

No Part of the World: How Jehovah's Witnesses Perform the Boundaries of their Community

Joseph Blankholm, *Columbia University*

One of the most important ideas in Jehovah's Witness theology¹ is the binary distinction of *the Truth* and *the World*.² Evangelical Christians commonly use *the World* as a term to define their community and beliefs.³ What differs about Jehovah's Witnesses is that among themselves, they refer to their religion as *the Truth*. These terms mark for them clear domains of inside and outside. Insiders believe in the Truth and are literally *in the Truth*. For example, if someone were wondering about an old friend she had not spoken to in a while, she might ask if he is *still in the Truth*, or if he has *left the Truth*. Referring to outside discourse, Witnesses use the terms *the World* or *the Worldly system of things*. Outsiders are *Worldly people* or *people of the World*. Jehovah's Witnesses advise their membership against having any unnecessary association with Worldly people, which often includes coworkers and classmates. Commonly cited at their *meetings* and in their Bible literature is 1 Corinthians 15:33: "Do not be misled.

1. For more on Jehovah's Witness theology, see Heather and Gary Botting, *The Orwellian World of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984). Despite the bias manifest in their title, the Bottings' theological knowledge is quite sound. For more on the sociology and history of Jehovah's Witnesses, see James A. Beckford, *The Trumpet of Prophecy: A Sociological Study of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975) and Herbert Hewitt Stroup, *The Jehovah's Witnesses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945). There is a dearth of quality academic work on Witnesses, particularly in the contemporary era, and much of the knowledge in this paper comes from my own fieldwork and by the patience of the many Jehovah's Witnesses who answered my myriad questions.

2. I will italicize the first instance of any Jehovah's Witness jargon in order to alert the reader to its significance. As will become evident later in the essay, this use of insider speech works to perform the group's boundaries.

3. Susan Harding eloquently discusses this usage in her analysis of Fundamentalist language and politics in *The Book of Jerry Falwell*. Susan Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Bad associations spoil useful habits.”⁴ Bad associations are taken to mean Worldly associations, and hence Witnesses must minimize those links to outsiders.

Keeping this Truth/World distinction in mind, I would like to turn to the two quintessential images of Jehovah’s Witnesses. The first is that of two men dressed in suits, holding book bags or briefcases, knocking on the door of a stranger. In this stereotypical scenario, the homeowner is probably either peeking through the curtains hoping they will go away, or preparing to deliver a witty line once he opens the door. In cultural shorthand, Jehovah’s Witnesses are people who knock on doors. Thus in 2003, when Prince, along with former member of Sly & the Family Stone, Larry Graham, visited the suburban Minneapolis home of a Jewish family, it meant that he really *was* a Jehovah’s Witness, beyond all doubt.⁵ His identity was affirmed by the wider public because of a practice that is for him relatively minor against the background of all his weekly rituals. Because ministry work is so publicly salient, it is the way in which the outside world affirms him. Yet it is merely one of many ways in which his community identifies him as belonging.

A second image is perhaps more telling: a coworker or classmate cannot participate in a holiday party or bashfully declines a birthday gift or Christmas card. This is the other time in which a Jehovah’s Witness’ identity becomes most publicly salient. When he has to exempt himself from a holiday celebration and explain to his worldly associates that he cannot accept their gifts, he marks himself as a Witness. In other words, the public he occupies comes to see him as a religious subject, and in particular, as a Jehovah’s Witness. He necessarily becomes different and a kind of other, standing apart. It is no coincidence that these two images of Witnesses, those of the Witness at the door and the Witness not participating, should prevail for many people, since these are the moments in which Jehovah’s Witnesses are most separate *in the eyes of the World*. Perhaps until she

4. All citations from the Bible come from the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ own *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*. Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. and International Bible Students, 1984).

5. Cheryl Jones, “I-witness news: Visit from Prince; Proselytizing pop star knocks on previously committed door,” *Star Tribune*, October 12, 2003, <http://www.lexisnexis.com> (accessed April 30, 2009).

knocked on your door, or perhaps until you wished her happy birthday, you had no idea that this person you knew was a Jehovah's Witness. For those whom Jehovah's Witnesses encounter, these are their most salient and defining characteristics. And yet by Witnesses' own measures, it is a complex theology and a wide range of daily practices that set them apart from their worldly counterparts.

For Witnesses, because of this World/Truth distinction, they must live two lives: one in which they participate in daily rituals and speak a language full of insider idioms with fellow Jehovah's Witnesses, and another in which they engage with the World and Worldly people. Indeed, it is the former that prepares them for experiencing the latter. Through deep engagement with their fellows and their beliefs, Witnesses attempt to steel themselves against the assaults of the outside World and its values, though they must yield a little in their interactions with the World in order to be recognized and understood by it. I will begin my essay by examining some of the ways in which Jehovah's Witnesses constitute their identities from within, or in other words, how they fashion themselves as Jehovah's Witness in their own eyes. To do so, I will look closely at their weekly gatherings at Kingdom Halls, their rigorous study habits, and their barriers to baptism.⁶ The second part of my essay will look at some of the ways in which Jehovah's Witnesses invite⁷ outsiders to constitute them, such as through ministry work and abstinence from worldly rituals. These principles delegate some of the work of boundary performance to worldly outsiders.⁸

6. For a much larger discussion of the performance of religious subjectivity, see Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). For a close examination of study practices as constitutive of religious subjectivity, see Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). While both anthropologists examine Islamic religious practices in Egypt, their insights into the ways in which religious subjectivity is a process of agency within constraints has been very helpful to me in my work. In particular, Mahmood's careful readings of Judith Butler on performativity and Michel Foucault on the discursive construction of the subject have greatly influenced my essay's understanding of religious subjectivity and the performance of identity.

7. I would like to bracket the question of whether or not this invitation is intentional. In some cases, Witnesses would admit to a certain degree of intentionality, whereas in others they would absolutely deny that they were intentionally welcoming ostracization. The answer would likely also depend on which Witness were asked.

8. While working on the final draft of this essay, I was fortunate to read Iddo Tavary's "Of Yarmulkes and Categories: Delegating Boundaries and the Phenomenology of Interactional

Relying on fieldwork I have conducted in the United States and Zambia, as well as analyses of Jehovah's Witness literature and academic scholarship, the ultimate task of this essay is to think through the ways that Witnesses perform the boundaries of their community—the boundaries between the Truth and the World—specifically through rituals and other practices.⁹

One of the main ways that Witnesses affirm and bound their community is through frequent association with their fellows. Witnesses have a rigorous culture of study and ministry work that places significant demands on the time and energy of members and also engages them with very structured rituals. There are three Bible meetings each week. Sunday meetings have two parts: *the public meeting* and *the Watchtower study*. The first half is an hour-long public *talk*¹⁰ on a topic that the congregation's *elders*¹¹ feel is important to that congregation. Elders at other congregations in the area each have a talk or two that they have prepared, and they travel locally to deliver them when requested. An hour-long study of the bimonthly *Watchtower* magazine follows the public meeting.

Expectation" (forthcoming in *Theory and Society*), in which he examines the ways in which Hasidic Jews in Los Angeles are constituted as Jews by those they meet on the street, whether they be fellow Jews, non-Jews, or hostile (anti-Semitic) non-Jews. His argument is ultimately similar to the one I present here in that he notices that the outward sign of Jewishness (in his fieldwork, primarily the yarmulke) becomes a conspicuous interactional "hook" that invites the out-group of the wider public to identify Jews on the street as Jewish. I make the same argument for Jehovah's Witnesses when it comes to their ministry work and their abstinence from worldly rituals, namely, their refusal to celebrate holidays or engage with politics. These, too, are instances of interactional hooks that ultimately delegate some of the boundary performance work to worldly outsiders. Tavary takes the metaphor of an interactional "hook" from Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1963).

9. For a larger discussion of ritual, performance, and identity, particularly within a religious context, see Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) and "Performance," in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 205-224.

10. Though at times a "talk" is something an outsider might call a sermon, the term also includes other forms of speech addressing the congregation.

11. Elders are the highest-ranking authorities on the congregational level. A *body of elders* handles a range of administrative duties, including discipline and most decision-making. They are roughly analogous to ministers or priests, but they have no special clothing and no one elder has authority over the others. Elders are always men.

The *Watchtower* study provides a good example of Jehovah's Witness study habits. Each *Watchtower* magazine contains two to three study articles (as it is bimonthly and some months have five Sundays). The studied portions of the *Watchtower* contain questions associated with each paragraph, and it is this paragraph/question format that structures the meetings. An assigned reader on stage reads a paragraph, each of which are numbered, and then the elder who is leading the study asks the question or questions assigned to the paragraph. After the elder reads the assigned question, a congregant raises her hand, at which time a man, almost always young, brings her a microphone attached to the end of the pole.¹² The congregant will typically respond with an answer that paraphrases a sentence from the paragraph. The question can be answered by reading a sentence from the paragraph verbatim—something children often do. More experienced members of the congregation display their familiarity with the meeting performance and the material by improvising more elaborate answers. In addition to asking the question written in the magazine, the leading elder often directs the flow of the meeting with an additional question or comment that in some way expands upon the given text.

For someone who is an upstanding member of the congregation, this is all a repetition of a study ritual they have already undergone at home. Witnesses are urged to study the material sometime during the week before, in preparation for the meeting. This means that for many seated in the Kingdom Hall, they are reading a text they have already read and that they have likely highlighted or underlined. Walking through a Kingdom Hall during the *Watchtower* study, or simply looking around at others nearby, one can see who has and has not studied the magazine in advance of the meeting. The meeting's deliberate pace does not seem to affect the majority of congregants, who maintain at very least the appearance of attentiveness, facing forward, typically with erect posture.

Those members who have thoroughly mastered this performance are evident even to an outsider, as they answer with seemingly off-the-cuff insights and occasional anecdotes. Their speech is usually sure and articulate,

12. Every Kingdom Hall at which I have ever conducted fieldwork, including Halls in the United States (in Minnesota and California) and Halls in Lusaka, Zambia, has been equipped with a PA system and has had these microphone runners. I have no doubt, however, that there are Kingdom Halls that do not have this equipment.

no doubt due in no small part to their copious practice speaking publicly. Witnesses practice not only when answering during meetings and engaging in door-to-door ministry work; they also have a weekly school dedicated to improving congregants' ability to preach in public. One evening during the week, there is another Bible meeting with two parts: *the Theocratic Ministry School* and *the service meeting*. The Theocratic Ministry School is an hour-long meeting during which members give talks on topics or Bible passages. Every meeting has a set schedule of talks, some of which are given by elders or ministerial servants, and some of which are given by a lay member of the congregation.

After two initial talks, *the instructional talk* and *the Bible highlights*, the school actually begins, and an elder evaluates the *speaker* giving the talk using a rubric, which is literally a printed form provided by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society.¹³ Only men can give what they call the *number two talk*. Women can give the numbers three and four talks, but the terms differ. Whereas men will stand in front of a podium and deliver a talk, women sit facing each other and perform a skit that addresses the assigned topic. The skit typically depicts the interaction between a Jehovah's Witness and a *householder* during door-to-door ministry. Following the Bible meeting, the evaluating elder gives the completed rubric to the student who gave the talk, having marked areas that need improvement. The rubric assesses the student on a specific point assigned in advance. Each assigned point corresponds to a chapter in the *Theocratic Ministry School Guidebook*,¹⁴ which addresses topics ranging from gestures and timing to pausing for emphasis.

As part of their apprenticeship into the ministry work, boys in the congregation are often assigned talks during the Ministry School, once the congregation's elders deem them ready. In the course of my fieldwork, the youngest boy I heard of giving such a talk was eight years old, though his age was not the determining factor. A younger child could give a talk if he seemed to the elders to possess the necessary presence and reading ability.

13. This name is frequently shortened to *the Society*. The term generally refers to any agent perceived as high up in the organization. The Society produces literature; makes structural decisions regarding congregations; sets forth guidelines for behavior; organizes regional, national, and international Bible conventions; etc.

14. Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, *Theocratic Ministry School Guidebook* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. and International Bible Students, 1971).

Because the talk is an exegesis of an assigned passage from the Bible, it too serves as yet another site of Witness study culture. For the child and the new convert who receive their first talk assignments, they must try to re-enact the exegetical performances of those they have already seen, though they often receive coaching from parents or elders. Experienced elders occasionally fill in for congregants who are not able to give their talks, sometimes preparing the replacement talk in the half hour or so before it must be given. This expert ability garners the admiration of other congregation members and affirms their position of authority in the congregation.

The second half of the weekday evening meeting is the service meeting. This meeting focuses on the best ways to engage in *preaching the good news of God's Kingdom*. From this phrase, the Jehovah's Witnesses take the name of their monthly newsletter, the *Kingdom News*, which they study during the service meeting. Both the Sunday meeting and the weekday evening meeting follow the same song/prayer structure. The meetings open with the singing of a song from the standard Jehovah's Witnesses songbook, *Sing Praises to Jehovah*,¹⁵ which they follow with a prayer given by an elder. Between the two halves of the meetings, they sing another song, and following the second-half of the meeting, they sing a third song, which is followed by a prayer.

An additional meeting called *the book study* takes place each week. These are hour-long, small-group meetings that can occur at various times throughout the week. This meeting is much less formal and is sometimes held at the homes of congregation members. Congregants may sit for prayers and do not sing songs. During this meeting, Jehovah's Witnesses study a book written and assigned by the society that is designed for the purpose of the book study. The book is read in the same way as the *Watchtower* is read on Sundays: by reading each paragraph at a time followed by the assigned questions. Some book formats differ from this slightly by asking questions at the end of each chapter. The setting is more informal and thus more conducive to discussion, though at no point does the meeting become a true discussion. After every answer or comment, the meeting's leader moves the meeting forward, makes a comment of his own, or calls on someone who

15. Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, *Sing Praises to Jehovah* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. and International Bible Students Association, 1984).

has her hand raised. As far as I have witnessed, there is no direct interaction between congregants during this time, though they might make reference to an earlier comment given by one of their *brothers* or *sisters*.¹⁶

Two more types of meetings occur annually, which are called *circuit assemblies* (two-day events) and *district conventions* (three-day events). At these events, congregations from a local area (the circuit) or the region (the district) gather and follow a planned schedule of talks. The district convention is a much larger event and often marks the release of a new book by the society (a fairly regular occurrence). It also features a drama that centers on a specific moral problem faced by a family. As the family uses the Bible to solve its problem, the Biblical scenes are re-enacted as flashbacks, and the actors (Jehovah's Witnesses from congregations somewhere in the district) wear period costumes. Both the circuit assembly and the district convention also provide Jehovah's Witnesses access to a broader social milieu and are meant to evoke a sense of belonging and wholeness. The numbers of those attending are always read aloud, and some anecdotes are told that tell the story of someone who attended despite health problems or someone who traveled very far to attend. These larger meetings also provide the venue for baptism. Witnesses who have been preparing for months are finally dipped into a pool in front of a public of their peers, officially confirming their entry into the religion and affording them certain modest privileges in the congregation as full members.

To remain in good social standing, Jehovah's Witnesses must attend all weekly meetings and both the annual district convention and the annual circuit assembly. As is evidenced by the above overviews of those meetings, each is an immersion into an entire discourse with which one can only become familiar through attendance. Mastering this discourse and its performance are crucial to social acceptance in the community. The Society standardizes this discourse as much as possible, so that a Jehovah's Witness feels no different walking into a Kingdom Hall in California than he would in Minnesota, despite their geographic distance. Even when in Lusaka,

16. These are not literal brothers and sisters, but rather, this is how Witnesses frequently address one another. For example, a man in the congregation could be Brother Hewitt, and a woman could be Sister Svenson. A Witness might also refer to a mixed gender group as "brothers and sisters." The title is honorific, as well, so there is an expectation, for example, that young people will address and refer to their seniors with the title of Brother or Sister so-and-so.

Zambia, I found little difference between services there and in the United States.

As mentioned above, members are expected to study the literature in advance of the meeting, and the meeting is a time to go over the material again. Jehovah's Witnesses identify themselves as Bible students and consider themselves very knowledgeable about the Bible. One of the main goals of Bible study is to teach Witnesses to be able to refer to relevant Bible verses when addressing a potential convert. Jehovah's Witnesses attempt to filter all knowledge through their particular exegesis, and hence they place a great deal of importance on the ability to master that discourse. This expectation is one of the ways in which someone becomes a Jehovah's Witness, both in a literal sense and also in the sense of daily practices, discursive and prediscursive.¹⁷

For a potential convert to be allowed to become baptized, she must first have good standing in the congregation and then must study with a group of elders who ask her questions that are formally assigned by the Society. The answers to these questions come from a book given to the potential convert entitled *Organized to Accomplish Our Ministry*.¹⁸ The convert must also have a solid record of *field service*, the term for ministry work. Each congregation keeps records of every member's field service and submits these records to the society, which processes them in order to produce the statistics that go into the annual *Yearbook* they publish. These records are also used for strategizing how best to go about the field ministry work, e.g., which territory needs to be covered, how frequently, etc. For a convert to become baptized, she must display a great deal of zeal for the religion, dedicating enormous amounts of time to meeting attendance, Bible study, and ministry work. In the process, she becomes initiated into the rituals

17. In thinking about the prediscursive, I am drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the habitus in Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); *Distinction*, 1984; and *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990). For a critique of Bourdieu's notion of the habitus with respect to resistance and the body, see Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 26-27, and Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, (New York: Routledge, 1997).

18. Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, *Organized to Accomplish Our Ministry* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. and International Bible Students Association, 1989).

and discourse of the community, which in turn demands that she separate herself further from the World as part of entering the Truth.

Witnesses have well developed rhetoric concerning the nature and dangers of the Worldly system. They see the World as a harmful place and the Truth as an escape from it. Bible meetings and Bible literature regularly feature scare-articles that highlight how *bad the World has become*. This fits into and shapes the Jehovah's Witness eschatology. The World will become increasingly bad until its final destruction; since 1914 the pace of this decay has accelerated. Natural disasters, wars, and terrorist attacks all fit into the Jehovah's Witness idea of the time of the end. For Witnesses, all these events provide good reasons to enter into the safe haven of the Truth while avoiding the World as much as possible.

Jehovah's Witness also have a way of understanding the out-group pressures that perform the boundary between the Truth and the World. When Witnesses are persecuted, they understand that this affirms them as *Jehovah's People*. Though contemporary Jehovah's Witnesses have little difficulty practicing their religion in the United States, historically they have engaged in both legal battles and civil disobedience.¹⁹ The same is true for Witnesses living in countries with more restrictive policies, and the annually published Jehovah's Witness *Yearbook* chronicles myriad anecdotes of Witnesses being persecuted worldwide while continuing to study the Bible and *preach the word of God*.

Interestingly, Witnesses I spoke to in Zambia told me that they experience very little persecution and rarely even encounter impoliteness when in the door-to-door ministry work. One middle-class Zambian woman I spoke to told me how surprised she was at the rudeness she faced when she went door-to-door in the United States while on a trip to visit her sister, who was attending university in upstate New York. She said that by comparison, Zambians are much more welcoming of Witnesses, both on a personal

19. For discussions of the legal battles waged by Jehovah's Witnesses in the United States, see Eric Michael Mazur, "Constitutional Congruence: Jehovah's Witnesses and the Constitutional Order," *The Americanization of Religious Minorities* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); William Shepard McAninch, "A Catalyst for the Evolution of Constitutional Law: Jehovah's Witnesses in the Supreme Court." *University of Cincinnati Law Review* (55. No. 4:1008-11, 1987); and Shawn Francis Peters, *Judging Jehovah's Witnesses: Religious Persecution and the Dawn of the Rights Revolution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

level and at the level of state policy. Other **Zambian Witnesses** I spoke to confirmed this view of their place in **Zambian society**. As possible reasons for the difference, those I spoke to noted that **Zambia is a Christian nation** and that it has one of the largest **Witness populations per capita** in the world. **Witnesses in Zambia** seemed to have less of a sense of day-to-day otherness and persecution than those in the **United States**.

For **Witnesses** who do feel on some level persecuted, as I found was common in the **United States**, it can confirm to them that they are in the *true religion*. They frequently cite **Jesus' words to his apostles during the last supper**: "A slave is not greater than his master. If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (**John 15:20**). That they are persecuted confirms to them that they are doing **God's will** and following **Jesus' teachings**. In this way, when **Jehovah's Witnesses** understand negative affirmation of their identity by outsiders to be evidence of their chosenness, they are further internalizing their identity. For **Witnesses in the United States**, and in particular for those raised in the **Truth from childhood**, there is a strong sense of both forced and self-imposed non-belonging.

The refusal of **Jehovah's Witnesses** to participate in any way in the celebration of holidays is a powerful mechanism that separates them from their families and the rest of the **World**. In this case it is the performance of a boundary through the refusal of **Worldly traditions**. The rejection of holidays acutely affects children because of social pressures to participate in the celebrations, particularly within the school setting. **Jehovah's Witness children** must frequently separate themselves from their classmates, either by leaving the room or by not attending school on holidays. They become marked in the eyes of their classmates—marked as a religious other and marked specifically as a **Jehovah's Witness**. To avoid the discomfort of these situations for their children and the teasing that results, and also because they fear the spiritual dangers their children face in school, many parents choose to home-school their children. Home-schooling limits their association with **Worldly people**, further embeds them in their religious communities, and makes the outside world seem that much more alien and uncomprehending of the **Witness of way of life**.

The rejection of holidays marks **Witnesses** among outsiders and serves as one of their most effective means of dually performing the boundaries of their community. Because they choose to remove themselves from normalized and established traditions, **Witnesses** are in turn treated

as outsiders and marginal figures. They go so far as to discourage their children from having Worldly friends or becoming involved in extra-curricular activities in school. After high school, Witness children are also discouraged—though not prohibited—from attending university, which poses multiple spiritual dangers to young Witnesses. Even if they continue to live at home and attend a nearby college, they are necessarily exposed to new ideas as part of their education, which may prove harmful to their spiritual well being. One young woman I spoke to who was attending the University of Minnesota told me that Witnesses are discouraged from taking philosophy classes as these are seen as particularly dangerous. Witnesses who do not attend college and who may later be met with harsh economic realities can blame these conditions on the badness of the Worldly system and persecution as a result of their being Jehovah's people.

Many Witnesses who entered the religion as adult converts cite the corruption of the Worldly system of things as one of their main reasons for turning to Jehovah's Witnesses. When I asked further, I heard hard-knock stories that seemed to my academically trained ear like the hardships of a particular class or the misfortunes that may befall us all (to paraphrase Ecclesiastes 9:11). Witness theology provides members with a way to reinscribe their own life histories according to the Truth/World distinction, showing them how their past life was located outside the Truth, and their new life is within its bounds. To be inside the Truth is to occupy a safe and fortified space, protected by the barriers constructed from within and from without.

Like abstaining from participation in holidays, Jehovah's Witnesses mark themselves as different in the eyes of outsiders through their refusal to accept blood transfusions. They are instructed to refuse all whole blood transfusions and accept some minor blood fractions, though individual members can ultimately decide for themselves. The Society wrote concerning the blood issue in *Awake!*²⁰ magazine, "Each [member] must be guided by his Bible-trained conscience."²¹ Baptized members are encouraged to carry

20. *Awake!* is a companion magazine to the *Watchtower*, but it is not intended for formal study. It features a combination of issues the Society finds important to elaborate for its members and human interest and science articles that have no overt Biblical relevance.

21. Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, "The Real Value of Blood." *Awake! Magazine* August (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc.

NO BLOOD cards in their wallets, and many unbaptized members and the children of baptized members typically do so as well. If they accept a blood transfusion, baptized Witnesses may be sanctioned in some way, or even *disfellowshipped from the congregation*.

Disfellowshipping is social banishment from the congregation and is typically reserved for *apostasy* or heresy, though it can be wielded for other offenses. Other Witnesses will not speak to disfellowshipped members, though they may attend meetings. The Witness may eventually be reinstated provided he repents for his wrongful actions and pending approval from the congregation's elders. The Society's lawyers have won legal protections for Witnesses to prevent doctors from overriding their wishes and administering transfusions. Despite the Society's active involvement in the juridical sphere for nearly a century, Witnesses strongly discourage all political involvement, including recitation of the "Pledge of Allegiance," voting, and all military involvement. Refusal to celebrate holidays, to accept blood transfusions, and to engage in any sort of political activity not only make them seem like no part of the World, but also cause Witnesses to draw persecution from outsiders. Witnesses expect this persecution and see it as affirmation that they are Jehovah's People, further affirming their community identity.

In one of the most dramatic moments of persecution in Jehovah's Witness history, the Nazi government executed and interned Witnesses in camps during World War II on account of their strict pacifism and refusal to engage in military service—both being ways in which they still see themselves as distinctly separate from the World.²² Among the artifacts pertaining to Jehovah's Witnesses in the display cases at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. are upside-down purple triangle patches that Witnesses were forced to wear to identify them. The museum also publishes a pamphlet that gives background information on Jehovah's Witnesses and describes their persecution in Nazi-controlled Germany.²³ The history is a source of great pride and inspiration for Witnesses, and was

and International Bible Students Association, 2006), 11.

22. See Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, "Courageous in the Face of Nazi Peril," *Watchtower.org*, http://www.watchtower.org/e/19980708/article_01.htm (accessed April 30, 2009) and "They Triumphed Over Persecution," *Watchtower.org* http://www.watchtower.org/e/20030301/article_02.htm (accessed April 30, 2009).

23. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Jehovah's Witnesses* (Washington D.C.: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996).

the basis of a documentary produced by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society entitled *Jehovah's Witnesses Stand Firm Against Nazi Assault*.²⁴ The purple triangle has become an ambivalent symbol among Witnesses. While it was a negative marker when imposed by the Nazis, its mention stirs feelings of pride that no other symbol could rouse given Witnesses' fiercely aniconic theology that denies even the cross any legitimacy. Thus while the symbol could never be accepted as an icon of any kind, its signifier—i.e., its name, the purple triangle—remains symbolically significant.

In this article, I have tried to demonstrate some of the ways in which Jehovah's Witnesses perform the boundaries of their community—that is to say, the ways in which they divide the world to determine what belongs inside the Truth and what belongs out in the World. Witnesses not only prescribe this distinction, but they enact and make it possible through innumerable daily practices, special communal events, and by abstaining from widely accepted and fully institutionalized rituals that belong to the World. By marking themselves as separate, they are treated as separate, and this process gives their boundary external affirmation, making it seem all the more convincing to those accepting its terms. The intensity of the Truth/World boundary makes leaving the Truth at least as difficult as entering into it because members must not only replace their Witness rituals, but they must also engage with new rituals that for them have been taboo and hence carry residual stigma. Those leaving the Truth to enter the World must do away with or at least reshape the distinction, though those who simply find another Truth can carry its boundaries into a new context.

The Truth/World distinction itself is a kind of hard-line secularist imaginary, separating church from state and public ritual from private. Only in this imagination, the terms are radically flipped; rather than follow earthly rulers, Witnesses have chosen to abstain from worldly things; rather than follow earthly rituals, Witnesses have chosen to follow Jehovah's. Their self-separation can in some ways be seen as the playing out of still earlier separations and power consolidations that have shaped the very notions of which things are God's and which things belong to the World of men. Secular constructions of reason and faith and public life and private religion

24. Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, *Jehovah's Witnesses Stand Firm Against Nazi Assault* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. and International Bible Students Association, 1996).

undoubtedly share a common ancestor with Witness notions of the Truth and the World. We can begin to see a parallel between the way in which a Jehovah's Witness might argue that he is in the Truth and all others are outside of it, and the way a liberal, secular subject might make the same claim about his own Truth when looking upon the practices of another's Islamic piety.²⁵ This parallel becomes all the more manifest when we consider the role that persecution (or perhaps more precisely in the case of secular liberalism: terrorism) plays in self-understandings of within and without. While the boundaries of the community and the identity of its constituents may be ideational constructs, their performance, as I hope I have shown, operates on the level of everyday practice and intimate personal encounter.

25. I return here again to the subject of Saba Mahmood's ethnography, *The Politics of Piety* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).