can mean virtually anything. For example, Witnesses are not allowed to salute the American flag or recite the pledge of allegiance. Therefore, remaining entirely invested and committed to the center of the system is the only way to avoid evil.

Although these mechanisms are typically successful at controlling the members of the system, individual members will inevitably attempt to stray from the center. Effective systems contain measures designed to prevent these attempts from succeeding. Jehovah’s Witnesses refer to individuals who are beginning to stray as “inactive.” Inactive members are specifically defined as those who have not logged any field ministry hours in six months. However, members who have been absent at meetings or those less than fully engaged in recent activities attract similar reactions. Members who stray are described as “spiritually weak” and garner a variety of other labels with negative connotations. When any member begins to stray, the entire congregation mobilizes under the command of the elders in an effort to bring them back.

Occasionally, however, individuals successfully escape the system and its control mechanisms. These ex-Jehovah’s Witnesses acquire a very powerful label – apostate. Apostates are generally considered by the Witnesses to be the most threatening entity to their system. Witnesses rationalize this high threat level they assign to apostates because the apostates once knew the truth and rejected it. In other words, people who know the truth and reject it are worse than those who are merely ignorant. This label and its implications also function to prevent other members from straying in the future. Apostates are commonly described as

dangerous, worthy of fear, and purveyors of the devil's work. Members are instructed not to associate or even speak with apostates.

One lecture I observed during a Sunday meeting was devoted entirely to the topic of straying – i.e., inactive members and apostates. The elder giving the lecture discussed inactive members generally by first expressing sympathy and fear at their having strayed from the church. He called on the members in attendance to contact inactive members both individually and in groups to essentially re-evangelize them and bring them back to the church. He called their attention to the danger of remaining inactive – that would become entangled in society and ultimately be cast into hell. That served as a point of transition into his lecture on apostates. He taught that members should avoid apostates by not speaking to them or taking their phone calls or even acknowledging them should they happen to encounter. He told a story of an apostate he encountered recently at a grocery store. The elder explained that he ignored the apostate entirely and that members should do the same if they happened across an apostate.

Boundaries and Maintenance

As Jenks (2003:41) stated, “the social system is finally dependent upon the successful capture of total personalities.” In order for the system to grow in both size and strength, there must be a constant influx of new members. Recognizing this reality, Jehovah's Witnesses have made evangelism an extremely important and defining characteristic of their faith. The first sentence of their pamphlet entitled *Jehovah's Witnesses: Who Are They; What Do They Believe?* reads “it is the desire of Jehovah's Witnesses that you become better acquainted with them.” Recruiting new members, however, is a dangerous task since threats must never be allowed to pierce the boundaries of their system.

Durkheim argued that anything or anyone that would upset the equilibrium of the system will be perceived as a threat. Witnesses believe that all other social systems are threatening and are to be totally avoided. As such, Witnesses are not allowed to vote in political elections or even recite the national anthem. Recruiting new members essentially means taking someone from these evil, secular systems and “refining” them into Witnesses. In order to ensure that potential new recruits will not upset the equilibrium of the system, the Witnesses engage in a careful, drawn-out evangelism process.

Contrary to popular belief, Witnesses (typically) speak only with and evangelize at length (i.e., for more than several minutes) those who initially respond positively to them. To bring someone into or around the system who is hostile to its core beliefs is to introduce a threat. Once a person responds positively to their initial encounter and expresses interest, a Witness will initiate a weekly bible study with them. During these studies Witnesses begin teaching the potential recruit their core beliefs. They also pay close attention to the recruit's reactions in an attempt to determine how amenable he or she is to their system. By acting skeptical and overly critical, potential recruits may dissuade the Witnesses from assimilating them. This field ministry process can span several months or years.

The next step in the process is to begin attending public meetings at the Kingdom Hall. This only occurs, however, if both the recruit and his or her contact feel comfortable taking this next step. At this point, the recruit is expected to begin practicing the Witnesses' faith in their everyday lives. For instance, they must begin disassociating themselves with secular systems and read the literature provided to them by the Witnesses. The entire congregation, especially the elders, judges the recruits willingness to practice their faith and the success with which they navigate these obstacles. If the Witnesses determine that the recruit does not pose any threat to the inner-workings of their system, he or she is invited to be baptized. This is the final stage of the recruitment process, after which the new recruit is a full-fledged member.

CONCLUSION

During a time when the religious traditions that have historically occupied powerful positions in the American religious milieu are losing ground, Jehovah's Witness is growing. There are, of course, a host of factors that have likely contributed to this shift. The findings of this study suggest that one of the most prominent causes is the functionality of the Witnesses' religious organization. Jehovah's Witness is a highly effective and sophisticated social system. It is comprised of various mechanisms that operate to maintain its core values and prevent existing members from deviating from them.

Requiring members to totally avoid and disregard other social systems insulates the center from the influence of competing value systems and socio-cultural norms. This particular maintenance technique

is singularly effective because it is preventative. The Witnesses' system does not have to reconcile dissonance between, for instance, the moral imperatives of the law and those that comprise their core values. Any potential dissonance is prevented because Witnesses are prohibited from participating in the processes of other systems that might communicate alternative values. Moreover, Witnesses are not only prohibited from participating in other systems, but also from associating with other people outside their system. Thus, the other Witnesses are each member's total community. Garnering the disapproval of other Witnesses therefore amounts to being shamed by your entire community. Leaving the system or being thrown out for threatening it is analogous to being cast into the wilderness.

These mechanisms ensure that very few people within the system will leave. The functionality of Jehovah's Witness is not limited to maintenance, however. The growth of this system is a result of combining effective maintenance techniques with processes designed to successfully incorporate new personalities. A core component of these inclusion processes involves identifying individuals who may pose a threat to the system and keeping them outside of its boundaries. The Witnesses' system achieves this by requiring all members to engage in highly structured evangelism activities. Much of their evangelism involves a vetting process. Witnesses are taught to identify any hostility in potential new recruits. If the targets of their evangelism display hostility toward them or their system, the Witnesses are instructed to discontinue contact with them and move on to a new pursuit. This vetting process does not stop after initial contact. Potential new members are invited to attend public meetings where they are watched by the entire congregation, particularly the elders. This can occur for months and even years before recruits are invited to be baptized and become full members. The caution and precision of these processes are astonishing. It may appear at first glance that these conditions would produce slow growth at best. However, much like any effective social system, the Witnesses learn from their mistakes and become more efficient over time.

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