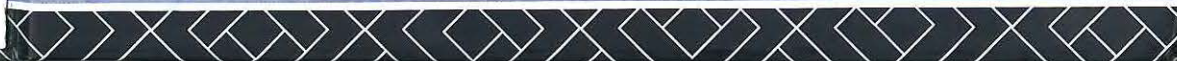
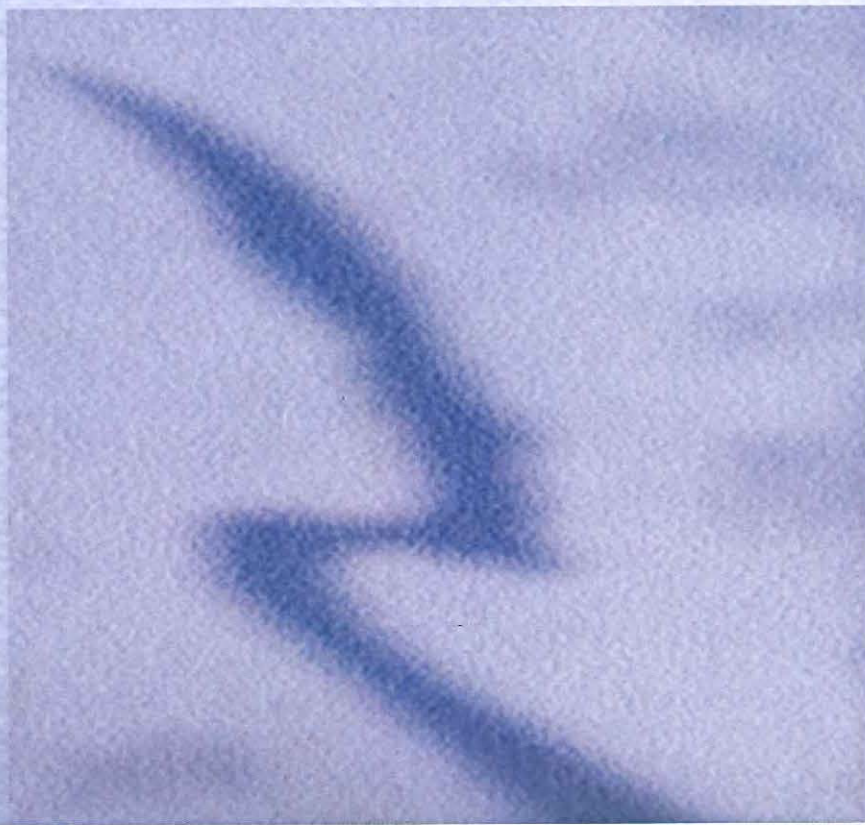


Jehovah's Witnesses

Portrait of a contemporary religious
movement

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2 The Jehovah's Witnesses in the modern world

Before we can begin to establish the Witnesses' status at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we need to know something about their organisation's evolution and doctrines. These details help us to understand the culture in which the Witnesses operate and allow us to consider the various compatibilities and incompatibilities between the Watch Tower Society and the outside world. Moreover, the hierarchical structure of the movement enables devotees to resist those forces that might threaten their status as bona fide members of a system they call 'the truth'. In short, an enquiry into what the Witnesses believe, how they came to believe it and how they are able to reaffirm these beliefs internally aids our understanding of their relationship with modernity.

History, doctrines and internal structure

From origin to present day

The history of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society spans 130 years and is rich in controversy. From the moment of its foundation by Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916) to the present day, reactions towards the movement include fascination, compassion, anger and hatred. Although the available literature indicates that their world-renouncing theology and adherence to millenarianism have been the sources of great strain in terms of their liaison with secular bodies (particularly the legal system), the Witnesses have managed to gain converts and expand on an international scale.

Surprisingly, there is very little information about Russell's background. Rogerson's sociological research reveals that Russell was educated in state schools and then by private tutors (Rogerson 1969). Russell inherited Presbyterian beliefs from parents of Scottish–Irish descent, but his mother died when he was only nine years of age. In 1867, at the age of fifteen, he entered into partnership with his father, who ran a chain of men's clothing stores in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. Russell was an astute businessman. Before he was thirty years of age, he had expanded his father's clothing store, which he sold for \$250,000 – the equivalent of more than a million dollars today.

He also sold what he called 'miracle wheat' to credulous farmers at \$60 a bushel. The fraud was eventually stopped by the federal authorities, who made him refund the money (Ripley 1982: 1-12). During his initial years as a draper, Russell abandoned Presbyterianism in favour of more liberal Congregationalist beliefs, but even these eventually gave way to a firm conviction that an omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient God was incompatible with conventional doctrines of suffering and hell. This left Russell in a state of perplexity and doubt, as his own reflections confirm:

Brought up a Presbyterian, indoctrinated from the Catechism, and being naturally of an enquiring mind, I fell a ready prey to the logic of infidelity, as soon as I began to think for myself. But that which at first threatened to be the utter shipwreck of faith in God and the Bible was, under God's providence, over-ruled for good, and merely wrecked my confidence in human creeds and systems of Bible misinterpretations.

(*The Watchtower* 1916: 170-2 quoted in Rogerson 1969: 5-6)

At this point, Russell became an avowed sceptic and discarded the Bible altogether; but in 1870 he attended a meeting held by some Seventh-Day Adventists in a basement near his store in Allegheny. It would appear that this meeting was a significant influence in the restoration of Russell's faith, for, although he failed to join the Adventists, they did at least persuade him of an alternative creed to Christendom. He gathered together some like-minded friends and acquaintances and they formed a Bible study group in Pittsburgh where they met on a regular basis. Witnesses today believe that this was the point at which Russell returned to the Bible and discovered real truth. Undoubtedly influenced by the Seventh-Day Adventists, Russell espoused doctrines such as the annihilation of the wicked, the denial of hell, the extinction of the soul at death and a new code for salvation. His interest in the Bible became almost obsessive, and, between 1870 and 1879, he wrote several pamphlets and a new periodical called *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*. This new magazine was to play a crucial role in the expansion of the movement, and by 1880 some thirty congregations had sprung up in several American states. By 1884, 'Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society', managed by Russell, was given legal charter (Hoekema 1984). The Society printed tracts, papers, pamphlets, magazines and other materials in various languages and, in 1886, over six million copies of Russell's first publication, *Millennial Dawn* (later called *Studies in the Scriptures*), came to be sold. By now, Russell saw himself as 'the Servant of the Truth'. Not surprisingly, his opponents accused him of conceit. By the late 1880s, Russell had employed thousands of colporteurs (today called *pioneers*) who worked almost full-time preaching the theology and distributing millenarian literature. Russell devoted all his time to the study of the Bible and the administration of his fast-growing organisation. In 1889, a new building was finished in Pittsburgh to house the printing works

and to act as the Society's central office. In 1900, the first branch office was established in London.

Russell wrote specific instructions for selling his literature and employed virtually every device of modern advertising to disseminate his biblical message. By the early 1900s, he had travelled to Ireland, Scotland, Russia and Turkey to deliver his sermons. By 1917, there was a total of ninety-three *pilgrims* (today known as *circuit overseers*) travelling from congregation to congregation. Russell had laid the foundation of a movement that would inevitably expand. Most of Russell's written work consisted of elaborate biblical chronology that applied to his own time. His books reveal that he was greatly concerned with dates and events. He related social, political and economic issues to biblical prophecy and was fond of debating the exact meaning of the original Greek and Hebrew words in scripture. In a court in Ontario, Canada, in 1913, he declared under oath to be an expert scripture scholar, but when handed a Greek New Testament he was forced to admit that he did not even know the Greek alphabet. Neither did he know Latin or Hebrew. Few, if any, academic theologians in the universities of the world today acknowledge Russell as a scholar in any sense of the word (Ripley 1982: 1-2). Most Jehovah's Witnesses know little or nothing of Russell's prophecies, but they are all convinced that he correctly predicted the heavenly establishment of the Kingdom of God in 1914. When 1914 finally arrived, it was too late to persuade his followers that he might be wrong. Some left the movement in disappointment, but those who remained were confused about what was going to happen. The Witnesses have since claimed that, in some way, Russell predicted the First World War, but, for Russell himself and his successor Joseph Rutherford, the beginning of a war in Europe was of little significance. Russell was still convinced that heavenly glory was soon to come. In 1916, Russell's health deteriorated rapidly and he died on Tuesday 31 October that year.

In January 1917, Joseph Franklin Rutherford was elected President of what was now known as the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. Rutherford called himself 'Judge', although some sources claim that he never held an official appointment as such. At the age of twenty-two, he was admitted to the bar and began to practise law, later serving four years as public prosecutor for Booneville. He had frequently defended Russell in court and had become an ardent supporter of the movement. When he became President, he proceeded to restructure the Society and to encourage devotees to engage in a more active programme of Witnessing. He was dissatisfied with the Board of Directors, over which he adopted total control.¹ This culminated in open rebellion, after which several disaffected leaders were dismissed from their official positions. This led to the formation of small schismatic groups. In July 1917, the seventh volume of the *Studies in the Scriptures* series, *The Finished Mystery*, was published. This book, compiled by Watch Tower editors from the earlier works of Russell, was chiefly a commentary on Ezekiel and Revelation.² According

to this tract, Catholic and Protestant organisations together represented Babylon, which was soon to pass into oblivion. Possession of these publications was forbidden in Canada, where the movement had been declared illegal. On 8 May 1918, together with other Russellites, Rutherford was arrested under the United States Espionage Act for spreading dissent in the army and navy and sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment. He served only nine months, although, like his predecessor, he was frequently accused of fraudulent practices, even by his own followers. Unlike Russell, Rutherford developed a hatred of his avowed enemy, the clergy.³ It was during this period that Rutherford began to teach that Christ had returned *invisibly* in 1914, and that Armageddon was imminent.⁴ Rutherford claimed that this would be the point at which worldly organisations (including of course, Christendom) would perish. In 1931, he devised the new title 'Witnesses of Jehovah' and publicised the slogan 'Millions now living will never die'. He was not one of the millions! He died in 1942 in the palatial villa he had had built at San Diego as an official residence pending the return of Christ. He had been President of the movement for twenty-five years.

During Rutherford's presidency, the Society had moved from a more or less democratic to a theocratic structure, in which the directors of the various local congregations were no longer elected by local assemblies but were appointed by a Governing Body in Brooklyn. Rutherford was succeeded in 1942 by Nathan Homer Knorr, who had worked as a full-time preacher and co-ordinator of all printing activities within the organisation and General Manager of the publishing plant. In 1934, Knorr had been appointed one of the directors of the New York corporation and in 1940, he became Vice President of the Pennsylvania corporation (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1959: 196). Knorr immediately began a face-lifting and public relations programme that has since paid dividends in recruits. Several doctrinal books were published during Knorr's presidency, including *Theocratic Aid to Kingdom Publishers* (1945), *Equipped for Every Good Work* (1946a) and *Qualified to Be Ministers* (1955a). These three books contained information about scripture, door-to-door canvassing and history, but there were other books which were considered authoritative guidelines taking the place of previous publications by Russell and Rutherford, including *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (1943), *Let God Be True* (1946b, revised in 1952) and *Make Sure of All Things* (1953, revised in 1957). The books are summaries of doctrines, and millions of later editions have been printed and sold all over the world. *From Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained* was published in 1958 and is often used along with *Make Sure of All Things* and the more recent *Reasoning from the Scriptures* (1989b) as a handy reference book by the Witnesses in their doorstep ministry.

Another important project carried out under Knorr was the translation of the Bible into modern English. This began in 1950, and in 1961 the entire Bible in *The New World Translation* was published in one volume.

Those members who were responsible for the translating requested that they should remain anonymous. Under Knorr's presidency, door-to-door evangelists no longer carried a portable gramophone and collection of Rutherford's records. Rather, devotees were given a thorough training in speech and non-verbal communication that enabled them to deliver their own sermons. To this day, the Witnesses hold regular meetings, during which training and demonstrations take place to enable them to minister more effectively to the general public. During Knorr's regime as President, there was a huge expansion of the Witnesses' work worldwide. In 1942, evangelism took place in only fifty-four countries, but by 1971 it had spread to 207. The movement grew by 25 per cent during the 1930s and 1940s, with a total of 20,842 active members in Britain by 1950. By 1971, the country in which the Witnesses were most active was West Germany (87,976 members listed), followed by Nigeria with 75,372, and Brazil with 66,460. The British Isles followed with 62,813, then the Philippines with 54,264 and then Zambia with 52,369. Next was Mexico with 51,256 members, then Canada with 48,100. Other countries in which the Witnesses claim to have had more than five thousand active members in 1971 include Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, Colombia, Congo (Kinshasa), Denmark, Finland, France, Ghana, Greece, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Korea, Malawi, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Rhodesia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Venezuela (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1971). Millions of copies of the Society's two magazines *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* are sold throughout the world every year, and Witnessing takes place in over two hundred countries. The 1 January 2001 issue of *The Watchtower* recorded 126,297 Witnesses in Britain alone in 2000 and over ninety thousand congregations worldwide (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001).⁵ All the countries cited above have seen fairly substantial increases in membership over the last three decades, although in recent years the movement has remained static in Australia, Belgium, Britain, Germany, Scandinavia and Spain. The Witnesses are, however, continuing to expand in Eastern Europe, Latin America and many parts of Africa. Albania, Cambodia and Mongolia all claimed at least a 25 per cent increase in their total membership between 1998 and 1999.

James Beckford tells us that Russell founded his movement amidst a certain amount of dissatisfaction with what was regarded as 'modernism' among Protestant thinkers in late nineteenth-century America. Russell opposed this with what he considered to be fundamental religious truths – truths that he feared were being replaced by individual-oriented Arminianism.⁶ Beckford writes:

Russell chose precisely to oppose modernist philosophy, theology and ecclesiology by restating what he understood to be the unchanging principles of Christianity and by organizing a religious movement with

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the explicit goal of propagating those principles . . . His proposed solution to the twin problems of 'infidelity' and 'modernism' was to restore faith in the 'principle (that) seems to be disappearing in respect to religious matters',⁷ and his own set of teachings crystallized in the attempt to oppose error with truth and liberalism with 'principle'.

(Beckford 1975a: 3)

Beckford goes on to describe how a movement which became known as The Social Gospel played a significant role in convincing Russell that churches were becoming tainted with secular influences, and that the clergy had begun to neglect their primary duty of ministry for superficial reform. Although there are few sources that link Russell's way of thinking to the social, cultural and political climate of late nineteenth-century America, it would appear that his disillusionment with modern society in general and orthodox Christianity in particular led him to establish a monosemic, scriptural theology which he argued was rational and irrefutable. To this day, the Witnesses regard the international expansion of their movement as evidence of the gospel of the Kingdom having been preached throughout the whole world predicted in Matthew 24, and have countered what they perceive as the immoral conditions of modern liberal society with puritanical doctrines.

Watch Tower teachings

Watch Tower theology is the Society's most crucial resource, and devotees are expected to adhere to all doctrines established by the Governing Body. These doctrines pervade almost every conceivable sphere of life. The theology plays an important part in uniting devotees into a close-knit community and separating them symbolically from the outside world. It should be borne in mind, however, that Watch Tower theology cannot be summarised without doing gross injustice to its complexity. Were it to be presented in its entirety, the thoughts and questions that will be prompted by this book would undoubtedly receive more attention. In the pages that follow, accounts of the Witnesses' beliefs are intended only to illuminate a social phenomenon. It is the task of the theologian, not the sociologist, to engage in debates concerning scriptural interpretation.

Ever since the organisation was founded, there has been no mechanism for contributing to or criticising the canon of official teachings. The establishment of doctrines has been very carefully restricted to, and controlled by, the Society's Governing Body. This means that Jehovah's Witnesses around the world are recipients of an absolutist message rather than free-thinking agents who are actively involved in the formulation of religious ideas. What is significant about this is the effect of such a uniform set of doctrines on the Witnesses' social relations. Doctrines prescribed by an autocratic administration play a crucial role in the construction of a tightly bonded

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community. Where inconsistencies are noticed by devotees, personal questioning is abrogated in favour of the safe conviction that those responsible for the formulation of Watch Tower doctrines must also be able to deal effectively with any criticisms. Witnesses at grass roots level often argue that, if inconsistencies were real, then the organisation would not have gained the widespread popularity that it has. It is possible that this acquiescence has brought about even greater support than any serious attempt to deal with questions of doctrinal consistency would do. This is why an analysis of the symbolic meaning and presentation of doctrines serves a greater purpose for this book than details of the doctrines themselves.

The Witnesses see themselves as members not just of a religious movement but of one that monopolises the word of God. For this reason, they feel they are called upon to proselytise. Nonconformist ideas that were widespread during the period in which the Society was founded provided the basis for some of its teachings. The one imperative belief, however, is that the Bible, from beginning to end, is the inspired word of God. This means that all Watch Tower teachings are scripturally supported and most, but not all, the Bible is interpreted literally. The exceptions are the recorded visions in the Books of Daniel and Revelation. The rest the Witnesses regard as historically accurate, including the stories in the book of Genesis. The following transcript from an interview with a local elder conveys the importance of this biblical literalism. He is worth quoting at length:

The Bible is the fundamental foundation of doctrine and I would say to someone interested in our faith, 'Are you willing to adjust to it in order to be pleasing to God whom you have faith in?' So we would have a Bible study. For instance, I would say to you, 'Do you believe that God is a single person?', and, depending on how you answered, I would go to references in the Bible that would show you what our beliefs are. Now, when you've heard that clarification it's up to you whether you accept it or not, and then we would go to other angles of fact. I would say, 'When you die, what do you expect will happen to you?', and then I'd say, 'Well, let's see what the Bible has to say about death and why we die, and let's see if there's a different future to the one you envisage'. So, the main fundamentals are, 'Do you believe the Bible is the inspired word of God?' and 'Do you believe in the truth of its doctrines?' and 'What do you think happens when you die?', and then we'd turn to the Bible and give you the biblical answer, and if the Bible is the foundation of doctrine and action and way of life, are you willing to adjust to it in order to be pleasing to God? The Bible can be likened to a rule. The rule is a measurement which is internationally accepted, so the Bible becomes the measure of faith and therefore if you measure your conduct by the Bible's measure, then you're doing what Jesus said, you're in the truth. We're convinced we have the truth because the Bible says it's

the truth. Jesus in his speaking said, 'Thy word is truth' – that's from John 17 verse 17. Now when he said that, he was speaking of the Old Testament, because the New Testament hadn't been formulated. So when he said, 'Thy word is truth' or 'Your word is truth' as the modern language would say, we believe that the Bible is an accurate account of facts – historically, scientifically, genealogically and all the other angles of life, and so when Jesus said, 'The first Adam was made flesh', when he talks about 'as it was in the days of Noah' and when he talked about 'the patience of Job', he was making factual references, not allegories. So, when you go therefore to what Jesus referred to as 'the truth', the Old Testament, then you study its narrative, its history, you look at the genealogical lives which are very well recorded in the book of Luke – where Luke said, 'I want to trace things back to the beginning' and he goes back genealogically and ends up with Adam. So therefore, that's why we feel we've got the truth. We try to see things from the biblical viewpoint, which is God's viewpoint.

In contrast with the pick-and-mix philosophy of many of the New Age religions, this elder's comments demonstrate the absolutist nature of the authority to which he defers. Scriptural texts are used by the Witnesses as a constant frame of reference. World catastrophes such as war, famine, murder, environmental pollution, genocide and terrorism provide them with evidence in support of their theology. When ministering on the doorstep, it is not unusual for Watch Tower evangelists to refer to a recent world event and use biblical texts to explain its occurrence. These events are also taken as evidence of signs of the Last Days. It seems that the more the Witnesses hear about social and economic crises when they turn on their television sets, the more their monosemic view of the world is validated.

The Governing Body of the Society teaches its members that God has a personal name – Jehovah (Exodus 9: 16 is used to support this). The Witnesses' God is the God of the Old Testament, and they reject the Trinity doctrine, declaring it unscriptural. Although Jesus is regarded as inferior to Jehovah, it is believed that, together, both Jesus and Jehovah produced perfect spiritual beings that possessed free will. Satan was one such spirit. The Witnesses maintain that, since the deception in the Garden of Eden, Satan has misled the world, and the most important reason for the existence of humankind (as revealed in the Bible) is the vindication of Jehovah over Satan. Instead of destroying Satan, Jehovah decided to test the loyalty of the rest of humankind and to prove to the rest of creation that Satan was a liar. Jehovah has set a time limit of six thousand years for this challenge (the period would have ended in 1975 – the year in which the Society expected Armageddon), after which, the Witnesses will be rewarded for their loyalty to his divine plan.

The Witnesses believe that the Fall (recorded in Genesis) is responsible for death, but they reject the doctrine of the immortal soul. They do not,

however, believe that death is the end for everyone (although the Society does teach that this is so for those who fail to pass future millennial tests). They maintain that the reason we die is that our first parents rejected God's law, and human governments have been controlled by Satan ever since. Human misery is the result of Satan's power in a world in which he will soon be destroyed. The Witnesses claim that some kind of existence after death can be expected for most human beings and this will take the form of resurrection. They also believe that, since Pentecost, Jehovah has been preparing a 'Bride of Christ', a 'Little Flock', a body of 144,000 people (a figure mentioned in Revelation 14: 3) to share heavenly life and leadership. Thus, an anointed class of 144,000 Jehovah's Witnesses will win heavenly reward, while the remainder (along with non-Witnesses whom Jehovah deems worthy) will spend eternity in a different paradise here on earth. The righteous who are asleep in death will be raised from their graves (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1955b).

Like their founding fathers, Witnesses today continue to renounce the conventional Christian doctrine of hellfire on the basis that it is unscriptural and contrary to Jehovah's loving nature (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1989b: 168–75). They claim that hell is nothing more than an insensible state. To support this, they quote Ecclesiastes 9: 10, which describes both Jacob and Job in moments of depression wanting to enter Sheol; and Acts 2: 24–7, 31, and Romans 10: 6, 7, which mention that Jesus himself was in Hades. This, say the Witnesses, would be very difficult to understand if hell were a place of eternal torment. For them, hell is complete annihilation that Jesus will execute upon Satan and his demons at Armageddon, after which there will be no resurrection (Rogerson 1969: 93). Armageddon is the battle in which Christ will purge the earth of Satan's influence – a battle symbolising Jehovah's victory over evil. But Armageddon is not incompatible with the pragmatic nature of building new headquarters for the administration of Watch Tower activities and the continuation of all other features of daily life. Since the Witnesses believe that the just will be saved at Armageddon and that the wicked will be destroyed, the doctrine plays an important role in Watch Tower ministry. The promise of eternal bliss in the post-Armageddon Kingdom informs them that world chaos and life-threatening events are not meaningless but part of a larger system of order.

The Society forbids its members to participate in annual events such as Christmas, Easter, birthdays and national festivals. It teaches that Jehovah does not acknowledge these events since, wherever they are cited in the scriptures, they are always in the context of sin or apostasy. According to the Witnesses, the only two birthday celebrations mentioned in the Bible involve people who were not true believers. These are a pharaoh of Egypt and the Roman ruler Herod Antipas (Genesis 40: 18–22; and Mark 6: 21–8), whose celebrations ended in misery. Though they recognise that the birth of Christ is presented as a joyful occasion by the synoptic writers, devotees refuse to

partake in the celebration on the grounds that we do not know the precise date of an event that has, in any case, become tainted with secular images such as lights, trees, tinsel and mistletoe. As far as Easter is concerned, the egg is historically a pagan symbol for the celebration of the return of spring and the rabbit was an emblem of fertility, neither of which is connected with the resurrection of Christ (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1989b: 179). Furthermore, the Witnesses associate annual celebrations with immodest behaviour and excessive alcohol consumption – practices that they say are contrary to the counsel of Romans 13: 13, 'As in the daytime let us walk decently, not in revelries and drunken bouts, not in illicit intercourse and loose conduct, not in strife and jealousy.' This explains why, in addition to their eschatological beliefs, devotees adopt a puritanical lifestyle.

Despite their belief that Satan controls the world, the Witnesses do not generally go as far as members of religious organisations such as the Plymouth Brethren in isolating themselves completely from outsiders. None the less, their persistent refusal to engage in political activities such as voting in elections or joining pressure groups shows their disdain for secular society. The Witnesses continue to object to both jury and military service (on the grounds of pacifism and neutrality), and they do not support local or national charities. Although some devotees join social and leisure clubs and progress to post-compulsory education, Watch Tower officials encourage Kingdom interests and frown upon activities that detract from the Society's teachings. The Governing Body officially condemns behaviour that violates these teachings. Devotees are expected not to smoke and to drink alcohol only in moderation. The dualistic nature of Watch Tower theology means that, in principle, Witnesses everywhere are expected to adhere to a strict ascetic code. Sexual purity is high on the agenda of moral regulation. Adultery, fornication, masturbation and homosexuality all flout the organisation's teachings on sexual conduct. Anything other than highly controlled heterosexual activity is regarded as immoral, and sexual intercourse is confined to marriage. Drug abuse, smoking and the excessive consumption of alcohol, although not symbolically polluting, are believed to be physically polluting and offensive to Jehovah. Blood transfusions are both symbolically and physically polluting. These moral boundaries must be understood and accepted by every individual prior to baptism. In its advice to its younger members, the Governing Body has this to say:

The Bible describes a young man who meets a promiscuous woman. She kisses him and says: 'Do come, . . . let us enjoy each other with love expressions.' Then what happens? 'All of a sudden he is going after her, like a bull that comes even to the slaughter.' (Proverbs 7: 7–22) Obviously, this youth's passions were aroused not simply because his hormones were at work but because of what he saw and heard. Similarly, one young man admits: 'The root of my whole problem with

masturbation boiled down to what I put in my mind. I would watch TV programs that included immorality and in some cases watch programs on cable TV that would show nudity. Such scenes are so shocking that they stay with you. They would surface again in my mind, providing the mental fuel needed to engage in masturbation.'

(Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1989a: 200)

The tract goes on to explain how marriage is the only legitimate structure in which sexual desires can be satisfied and that masturbation endangers future happiness between a married couple, since the masturbator risks disregarding his or her spouse's needs. Implicit in the Society's rules of sexual purity is the notion that the body is a temple of God and must therefore be freed from moral contamination. Of all these sexual activities, homosexuality is regarded as probably the most vile and unnatural. In a much earlier tract, but one still widely used by devotees, we read:

masturbation can lead into homosexuality. In such instances the person, not satisfied with his lonely sexual activity, seeks a partner for mutual sex play. This happens much more frequently than you may realize. Contrary to what many persons think, homosexuals are not *born* that way, but their homosexual behaviour is learned. And often a person gets started when very young by playing with another's sexual parts, and then engaging in homosexual acts.

(Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1976: 39)

The passage continues with an anecdote about a young man who became 'hooked' on homosexual practices and was able to fight them only by realising that God viewed them as unnatural. As usual, the story ends with a biblical injunction against homosexuality: 'God's Word is very clear on this matter, saying: "Make no mistake: no fornicator or idolater, none who are guilty either of adultery or of homosexual perversion . . . will possess the kingdom of God"' (1 Corinthians 6: 9, 10).

I attended several Kingdom Hall meetings at which homosexuality was referred to as an unnatural perversion. At a *public talk* that was delivered by a highly enthusiastic young man who aspired to become a *pioneer* for the Society,⁸ I listened to a forty-five minute sermon about whether homosexuals are 'born that way' or if their sexual behaviour is learned. At this, as at most other Watch Tower sermons, reference was given to the widespread nature of homosexuality, but used only in a way that reinforced the organisation's own teachings – that is, that the world has become unashamedly wicked. There can be little doubt that it would be very difficult for someone with a gay orientation to remain a Witness without experiencing a great deal of injury to his or her personal identity, not least because the Society fails to distinguish between the homosexual condition and homosexual practice.⁹

Of those Watch Tower doctrines that condemn impurity, however, it is the refusal of blood for which the Witnesses are best renowned. This issue has undoubtedly earned the movement the most attention from the outside world (particularly from the courts), and yet, surprisingly, it is not one that often appears on the agenda at Kingdom Hall meetings. Nor is it discussed regularly by elders or even among devotees themselves. Blood prohibition is rarely selected as a key topic for a doorstep sermon, not only because it has given the Witnesses a negative profile (exacerbated over the years by the popular press) but also because it is unlikely to entice new recruits. The Society teaches that blood transfusions are strictly forbidden since blood is a source of life that is sacred to Jehovah. However, the Witnesses insist that most modern surgery can be performed successfully without the use of blood (the Governing Body has no objection to the use of non-blood plasma expanders). Watch Tower publications also warn against the risks of bacterial infection, transfusion reactions and Rhesus sensitisation in their condemnation of the practice. Genesis 9: 4 and Leviticus 17: 11–12 are among the scriptural references used by the Society in support of the doctrine, but it is Acts 15: 28–9 that is most frequently quoted in Watch Tower literature: 'For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity.'

Blood transfusions are thus considered physically and morally unclean. As in the case of sexual impurity, receiving blood is tantamount to polluting oneself as well as offending the community. This belief demonstrates the strict purity code that characterises so many Watch Tower teachings. The emergence of AIDS during the 1980s also provided the Witnesses with secular if macabre confirmation of the virtue of the doctrine as well as a powerful justification to abstain from blood on health grounds. It is also worth noting that, prior to its prohibition of blood transfusions in 1945, the Society objected to vaccinations and inoculations, although this never became an official Watch Tower teaching in quite the same way. Sociologist Richard Singelenberg (1990) argues that the patriotic period of the Second World War (ideologically anathematised by the movement) provided a breeding ground for the prohibition to crystallise. The American population was regularly incited to donate blood for its injured soldiers and, in this way, blood transfusions became part of nationalistic manifestation such as armies, national anthems and flags, to which the Witnesses were already vehemently opposed (519–20). The Society's condemnation of blood transfusions constitutes a rule of pollution and purity that is instrumental in creating structural boundaries. In a period marked by state opposition to Watch Tower doctrines (particularly in the USA), devotees needed to maintain their exclusivity in order to re-establish their universal collective identity and to detach themselves from orthodox Christianity. The Witnesses' refusal of blood is functionally analogous with Jewish dietary

laws – it confirms that sacrifice is part of the price of membership and reinforces internal cohesion by distinguishing between purity and pollution. Blood is a powerful symbol of allegiance simply because of its lack of meaning for other cultures.

Like most other religious movements, the Watch Tower Society imparts a theology that embraces a large number of highly complex issues and each member usually has at his or her disposal several tracts containing hundreds of biblical references which are used to substantiate beliefs. The doctrines outlined above are those which, in my view, pose the greatest challenge to the Witnesses when they find themselves in the company of non-members and, as such, provide the ethnographer with some important analytical material. I would wish to suggest not that the Witnesses can never circulate in secular environments without experiencing hostility from those who do not share their doctrines, but, rather, that their disillusionment with the world has important implications for how they manage their private beliefs in public. Whatever happens, the Witnesses' loyalty is first and foremost to an organisation that secures their salvation.

Internal organisation and control

As far as the communication of Watch Tower doctrines is concerned, all information is transmitted by central headquarters (that is, the Governing Body) through direct channels to individual members. The result is that Witnesses at all levels are kept aware of the activities of their brethren abroad. The Society's official mission is the key to understanding the relationships that hold devotees together in something that can be called a religious movement. This calls for an examination of the forces of integration and disintegration, the distribution of authority and the internal factors affecting growth and change. Such an exercise involves a description of the activities in which the Witnesses participate. As one might expect, there is a division of labour within the organisation as well as inevitable differences in status and roles.

The Witnesses make use of two corporations – namely, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania and New York, and the International Bible Students Association. The Pennsylvania Corporation has voting members who live in all parts of the world. They meet annually and elect or re-elect seven directors of the corporation, who themselves elect officers. The President of the corporation is therefore, elected not by popular vote but by the directors, who choose one of their members for the post. The International Bible Students Association is a London Corporation. It owns property in Britain and is responsible predominantly for British affairs. The President is responsible for the central administration of door-to-door evangelism and travels extensively to check on the progress of the movement worldwide. Doctrinal edicts are the responsibility of a larger body of Jehovah's Witnesses known as the *remnant class* – a spiritual

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committee comprising the President and other devotees. The Society has an extensive printing factory in New York, consisting of four large interconnected buildings in which millions of magazines, tracts and other publications are printed every year. This literature appears in nearly every language as well as in Braille. Factory workers are all fully baptised members of the community. There are also Branch Offices in London, which have a printing factory producing several million magazines each month. For administrative convenience, the country under the Branch Office is divided into *districts* that are further divided into *circuits*. At the time of writing, the Society also has three official internet websites.¹⁰

The Witnesses have no ordained clergy. They refer to all members as *ministers* or *publishers* (or, more personally, *brothers* and *sisters*). This is based on the belief that hierarchies are contrary to biblical teaching. However, closer examination reveals that there is a visible hierarchy, and Witnesses in over fifty thousand congregations throughout the world are assigned responsibilities. The chain of posts and the graduation of authority upwards from *Minister* (or *Publisher*) to *Pioneer*, *Special Pioneer*, *Circuit Overseer*, *District Overseer*, *Branch Official* and *Governing Body* suggest a complicated system of command and promotion. Strange as it may seem to outsiders, all positions are viewed as positions of service with no visible or official exaltation of individuals. At every level of the organisation, those in authority oversee those below them, which means that every Witness is under official surveillance. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to argue that the movement does not contain any informal structures, since kinship relations often facilitate a flow of information outside official channels. Beckford (1975a) argues that kinship links have helped the organisation to expand without threatening the efficient pursuit of goals. Legitimation of official authority is claimed on the grounds that the Society acts as Jehovah's earthly agent and as Christ's instrument for the forthcoming Kingdom.

In sociological terms, the Watch Tower Society is Durkheimian in that there can be no division between God and society. In such a system, the sense of self-discovery or self-exaltation is minimised – often even non-existent, as conveyed in the following passage from a Watch Tower publication:

There are, of course, many factors involved in being a faithful servant of God. But basic to all of them is reliance on Jehovah and his provisions. How do we show such reliance? One way is by attending congregation meetings. The Scriptures urge us not to neglect them. (Heb. 10: 23–5) Those who have continued to be faithful witnesses of Jehovah, whether in the face of public apathy or of persecution, have exerted themselves to be regular in attending meetings with fellow worshippers. At these meetings our knowledge of the Scriptures is increased, but it is not mere fascination with new things that draws us . . . We are drawn close to our Christian brothers in united worship and we personally are strengthened to continue doing God's will. Jehovah's

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spirit provides direction through the congregation, and by means of that spirit Jesus is in our midst when we assemble in his name. (Rev. 3: 6; Matt. 18: 20)

(Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1983b: 170–1)

This passage is rich in detail about the all-powerful congregation over the subordinated self. Although devotees recognise that each human life comes from Jehovah, individual exaltation is given little space. The individual Witness who attends meetings regularly and ministers truth with passion can never pursue personal interests. Many riches await those who are prepared to sacrifice their metaphysical curiosity and personal innovation for the public symbolic system that has stamped its authority on every member of the congregation. In Durkheimian terms, success in the world is incompatible with the given categories of truth in which the internal consciousness of the private person matches that of the collective whole. Witnesses who spend the most number of hours in ministry work and become pioneers or elders are admired and respected for their loyalty and commitment. Individuals derive satisfaction from the knowledge that the community has benefited spiritually from their efforts, while personal success is considered self-indulgent. The following excerpt from an interview with an elder confirms how difficult it is for the Society to allow individual Witnesses to cherish their own achievements:

Involvement in business isn't discouraged except if it's going to overrun and remove your time and energy for spiritual things. You see, Jesus did give an illustration about a man who had grown fat and wealthy and he decided to pull down his barns and build some more barns, 'cos he thought it'd be nice to have some more barns. But Jesus said, 'Beware', and, that very night, the man died. Now many of our younger people do begin to enter into business and that's OK provided it doesn't injure their spiritual activities. Now as far as education is concerned, the organisation through its literature tells our young people, 'Get as much education as you can while you're at school'. Now when it comes to college and university, caution is needed because of the philosophies that can be anti-spiritual and association can be as well.

This elder's comments show how devotees are strongly advised to 'seek first the Kingdom', and there seems to be great pride expressed among active members when their children decide to leave school and become full-time evangelists (or *pioneers*). Financial success can never compensate for one's status as a Witness. The separation of oneself from the community could well mark the beginning of breaking away from it. Unquestioning loyalty of this kind has undoubtedly helped to play down doctrinal inconsistency. The failed prophecies of 1914, 1918, 1925 and, most significantly, 1975 could no longer be taught after these years came and went, and yet the movement

has since managed to expand. At the same time, certain doctrines were introduced long after the Society was founded, only to be phased out years later. Examples of these include the ban on vaccinations and the prohibition of organ transplants between 1967 and 1980 (I have also mentioned that blood transfusions were not prohibited until 1945). The movement has been successful in persuading its members that such change comes from the Almighty who never tires of teaching them new things: 'the path of the righteous ones is like the bright light that is getting lighter and lighter until the day is firmly established' (Proverbs 4: 18).

It could well be that many Witnesses have not yet been in the organisation long enough to realise that 'new lights' have a habit of growing dimmer, while old ones are sometimes switched back on! For example, in its guidelines on sexual conduct within marriage in the early 1970s, the Governing Body prohibited certain forms of stimulation, foreplay and intercourse; but in 1978 it advised that it was inappropriate for congregational elders to attempt to control marital intimacy. In 1983, the pendulum swung back when an article in *The Watchtower* of 15 March issued an 'amplification and adjustment in understanding' of the 1978 guidelines, asserting anew the Society's right to examine sexual relations and to impose sanctions, including *disfellowshipping* (the official term for the expulsion of dissident members), on those whose marital behaviour was considered immodest. For Witnesses who have lived through these inconsistencies, leaving the Watch Tower community poses a more painful option than doubting its version of reality. As I will show in Chapter 8, the part that such inconsistencies might play in causing members of other religious organisations to abandon their beliefs is missing in the case of the Witnesses, many of whose loved ones are also members. Loyalty, emotional dependence and a strong sense of community have enabled the movement to survive. Former Witness David Reed (1989a) also suggests that the main reason for the Society's success is that it is able to impart a certain mystique about the authority of the presidency. Until recently, members of the Governing Body remained completely anonymous to Witnesses at grass roots level. Their photographs were never to be seen in Kingdom Halls or in any of the organisation's literature. Witnesses everywhere continue to believe that God is using the Governing Body as his channel of communication, and any correspondence for which it is responsible is endorsed only by the Society's official rubber stamp. The role attributed to the Watch Tower presidency thus carries the same symbolic significance for the Witnesses as the papacy for Roman Catholics.

The structure of the movement and the intense loyalty demanded of each individual at every level demonstrates the characteristics of totalitarianism identified by Friedrich: namely, an elaborate total ideology making chiliastic claims with a promise of a utopian future, a single mass party, a monopoly of the means of communication and central direction and control of activity through bureaucratic co-ordination (Friedrich 1954). Although, historically,

totalitarianism has been heavily over-laden with ideology, the Watch Tower Society controls millions of people who are denied freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and freedom of conscience yet, paradoxically (or so it would seem to the outsider), devotees regard themselves as free, and non-members as oppressed or 'in shackles'. When people join the Watch Tower Society, they must adhere to its teachings, which means subjecting themselves to the theocratic rule of God himself and to judicial committees that claim the right to function as a literal government. In the Witnesses' eyes, these committees supersede secular courts since they act as divine judge and jury over eternal destiny (Reed 1989a). Why, then, do the Witnesses submit to this kind of authority?

Introducing modernity

I explained in Chapter 1 how, despite its international success, the Watch Tower Society has been largely neglected by academic writers. Other than the small amount of literature that addresses Watch Tower conversion and recruitment, most of the remaining sources focus on tension of one form or another between the Witnesses and secular states. With the exception of the historical examples of persecution of Watch Tower evangelists (which was often a result of their own attacks on official authorities), this tension mainly derives from the Witnesses' refusal to participate in activities pertaining to citizenship. Though some of the material raises important issues concerning the relationship between the Watch Tower community and secular society, most of this is written from a macro perspective and fails to examine the strategies which the Witnesses adopt for managing their beliefs in the various contexts of their daily lives. In addition to this, there is a serious shortage of academic literature on defection. Although Botting and Botting (1984) comment on the long-term effects of Watch Tower theology on former members, their discussion centres on those who have been disfellowshipped rather than on voluntary defectors. Most of the available material on defection is autobiographical and therefore lacks sociological analysis. There is, of course, always the potential for further research in every substantive area of social science, but by far my biggest concern about the current sociological literature on the Watch Tower Society is that there is little or no material on the relationship between the Witnesses and modernity. This is not to suggest that research to date is wholly empirical, but, where academics have attempted to theorise the current position of the movement, it is usually in relation to conversion and/or continuation of membership.¹¹ Search as I may in the sociological, anthropological and historical material, I find no attempt to link the beliefs and activities of the Witnesses to the general characteristics of modern secular society. This is where I believe the concept of modernity is useful.

The literature on modernity is, as anyone who has ever consulted it knows, abstract and dense. The concept has no simple definition and there

is very little consensus among sociologists about when modern societies broke with traditional ones.¹² Modernity is complex and multi-layered and involves contrasting and contradictory principles. In the following account, I have outlined a number of issues that provide a backdrop for my analysis. Although the content of this chapter is by no means a blueprint of the modernity thesis, the literature emphasises three main spheres of modern life – the economic, the political and the cultural. Broadly speaking, the economic sphere involves the dominance of industrial capitalism; the political sphere involves the rise of liberal democracy and the consolidation of the nation state; and in the cultural sphere rationality replaces traditional authority (Jones 1993). Other literature focuses on the impact of these structural changes on the construction of modern identities (see, for example, Giddens 1991, Hall and Gieben 1992, Weeks 1992). More dynamical, perhaps, is the claim that the modern age is being replaced with a new social order which is characterised by flexible forms of technology (that is, post-Fordism), globalisation and a cultural ethos containing a radically new set of art forms, lifestyles and values.¹³ Bauman, however, sees modernity as:

a historical period that began in Western Europe with a series of profound social-structural and intellectual transformations of the seventeenth century and achieved its maturity: (1) as a cultural project with the growth of the Enlightenment; (2) as a socially accomplished form of life with the growth of industrial (capitalist and later communist) society.

(Bauman 1991: 4)

There can be little doubt that industrialisation has altered the religious landscape in the West. Some modernity theorists suggest that capitalism has had a corrosive effect on our sense of moral order.¹⁴ The rapid expansion in economic scale bolstered by technological innovations (particularly throughout the twentieth century) gave rise to the enormous loss of confidence in environmental matters and the subsequent emergence of a mood of uncertainty – a mood in which religion has taken on new and sometimes unexpected roles. On the one hand, market demands have required larger economic units in order to expand internationally while, on the other, people have felt inclined to reassert local and national identities in their search for psychological security. These contradictory economic and cultural pressures have brought about some significant changes in religious expression. Sociologist Paul Heelas argues that one of the most important consequences of modernity is the decline in mainstream religion and the emergence of a society in which the individuals are free to negotiate their own identities as consumers. For Heelas, modernity lies at the heart of the New Age movement, which he defines as:

the faith which has been placed in obtaining progress by way of scientific expertise, together with the application of reason to the management of social and individual affairs; the faith which has come to be placed in the promises of consumer culture; the loss of faith in religion, in particular in northern Europe.

(Heelas 1996: 135–6)

Similarly, Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sachs invites us to think about the consequences of the transition from traditional communities, where life chances, beliefs and identities were narrowly circumscribed, to a modern situation in which lifestyles, relationships and careers are open to a multiplicity of options:

Modernity is the transition from fate to choice. At the same time, it dissolves the commitments and loyalties that once lay behind our choices. Technical reason has made us masters of matching means to ends. But it has left us inarticulate as to why we should choose one end rather than another. The values that once led us to regard one as intrinsically better than another – and which gave weight to words like 'good' and 'bad' – have disintegrated, along with the communities and religious traditions in which we learned them.

(Sachs 1990: 6)

All these writers suggest that rationalisation has led to the increased differentiation of social institutions. Industrial societies with high levels of technology have seen the freeing of communities from religiously sanctioned controls and the emergence of autonomous individuals driven by their own values. The loss of community and the rise of individualism are regarded by modernity theorists as essential features of secularisation – a process which arguably has its roots in the 'modern' discourses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁵ Since then, modernity has become identified with major changes associated with industrial capitalist societies including the rise of the secular state, the expansion of a capitalist economy, the formation of classes, the emergence of distinctive patriarchal relations between men and women, racial divisions and 'the transition from fate to choice'. Over a long period of time, so we are told, these processes brought about a materialistic social order governed by individualistic, instrumental and rational impulses. These historical trends and changing social patterns resulted in a variety of lifestyles and a huge proliferation of consumer products. Life chances both within and between nation states have since become enormously complex and asymmetrical. Throughout the twentieth century, modernity became a progressively global phenomenon (Hall and Gieben 1992).

Davie (1994) offers a historical analysis of religious expression in her examination of the relationship between the ordering of societies and the

cultural forms with which they have become associated. Though she acknowledges that there are disagreements among historians about the origins of modernity, Davie argues that the shift from pre-industrial to production-based societies made heavy demands on organised religion. Migration away from the countryside to what eventually became large industrial conurbations brought about lower levels of religious practice than had previously been the case (particularly among the working classes) across the whole of Western Europe. Davie suggests that this was mainly because of the increasing detachment of many people from their previous churches. In the case of the sizeable minority who, for whatever reason, were able to find employment, Sunday in its traditional form as a day of rest had become like any other – a day of struggle. Davie goes on to explain how, since the eighteenth century, the scrutiny of all knowledge has led to widespread pessimism in both Eastern and Western societies. The undermining of the traditional formulas of the earlier period infected religious and secular life to the extent that creeds of both kinds began to be replaced by continuous self-questioning. As far as Britain is concerned, Davie argues that this has caused the mutation rather than the disappearance of religious life in a society which plays a crucial role in a global economy but which is still rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.¹⁶ Although Davie believes that the sacred will continue to persist, the forms in which it will do so will be fundamentally different from those of previous times. The various manifestations of religion at the beginning of the twenty-first century reflect the age of heterogeneity and self-fulfilment described by postmodernists. In short, individual freedom has led to the adoption of beliefs that are as unconventional as they are diverse.

The weakening of tradition and the rise of individualism have also blurred the boundaries between the public and the private spheres, both in our emotional lives and in our relationships with wider society. Individuals have become increasingly aware of their own ability (and often their own need) to construct new identities in a world which is atomised and fluid.¹⁷ One does not need to have read modernity literature to realise that this is a condition that has caused some considerable concern to current scholars, as expressed in the following passage by Gehlen:

Any individual transplanted into our times from the vigorously concrete cultures of antiquity, of the Middle Ages, or even of the baroque era, would find most astonishing the conditions of physical proximity, and the lack of structure and form, in which the people of our time are forced to vegetate; and would wonder at the elusiveness and abstractness of our institutions, which are mostly 'immaterial states of affairs'.

(Gehlen 1980: 74)

Gehlen's commentary hints strongly at a culture without shared meanings. Particularly significant (at least for the purpose of this book) is the effect that

the 'elusiveness' to which he refers have had on religious beliefs. The abstract nature of social institutions and the absence of an overarching religious ideology has left us increasingly alone in an impersonal (some might say *heartless*) world (Lasch 1980, 1991). With the weakening of mainstream Christianity, monosemic beliefs have become ever more obscure and difficult to uphold, and this has led to significant changes in religious behaviour. The plurality of religious movements indicates that faith is now well and truly a matter of choice, and is no longer part of one's membership of society. Davie (1994) suggests that the majority of people lack discipline in their spiritual orientation in a society in which it is common to believe without belonging. This modern form of religious expression allows the individual to select at will from a variety of goods that can be tailored to meet his or her lifestyle.¹⁸ Faced with so many rival movements – traditional, cultic and postmodern – no single religion can ever be the final arbiter of truth and falsity. In the absence of clear divisions and boundaries, a variety of religious beliefs and practices exist alongside monosemic and revelatory doctrines. The religious eclecticism of the modern world operates on the basis that we can *all* discern reality and that all versions of it are equally valid, as Bruce explains:

Like the hominid creature drawn on charts of human evolution, who starts on the left-hand side as a small hunched hairy beast and gradually grows and sheds hair until he turns into the sleek human on the right, modernization has seen the individual grow and stand erect. From a stunted and ill-formed beast, subordinate to his Gods as he was subordinate to his political masters, the individual has risen in confidence, claiming first the right to make choices in ever-expanding spheres of behaviour and now insisting, . . . on the right to define reality and then, because the definitions clash, asserting relativism as the practical attitude.

(Bruce 1995: 134)

The relativist's insistence that we are all now released from social constraints and free to decide what counts as knowledge poses a threat to those who extol rational thinking.¹⁹ But the coexistence of individual sovereignty and rationality represents one of the contradictions to which modernity theorists draw our attention. The modernists' belief that it is both possible and desirable to produce valid knowledge has long been recognised as one of the main sources of dispute between modernity and postmodernity theorists.²⁰ However, modernity writers also contend that self-authoritarian, pluralistic societies are likely to undermine notions of rational knowledge. They call this condition *anti-foundationalism*. Individuals who yearn security in the modern world of contradictions often experience personal and emotional crises (Giddens 1990, 1991, Wagner 1994). The Watch Tower Society has managed to offer its devotees a meaningful identity at a

time when free thought has shaken the very foundations on which substantive value systems are built. To the Witnesses, the modern world presents risk – risk of moral contamination, risk of physical harm and, ultimately, risk of eternal damnation. So what is the significance of their monotheistic system with its literal interpretation of scripture and non-negotiable prescription for salvation in a world where polysemic beliefs and absolutist cosmologies occupy the same stage?

Certainty in an uncertain world: the Witnesses' response to ambiguity

In his article on the modern world in the *Guardian* on 3 April 1997, journalist Douglas Rushkoff commented:

It's a place where nothing is fixed and everything is uncertain. Facts are reduced to conjecture. Linear arguments are deconstructed into discontinuous obscurity. Stories no longer have absolute endings. Authorities have no advantage. Autonomy is the only rule. The holy maxim: empower thyself. So let the celebrations begin. We are liberated from linear thinking and its determinist conclusions. Now we can live in a reality where anything can happen. We don't need heroes, saints, martyrs or messiahs – especially not ones who enforce their messages with a terrifying day of judgment to divide the saved from the damned.

In this passage, Rushkoff offers a concise description of the anti-foundational society. But while the days of catechisms, commandments and absolutes may be regarded as a thing of the past for religions which allow individuals to construct their own identities, the Watch Tower Society claims to offer its adherents the same degree of existential security in the twenty-first century as it did 130 years ago. By renouncing modern notions of individual freedom and liberty, the Witnesses have won recruits year by year and managed to maintain their exclusivity throughout the world. The real problem that modernity poses for the Witnesses is the problem of *choice*.

For sociologist Peter Wagner (1994), modernity is haunted by ambiguity. Wagner argues that although the Enlightenment celebrated freedom and autonomy, modern societies have never allowed liberation in its fullest sense to take place. The state, for example, has always had to safeguard what have been regarded as important objectives of the modern project as well as maintain social order. Far from fulfilling the humanist promise of self-realisation, it has had to restrict practices and discipline individuals to such an extent that total human emancipation has become untenable. At the same time that societies have become marked by difference and plurality, the decline in traditional authority has made the construction of modern identities an ever more precarious and anxious exercise. One of the paradoxes of modernity is that the disembedding of people from their

social and cultural contexts at the end of the nineteenth century led to a situation in which the autonomy of one individual meant the exploitation of another. Wagner argues that this is part of the general ambiguity of modern *reasoning* and modern *practice* (1974: 22–4). The capacity to choose new ways of life has weakened tradition to such a degree that we are now living in what Berger calls 'the terror of chaos' (Berger 1977: 109), and it is against these uncertainties of modernity that the Witnesses seem to have launched their appeal. One way of surviving in a pluralistic world is to select one particular fragment of what is on offer and transform it into an all-encompassing worldview. Joining the Watch Tower community enables individuals to eschew those secular institutions that weaken identity. In this sense, the Witnesses have successfully constructed certainty and reduced the risks caused by confusion. But on what cultural resources have they drawn in order to achieve this?

As far as the *certainties* of modernity are concerned, Heelas contends that the enterprise culture of Thatcher and Reagan throughout the 1980s created a climate in which it was impossible (at least in principle) not to think of individuals as more autonomous and better able to take control of their own lives than ever before. This self-empowerment marks a shift away from the influence of traditional, overarching systems towards one's own inner sources of authority and responsibility. But if self-authority is an indicator of certainty, the Watch Tower Society hardly exemplifies it. The Witnesses' continued deference to external authority suggests that they are in no way inclined to gravitate in the same direction as those involved in the New Age. This is not to suggest, however, that the Witnesses' worldview is the complete antithesis to modernity (their movement was, after all, founded as a result of the rejection of orthodox Christianity) for, although world-renouncing tenets undoubtedly curtail life options, modernity theorists do not deny that even some so-called moderns continue to hold absolutist beliefs. In exercising their freedom to choose a post-traditional lifestyle, the Witnesses have solved the problem of finding ontological security in a world of uncertainty. For them, absolutism is the essence of a meaningful identity that eradicates risk and ambiguity with one fell swoop.

The Witnesses' version of truth is the answer to modern doubt. Reactions that advocate the complete transformation of society are part of a phenomenon which sociologists call *fundamentalism*.²¹ This is a highly problematic concept (not least because it is used in a pejorative sense to stigmatise beliefs and behaviour that are considered widely unpopular or of which people disapprove), but can, if used accurately, help to illuminate the status of various social movements in the modern world. Some writers regard fundamentalism as a product of late capitalism, and it can take a variety of forms, both religious and non-religious (Davie 1994, 1995, Harris 1994).²² The available literature suggests that fundamentalist movements arise out of conditions of uncertainty. Generally speaking, it is the passion and simplicity of fundamentalism that gives it its appeal. Fundamentalists are

known for their preoccupation with an all-encompassing explanation of the world and their defence of essential truths. According to Davie, they evoke the reaffirmation of these truths 'within a situation that has been profoundly disturbed by the pressures of an expanding global economy and the effects that this has had on social, political or ideological life' (Davie 1995: 2-3).²³ Fundamentalism can thus be seen as a by-product of the modern age. Religious fundamentalists see God and the devil as active forces in everyday life and ascribe the most mundane events and decisions to divine authority. Most believe that we are not far from the final judgement where God will intervene, ridding the world of all its ills and rewarding the righteous with everlasting life. The main goal of religious fundamentalism is to protect society from moral decay. This is usually accompanied by a programme of radical reform. Fundamentalists often deliver public sermons to warn nation states – be they communist or secular humanist – of the dangerous forces of atheistic and liberal thinking. Their level of activity ranges from supporting right-wing causes to engaging in direct political action against certain social and moral issues (Davie 1995: 3-4).

The sociological literature on fundamentalism provides an appropriate starting point for an analysis of the Watch Tower movement. The Witnesses' literal interpretation of the Bible can be seen as a retreat to the certainties of fundamentalism by a people who are threatened by the loss of a stable sense of self. Hunter (1991) argues that, in the case of religious fundamentalism, sacred texts play an essential part in sealing beliefs and activities with the approval of divine authority. 'Given the moral and religious ambiguities that seem intrinsic to modern and post-modern thought and aesthetics, the text becomes the source of all religious and moral authority, establishing safe, definable and absolute standards of life and thought' (157-8).

The belief that the inerrant word of God has been correctly translated from original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts has earned Watch Tower theologians a deference not unlike that of papal infallibility. As far as the Witnesses are concerned, religious conviction is not just about attending meetings at their local place of worship, or even believing in the existence of an omniscient being; it is about substantiating beliefs with tangible evidence. Scriptural literalism signifies a *revealed* truth that guards against polysemic beliefs by presenting a one true interpretation of the Bible that holds good for the whole of humanity. Polysemy would seriously undermine the exegeses of Watch Tower interpreters.²⁴ The certainty that devotees construct from scriptural texts is a proverbial stick with which to beat moral danger. These texts enable them to consult Jehovah on every aspect of their lives.

Although religious fundamentalism is a relatively recent phenomenon, there can be no denying its tension with modernity. Bruce (1990) argues that fundamentalism is never likely to be a major social force because of the ideological dominance of science, technology and humanism, all of which are better able to accommodate cultural diversity. Fundamentalist tenets are

in direct conflict with most definitions of liberalism, and liberal thinking is anathema to the Witnesses as they step up their appeal for a puritanical lifestyle based on literal biblical interpretation. Though they are a product of modern conditions, the Witnesses have also successfully resisted some of the very features of the modern world theorised by the above scholars. Only an organisation as highly insulated as the Watch Tower Society would be able to enforce fundamentalist doctrines and a puritanical code of conduct with such a high degree of conformity. The outside world is clearly a world that requires careful management on the part of the Witnesses, who jeopardise their eternal salvation when they cross the organisation's ascetic boundaries. Millenarian beliefs act as a defence against those forces that threaten the fabric of the community. But since the Witnesses represent only a tiny percentage of the world's population, no empirical study of their social relations can constitute either an acknowledgement or a devastating critique of the modernity thesis. What such a study can do, however, is help us to understand how they perceive the world, and what they are able to offer prospective recruits.