

STATEMENT DJ-601

PARADISE POSTPONED...AND POSTPONED: Why Jehovah's Witnesses Have a High Mental Illness Level

by Jerry Bergman

Summary

A review of scientific literature shows that the rate of mental illness among Jehovah's Witnesses is considerably above average. Statistical information varies partly because the extant research has been conducted on different populations at different time periods. Several major factors stand out as harmful to Witness mental health. Not only do persons with emotional problems tend to join the Witnesses, but also the Watchtower teachings and its subculture adversely affect the mental health of those involved.

The Watchtower has carefully cultivated a public image of a devout, God-fearing people, determined to ferret out God's truth from the Scriptures and fully live their lives according to it.[1] Behind this optimistic vision lies a nightmare that has resulted in a rash of mental illness and social problems considerably higher than that found in virtually every other American religion. Over 10 million people are now either active Jehovah's Witnesses or studying to become so**.** The nightmare that these millions of people enter could have been avoided if they were aware of the deception and entrapping quagmire of the Watch-tower.[2] The reasons for this Watchtower tragedy are complex and can be explored only briefly in this article.

THE SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Especially since 1975 failed to usher in God's kingdom on earth, as the Watchtower had predicted, numerous problems in Jehovah's Witness congregations have received popular media and scholarly attention. Several academic studies have explored the problem of mental illness among the Witnesses.[3] I will briefly review some of them by year, beginning with the oldest.

Rylander's Study

In 1946, Gosta Rylander investigated a sample of conscientious objectors imprisoned in Sweden. Of the 135 randomly selected cases, 126 were Jehovah's Witnesses. Of these 126, Rylander diagnosed 51 as neurotic, 42 as psychotic, 32 as mentally retarded, and 5 as brain-damaged (some cases were in two or more categories).[4] Diagnosis was made solely on the basis of behavior that was clearly pathological, such as irrational paranoia or severe long-term depression. Rylander also concluded from the subjects' medical records and his interviews that their pathological states were commonly evident before conversion, and that the Watchtower's influence was often further detrimental to their mental health, sometimes severely so.

About four percent of the eligible Swedish population was judged psychologically "unfit" for military service, and the corresponding figure for Witnesses was 21 percent, or five times greater. This is close to the same ratio later

found by John Spencer,[5] whose diagnosis of "psychotic" or "neurotic" was made on the basis of mental hospital admission screening. Few of the cases in Rylander's study were marginal Witnesses, and most were active in spreading the sect's doctrine.

Rylander also concluded that individual Witnesses tended to be burdened with a variety of serious concerns and often joined the sect in an effort to solve their problems. Although the results of this study are not fully applicable to today's situation, many of his conclusions are still relevant.[6] A major difference is that the Witnesses are now more middle-class and less socially rejected. But many Witnesses, especially those living in developing nations, still experience the same problems that Rylander reported.

The First American Study

In 1949, in the first study on American Witness mental health, M. J. Pescor diagnosed as psychotic over seven percent of his total sample of 177 young males imprisoned due to obeying the Watchtower's prohibition against complying with military regulations.[7] The sample was obtained by interviewing all selective service violators admitted to the Medical Center for Federal Prison in Springfield, Missouri during the study. The level of Witness psychosis in his sample was about 17 times higher than that for the population as a whole. An astounding seven percent were diagnosed psychotic; four percent had other mental abnormalities; and fully one-quarter were rated socially maladjusted. Of Pescor's sample, 16 percent were on hospital status and 44 percent of these were diagnosed psychotic.

Montague and Other Researchers

Licensed therapist Havor Montague monitored the admissions to state and private mental hospitals and local mental health clinics in Ohio from 1972 to 1976.[8] From this study of 102 cases, he estimated, "The mental illness rate of JWs is approximately 10 to 16 times higher than the rate for the general, nonWitness population...about 10% of the publishers (full members) in the average congregation are in serious need of professional help... [although they are often] able to hide this fact quite well, especially from outsiders."[9] From his intensive interviews with Witness patients and others, Montague concluded that persons who had emotional problems were attracted to the Witnesses, but involvement also caused many of the emotional problems that they suffered. This is evident from the fact that many with problems reported they were far happier after they left.

Another study was completed in 1985 by Robert Potter as part of a Ph.D. thesis on religion and mental health.[10] He concluded that there exists "a strong positive correlation between Witness membership and clinical schizophrenia." The same year, Ursula Sack evaluated the effect of religion on the mental health of select clients for her Ph.D. dissertation.[11] The clients she utilized furnished an enormous amount of insight into the pathological processes of the Watchtower, which complemented the results reached in earlier studies.

In addition, a 1985 German study by Elmer Koppl[12] came to similar conclusions, as did a study by Norwegian psychologist, Kjell Totland.[13] Using Oakland County, Michigan court records from 1965 to 1973, this writer found that not only is the mental illness rate above average, but the suicide and crime rates are also high, especially aggressive crimes against persons.[14]

WHY ARE MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS SO GREAT?

Many reasons exist for the mental health problems among Witnesses, but research has found the following to be the most important.

Changes in Policy

The Watchtower is in a perpetual state of doctrinal change, often flip-flopping as many as three or four times on a single issue. Nowhere has this been so tragic as in its medical teachings. During the 1930s and 1940s, the Watchtower taught that vaccinations not only were ineffective, but also were a "direct violation" of God's law.[15]

Then in the early 1950s vaccinations were up to one's conscience. Now, however, the Watchtower publishes articles extolling the virtues of vaccinations and the many lives they have saved.

Another medical issue is organ transplants. In late 1961 they were specifically ruled acceptable, but in 1967 they were banned.[16] Even cornea and kidney transplants were pronounced wrong because they were considered to be cannibalism. Then in 1980 organ transplants were ruled a matter of conscience,[17] except bone marrow transplants (because bone was a source of blood). In 1984, however, even bone marrow transplants were approved.

In 1909 the Watchtower specifically stated that the Jewish prohibition against eating blood was not considered law for Christians, but in 1961 it declared that taking a blood transfusion was grounds for disfellowshipping.[18] The Watchtower now teaches that "if a court authorized transfusion seems likely...[a witness must] put forth strenuous efforts to avoid a violation of God's law on blood [and if] authorities...consider him a law-breaker or make him liable to prosecution...the Christian could view it as suffering for the sake of righteousness."[19]

The present Watchtower teaching is clear: Witnesses are to die rather than submit to a transfusion, and this includes allowing their children to die. Yet even in this area the Watchtower society has changed. At one time use of all blood products and blood fractions for any purpose was condemned. Now Witnesses may accept albumin, globulins, factor VIII, factor IX, and even circulating blood. Furthermore, the ban on blood fractions for hemophiliacs was lifted in 1978.[20] Blood serums are now approved because those for viral hepatitis rabies, tetanus, diphtheria, and others contain only "a tiny amount" of blood.[21] Yet the Watchtower also teaches Witnesses are to be faithful "in little things," and many view these exceptions as hypocritical.

According to Carson Walker, religion editor for the Sioux Falls *Argus Leader*, "Twenty-five years ago, Gary Busselman watched his wife, Delores, die of leukemia. As Jehovah's Witnesses, the couple did not believe in blood transfusions or a bone-marrow transplant.... Today, Busselman thinks the refusal of those medical procedures was wrong and he wants to help others who might have experienced similar tragedies."[22] He added that "she died in 1971 and in 1980 they changed their rule and members since then can get transplants." Guilt and anger commonly result from the belief that one's spouse or child died because of following a doctrine that was later admitted by the church to be wrong.

The Watchtower Theocracy

Another major cause for disillusionment among Witnesses is that they are taught that their organization is a theocracy, specifically run by God. Those inside the Watchtower organization are the only true servants of God, and all of those outside are evil persons soon to be destroyed at Armageddon.

Yet many are aware of the numerous cases of Witnesses who have done horrible things. A recent example is that of two formerly devout young Witnesses, the Freeman brothers, who "used to get along with their parents...and [were nice boys]" but murdered their mother Brenda, 48, their father Dennis, 54, and their brother Eric, 11.[23] The boys, Brian, 17, and David, 16, both pleaded guilty to lesser charges and received life in prison. This horrendous crime received international attention and no doubt reminded many Witnesses of other infamous Witness murder cases.

Prophecy Failure

Many Witnesses harbor a deep-seated fear — fueled by a long history of doctrinal reversals and prophetic failure — that the Watchtower is a false religious organization. Since this idea has earth-shaking implications for followers of that organization, they refuse to explore their fears, preferring to ration-alize or suppress rather than acknowledge and deal with them.

The most recent drastic prophecy change concerned the former Watchtower teaching that the countdown to Armageddon commenced in 1914, and World War I was a major sign that Christ would very soon establish his millennial kingdom on earth.[24] The organization also taught that the generation that saw 1914 would see Armageddon and the New World. Then a November 1995 Watchtower release, according to *Newsweek*'s Kenneth Woodward, announced that "all millennial bets are off...the sect's leaders quietly acknowledged that Jesus was right in the first place, when he said that 'no one knows the day or the hour.'"[25] The Watchtower has been wrong about

almost every single prediction it has ever made, and this realization is especially traumatic when a person takes stock of what he or she has sacrificed to become a Jehovah's Witness.

The Watchtower organization once discouraged marrying and having a family, teaching that Armageddon was too close to risk having children. In 1941 the Watchtower published a book entitled *Children,* showing how people can "please God" by acquiring "the right kind of knowledge."[26] The book's purpose was primarily to convince the reader that only the Watchtower is God's organization, and it is only by following it that everlasting life can be obtained.[27] Woven within this message is the story of John and Eunice, who decide not to marry but instead to serve the Watchtower full-time. They conclude that they will someday have children, but not until after Armageddon. "Armageddon is surely near," John said. "We can well defer our marriage until lasting peace comes to the earth. Now we must add nothing to our burdens, but be free and equipped to serve the Lord...Eunice, my decision is made."[28]

Eunice and John are now in their 70s, still waiting for Armageddon, which in 1941 was prophesied to occur very soon. Witnesses who chance upon these older publications can become deeply disturbed by the realization that the Watchtower had deceived and betrayed its earlier followers. Witnesses who lived during the time when these things were written have often been especially bitter because they sacrificed for what turned out to be a false hope.

Those who are not part of the Watchtower often do not understand the critical significance that failed prophecy and erroneous teachings have in the lives of Witnesses. Watchtower publications are not simply promoted as books written by humans to try and explain Scripture, but they are also viewed as quasi-inspired. Witnesses are taught that *no one* except the top Watchtower leaders can discern God's will, not even through extensive Bible study. One can be saved only by being part of God's organization, the Watchtower, which they teach is the ark of salvation. As the Flood came and wiped out all who were not in Noah's ark, Armageddon will destroy forever all who are not in the Watchtower ark.

The key to salvation lies not in being saved in the Christian sense or even being good, but being in the Watchtower organization — although they also teach that *even this* does not guarantee salvation. Witnesses firmly believe — at least they must verbalize they firmly believe — that the Watchtower is God's only organization and is directed by Him. For this reason, the many changed teachings (and hundreds of examples exist) are of no small importance. False prophecy poignantly tells Witnesses they have devoted their lives to a false religious organization. Dealing with this reality is enormously traumatic, can take years to adjust to, and can bring on psychological as well as somatic symptoms. Those who have been in the organization only a short while usually are not aware of the Watchtower's history, but with time nagging doubts often become greater and greater, precipitating a crisis of conscience that forces many eventually to leave the Watchtower.

Moreover, leaving is no easy matter. When people become Witnesses, they are slowly indoctrinated into a belief structure that requires them to give up their friends — often even their family — and adopt a new family, that of the Watchtower. After they have been Witnesses for a few years, almost all of them have only Witness friends. For many, especially those who were born into the Watchtower, their entire family and many relatives are all Witnesses. Leaving often results in being disfellowshiped, which means that they will be forced to cut off all meaningful association with virtually every one of their friends, and often their family. Consequently, many find leaving extremely traumatic, even after they are fully convinced the Watchtower is wrong. For this reason many elect to stay, trudging along to Watchtower meetings and hearing and saying things that they themselves disagree with. Eventually, the inner conflict may become too great, and they have to leave, giving up family, friends, and their whole previous life.

Watchtower Prohibitions

The Watchtower prohibitions have reached into virtually every area of life and cover minutia to the extreme. They condemn all holidays and celebrations except one they call "the memorial," and for generations have discouraged higher education and career advancement (although they have relaxed this rule recently). Missing one of their required five meetings per week (Watchtower activities can take between 20 and 30 hours per week, if one is conscientious), and spending time with non-Witnesses except to proselytize are also condemned. As a result, it is very difficult for a child raised a Witness to develop into a normal, socially aware, well-adjusted adult. They are taught that those of the world are evil, and even though worldly people may appear to be kind, this is one of Satan's tactics to lure people out of God's organization.

Prohibited from involving themselves in normal social relations and most school activities, Witnesses grow up as lonely children. Although deviance among them is common, it still brings guilt and ambivalence. In addition, their stand on many topics — especially refusing to salute the flag or celebrate holidays — often brings derision from their peers that typically hinders normal social development.[29] The Watchtower teaches Witnesses to have "nothing to do with" critics, and that they should "not be curious about what such people have to say."[30] Yet they routinely put themselves into an antagonistic position when they go from door to door, and from this experience they often develop paranoia. In fact, paranoia schizophrenia is extremely high among them.

Few Guidelines for Life

A major reason why so many Witnesses have mental health problems is that the Watchtower has issued few effective guidelines to help them live their lives. Their main goal is to serve the Watchtower. Consequently, they feel compelled to attend five meetings each week and involve themselves in the often unrewarding door-to-door proselytizing work. Doors commonly slam in their face, and although many householders are polite but not interested, some are very rude. A Witness can spend years in the field service without detecting a person who has a genuine interest in the Watchtower message!

Discouraged from many normal means of self-fulfillment, Witnesses slavishly devote their time and energy to serving an organization that does not care about them as individuals. Given little practical and realistic advise as to how to deal with life problems, and discouraged from finding rewarding employment that is enjoyable and financially adequate, many feel they are trapped in a way of life in which virtually every alternative is undesirable. Many plod along for years, hoping that Armageddon will soon come to rescue them from their plight. In the meantime, their depression and hopelessness colors everything they do, even though they ostensibly may appear to be "happy serving Jehovah."

The attractions that originally pull people to the Watchtower often do not last much beyond baptism. Their Witness friends, who once were supportive and tolerant of their lack of doctrinal conformity, soon insist that they rigidly teach and believe Watchtower policy. No longer is celebrating birthdays "up to the individual"; it now becomes a disfellowshiping offense. They are now considered mature and must rigidly follow every whim of the Watchtower. Once they are trapped, they are thus successfully pressured into doing things they had first resisted, sometimes strongly. The hope of a New World just around the corner retreats more and more into the future until many wonder if this often-delayed promise will ever come.

Discouragement is a common theme, both in the Watchtower literature and in discussions among Witnesses. They are constantly admonished to keep their chins up and focus on only serving the Watchtower, the assumption being that slavishly spending as much as 30 hours or more per week in Watchtower interests will solve one’s every problem. When it doesn’t, guilt often sets in, causing Witnesses to feel that they are evil and will not survive Armageddon. The depression and hopelessness have led to a disproportionate number of suicides and homicides among Witnesses.

THE WAY OUT

Some do find their way out. Many of these become agnostics or atheists, hating God and all attempts to understand and reach Him. Some are blessed to find true spiritual and psychological recovery, however. Through intensive Bible study they come to realize that the Watchtower is based on a false understanding of the Bible. These persons realize a faith does exist that is not based on the shifting sands of a manmade organization directed by individuals who are ill-informed about Scripture, historic Christianity, and modern biblical research. Such people look back at their experience in the Watchtower as one that can help others. Many of them become involved in the various countercult ministries and use their Watchtower expertise to help others find salvation in Him who is the only way, truth, and life.

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NOTES

[1]See Joseph Zymunt, "Prophetic Failure and Chiliastic Identity: The Case of Jehovah's Witnesses," *American Journal of Sociology* 75 (1970): 926-48.
[2]Jerry Bergman, "Jehovah's Witnesses Experience in the Nazi Concentration Camps," *Church and State,* Winter 1996, 401-27.
[3]Lois Randle, "The Apocalypticism of the Jehovah's Witnesses," *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1984, 18-24.
[4]Gosta Rylander, "Jehovah's Vittnan-En Psykologisk-Sociologisk Studie" (A Psychological and Sociological Study of Jehovah's Witnesses), *Nordisk Medicin* (Scandinavian Medicine) 29 (1946): 526-33.
[5]John Spencer, "Mental Health among Jehovah's Witnesses," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 126 (1975): 556.
[6]See Christopher Edwards, *Crazy for God* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1979); Chris Elkins, *Heavenly Deception* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1980).
[7]M. J. Pescor, "A Study of Selective Service Law Violators," *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 105 (1949): 641-52.
[8]Havor Montague, "The Pessimistic Sect's Influence on the Mental Health of Its Members: The Case of Jehovah's Witnesses," *Social Compass* 24 (1977): 135-47.
[9]Ibid., 139.
[10]Robert Potter, *A Social Psychological Study of Fundamentalist Christianity* (Ph.D. diss., Sussex University, England, 1985).
[11]Ursula Sack, *Case Studies of Voluntary Defectors from Intensive Religious Groups* (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1985).
[12]Elmer Kopol, *Die Zeugen Jehovas; Eine Psychologische Analyse*s (Ph.D. diss., University of Munchen, Germany, 1985).
[13]Kjell Totland, "The Mental Health of Jehovah's Witnesses," *Journal of the Norwegian Psychological Association*, in press.
[14]Jerry Bergman, *The Evaluation of an Experimental Program Designed to Reduce Recidivism among Second Felony Offenders* (Ph.D. diss., Wayne State University, 1976).
[15]"The Sacredness of Human Blood (Reasons Why Vaccination Is Unscriptural)," *Golden Age*, 4 February 1931, 293-300.
[16]"Questions from Readers," *The Watchtower,* 15 November 1967, 702-4.
[17]Ibid., 15 March 1980, 31.
[18]Ibid., 15 January 1961, 63-64.
[19]Ibid., 15 June 1991, 31.
[20]Ibid., 15 June 1978, 30.
[21]Ibid., 30-31.
[22]Carson Walker, "Ex-Jehovah's Witness Shares Loss," *Argus Leader* (Sioux Falls, South Dakota), 23 January 1996, 1.
[23]Thomas Nord, "Something Poisoned Freeman Brothers," *The Detroit News,* 3 March 1995, 8.
[24]Kenneth Woodward, "Apocalypse Later," *Newsweek,* 18 December 1995, 59.
[25]Ibid.
[26]*Children* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1941), 2.
[27]Ibid., 347.
[28]Ibid., 366.
[29]Jerry Bergman, "Modern Religious Objections to the Mandatory Flag Salute and Pledge of Allegiance in the United States," *The Christian Quest* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1989): 19-47.
[30]*The Watchtower*, 15 March 1996, 17.