

Becoming Accountable

Jehovah's Witnesses and the responsibilities of evangelism

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2021

79,894 words



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It does not exceed the prescribed 80,000 word limit for the Archaeology, Anthropology and Sociology Degree Committee.

Abstract

BECOMING ACCOUNTABLE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF EVANGELISM

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For Jehovah's Witnesses, evangelism is of prime importance. It forms the core of their identity and is shaped by an ethics of communication. Witness evangelism is a fundamentally pedagogical process through which one "learns the truth" by studying the Bible with a Witness. In this thesis I describe Witnesses' evangelism in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan by exploring the way they conceptualize "preaching and teaching" as a process that "makes disciples," from the moment of first contact with a person to their baptism. The process of making disciples and becoming a disciple is, ultimately, a process of becoming accountable to Jehovah God. I detail the responsibilities Witnesses understand themselves as having in evangelism, and the way they imagine preaching and teaching to be about getting others to take those responsibilities as well.

The arc of this thesis explores these responsibilities by: laying out how Witnesses organize their preaching according to the "local needs" of a specific place; the problematics of understanding truth in the "initial call"; the roles of "Bible literature" in cultivating "interest" in "things as they really are" through "return visits"; and, the "theopolitics" of "theocratic education" as Witnesses' students take on preaching themselves during Bible studies. This leads a person to become accountable through dedication and baptism, which I explore as the embodiment of accountability. I conclude by examining what happens to evangelism after Armageddon and what eschatology means for Witness evangelism in the here-and-now.

To draw out how Witnesses conceptualize and methodologize the process of becoming accountable to Jehovah in the chapters of this thesis, I ethnographically disaggregate "accountability" and "responsibility" in Witness ethical life to show how they differ in their temporality, their institutionalization, and the way they relate to the human subject. This allows for an analysis that can make sense of how Witnesses' take universal moral thinking and apply it to particular social contexts.

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Acknowledgments

I am indebted to all those who have supported me in my constant thirst for knowledge.

I would first like to thank Joel Robbins. Your careful and thorough remarks over the years have truly expanded my thinking. Through thick and thin your support and enthusiasm have empowered me to complete this project and grow intellectually. More particularly, I am grateful that you encouraged me to work with Witnesses after my first field trip to Kyrgyzstan and pointed my work more generally towards evangelism. Thank you, this project would never have happened with you.

To Courtney Handman and James Laidlaw, I am indebted for a very meticulous reading of this work. Your insightful comments have truly made this thesis a better piece of anthropological writing. I am excited to continue the conversation.

I am grateful for my Witness friends that I have made around the world. To those I met in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, thank you for all you have taught me—I will never forget your lovingkindness, especially my friends in Karakol who showed my family such generous hospitality. Misha, our long conversations will never be forgotten. To Slava and Lena, this project could not have happened without your interest, grace, and companionship.

To Jolene Chu and Ashley Ferdinands, I am exceptionally grateful for our many conversations and the comments you gave on the thesis—it would not be as accurate if it were not for your diligent suggestions. Any errors herein are mine. I look forward to our future collaborations. Ed Salazar, thank you for your response and letting me use your artwork.

Thank you to the faculty at the Department of Anthropology at BYU, whose comments on Chapter 5 were instrumental in its development, but also for inspiring me to study anthropology in the first place. And to all those, both staff and students, in the Department of Social Anthropology here at Cambridge for taking care of me after I submitted the thesis in 2021.

I am thankful for all my many sponsors, including the Cambridge Trust, Trinity Hall, the Sutasoma Trust, and many others. But I am especially grateful for all the financial support my family and ward members have extended to me, my wife, and my children—your sacrifices for my education will never be forgotten.

To the GERG. You help me know that I am good enough.

Claire Moll Namas, Giulia Sciolli, Liangliang Zhang, and Sam Victor made the dark days worth

working through and whose comments on my thinking or on chapters of my thesis were care-filled, honest, and illuminating. More than that, however, your friendship is priceless. Scott Savage was always there to give me hope, and Mike Willis taught me it is okay to ask for help. Jildiz Asanova and Richard Hayes, your friendship made my research possible in more ways than I can enumerate. Thank you all.

I am grateful for a mother who taught me to love to read and a father who taught me to love to think. Thank you to grandparents who supported so much of my education, especially my grandfather whose final moments in this plane of existence concluded during my fieldwork

None of my ideas appear on the page until I thoroughly developed them in conversation with my wife, Ashley. Your help is precious, and this thesis would not have been possible without you, my love. Your support and guidance over the last six years mean everything to me, not to mention the hours of work you directly contributed to this thesis, whether in the field or at home. Thank you, you're the best companion in the universe.

And, to my children, for the joy and inspiration they bring to me. I love you each dearly.

And this good news of the Kingdom will be preached in all the inhabited earth for a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.

-Matthew 24:14

Introduction

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES—KINGDOM EVANGELIZERS

The meeting ended and the low buzz of chatter started up in the Kingdom Hall as Jehovah's Witnesses turned one to another to talk. It was a normal Sunday morning in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and the Witnesses in the English Group had just finished their study of *The Watchtower*. A few Witnesses filtered out of the Hall, but quickly came back in, as Sabir, the elder in the congregation who organized "field service," or public evangelism, stood up in the front of the hall to start the "Field Service Meeting." Wasting no time, he welcomed everyone in English—this despite the fact that all the congregants were Kyrgyz and Russian—and offered a prayer, also in English, in which he asked for Jehovah's blessing that they could "meet the local needs of the people in Bishkek." Sabir nodded to Dima in the back of the Hall. Dima, ever the technical genius, clicked around on a laptop and the television screen behind Sabir went from black to displaying a satellite image of the city. Dima panned around the image, zooming in and out, to get the frame that he wanted, centering the image along the axes of Prospekts Chuy and Manas, two of the central thoroughfares in the city, and near the origin of which was located the *Mezhdunarodnyy*

Universitet Kyrgyzstana (International University of Kyrgyzstan; MUK) whose English-centric programs attracted large numbers of South Asian students.

“Okay. That’s good. Today we want to think about where the students are so we know what territories need our attention,” Sabir said to the group of about thirty Witnesses, “What do you think? Where can we find our students?” Sabir’s question started a brief discussion, in which the Witnesses elaborated where they had noticed MUK students gathering on the streets. The conversation quickly centered on a cafeteria opposite the university that served Indian food where many of the South Asian MUK students would hang around. Sabir, noting the location on the map—though this was unnecessary as everyone was very familiar with its location—steered the conversation to the problems one might encounter when attempting to preach to students in the busy setting of the cafeteria, noting that focusing on finding students on the periphery of the restaurant would more likely result in a meaningful conversation. Sabir, wrapping up the meeting, which was a brisk ten minutes, asked for a few volunteers to come along to attempt this proposed method of preaching on the periphery of the cafeteria. With a small group assembled, Sabir closed the meeting, again with prayer, and they left to implement the method.

The Witnesses I knew in Bishkek were very concerned with evangelism and this sort of meeting was wholly ordinary. It seemed that all talk in the Kingdom Hall or in my conversations with Witnesses anywhere else, circled back to preaching the word of God. That said, during my fieldwork in my Bishkek, I did not often hear Jehovah’s Witnesses say the word “evangelism” in any of the languages I encountered.¹ As I have written this thesis, I have listened through a trove of recorded interviews and Bible studies, conversations and “public talks” in the Kingdom Hall, as well as other meetings, and have looked through the pages of my fieldnotes, to find that the word appears, here and there, but it is not all that common. This is all despite the fact that most of my Witness friends in Bishkek spent much of their time practicing, preparing for, or engaging in what might readily be called “evangelism.” Instead of “evangelism” itself, a plurality of other words appears to signify the practices of evangelism: “preaching,” “publishing,” “proclaiming,” or “witnessing.” In this sense, Jehovah’s Witnesses are very practice-oriented: the Witnesses I have known pride themselves on fulfilling the Biblical prophecy in Matthew 24:14, “And this

1 Primarily English and Russian; see Ch. 1 on the linguistic context of my fieldwork.

good news of the Kingdom will be preached in all the inhabited earth for a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.”² This verse might even be thought of as the lodestar for this thesis, in that it describes the core ideas of Jehovah's Witnesses' theology in one sentence. This deserves to be unpacked.

First, this verse points us to a theological reason why Witnesses do not often use the terms “evangelize” or “evangelizer,” instead favoring the use of words like “preach” or “publisher.” Witnesses put a lot of stock into looking at “the original” Hebrew or Greek words that were used in scripture. While I will consider this in further depth when thinking about how Witnesses “let the Bible interpret itself” (Ch. 3), for now this is important in doing some basic definitional work, as Witness theology bases its conceptual framework of evangelism on the interpretative meaning of a few key Hebrew and Greek biblical words. The primary elements of these concepts are in Matthew 24:14, including “good news” and “preach.” I quote the Watch Tower Society's³ popular two-volume study guide, *Insight on the Scriptures*, at length to give the flavor of this sort of text and because it nicely introduces the terms at hand:

“The Biblical concept of “preaching” is best ascertained from an examination of the sense of the original Hebrew and Greek terms. The Greek *kerys'so*, which is commonly rendered “preach,” means, basically, ‘make proclamation as a herald, to be a herald, officiate as herald, proclaim (as conqueror).’ The related noun is *ke'ryx* and means ‘herald, public messenger, envoy, crier (who made proclamation and kept order in assemblies, etc.).’ ... *Kerys'so* thus does not convey the thought of the delivery of a sermon to a closed group of disciples but, rather, of an open, public proclamation. This is illustrated by its use to describe the “strong angel proclaiming [*kerys'sonta*] with a loud voice: ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and loose its seals?’”—Revelation 5:2; compare also Matthew 10:27.

“The word *euaggeli'zomai* means “declare good news.” (Matthew 11:5) Related words are *diaggel'lo*, “declare abroad; give notice” (Luke 9:60; Acts 21:26; Romans 9:17) and *kataggel'lo*, “publish; talk about; proclaim; publicize.” (Acts 13:5; Romans 1:8; 1 Corinthians 11:26; Colossians 1:28) The principal difference between *kerys'so* and *euaggeli'zomai* is that the former stresses the *manner*

2 Unless otherwise noted, all Biblical citations throughout this thesis reference the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*; see Ch. 3 for a consideration of the *New World Translation*.

3 Throughout this thesis I will use “the Watch Tower Society,” “the Society,” “Watch Tower,” and similar terms to refer to the global organization of Jehovah's Witnesses. Such naming stems from the historical legal entities Bible Students (Witnesses adopted the name “Jehovah's Witnesses” in 1931 [see WTBT 1993b: 79-82], before which they called themselves “Bible Students”) used to register their organization with the United States government. It should be noted that while I use these terms for specificity, Witnesses do not often use terms like “the Society” or “Watch Tower” to refer to their global community, preferring terms such as “organization.”

of the proclamation, that it is a public, authorized pronouncement, and the latter stresses the *content* thereof, the declaring or bringing of the *euagge'lion*, the good news or gospel.”

(WTBTS 2018d: 671; emphasis original)

What we see here is that these terms are categories of communication. But importantly, both of these sorts of communication are “public.” This idea of public communication (despite the word’s Latin etymology), Witnesses draw from the notion of “*leitourgia*” (WTBTS 2000: 10-11), or “liturgy,” based in the Greek notions of “people” and “work.” In other words, unlike the liturgies of “Christendom” (see Ch. 1), for Witnesses, sermons and worship in the congregation are not liturgical. *True* liturgy is the “work,” or “service” of communication that happens in the public square, among the people. Further the public nature of this notion of liturgical service delineates *which* people. That is, evangelism is communication with people in “the world.” I will explore this boundary between Jehovah’s Witnesses and “the world” in more detail in Chapter 1, but for now, I will note that for the sake of clarity in this thesis I will call the addressees of Witness evangelism “people-in-the-world.”⁴

The second thing we see is a binary categorization of this public communication as either focused on content or form. The content of public communication is “the good news of the Kingdom,” namely “salvation by faith in Jesus Christ” (WTBTS 2018c: 986). Salvation is specifically the abolishment of death and the possibility of resurrection. Evangelism, accordingly, could be thought of as the communication of salvation (i.e., the content). Preaching, on the other hand, focuses on methods of evangelism. The most common of these, as we will see, is the “house-to-house work” Witnesses do around the world. While preaching could theoretically concern other content, it is taken to be the method of proclaiming the “good news,” or the salvation offered by God’s kingdom in the imminent New World. One particularly important methodological tool for doing this is giving a “witness,” or a “proclamation or statement of things ‘as they really are.’” But there are many other methods I will explore herein. In this way,

4 Witnesses historically used the term “worldling” to refer to what I am calling “people-in-the-world.” However, in the 1990s Witnesses deemed the word to be overtly pejorative and was counterproductive to the sorts of communication under discussion. Many Witnesses continue to use phrases like “worldly people,” but such wording is controversial, as it seems too close to “worldling.” To avoid this problem, I have opted to create this purposely clunky term that is strictly meant as an analytic that emphasizes the boundary between the world and “true Christians” and designates the addressee of Witness evangelism.

at least for the purposes of this thesis, “evangelism” is to be taken as the broader category of communication, the different pedagogical methods of which are called “preaching.”

Witnesses, when conceptualizing evangelism in meetings such as the one I sketched above, are more concerned with methodology, and so focus on preaching, proclaiming, publishing, witnessing, teaching, and so on. I posit that because of this focus on communicative form, Witnesses less frequently talk about their preaching as “evangelism” because they are so intent on theorizing the *how* of their actions. Similarly, the very fact that Witnesses are more likely to call themselves “publishers” or “preachers” or “ministers” or “teachers” instead of “evangelizers” (though they do use this term) positions them as methodologists, concerned with thinking through and applying different ways of evangelizing. In Chapter 3 I will argue that this is due to the way responsibilities are allocated to teachers vis-à-vis the Bible and “Bible literature,” positioning their prolific focus on the creation of tracts, magazines, and Bibles as a cornerstone of this methodologizing. Of course, this language can be slippery, but for the sake of my analysis I will primarily refer to “evangelism” and “evangelizers” when considering the communicative form in the abstract and “preach” and “preacher” or “publish” and “publisher” when accentuating the *methods* of evangelism.

Returning to Matthew 24:14, many times when I forwarded the question, “How do you know the Watch Tower Society is God’s organization?” the prophetic nature of the verse would emerge. My Witness interlocutors’ answers, as almost all Witnesses attempted to do when answering my questions, immediately pointed to the Bible. Redirecting questions to the Bible was easy to do, as Witnesses would have me open the Bible on my phone in the JW Library app.⁵ Witnesses might have me look at a verse like Matthew 7:16, which begins, “By their fruits you will recognize them,” before having me turn to Matthew 24:14—or another verse like it—and then say, as one Witness did, “What other religion preaches ‘in all the inhabited earth’? Only Jehovah’s Witnesses preach everywhere on earth. That’s how we can recognize this as Jehovah’s true organization.”

5 “JW Library” is an app available on most mobile operating systems. The app is, fittingly, a library that contains access to much of the Society’s media. My interlocutors ubiquitously used it for study and field service and Witnesses frequently could be found with smartphones or tablets even in rural parts of Kyrgyzstan (see Cardoza 2019).

Witnesses consider themselves to be “Jehovah’s people.” It is literally in the moniker they took upon themselves, as “Jehovah’s Witnesses” accentuates the possessive form. This sense of belonging to Jehovah (WTBTS 2018i) or being his special “possession” (Psalms 33:12) emphasizes the boundary between them and the rest of humanity, an idea that will be fleshed out below. Because all humankind is already Jehovah’s creation by default, the “special” qualifier is important, because it delineates for Witnesses the group of people who have “submitted to God’s kingdom” (Ch. 4) and “dedicated themselves to him” (Ch. 5).

A few months after I settled in Bishkek, I studied an article in *The Watchtower* in preparation for a “weekend meeting” (see “Theologically engaged ethnography” below) that focused on this very notion of belonging to Jehovah. When studying, I noticed that the next article in the magazine was focused on “cultivating compassion for ‘all sorts of people,’” laying out compassion as a method of preaching (WTBTS 2018b). Before the meeting, I met up with one of the elders in the English Group and asked what the connection was between “being Jehovah’s people” and “preaching,” because I could feel that there was something there, but I could not make the link.

The elder told me, “When we dedicate ourselves to Jehovah we are promising to submit to his will. This is a promise to Jehovah to preach the Kingdom message. We are accountable to Jehovah for the preaching work.” A primary way Jehovah’s Witnesses see themselves and their relationship to God as his people is as his Witnesses. As Jehovah’s Witnesses, they are accountable for evangelizing, and must render an account to Jehovah of their evangelism, making good on their promise to him (WTBTS 1996b). As such, because Jehovah’s command is not just to preach but to “make disciples of people of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19), the evangelism for which Witnesses are accountable is centered on making others accountable too. In this thesis I describe how Witnesses conceptualize the methods of evangelism as a pedagogical process through which a person-in-the-world can become accountable to God.

Evangelism in the Anthropology of Christianity

To clarify this idea and to form the anthropological framework with which I will analyze Witness evangelism, I will situate my research in a recent flourishing of interest in evangelism in the anthropology of Christianity. After this I will turn to ethnographically describing accountability and responsibility in Witness theopraxis.

Evangelism as “circulation”

Courtney Handman (2018: 153) insightfully points out in her recent call for the anthropology of Christianity to attend to evangelism that processes of making more Christian subjects can be thought of as processes of “circulation,” or, as she writes, “the ways in which Christian speech and interpretive frameworks move through time and space, and the ways in which people understand themselves and others to be taken up in these networks of communicative circulation.” This notion of “circulation,” drawn from linguistic anthropology, focuses primarily on “the reflexive understandings that speakers have about their place, role, and capacities for movement within specific communicative networks of circulation” (ibid.: 155; cf. Lee and LiPuma 2002). Circulative networks are constructed—that is to say they are not natural—through political, economic, and social forms, which, as Handman points her readers to, have been called “cultures of circulation” (Lee and LiPuma 2002: 192). As such, circulation concerns not only organizations of speaking subjects (Lee 2002), but the relationships between speakers and listeners, the infrastructures and institutions along which communication flows, and the material conditions upon which the communicative networks rely.

Handman (2018: 153) argues that a focus on Christian evangelism as circulation allows the anthropologist of Christianity to “go beyond an analysis of the semantic content of specific theological principles” that Christians evangelize to their addressees as a way of drawing out the conceptual frameworks—what she calls “reflexive cultures of circulation”—Christians deploy to explain not only what it is *they* are doing or are able to do, but what it is God or other divine entities do, materials do, and what it is their addressees are expected to do in evangelical interactions. Handman's approach is different from many previous approaches to conversion in two principal ways.

First, circulation focuses on the reflexive understanding of the evangelizers themselves. This is intrinsically different from theorizing the “personal conversion experience” of the addressee of evangelism, as has been the career-spanning focus of Lewis Rambo (1993; 1999; 2003; Rambo and Farhadian 2014). Similarly, a focus on circulation puts to the side work that views conversion as transforming the self and the state in socially scalar ways that are often tacit (Özyürek 2009a; 2009b; 2014). But it also is different from studies such as Rosalind Hackett’s (2008) focus on what she terms “proselytization,”⁶ which similarly favors the analyst’s perspective on what ought to be the locus of study—namely, for her, interreligious conflict. For example, writing in Hackett’s volume, Julia Kovalchuk (2008) analyzes the sociology of the conflicts encountered by Korean Protestant missionaries in Siberia, by detailing the demographic factors she sees as explaining the efficacy of her informants’ evangelism. These various projects are valuable in their own right, but “evangelism” as I take it up here follows Handman’s call to attend to the ways Christians see their evangelism as fitting into communicative networks.

As such, circulation has important consequences for *how* the ethnographer does fieldwork. For example, my fieldwork focused less on the ways the addressees of Witnesses’ evangelism understood what was going on and more on the way the Witnesses talked about and theorized what it was they were doing. As a matter of course this meant that while conducting my research for this thesis, I focused my attention on the evangelizers rather than the evangelized.

Second, a focus on circulation allows for a comparative analysis across Christian forms that avoids having to directly reckon with the “semantic content” of the message being shared, meaning comparisons of evangelism in the anthropology of Christianity can bracket the theological puzzles critical to the people of separate Christian contexts (and perhaps even bracket Christian contexts altogether). To perhaps read a little into Handman’s argument, this does not mean a complete sidelining of theology, but that theology would be an important part of the context specific to how Christians understand their own evangelism. That is to say,

6 A brief note on the “p-word.” Hackett (2008: 2-3) tries to sanitize the term “proselytize” by differentiating it from “proselytism,” which is widely understood to be pejorative. While her volume is an excellent contribution, and this move to call it “proselytization” instead of evangelism is clearly an attempt at starting a comparative conversation, noting that the conversation on “conversion” is very obviously too Christian (e.g., Asad 1996), it does not quite purify the term as she wants it too. This is largely because the volume deals with state actors and others that are making attempts to demean the religious practice (e.g., Mayer 2008), and the line between the analytic and the pejorative is often blurry.

Handman (2018) writes that anthropologists of Christianity should attend to circulation and not “the specific theological principles that missionaries try to impart on the communities with which they engage.” This does *not* mean Christians would not reference theological principles when explicating their position in chains of circulation, nor does it mean theology should be systematically ignored by the anthropologist as it is hard to imagine a Christian *not* referencing doctrine.

Moving away from a focus on the doctrines taught to *how* the doctrines are taught moves analysis away from the pointless (for the anthropologist, anyway) activity of delineating what theology *makes* a Christian (cf. Garriott and O'Neill 2008). Put another way, a focus on evangelism (as circulation) allows the anthropologist of Christianity to ask, “what it means for people to *become* Christian” (cf. Cannell 2006: 5) in the eyes of the Christians we study. But even further, it seems to me that theology becomes important even across Christian differences, especially because, as Handman points out, evangelism is important (though in vastly different ways) to many different kinds of Christian. As an example of how theology could be an important part of the semiotic ideology of Christian evangelism writ large, I will consider the way Handman points us to “the problem of presence.” But first, a word about semiotic (and language) ideology.

Semiotic ideology and theology

Webb Keane (2018: 65) argues that semiotic ideology “put simply... refers to people’s underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions signs do or do not serve, and what consequences they might or might not produce.” The concept is deeply indebted to Michael Silverstein’s (1992) formulation of “ideology” as not “ideological” in the sense of validity, truth claims, or false consciousness, but as the ethnographic study of “mental phenomena.” Silverstein’s “ideology” has been thoroughly developed as the well-known concept “language ideology” (Silverstein 1979; Gal and Irvine 1995; 2019; Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998; Kroskrity 2000). Semiotic ideology envelopes and extends language ideology to include the explicit and tacit formulations humans give to “the full range of possible sign vehicles and the sensory modalities they might engage” (Keane 2018: 65). All humans have semiotic ideologies but there is not a singular semiotic ideology, as they are particular to social and historical context.

Returning to Handman, she points the reader to Susan Harding's (2000: 34) now classic study in which she argues that for her Evangelical interlocutors, "the moment of salvation" is when "the listener becomes a speaker." That is, Harding describes the process of becoming a Christian as the uptake of a "specific religious language or dialect"—what I will call herein a "register," see Chapter 2—as the listener of evangelism begins to be transformed as the language of the interaction "appropriates" the listener's "inner speech." Handman points out that aside from making evangelism central to the practice of her conservative Evangelical interlocutors, Harding's account shows how the interactional event between speaker and listener, evangelizer and addressee of evangelism, is "almost criterial" of Christianity (Handman 2018: 152). But further still, building on Harding, Handman notes that Christian evangelism is premised on a semiotics of putting the listener "in proximity to God," as part of a chain of communication that begins with "God to some humans and then to other humans" (*ibid.*: 154), though this chain is not always figured to be unidirectional (e.g., Viswanathan 1998: 42). As such, Handman contends, evangelism is concerned in part with the "problem of presence."

Matthew Engelke's (2007: 9) formulation of the "problem of presence" turns on "how a religious subject defines and claims to construct a relationship with the divine through the investment of authority and meaning in certain words, actions, and objects," or a semiotic ideology. Further, he argues that "the problem of presence is a problem of representation and authority" (*ibid.*: 11). From this Engelke (*ibid.*: 12) moves to describe a "Christian" problem of presence as the "paradoxical understanding of God's simultaneous presence and absence." This paradox is one of the "central dynamics of Christian thought," not as in cultural instantiations of Christianity with which anthropologists were starting to engage (at the time of his writing), but a global, or root aspect of the various semiotic ideologies that make up Christendom writ large. In other words, for Engelke, various Christian semiotic ideologies will all deal with the semiotics of presence and absence. To substantiate this, he turns to theology, connecting the thinking of Paul Ricoeur and André LaCocque (1998), a Catholic theologian named David Tracey (1981), and, somewhat curiously, Hegel—read through John Milbank (1997)—though Engelke (2007: 15) does qualify how "theological" this move might be.

To summarize Engelke's exposition quite briefly, the problem is that humanity was originally proximally close to God but, through Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, was made distant. The distance was remedied momentarily with the presence of Jesus Christ, but after his ascension, it leaves the Christian with the question "How is God present?" In short, God's presence must be mediated as "certain words and certain things—defined as such according to specific semiotic ideologies—become privileged channels of divine apprehension" (ibid.: 16). And for many forms of Christianity, Engelke notes (with the notable exception of the one he studied), one of the most privileged is the Bible. This, to my mind, demonstrates how theology is inextricably linked to considerations of the semiotic ideologies that underpin evangelism. Accordingly, throughout this thesis I will pay considerable attention to Witness theology as a way of getting at the ways in which Witnesses consider how signs are circulated.

The problem of authority, evidence, and the responsibilities of evangelism

But a consideration of the problem of presence is important in another way to an anthropology of evangelism. This is because evangelism is explicitly about teaching the listener the semiotics of absence and distance that make up God's presence in the life of the evangelizing Christian. Handman (2018: 159) notes that this pedagogical process is, at its core, about "different kinds of suasion and debate," as Christians' evangelism is often about persuading the listener to change in some sort of substantive way. Indeed, though Christians would scarcely use these terms, much of the reflexive way they consider their evangelism is grounded in the idea that between them and their listeners there will be some sort of clash between semiotic ideologies, particularly of what counts as legitimate "signs of God's presence." Jehovah's Witnesses, with their highly evolved methodologies of evangelism think this problem through constantly, and I suspect that this is true for other denominations as well.

John Du Bois (1986: 313) details how the speaker of religious language is confronted by a "problem of evidence, or more broadly authority." This specifies that the problem Engelke indicates more generally is in the case of interreligious communication an issue of what signs count as evidence.⁷ That is, for Du Bois, in "ordinary speech" (that is, nonreligious speech),

⁷ Though, Engelke (2007: 252) does note that "evidence of presence" is central, he is not considering evidence in terms of interreligious communication.

“evidentials” (Aikhenvald 2004; Chafe and Nichols 1986; Nuckolls and Michael 2014) in standardized language mark mutually verifiable sources of knowledge. Religious language can do this too, but according to Du Bois, it has to do extra work to be verified, such as through ritual.

Du Bois’s point that religious language uses evidence in ways that are different from other forms of language is useful because evangelism is premised on an encounter where the evangelizer assumes evidential signs are doing work that their addressee has to learn to verify. In other words, unlike other forms of evidentiality that can be verified without special knowledge, Du Bois’ point leads us to attend to the semiotic ideologies that are necessary for verification. This points the analyst towards what is considered to be persuasive in the pedagogical interaction that attempts to convince the addressee to interpret signs in a particular fashion and with particular consequences. Thus, I would contend that as anthropologists of Christianity attend to the broader semiotic ideologies of their interlocutors to understand their evangelism, they should pay specific attention to what signs are considered to be evidence (of God, truth, and so on) and how others are persuaded to interpret that evidence as they would themselves.

For example, Webster (2013: 101-23) gives a brief but detailed account of how “giving testimony” for Protestant Scottish fishermen turns on gender and emotional performance, as he recounts the way one man, Alasdair, shared his testimony with him (Webster) on several different occasions. Webster (*ibid.*: 199; *emphasis original*) emphasizes the way Alasdair’s testimonies were shared through bleary eyes and punctuated by emotional weeping, intertwining affect with the semantic content of his testimony to create an “intentional (in a sense *strategic*) interaction” of evangelism. The intention or strategy, or method in the terms I have laid out above, of testimonies had its ground in a reconstitution of the male body, as Alasdair—a once gruff and fowl-mouthed man of the sea—became a new kind of *man*, one whose “Christian masculinity” could be found in the open performance of emotion, such as freely weeping while uttering the words of his testimony, sometimes to the point that he could no longer even talk. His wordless sobbing was to be read as part of the testimony.

The weeping, Alasdair’s very tears, and the overall performativity of gendered emotion were the sign vehicles understood to evidence sincerity and be persuasive to converting the male

addressee, namely Webster himself. Most important here is that, as Alasdair said of the somatic experience of testimony, “it’s *nothing* to do with me, it’s the *Lord*, that’s the way *He* works” and that the emotions were simply a result of his “yield[ing] to Christ” (ibid.: 117-8). That is, evangelism in Webster’s account turns on a semiotic ideology that takes emotion to be evidence that collapses the problem of presence and distance, and therefore potentially the problem of evidence and authority, as Christ works through the embodied testimony of a converted Christian.

By turning to Harding, Webster then points out something critical about how evidence operates in evangelistic interactions. Harding (2000: 55) tells us how Reverend Campbell wove together “‘typological,’ or ‘figural’ links” between Abraham’s sacrifice, Christ’s self-sacrifice, and “our sacrifices” to create a narrative that could be used to convert Harding. The sacrifice in the narrative Campbell constructs for Harding is the death of his son, who he accidentally killed whilst operating a crane. The retelling of his son’s death acted as evidence in the narrative. That is, as Handman (2018: 152) points out, it is the typological linkages between Campbell and the Bible stories that make God present in the narrative Campbell “performed” for Harding. But that Campbell considered this persuasive is the case because the “types” were signs that were to operate as evidence. And they do because “the cumulative pattern of [Campbell’s] Bible-based storytelling... created a space for me to take responsibility, and feel responsible, for determining the meaning of his son’s death” (Harding 2000: 57). That is, Campbell strategically structured the interaction—which Harding says makes up the “performer’s” responsibility (ibid.: 42)—to put the onus on Harding to “determine the meaning” of the evidence he presented. The various responsibilities shape the relationship that unfolded in their interactions.

Returning to Alasdair, Webster (2013: 120; emphasis added) asks, “What, then, was my responsibility toward Alasdair and *his Lord*?” Webster then outlines the specific ways Alasdair wanted him to respond, all of which amounts to what might be a true of all evangelism: “Alasdair was calling me to commit myself to the spiritual path that he himself had committed to” (ibid.). While the responsibilities allocated by Webster and Harding’s examples of evangelism are plural, the telos is the same in that they are both about opening opportunities for the addressee to make new ethical commitments. The differences in responsibilities are rooted in the semiotic

ideologies that understand what evidential work signs do and therefore responsibilities vary according to context, even within one social milieu. Consider, for example, if Webster was not coded male by Alasdair; might his strategy, and therefore Webster's responsibility, have changed? I think so and take up this idea in Chapter 2.

As such, evangelism allocates responsibilities differently according to the evangelizer's semiotic ideology and how they imagine their addressee will interpret their evidence, though the telos of evangelism is always the same: evangelism works to persuasively open a space that makes possible the addressee taking up the same⁸ commitments as the evangelizer. The listener's responsibility is given to them by the bearing of testimony or the delivery of narrative, as in these two examples, but their commitment to the evangelizer's message is indeterminate (until it is not). But commit themselves to what? Webster tells us: to the God of the evangelizer. Indeed, Alasdair wanted Webster to take up *his* path—namely that of a “‘born-again’ Christian,” who would also go forth bearing testimony. Thinking of Jehovah's Witnesses, the goal of their evangelism is about making others accountable to God to go forth bearing testimony as well.

Becoming accountable and the responsibilities of evangelism

“Accountability to Jehovah,” one article in *The Watchtower* puts it, “came to the fore when our first human parents, Adam and Eve, were alive” (WTBTS 1992a: 11). When in the Garden of Eden, God gave Adam and Eve a command to not eat the fruit of “the tree of knowledge of good and bad” (Genesis 2:16-17), promising them that if they did, they would lose the paradisiacal conditions of the Garden and die. Further, God created the first humans with “free will,” or “moral agency” (WTBTS 2018c: 852), meaning that they intrinsically possessed the ability to choose to listen to God's will. The drama that unfolds after Jehovah finds Adam and Eve hiding with fig leaf coverings (Genesis 3:8-24) is, as Witnesses termed to me, their “trial.” The trial being a time when they were, quite literally, called to account for what they had done (Genesis 3:9-13), as Jehovah calls out to Adam and Eve, asking them to tell him what each person had

8 Or similar. Campbell obviously did not expect Harding to become a minister but a fellow Christian of the same sort he was.

done. This begins with Eve and ends with Satan. Jehovah then passes judgment (Genesis 3:14-19), condemning Adam and Eve to death and through their judgment the conditions humankind would inherit on the earth were laid out: death, sin, and separation from God.

The Garden of Eden motif demonstrates what is meant by accountability in Witness theological terms. Similar to Adam and Eve, all human beings will be called on by Jehovah to account for their lives. Whilst all humans are accountable in this grand eschatological frame that concludes with Final Judgment, becoming accountable during one's life takes a second, more precise or exclusive frame. That is, groups of people have made covenants with Jehovah to become "his special people" (WTBTS 1992a: 11-12). That these people have covenanted with God means that they have become *specially* accountable to him to do his will. Witnesses understand the narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures to be one about a "covenant people." However, covenants are not unique to the Hebrews and Witnesses contend that the followers of Christ took up a new, special covenant as Christians to preach his gospel, as I outlined above.

To understand the nuances of the ethical commitments of being God's special people it is helpful to differentiate what Witnesses call "accountability" from a notion of "responsibility." God's people have become accountable to do his will, meaning that like Adam and Eve they will have to account to God for what they did, but specifically the account will detail what they did as *his people*. In other words, accountability is about giving accounts at events like Judgment and becoming accountable is setting oneself on a particular course by making a vow with God. But the *doing* of God's will itself is "using free will" in "responsible ways" (ibid.). Witnesses call themselves "true Christians" because they take up the responsibilities of preaching and teaching through evangelism, not just because they are accountable to God. In other words, preaching and teaching—the enactment of the methodologies they so carefully devise—is not the same thing as accounting for what they did while evangelizing, something with its own repertoire of techniques.

Evangelism is figured as processes of communication through which Witnesses take responsibility by *giving* responsibility to others. In this way the individual frame of accountability—that all humans by dint of being human will have to render an account to God—merges with that of the second frame, the accountability of God's people, as the individual takes responsibility

for acting in alignment with God's will. Both instances of accountability are made in reference to future accounts that will be given to God about things done (ir)responsibly in a continuing *now*, but the former indicates how the individual will be subsumed by the later as they become part of "Jehovah's organization" through making a vow to God. Further anticipating that great reckoning, Final Judgment, Witnesses take account in regular intervals. Responsibilities, on the other hand, indicate the sorts of communicative processes that happen in everyday moments of evangelism itself.

Thus, my thesis asks, "What are the connections between the responsibilities of evangelism and becoming accountable to Jehovah God?" In answering this question, I argue that differentiating their ethical commitments in this way is ethnographically revealing, giving us a view into how Witnesses conceptualize and practice evangelism. This includes considering when and where evangelism happens, how responsibilities are distributed among people and things, and how evangelism is theorized and organized. To further elucidate what I mean by responsibility and how it relates to being/becoming accountable as part of God's people, I will discuss how responsibility and accountability are different in terms of temporality, personhood, and institutions.

Temporality

As I have indicated, accountability points towards future events during which an account will be rendered. These events are multiple, but always connect together the future and the past. While ultimately accountability points towards the accounting that will play out in the New World after Armageddon, accountability is also figured in more temporally local events, such as the rendering of monthly reports of how many hours an individual Witness spent preaching, teaching, and how many pieces of media they "placed" in the previous month.⁹ Importantly, however, these temporally local events are never permanent, and are only moral waypoints that create a trajectory into the future. Foremost among temporally local events are those where human subjects become accountable to God through making a vow, which I explore herein as "accountability events" (see Ch. 5). Accountability, as such, deals in terms of how Witnesses

⁹ See Ch. 3 for discussion of "placement"; see Chs. 1 and 5 for discussion of accounting mechanisms.

(both individually and as a group) understand that they will have to render accounts to God about their ministry at Judgment and the ways they account for how they are evangelizing now. Whilst there is a strong sense of futurity to how Witnesses understand accountability, accounts given must always be of past actions. To wit, Witnesses can only render an account in their monthly reports of the preaching and teaching they have *already* done. Further, when judged by Christ in the New World, humans will be rendering accounts of the lives they lived, choices *actually* made. Accordingly, throughout this thesis I will use verb forms of “accountability,” such as “take or give an account” or “accounting,” to reference the ways in which accountable persons make reports of responsible actions at specified, institutionalized events that “count” and “calculate” what happened in the ministry.

Responsibility, on the other hand, is rooted in the continuous present, as Witnesses take responsibility by attempting to evoke *responses* in those to whom they are preaching. Getting people to respond is part and parcel of responsibility (see Ch. 2). Further, the responsibilities of evangelism are also necessarily rooted in place, as Witnesses hold that it is more than just face-to-face interaction that makes it possible to truly teach, but a deep concern for how people born of different social or cultural histories can understand what is being taught. The responsibilities of evangelism, as such, are rooted in the processes of dialogic interactions that unfold in the present as situated in “the world” (see Ch. 1), placing interactional ethics at the center of “responsibility” (see Lempert 2013; Keane 2016; cf. Goffman 1959; Grice 1991; Rawls 1987). The difference between responsibility and accountability here is rooted in social interaction itself; the responsibilities of evangelism as an interactional process help others become accountable to God as Jehovah's Witnesses. These are two sides of the same coin of ethical commitment: responsibility highlights the ways that forms of communication align a person and others with God's will, accountability is the report and evaluation of their actions *post facto*, especially in the eschatological sense when time ends and eternity begins. This notion of responsibility could be seen as indicating a theological parallel with André LaCocque's (1998: 10; emphasis added) argument that “the essence of being human is to be in communication with others, to be turned *ad extra*. This is the *human responsibility*.”

Personhood

Witnesses understand accountability to be unique to human beings, spiritual entities (Satan, demons, angels, and so on), and collectives of persons, such as “God’s people.” Animals and inanimate objects cannot be held to account precisely because they do not have free will.¹⁰

Witnesses understand free will as being synonymous with personhood. Persons, namely humans, angels, demons, and Satan, are the sorts of entities that Witnesses understand the Bible indicates God has judged in the past. This includes Adam, Eve, and Satan in the Garden of Eden, but it also includes all of the wicked who perished in the Deluge, as well as a number of other events, such as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. This is also in no small part because accountability for Witnesses is intimately linked with *knowing*. Adam and Eve could be held to account because they knew what they were doing contradicted God’s will *when they acted*. Accountability is something, therefore, possessed by knowers. Witnesses understand this to be the case in both frames of accountability, but more obviously in the case of the second, as this is the motivating impulse or logic for evangelism in the first place: bring the knowledge of the gospel to others who do not know it so they can in turn do the same thing. This is central to the narrative arc of becoming accountable, as I will sketch out below in the overview of this thesis.

Responsibility, on the other hand, does not require personhood, nor even a knower. It simply requires the “ability” to *respond*.¹¹ This is more than a “responsive,” or “narrative self” (Mattingly 2018)—though it would include that—sweeping up how material networks are part of the interactions for which actors, humans or spiritual, are made accountable to Jehovah God. Stuff “in the world,” as Witnesses describe the socio-material conditions in which we all live (see Ch. 1), or “intermediary” materials (Laidlaw 2013: 179-96), can be given responsibilities as it is made into tools for carrying out Jehovah’s will, such as a publisher using a smartphone on a doorstep

10 Not to mention the fact that, as one Witness exasperatedly pointed out to me, such creatures and things cannot speak and would have no way of providing an account.

11 This shares a kinship with Knox and Harvey’s (2015: 71) formulation “respons-ability,” except that ethical boundary making for Witnesses is reserved to delineate accountability as pertaining to personhood, whereas the field of “respons-able” entities and things is infinite.

to show a video (see Ch. 3; see also Cardoza 2019).¹² But this also includes how Witnesses figure their unknowing human interlocutors as being passively engaged in the evangelistic encounter (see Ch. 2; cf. Raffoul 2018). This is exemplified by the way Witnesses commonly talk about evangelism as “making disciples” (Matthew 28:19). The apparent logic of this ubiquitous turn of talk is that there is an inherent passivity to the responsibilities of the evangelized.¹³ But unlike responsibility, which is not necessarily tethered to intentionality (Rumsey 2000; Shoaps 2007; Laidlaw 2013: 196), accountability seemingly always turns on the imputation of intentions and causality—it is precisely intentions and actions Witnesses argue God will judge.

Throughout this thesis, but especially beginning in Chapter 2, I will describe people and things as *responding* in this interactional sense; a sense that puts people and things—whether or not they know it or even can know it—into the network of dialogical social relations that makes disciples. Further, this allows for an analysis that can include God and Jesus, who are figured as non-accountable subjects by Witnesses. As such, I describe responsibility in dialogical terms. Responsibility is given and taken by various things and actors in the evangelistic encounter, painting a picture of the responsibilities of evangelism that are necessarily different to but a critical part of the story of accountability to Jehovah God.

Institutions

Witnesses understand the events of accountability to always be entangled in institutions that are based in a logic of meticulously “counting up” what has occurred. For example, “trials” require the institutional forms and infrastructures of courts and legal systems—the trials Witnesses are postulating are no different. That is, Jehovah's Witnesses believe that accounts are directed to groups of individuals representing God that have predetermined, specialized, and typically rigid technologies for eliciting, collecting, and evaluating accounts (cf. Strathern 2000). This is to say that institutions inscribe responses for (future) evaluation. Weber (1946: 205-6) tells us that calculability—the “ordering” of things into a “systematic budget,” or making countable—

12 This notion of “giving responsibility” is similar but different to notions of “responsibilization,” and associated verbs, in that it does not turn on implications of personhood or subjectivity (cf. Chua et al 2021).

13 In Russian the person-in-the-world is still grammatically the direct object, implying passivity on their part (e.g., *podgotovlyu uchenikov*).

is one of the first “presuppositions” of bureaucracy.¹⁴ John Borneman (1997: 15) writes that Weber’s notion of bureaucratic rationalization and institution building should be understood in the context of his wider theorization of “orienting values.”¹⁵ This means, Borneman holds, institutions and the rationalizations that make them (cf Doostdar 2018: 17) should be ethnographically understood through the “ethical values” driving people (cf Mattingly et al 2018). Further, he writes, “A moral community also requires belief in a superior morality of politics, a politics that is perceived as just” (Borneman 1997: 24).

This understanding of bureaucratic rationalization is helpful because it helps to illuminate the way Witnesses understand their institutional forms as a literal state, a bureaucratic government with a (the only truly) legitimate legal system. This embeds Witnesses’ projects of institution-building in politics, even if those “politics” are drastically different to the “politics” found in the “system of things,” something I describe herein as “theopolitics” (see Ch. 4). As Borneman argues, “justice” is massively important to how Witnesses go about “settling accounts” (the title of his book), but so are other values Witnesses talk about, such as “love,” necessitating a theory of value hierarchies (Robbins 2007; 2013a) to make sense of the politics and the institutional ways accountability is constructed.

“Jehovah’s organization,” or the human iteration of God’s Kingdom that exists in the here-and-now, is centered on making countable the responsibilities of evangelism. Evaluation and judgment are part and parcel of the function of the millennial institution of God’s Kingdom. That organization will be comprised of Jesus Christ and spiritual beings, or the 144,000 anointed servants mentioned in Revelations, and will rule over humankind (see Ch. 5). These entities are capable of passing lasting judgment, whereas the humans that make up God’s organization

14 Further, the Weberian idea that bureaucratic accounting is about predicting the future would not be lost on my interlocutors, as evangelism is very much seen as ushering in the New World and the ciphers in their accounts numerically reckon how that work is quickly advancing towards its eschatological conclusion. While Witnesses no longer put hard-and-fast dates on the end times, key dates in their theology, such as the 1914 date of “Christ’s presence,” were based on a complex biblical arithmetic that calculated chronologies of the Eschaton, common to Millerite (Adventist) groups (see Chryssides 2016: 25-48).

15 Of course, bureaucratic rationalization also fits into Weber’s wider developmentalist view that saw “non-bureaucratic forms of domination” (Weber 1978: 976), or what he termed “*Kadi-justice*,” as forms of accountability that lacked rationality, being arbitrary rather than stemming from a logic of counting.

on earth today, Witnesses understand, are incapable of this.¹⁶ Any evaluation made now by God's organization is always flexible, mutable, and impermanent. Instead of evaluation *qua* capital J Judgment as the motivating logic of God's current organization on earth, Jehovah's Witnesses understand their institution to be built upon a logic of counting and making legible the responsibilities of evangelism so that they can accurately and maximally fulfill their ethical commitments. The call to account and the evaluation or judgment of the account are both important, but Witnesses understand their current institution building project as singularly concerned with the former as a necessary way of prefiguring how God's kingdom will conduct the latter.

In other words, if the responsibilities of evangelism are the complex of interactions that unfold in localized time around the world, and are necessarily not predetermined (see Wentzer 2018), then the institutions Witnesses build are centrally focused on tallying up those responsibilities. This includes noting the interactions and their type, as well as the materials involved, primarily various forms of media, including Bibles, tracts, and videos (see Ch. 3). This obsession with counting is based in a deep concern with making sure their ethical commitment to evangelize is carried out with “exactness” (as Weber might expect), something they understand as being demonstrated throughout the Bible (e.g., WTBTs 2019d: 83-4). Getting evangelism exactly right fuels the drive to form committees and subcommittees, all of which take and give reports, as a calculation of the vows they individually made before baptism, but at the scale of God's people (see Ch. 5). These accounts, and the institution that is built to administrate the accounting, is uniform around the world because the accountability to Jehovah is uniform—Jesus's command to preach was singular, and so is God's organization. But the methodologies devised and employed by Witnesses to responsibly do Jehovah's will are implemented without uniformity, according to “local needs” (see Ch. 1), and in this way a witness can be given to all nations.

In sum, for Witnesses accountability to Jehovah signals Judgment. This is an event situated in the future that connects a person to an institution made in the past, namely through evangelism. Accountability is about being able to give an account (that is, accounts are only for entities with

16 A point oft forgotten in sociological treatments of Witness practices of “disfellowshipping,” more frequently termed “shunning” (e.g., Holden 2002: 79-81).

moral personhood), and God's institution receives that account. In the future, that accounting will be about life in a totalizing moral sense, but now that accounting is about events that point towards that ultimate conclusion. Responsibilities are the dialogic forms of communication that make up everyday life and how God's will is carried out. This happens in a continuous present and through locally-situated ways, as Witnesses attempt to make people-in-the-world become accountable as part of God's people.

The structure of Jehovah's organization—Built to account for evangelism

To further clarify how Witnesses understand God's organization on earth today to be all about accounting for evangelism I will briefly give the reader a sense of the institution at-the-local-level in Bishkek and how it relates to the global organization. I will detail the sorts of data Witnesses build their institution to take into account and discuss how these data are different to and stand in the way of a sociological demographic accounting of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The primary institution for Jehovah's Witnesses in Kyrgyzstan, as anywhere, is the congregation. During my fieldwork, in Kyrgyzstan there were 83 congregations in 2018 and 85 in 2019. Witnesses argue that congregations should build up the base of Jehovah's organization because this is the basic institutional model that can be derived from the Bible.¹⁷ In Bishkek, the range of congregations I attended were groups of 30-80 people who met together in "Kingdom Halls," which were all meetinghouses constructed by local publishers. Witnesses accentuate the importance of theologically separating the institution "congregation" from the building "Kingdom Hall," as the emphasis of the congregation is the social relationships that underpin the preaching and teaching work, not the building. Two or more congregations in Bishkek share a Hall. In more rural parts of Kyrgyzstan also visited during my fieldwork, there were cases where a single congregation met in a Hall, though more often in these cases Witnesses met in homes or other converted spaces for their various meetings.

¹⁷ Watch Tower literature (WTBTS 2018c: 496-500, see esp. 499-500) lays out the scriptural basis for this organization, citing numerous uses of both Hebrew and Greek terms they render in English as "congregation."

The congregation is organized around a “body,” or committee, of male “elders.” This organization is considered in “theocratic,” or legalistic, terms. Importantly, this means that God’s spirit is the glue that holds the body of elders together, providing the means for governance, and making possible the sorts of pastoral care provided by the elders in a congregation. Further to this, the body of elders *together* is the “head of the congregation,” not any singular elder. The body of elders has various roles and subcommittees in which each elder temporarily serves that account for everything from the number of copies of *The Watchtower* that are distributed in a given month to the number that will need to be ordered for the following month, to the maintenance of the Kingdom Hall, to the training of individual publishers, to qualifying baptismal candidates, and much more. All of this work, however, points towards the organization, oversight, and regular, monthly accounting of the preaching and teaching work. In this way, these roles are largely seen as part of a logistical apparatus serving evangelism. To this end, Chapter 1 focuses on how the institutional organization and roles of Jehovah’s Witnesses are geared towards accounting for how the responsibilities of evangelism unfold in Bishkek based on “local needs.”

Because congregations are the foundational institutional building block of God’s organization, the number of congregations are reported in an annual “Service Year Report of Jehovah’s Witnesses Worldwide” (SYR) (see fig. 0.1).¹⁸ By my count in 2018-19 there were consistently 22 congregations in Bishkek, and these congregations could be further divided by how many were Kyrgyz- and Russian-speaking, 10 and 12 respectively, not to mention the further subdivision of “language groups” attached to the congregations (see Ch. 1). However, these data are not reported in the SYR. Further to this, markedly absent from *any* form of Witness accounting is what social scientists might consider “demographic data,” such as gender, age, ethnicity, and so on.

For a people consumed with “the exactness of accounts,” this lack of data might seem conspicuous at first glance, but it aligns with the lodestar verse for this thesis and Witnesses’ wholesale

18 Before 2017, these statistics were reported in a “Yearbook,” a practice dating back to 1926, with a preface to the first report detailing the work of “the Society” up until that point (WTBTS 1926: 21).

2018 SYR: <https://www.jw.org/en/library/books/2018-service-year-report/>

2019 SYR: <https://www.jw.org/en/library/books/2019-service-year-report/>

	Country or Territory	Population	2018 Peak Pubs.	Ratio, 1 Publisher to	% Inc. Over 2017	2018			
						No. Bptzd.	Av. Pio. Pubs.	No. of Congs.	Memorial Attendance
2018	India	1,354,051,854	48,615	27,853	4	1,702	7,958	684	136,916
	Indonesia	268,459,957	28,283	9,492	2	1,442	4,283	492	58,658
	Ireland	6,632,457	7,061	939	2	131	1,048	120	11,842
	Israel	9,055,123	1,808	5,008	7	42	309	31	4,179
	Italy	60,457,909	251,502	240		4,307	37,435	2,921	417,090
	Jamaica	2,899,000	11,425	254	-1	315	1,522	178	31,962
	Japan	127,185,332	212,802	598		2,050	65,890	3,025	294,296
	Kazakhstan	18,533,849	17,507	1,059	-1	517	3,869	261	30,809
	Kenya	51,226,537	29,860	1,716	2	1,160	3,643	641	73,103
	Kiribati	118,414	150	789	5	9	33	3	557
	Korea, Republic of	51,635,256	101,246	510		1,770	43,692	1,278	135,489
	Kosovo	1,798,506	262	6,865	-1	7	110	8	579
	Kosrae	6,616	18	368	-6		6	1	82
	Kyrgyzstan	6,256,700	5,420	1,154	1	183	1,223	83	10,321
	Latvia	1,925,253	2,216	869	-1	42	328	37	3,288
	Country or Territory	Population	2019 Peak Pubs.	Ratio, 1 Publisher to	% Inc. Over 2018	2019			
						No. Bptzd.	Av. Pio. Pubs.	No. of Congs.	Memorial Attendance
2019	India	1,366,418,000	49,743	27,752	4	2,512	7,797	692	137,439
	Indonesia	270,626,000	29,107	9,605	3	1,046	4,450	514	58,878
	Ireland	6,802,000	7,059	994	2	134	1,114	121	11,818
	Israel	9,260,000	1,879	5,044	4	58	329	32	3,166
	Italy	60,550,000	251,303	242		4,278	37,512	2,892	414,595
	Jamaica	2,948,000	11,334	266	-1	334	1,408	174	34,703
	Japan	126,860,000	212,651	597		2,118	66,100	2,991	291,206
	Kazakhstan	18,551,000	17,485	1,072		479	3,959	262	30,516
	Kenya	52,574,000	29,935	1,833	3	1,445	3,648	647	78,322
	Kiribati	118,000	134	952	-7	2	32	3	438
	Korea, Republic of	51,709,000	102,456	507	1	1,800	45,242	1,266	136,891
	Kosovo	1,796,000	267	6,803	2	6	120	8	594
	Kosrae	7,000	20	412	6		5	1	96
	Kyrgyzstan	6,390,000	5,300	1,226	1	192	1,233	85	10,489
	Latvia	1,920,000	2,188	896	-2	46	324	33	3,367

Figure 0.1 - Extract from Service Year Reports for 2018 (top) and 2019 (bottom), Kyrgyzstan marked with purple indicator. Compiled image from SYRs available on jw.org. See footnote 19 for links or scan QR codes for reports.



rejection of the “system of things.” Jesus’s command that evangelism should provide a “witness to all the nations” (Matthew 24:14) points towards why accounts end at the country-level, as the emphasis is accounting for how the work proceeded in the previous year in a nation-by-nation frame. The number of congregations are only one of several data-categories that provide this account. The SYR also indicates the peak number of “regular publishers” by country. This number fluctuates month-to-month because it is based on the data collected in “Field Service Reports”—the monthly bureaucratic form through which publishers account their preaching and teaching to the body of elders—and in order to be considered “regular,” a publisher must have reported a minimum of one hour spent preaching in the previous month (see Ch. 5). But perhaps most obviously accenting the country-level analysis in the SYR is the ratio of publishers to the population of a given country—1:1,154 in 2018 and 1:1,226 in 2019 for Kyrgyzstan—which Witnesses indicated to me was demonstrable proof of Jehovah’s work advancing.

That Witnesses do not consider any other form of demographic data whatsoever is directly linked to how they consider these sorts of categories, most particularly ethnicity or race, to be fundamental to the sociological divisions that underpin the system of things (see Ch. 1). Further to this, however, I am confident that even in academic accounts these sorts of data do not exist for Jehovah's Witnesses anywhere in any sort of robust way. There are significant barriers to accurately surveying practicing Witnesses in a rigorous sociological fashion because Witnesses by-and-large are skeptical of participating in such studies—something I experienced myself when I first arrived in the field—because academia is squarely rooted in the system of things. No such data exist of Witnesses in Kyrgyzstan in any case, though I provide a treatment of the demographic data (including age, gender, and ethnicity) I collected of the English Group in Chapter 1. However, Witnesses consistently have pointed out to me in interviews that chasing down demographic data of the social scientific sort asks exactly the wrong questions, as what really matters is the advancement of the preaching and teaching work to fulfill biblical prophecy. Therefore, Witnesses' foremost institution in Bishkek, the congregation, is laser-focused on accounting for evangelism in the ways that appear in the SYR.

To continue, congregations are organized together into groups called “circuits,” which fall under the oversight of a “Branch Committee,” housed at a “Branch Office,” which reports to the “Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses.” In Bishkek there were two circuits, overseen by the Branch Office in Kyrgyzstan (in the same campus where the English Group met). The Branch Office, in turn, was overseen by the Governing Body, and its various committees and personnel, located at the several campuses of “World Headquarters” (WHQ) in New York, USA. One function of this institutionalized chain of oversight could be to privilege religious authority. Witnesses make this claim, emphasizing that the theocratic arrangement demonstrated in the Greek Scriptures was that the disparately located Christian congregations of the ancient Mediterranean all “recognized the authority of the... governing body [which] was comprised of the apostles and older men of the Jerusalem congregation” (WTBTS 2018c: 499). Because the Governing Body directly oversees the production of Watch Tower media, and therefore makes decisions as to doctrine and hermeneutics, Jehovah's organization is often figured in top-down sorts of terms, with the WHQ as the authorizing power over all Witnesses.

However, another way to conceptualize this authority structure is in less hierarchical terms—though hierarchy certainly matters, if in different ways than typical social analysis allows (see Haynes and Hickel 2016)—and more in terms of a chain of accountability that reports the preaching and teaching of individual Witnesses to the Governing Body, and ultimately, to Jehovah. This bottom-up flow of accounts traces out the authority structure in a way that much more closely matches how everyday Witnesses describe experiencing Jehovah’s organization, as when they see statistics such as the global figure representing hours spent preaching in a year (2,074,655,497 hours in 2018 and 2,088,560,437 hours in 2019; see respective reports), they know they contributed their several hundred hours to those massive figures. Hours my interlocutors spent making disciples on the streets of Bishkek. This, of course, returns us to the congregation as the place where the Witnesses I worked with most closely dealt with accounting for the responsibilities of evangelism.

Layout of thesis chapters: A roadmap to becoming accountable

The goal of this thesis is to lay out how the Witnesses I worked with understand their own evangelism. As such, the bulk of the content in the following chapters describes the responsibilities of evangelism: how Witnesses theorize, methodologize, and practice their preaching and teaching. But the narrative arc of the thesis is a story of how Witnesses take accountability themselves as evangelizers and help others to become accountable to Jehovah God.

In Chapter 1 I lay out how Jehovah’s Witnesses organize their evangelizing work according to the local needs of language. To understand this, I explore the semiotics Witnesses’ theology of “the world,” or the “system of things,” expounding how evangelism is organized in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Namely, the preaching work is organized around languages according to what Witnesses call “local needs” for understanding—something that turns on speaking a common language. I expound the ways Witnesses take responsibility for evangelizing in the languages which they can (learn to) speak. To demonstrate this, I will describe the English Group in Bishkek with whom I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork for this thesis. Similar to my discussion of demographics above, my goal in this thesis is to lay out how my Witness friends understand

their own evangelism. This comes to the fore in Chapter 1 as I do not take “local context”—the way social scientists might understand ethnicity, society, history, or culture—to be explanatory in their conceptualization of evangelism. Instead, taking seriously their socio-theological notions of “the world” and their position in it as God’s people, I use local needs to show how Witnesses in Bishkek understand their universal methods of evangelism to be locally implemented.

The remaining chapters of the thesis expound how my Witness friends conceptualize, methodologize, and enact the process through which a person-in-the-world becomes accountable to Jehovah God and how responsibilities are distributed in the various stages of “progression,” from the moment Witnesses first meet a person-in-the-world to when they dedicate themselves to Jehovah and are baptized. As such, Chapters 2 – 4 follow this progression in three key phases before dedication and baptism (Ch. 5) that correspond to three states of knowledge/accountability as the Christian subject is formed:

Chapter	Pedagogical phase	Knowledge status	Accountability
2	The initial call	-in-the-world	Unaccountable
3	Return visits	Listeners	Unaccountable
4	Bible studies	Bible students / Unbaptized publishers	(Un)accountable / Accountable

The “initial call” (Ch. 2) refers to the first instance of contact with a person-in-the-world. I discuss the ways Witnesses in Bishkek implement the Bible’s methods of preaching, focusing on the method Witnesses understand to be directly imitative of Christ’s ministry and the apostles’ evangelism: to go house to house, finding people to whom they might proclaim Jehovah’s name and announce the imminent arrival of his kingdom. Through the “house-to-house work” Witnesses “search out” the “rightly disposed,” or find people who are already of a disposition to take the responsibilities given to them in the initial call. The primary responsibility given to the person-in-the-world in the initial call is “listening,” even if Witnesses consider it fundamentally impossible for their “listeners” to “understand” what they are preaching. Chapter 2 turns on an examination of how Witnesses understand people-in-the-world, including the rightly disposed, to be unaccountable to Jehovah as “true Christians” because they do not yet know “the truth.”

This chapter focuses on the interrelationships of evaluation, knowledge, responsibility, and (un)accountability.

“Return visits” (Ch. 3) denote the way Witnesses return to visit the rightly disposed they found through the initial call to slowly begin teaching them by coaxing the “listener” to “ask for explanation,” forming what will become the substance of the teacher-student relationship leading to Bible studies. This chapter explores how this persuasive process is mediated by the Bible and “Bible literature,” and the responsibilities given to religious materials (such as tracts, brochures, magazines, Bibles, and videos) that publishers “place” with their listeners. This chapter puts into relief the ways subjectivity is required for accountability by exploring both the ways print and digital Bible literature and non-Christians are given responsibilities.

To discuss “Bible studies” (Ch. 4) I delineate how Witnesses understand the responsibilities of evangelism to be inherently political, as Witnesses are responsible in the teacher-student relationship they form with their Bible students to not be in any way coercive. That is, Witnesses’ theory of evangelism posits that any amount of coercion or hypocrisy in the teacher-student relationship would render impossible any opportunity of the person-in-the-world becoming accountable to Jehovah God. I explore this by laying out the semiotics of what Witnesses call “Christian neutrality,” drawing on Samuel Hayim Brody’s (2018) notion of “theopolitics” to flesh out how “neutrality” is not a claim to be apolitical, but a (re)locating of politics from the world to God’s Kingdom and a utter rejection of the legitimacy of this-worldly politics.¹⁹ I argue that taking seriously a notion of theopolitics (rather than “political theology”) enables an anthropological understanding of Witness evangelism that does not sneak coercion or hypocrisy in the back door. Here I suggest an analytic decoupling of “evangelization” from “missionization,” as Christian missions are so squarely rooted in histories of violence and exploitation. I show how this distinction is important for understanding Witnesses in Kyrgyzstan by charting how Jehovah’s Witnesses arrived there during the Soviet period. This chapter focuses on how politics inflect in Witness theopraxis, specifically how coercion and hypocrisy in evangelism erase the possibility of accountability.

19 This must be understood in the context of “relative subjection” (see Ch. 4).

Chapter 5 considers how becoming accountable to Jehovah God through “dedication and baptism” entails embodying the accountability to be evangelizers. The previous chapters all concern evangelism as a linguistic interaction. This chapter explores how becoming one of Jehovah's Witnesses entails *being* Jehovah's witness, allowing analysis to see accountability on scales larger than the human subject, as Witnesses consider this sort of embodied evangelism to witness to divine entities—such as angels, demons, and Satan the Devil—as well as sociological structures, such as the “nations.” I explore how the temporality of being an accountable subject is tied to singular events that I call “accountability events,” whereas responsibilities can fall along a spectrum of the ordinary.

In conclusion, I review the reflexive way Jehovah's Witnesses consider the methods of their evangelism by thinking through what happens to accountability and responsibility in the New World,²⁰ as I take up the question of preaching to and teaching the resurrected dead during the millennium and what happens to ethics and virtue in an eternal frame.

Methods for an anthropological study of evangelism

How does one anthropologically study the reflexive way that Christians consider their own evangelism? This final section delves into three techniques I used in the research for this thesis to put together the framework Witnesses use to consider their evangelism. First, I consider how I used the study of Bible and Bible literature as an ethnographic method, and how I see this as pushing forward the “Anthropology-Theology Dialogue.” Second, I juxtapose what might be called “church ethnography”—that is, in this context, ethnography done in the Kingdom Hall—to the study of the process of Witness evangelism as it unfolds. And third, I reflect on the ways I see my positionality shaped my fieldwork with Jehovah's Witnesses.

“Theologically engaged ethnography”

Joel Robbins's (2020) recently published book, *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life*, frames what he calls a dialogue between Anthropology and Theology, drawing both on his 2006 article and J. Derrick Lemons' (2018; 2021) edited volumes that have created a buzz

20 The world after the destruction of the apocalypse.

around what he calls “theologically engaged anthropology.” Most particularly, Robbins is keen to develop what Lemons (2018: 5) calls the “transformational framework,” in which the anthropologists might engage theology in ways that are more than just showing how theologies (especially Christian ones) have shaped anthropology or than anthropologists treating theology as “special ethnographic data” (both of which Lemons calls the “stratified framework”), but instead engage theology in ways that transform anthropology and potentially how anthropology might transform theology.

Robbins (2020: 4-5) provides an interesting bit of commentary at this juncture to focus on forming a transformational dialogue. He explains that in his original 2006 article, he took for granted the way anthropologists differentiate between what he calls “ethnography” or “ethnographic data” and anthropological “theory,” the latter of which is meant to explain the former. He points to Malinowski (1922: 9), who claimed that anthropologists conducting fieldwork should have “good training in theory” for “the more problems [they bring] with [them] into the field, the more [they are] in the habit of moulding [their] theories according to facts, and of seeing facts in their bearing up theory.” While this sort of relationship between theoretical problems and “fact” has been much developed in the near century since *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* was published, this dialectic of theory and method, method and theory remains a staple of anthropological thinking.

Robbins then moves to say that he views the transformative interdisciplinary dialogue as unfolding in terms of theory. And indeed, it is in terms of theory that theology has been engaged in the conversation. Note, for example, how Patrick McKearney (2019: 468-69) thinks through how a book of theology he found during the course of his fieldwork plays into his writing: “In this process of re-interpretation, Alison’s theology transformed from an object in the ethnographic world I was trying to understand into an analytical tool to make sense of it.” For McKearney, theology may play less a totalizing transformational role than Robbins is getting at—one that is “representative of a foundationally different set of scholarly assumptions that ‘might lead anthropologists to revise their core projects’” (Robbins 2006: 287 in McKearney 2019: 469)—and is hence a creative “aid” that helps in the re-interpretation of ethnographic data, and through the re-interpretation of which “new categories and forms of analysis” are

brought to bear. While he qualifies the extent of this transformation, McKearney is attentive to the ways in which his analysis was in fact transformed by the theology he engaged.

McKearney's insight is representative of the way theology is most commonly deployed in theologically engaged anthropology. This is true for many of his co-authors publishing in the same Special Issue, such as Rose's (2019) analysis of Palestinian evangelicals and the "shared problematic" (Bialecki 2018), or "critique" (Bielo 2018), that anthropological and theological perspectives have of "citizenship." Or, take the way Marc Roscoe Loustau (2019: 503) uses debates about Catholic theological authority to challenge the anthropological "assumption that propositional belief is ahistorical, individualized, and overly conceptual." In both of these, and in McKearney's, as well as the rest of the articles in the issue, the transformational dialogue takes place at the level of analysis, once the ethnographer is tucked away behind their keyboard.

However, if we return to Robbins's point about the Malinowskian basis of ethnographic fieldwork, shouldn't the transformational dialogue also play out in the way anthropologists conduct fieldwork, not just in the ways we analyze ethnographic data? What happens to anthropological analysis when, instead, the problems we bring to the field are theologically engaged? Can there be a "theologically engaged ethnography"? How might this transform ethnographic methodology? My thesis should be read as experimenting on these questions in the spirit Robbins pointed us towards: as taking theologically engaged anthropological theory and inflecting that in the way ethnographic data is collected. To further explain what I mean, and to expound a central ethnographic method I used in conducting the fieldwork for this thesis, I must say a word about how Witnesses study the Bible and Bible literature.

Jehovah's Witnesses attend at least two primary meetings every week, one on the weekend and one midweek. The weekend meeting includes a study of an article in *The Watchtower* and all Witnesses, wherever they be found in the world, will read the same article on the same weekend. Similarly, the midweek meeting is structured around a study in a "meeting workbook," *Our Christian Life and Ministry*, which includes exegetical studies for a range of Bible verses, training in evangelistic methodology, the viewing of videos or discussion of "local needs" (see Ch. 1), and a "Congregation Bible Study" from a Watch Tower text, for example in 2021 the text is *Pure Worship of Jehovah—Restored At Last!* (WTBTS 2018e).

Witnesses are expected to study these materials ahead of the meetings and prepare “comments.” That is, during the weekend study of *The Watchtower*, a portion of the meeting will consist of a reading of the article, during which the brother conducting the meeting will stop at each section (usually by paragraph), and ask the question found in each top-level section header or in a footnote. The comments are prepared in a way that will, as one Witness put it to me, “thoughtfully answer the question,” drawing directly on the text, making connections to other texts or Bible verses, or to personal experience that supports the point of the question. Similarly, during midweekly meetings, there are questions in the study of Bible verses in both *Our Christian Life and Ministry* and the Bible study text, and Witnesses should prepare comments for these. While Witnesses are keen to point out that comments come in all shapes and sizes, reflecting the qualities, abilities, and individual circumstances of the person commenting—all of which are acceptable, and Witnesses’ students and visitors are encouraged to give comments (WTBTS 2018: 9e)—comments ought to be based on an engaged study of the material *before* the meeting.

Further still, the reading of *The Watchtower*, *Our Christian Life and Ministry*, and other texts, along with the accompanying selections of the Bible for these study articles, are only part of what a Witness may study throughout any given week. Witnesses also study for “Family worship” (or for single adults, “Personal worship”), which is usually oriented around parents teaching children the Bible through various pedagogical methods and texts (this alone warrants a doctoral project!); they study the Bible and Bible literature in preparation for individual meetings with their Bible students or listeners; they might study the “Daily text” from the book *Examining the Scriptures Daily*, which has a verse (or a fragment of a verse) from the Bible and some commentary taken from an issue of *The Watchtower* in the previous publication year (April—March); and they might study the Bible more deeply on their own, according to their time and fancy.

One of the first Jehovah’s Witnesses I met said their personal studies and studies together in the Kingdom Hall could be considered as being oriented towards two primary goals: “First, spiritual food for the self and second, to prepare for the ministry.” “Spiritual food” is meant to grow one’s own faith—or, in the context of comments in the Kingdom Hall, perhaps the

faith of another present—but the deep study of the Bible and Bible literature is also geared towards one's personal evangelism. This Witness told me, referencing Ephesians 4:7-16, “We can't preach if we're starving!”

Based on the short fieldwork I conducted with Witnesses in 2016 and 2017, which was the substance for my master's thesis, I knew about these meetings before embarking on my doctoral fieldwork. My thinking was—and still is—that I could apply Witness “Bible study” to my ethnographic fieldwork. Thus, when I got to the field, I began studying as Witnesses study. That is, before the weekend meetings I would read *The Watchtower* thoughtfully, consider the Bible verses therein, and prepare comments for the weekend. I would prepare the materials for the midweek meetings as well, reading the Bible verses and study materials. I would also read the daily text, and conduct my own studies of the Bible, looking at Watch Tower material to compare with my own understanding of what I was reading. Eventually, when my wife and I began to study with a Witness couple twice a week, I would study the books and articles they assigned ahead of our meetings and prepare questions and comments on the material. I viewed this study as an expressly theological exercise that attempted, as Witnesses do, to discover the “correct meaning” of Witness texts, rather than simply peruse them. I took seriously a Witness hermeneutics that attempts to “let the Bible interpret itself,” which I explore in detail in Chapter 3.

This challenged the way I was trained to do ethnography. Firstly, neither during my pre-field year at Cambridge—nor in my previous training in anthropology—had I ever heard of hermeneutical, text-based study as an ethnographic method. Indeed, since this practice is done alone, could it be considered ethnographic? I think that it was. I found my daily—and it was daily—study of the Bible and Bible literature to be an integral part of my understanding the way Witnesses conceptualize their evangelism.²¹ My study was not only prerequisite to fully *participating*—to deploy the ethnographic truism—in Witness meetings, but allowed me to comprehend them more fully, making connections between the theologies and practices discussed in any given sitting with the broader corpus of Witness ideas. This is to say that

21 To be fair, my originally proposed project focused on “ethical pedagogy” in a broader sense and it was only after reflecting on my data that I decided to focus my thesis on evangelism.

ethnographically deploying Witnesses' hermeneutical study, I was expanding in dramatic ways Malinowski's (1922: 9) axiom: "The field worker relies entirely upon inspiration from theory." Indeed, perhaps this method even subverts Malinowski's idea of "inspiration," as my study was also valuable to my own religious life.

Perhaps more in line with Malinowski's inspiration, my study in the field also provided endless fodder for conversation in my regular meeting with Witnesses in day-to-day life. These conversations invariably led to Witnesses referencing yet other Watch Tower material I had yet to study, filling my WhatsApp with messages with recommended articles to read and videos to watch. Aside from the constant renewal of things to study to prepare for meetings, there was no shortage of things to study, and on average, I found myself studying a minimum of an hour a day—a number not so far-fetched, as many of my Witness friends told me they often spend about that much studying as well.

To return to Robbins' notion of the sort of dialogue anthropology and theology might have, I see my method of hermeneutical study as pushing the conversation further, as it applies theological reasoning not only to theoretical analysis but is as an example of theory the anthropologist can bring to the field, shaping the sorts of problems they attend to in the first place. This is perhaps the more radical transformation McKearney was referring to, as I set out not to re-interpret my data—though, to be sure, I have done a fair amount of that as well in the writing of this thesis—but I attempted to interpret what I was seeing on the ground in the way Witnesses do, according to a hermeneutical study of the Bible and Bible literature. This methodology obviously would not do to describe every problem, but I argue that it is tremendously useful when attempting to ethnographically describe a conceptual project, as I have set out to accomplish here.

Ethnography in Kingdom Halls

While this thesis is about Jehovah's Witnesses' evangelism, I spent comparatively little time evangelizing with Jehovah's Witnesses. This was for several reasons. For example, as I note in Chapter 4, at one point a Matt, one the Witnesses' students I knew in Bishkek, invited me to accompany him during his Bible studies. I did accompany him but shortly after the experience,

Dima—Matt's teacher—texted me and asked that I tell Matt that I wouldn't be coming along to his studies anymore. Dima explained that it was too distracting.

Further, my coming along for "field service," whether that was preaching door-to-door or "street witnessing" (see Ch. 2) was, as I later learned, potentially controversial. While I never encountered this in Bishkek, with perhaps one exception,²² when I returned to Cambridge, I found not every Witness was so open to my coming along evangelizing. Once in Cambridge, I started studying with an older couple in the local congregation, which has continued every Saturday morning since, even until the time of writing. When I told this couple that I had been along with Witnesses preaching in Bishkek, the brother said to me, "You shouldn'ta been along in the ministry!" as he thought it would be too distracting to the people they were evangelizing. Reflecting back on my time in Bishkek, the Witnesses who invited me to come along did not advertise that they were doing so to the whole congregation and perhaps it was because their doing so was more controversial than I realized at the time. Since this Cambridge brother told me off, I have subsequently (perhaps penitently) corresponded with a contact at the Witnesses' "Office of Public Information" at the International Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses in Warwick, New York who clarified that my accompanying Witnesses was not ethically problematic for them and was up to the individuals involved,²³ and that I could write about my experience if I felt comfortable doing so. While surely not every Witness will be happy about it, I will draw on my experiences preaching with Witnesses as examples or vignettes that demonstrate the way Witnesses in the English Group in Bishkek imagine the responsibilities of evangelism can be implemented.

With that, I think it is safe to say that this project could have been adequately completed even had Witnesses in Bishkek been as staunchly opposed to my coming along preaching as my friend here in Cambridge. This is because Witness meetings revolve around evangelism. Midweek meetings are the most obvious in this regard. The midweek meeting, now called "Our Christian Life and Ministry," as in the workbook mentioned above, is the inheritor of what was

22 A Circuit Overseer (see below) once told me that I could not come with the congregation during a group ministry project during his visit.

23 That said, I have made every effort to anonymize my data.

once called “Theocratic Ministry School.”²⁴ This meeting is specifically understood to provide pedagogical training for Witnesses to prepare them for their own Christian lives (that is, being accountable subjects) and therefore their personal ministries.

The weekend meetings are perhaps less obviously centered on evangelism. Weekend meetings have two components, a “public talk” and a study of *The Watchtower*. If Witnesses invite their listeners or students to a congregation meeting, it is to this meeting. But the focus of many public talks and articles in *The Watchtower* directly pertain to evangelism. And, as I will consider in the first chapter, Witnesses themselves attend the weekend meeting for “spiritual food”—but this is metabolized into energy for their responsibilities to preach and teach. Even beyond this, much of the content of public talks or the discussion of *The Watchtower* article was understood as a metacommentary on how Witnesses ideally could preach or teach.

Finally, there are also special meetings called “Conventions”²⁵ and “Regional Conventions.” Conventions are day-long meetings and happen twice yearly, Regional Conventions are three days long and happen annually. These are special meetings during which baptisms are usually performed (see Ch. 5), there is an outpouring of spiritual food, and there is much in-depth training for field service. There are also two week-long visits a year from a “Circuit Overseer,” who is an elder who takes on a special assignment to care for and train the congregations in a circuit (remember, congregations are organized together into “circuits” under the direction of the country or territory’s Branch Office; see Ch. 1). The “CO,” as Circuit Overseers are often affectionately called, takes that week to individually train Witnesses in the door-to-door ministry, holds special training meetings, and—as ever—gives an extra boost of spiritual food to the congregation. Congregations, I have noted, are typically extra zealous in their preaching during the week of a CO visit, and in the weeks afterward.

This assortment of meetings was more than enough to fill my time. But further still, because this thesis attends to the ways Witnesses reflexively consider their evangelism, the meetings—

24 See WTBTS (2014a: 170-81) for a brief history of the various types of Witness meetings.

25 What I am calling here “Conventions” in English are more correctly called “Circuit Assemblies” in theocratic language (on theocratic language, see Ch. 2), however, because in Russian Circuit Assemblies and Regional Conventions are called «Kongress» and «Regional’nyy Kongress» respectively, during my fieldwork I heard both glossed in English as “conventions.” Accordingly, herein I will use “convention” to refer to Circuit Assembly.

aside from one-on-one interviews—were the best place to gather data on this thinking because the Kingdom Hall is where “makers of disciples” are trained.

“Don’t worry, he *actually* reads the Bible,” and other reflections on my fieldwork

Foma, one of my closest interlocutors (see Ch. 1), once invited me to accompany him while he gave a “public talk” (essentially a sermon, but which follows a preconceived and authorized “outline”) during a weekend meeting in a congregation about an hour’s bus ride outside Bishkek. Congregations often exchange speakers in this way, because only certain “spiritually mature” men in the congregation may give talks, and to make it so the congregation hears a variety of speakers, there is intercongregational rota of speakers. When we arrived in the village, we walked from the bus stop along a gravel road to a Kingdom Hall hidden behind a fence and shrouded in the shade of dusty trees against the heat of the summer sun. At the gate, we were greeted by an old Kyrgyz Witness, whom Foma apparently knew, as they greeted one another warmly and clasped each other’s shoulders.

After few moments, the older Witness asked Foma who I was. Foma immediately launched into explaining that I was a researcher from Cambridge writing a “book” (as he called it) about Jehovah’s Witnesses. The old man registered some surprise, as he simply uttered, “Ahhhh...” and clicked his tongue. Then Foma said, “Don’t worry, he *actually* reads the Bible.” At this, the brother’s skeptical utterance shifted into a string of muttered, “*Nado zhe... nu vot... nado zhe!*” [rambling positive Russian interjections] and vigorously nodded whilst Foma further explained my qualifications and project.

This sort of interaction was very common when a Witness who knew me well introduced me to another Witness who did not, or was meeting me for the first time. The idea that I “actually read the Bible” is of course inseparable from the methodology I proposed above in which I literally read the Bible. But Foma, and others who similarly introduced me, were referencing something more than the fact that I read the Bible. Their conceptualization of “the academic” or “the scholar” was rooted in a Soviet history of atheism and post-Soviet Russian sociology, which takes its cues from the anti-cult movement (Baran 2014: 210-1; Knox 2018: 268-73), where the social scientist’s goal was to, as Foma put it, “prove we’re a dangerous cult.” Further

convoluting things, the category “anthropologist” was meaningless to many of my Witnesses interlocutors, who when I would attempt to explain what I was doing assumed I was a journalist. Journalists, similar to their vision of academics, were there to sensationalize Witnesses as a cult. This is all to say that many Witnesses, much as the older Witness in the vignette I just sketched out, were initially skeptical of my intentions.

Foma pointed to two things that evinced that I was, in fact, different from the atheist social scientists and journalists who were out to get them and that I was not going to write some sort of exposé. First, I had regularly attended meetings. Foma told me, “No one—not even FSB agents—has that much resolve to be around Witnesses for as long as you have.” This is significant because there is a history of Soviet KGB agents infiltrating clandestine Witness congregations in the USSR (e.g., Baran 2014: 88-91), not to mention the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia that had begun in earnest in 2017, just before I began my doctoral fieldwork in 2018. Second, more than simple persistence, Foma and others understood my perseverance in studying the Bible and attending meetings as being rooted in an honest belief in God—a topic that would often come up in our interviews, and I, finding no reason to lie to them, would honestly answer questions regarding my own faith.

I am a lifelong member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When Foma said that I *actually* read the Bible, what he was indicating was not the fact that I was familiar with the contents of the Bible (compared to a Witness, I certainly am not!), or that I was reading the Bible “as part of my research” (though I was), but that I *actually* read the Bible for myself. That is to say that I believe that the Bible is God’s word (even if what that means is wildly different from what it means when a Witness says they believe the Bible is God’s word). My personal beliefs in God—whatever that means—were helpful to my interlocutors in that particular time and place (March-April 2018, July 2018 – August 2019, in northern Kyrgyzstan) to trust me enough to openly talk with me, hang out with me in their homes or in my family’s apartment, and even, on occasion, take me along with them to evangelize. Further, as my network of Witness interlocutors has gradually extended beyond Kyrgyzstan and into Europe, the United Kingdom, a variety of different African countries, Sri Lanka, and the United States, I have found that my being Christian has proven useful in building relationships and stimulating conversa-

tions with Witnesses even outside of contexts where the historical and political circumstances have led them to hold a deep distrust of academics. Further, for some Witnesses, the fact that “Mormons,” as my community is commonly called, also emphasize evangelism and the way we are sometimes negatively portrayed in popular media was further evidence that I might understand something of their experience as Witnesses and, therefore, be more empathetic towards them.

I both agree and disagree with this sentiment. To the former point, having been a missionary myself did make “knocking doors” with Witnesses substantively less uncomfortable for me, as I have knocked on my own fair share of doors in my own religious practice. But to the latter point, while I am aware of what might be perceived as popular “negative” (satirical) portrayals of “Mormonism” (i.e., *South Park* or *The Book of Mormon* musical, etc.), I have never been too fussed about such things, though I could relate to many experiences Witnesses have shared with me of being publicly berated. Principally what I disagree with is the idea that my positionality would somehow make me “more empathetic” towards Witnesses than other anthropologists (e.g., Howell 2007 could be read this way), as I hold empathy to be a core tenet of ethnographic methodology and the anthropological endeavor more generally (e.g., Rosaldo 2014; Beatty 1999).²⁶ As such, it is my opinion that any anthropologist worth their salt would be capable of empathizing with Jehovah's Witnesses, and they have (e.g., Barchas-Lichtenstein 2013), even if Witnesses hold we do not get everything right (how could we?).

Beyond these points, it is my opinion that my positionality as a believing Christian helped me “endure” fieldwork with Witnesses. That is to say, I actually cherished my fieldwork with Jehovah's Witnesses and found that my fieldwork to be not only enjoyable, but generally pretty easy-going. This is quite the opposite from the way that Andrew Holden (2002: 3-4), a sociologist of religion who conducted ethnographic research with English Witnesses in the mid-90s, describes his ethnographic fieldwork as having been, in his words, “far from easy.” Holden tells

26 Some hold that empathy is the principal thing anthropology has to offer an increasingly divisive public sphere (Shannon et al 2021). Others might render “empathy” as “intense listening” (e.g., Hammoudi and Borneman 2009: 260); even contending views of ethnography hold this as characteristic of the methodology. Further, the point is not that empathy as method emphasizes an anthropological focus on suffering, as Robbins (2013b) argues, but as Rosaldo (2014: 136) tells us, anthropologists are not “uninvolved spectators” and whatever experience they have can “provide knowledge about the cultural force of emotions” during ethnographic fieldwork.

his readers it was not easy because Witnesses are “fervent evangelists” and, as such, during his fieldwork he felt he had to perpetually make it clear to them that he “was not a prospective recruit.” While perhaps Holden is performing a scientific subjectivity for his sociologist readers—one where “going native,” as he puts it, is a legitimate concern—it seems to me from reading his ethnography that it was a thoroughly taxing experience for him, precisely because Witnesses persisted in seeing him as an object of their evangelism.

My experience could not have been more different. I found that some of my most enjoyable memories with Jehovah’s Witnesses were precisely when they were teaching me. This was precisely because their theological lives were so baffling to me. As Laidlaw (2013: 216-17) writes, “For anthropological enquiry—conducting ethnographic fieldwork, the writing and the reading of ethnographic works—...the study of other forms of ethical life becomes a form of self-fashioning insofar as initial puzzlement or incomprehension or prejudice is overcome by improved understanding achieved through modification of the self.” As I have come to see things from a Witness point of view, I daresay that I have learned something, and I think I am a better Christian for it.

That said, in the very beginnings of my fieldwork, as Holden (2002: 4) notes, I was “wary of doing or saying anything that could appear antagonistic” to my Witness interlocutors. This was similar to how Webster (2013: 121) describes when one of his interlocutors testified to him and asked for a response and, rather than give a perhaps thorny answer, Webster replied in a way he thought the man was looking for. This was particularly the case in view of my being a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as I thought that this might be off-putting to my would-be Witness friends. This is not to say that I ever lied about my beliefs, but that I also did not instantly signal my positionality, or let on to the full extent of my opinion on something. This hesitancy quickly gave way during my fieldwork, as I quickly learned that Witnesses cared little about my precise denominational affiliation or beliefs, except in that it helped them to discern my interests (see Ch. 2), what media they placed with me (see Ch. 3) and to how to individuate my study of the Bible (see Ch. 4). While this meant we focused on issues relevant to my personal history during our studies, as I noted above, the precise “content” of Witnesses evangelism is not the focus of this thesis, nor as Handman contends, an anthro-

pology of evangelism, making this a non-issue. All that said, when I became acquainted with the responsibilities distributed to the listener and the student, which I describe in Chapters 2-4, I would sometimes—like Webster—respond in the way I thought they wanted. This gave me opportunity to test various modes of responding and single out the sort of responsibilities Witnesses imagine students and listeners ought to take.

Lastly, the reader will note that quite often throughout my thesis I will refer to married couples. This is because of the way Witnesses understand gender as being an important aspect of evangelical pedagogy. That is, Witnesses will almost always allocate men to teach men and women to teach women. This is not exclusive, and individual circumstances may mean that women teach men or vice versa (though the latter is perhaps preferable). For example, when I first arrived in Bishkek and settled into the English Group (see Ch. 1), I remember attempting to have a conversation with a sister, Altynai, after one of my first weekend meetings. We walked from the Kingdom Hall to the bus stop during which I asked her a load of questions. She responded with increasing discomfort, telling me that I should “talk to the elders” in the congregation. Over the course of my fieldwork, I became quite close with Altynai and, as I became a fixture in the congregation, she would frequently invite me and my family over to her house or she would visit our flat.

The issue, I came to understand, was that despite being much older than me, Altynai was a single woman. Altynai's cautious approach was not unusual and was representative of Witnesses' gender politics, hence her deferral to talk to the elders. But it was also, perhaps, because of the possibility or perception of sexual improprieties. Altynai's change in stance towards me shifted as she got to know my partner, Ashley, and our children, whom she claimed to think of as her “grandchildren” (though she was only in her late 40s). Altynai was not unique in this regard. Being present in Bishkek with my family made me, as a man, more palatable to the women in the congregations with which I worked.

But, more importantly, because men teach men, and women teach women, it is also the case that married couples (“mates,” as Witnesses would say) teach married couples. As such, my closest interlocutors during my fieldwork were two couples, a Russian couple—Foma and Irina (though she preferred Ira)—and a Kyrgyz couple—Sabir and Jamilya. These couples met with

me and Ashley (and sometimes our children) precisely because we were couples. To be sure, Foma and Sabir focused on teaching me more intently, and Ira and Jamilya focused on Ashley, but I still found that I had a deep and meaningful relationship with both Ira and Jamilya. That said, these relationships were only possible because of Ashley and the fact that we are married (and this is not to mention our children). Were Ashley not there in Bishkek with me, much as I experienced in the beginning of my fieldwork, I would have likely worked solely with brothers in the congregation. My access to Witness women, as such, is critical because I do not think that Witness men or women have a greater proclivity for thinking through their methods of evangelism and the progressive pedagogical arc I outline in this thesis applies to both men and women.

Chapter 1

BUILDING GOD'S KINGDOM

Before I arrived in Bishkek in July 2018, I knew there were 22 congregations and four “groups” of Jehovah’s Witnesses. These congregations and groups, which I will explore in more detail below, met according to language: 10 Kyrgyz-speaking congregations, 12 Russian-speaking congregations, and groups that met in Russian Sign Language, Mandarin, Turkish, and English. During my preparations to move to Kyrgyzstan for my fieldwork, I used this information to formulate my thesis proposal: I would ground my research in at least three different congregations to make comparison between languages spoken in Witness pedagogy, one Kyrgyz-speaking, one Russian-speaking, and one of the other language groups. To simplify matters—since I would already be learning Kyrgyz (I already spoke advanced Russian) and learning yet another language seemed to unnecessarily complicate things—for the third congregation I proposed I would visit the English-speaking group. My emphasis, however, I planned to be on the Russian- and Kyrgyz-speaking congregations, with the intention that I would split my time between two congregations that shared a Kingdom Hall.

As many such projects go, when I arrived in Bishkek, things went much differently than I had planned.

Rakhmet, my contact at the Kyrgyzstan Branch Office located in Bishkek, arranged for a driver to pick my family and me up from the Manas airport. The driver was named Ramil, an aging Witness taxi driver from Tashkent. He arrived at the airport in his humble, rickety minivan wearing a suit, tie, and a pair of dark aviator sunglasses. Despite never having met Ramil, we could identify him quite easily as he stood amid all the other taxi drivers because he was holding a copy of *The Watchtower* the way the other drivers held a sign with a name on it. Ramil must have noticed us too—the only (and quite obviously) American family with two young girls—as he walked straight up to us, and with a booming voice, rendered my name in Russian, “Denny is it you?!” (*Denni eto tyi?*) I smiled in shock as he pulled me in for a close handshake, putting his right hand on my shoulder he said, “Let me help you!” He grabbed the trolley that was piled high with our luggage and led us through the airport and into the parking lot, where we loaded the luggage into his minivan.

During the drive to Bishkek, Ramil and I chatted about my research in Russian. As we talked, he asked if I would be going to meetings at the Kingdom Hall, and if so, what congregation I would be attending. His enquiry notably framed “congregation” in the singular, so I tried to clarify that as part of my research, I would survey all of the congregations in Bishkek, but was planning to regularly attend one Russian and one Kyrgyz congregation, especially as my plan was to learn Kyrgyz through congregational life. Finally, I told him that I might—on occasion—go to the English Group.

Ramil was very confused by my explanation. He shook his head, saying, “No, no. You should attend the English meeting.” I laughed and since he seemed jovial and our conversation to this point had been riddled with humorous small talk and laughter, I responded in jest, “Oh yeah? I speak Russian that badly?” At this he looked even more confused, and perhaps even a little scared that he might have offended me, “*Da-net!* You speak Russian well.” But then, taking his eyes off the road, he pulled down his aviators and looked me in the eyes, saying, “But, *bratan*, you will need to study the Bible in English to receive spiritual nourishment.”

More than an ethnographer's cliché, this "taxi driver vignette" introduces the reader to a critical, if obvious, aspect of how Witnesses theorize evangelism is even possible. Namely, that in order to foster communication, and for the person-in-the-world to begin to grasp the Bible's message, the interactions of preaching and teaching must be mutually intelligible. And to be mutually intelligible they must take place in a language held in common by the Witness and the addressee. But evangelism attempts at something more than mere comprehension. Witnesses understand the communicative processes of evangelism to be aimed towards giving the addressee "understanding," or the development of knowledge that is comprehended into knowledge that is "spiritual, having God as its foundation" (WTBTS 2018d: 1139). Understanding in this sense is at the root of what Ramil meant by "spiritual nourishment," though this phrase usually refers to the spiritual edification of those who are already Jehovah's Witnesses.

This idea of "understanding" is captured in passages of scripture that were often pointed out to me during Bible studies, such as John 5:39-40, in which Jesus speaks with his Jewish interlocutors, saying, "You are searching the Scriptures, because you think that by means of them you will have everlasting life; and these are the very ones that bear witness about me. And yet you do not want to come to me that you may have life." Witnesses pointed out to me that the issue here is that Jesus's interlocutors obviously comprehended the scriptures in that they read the words and apprehended them, but that they did not understand the deeper meaning of the scriptures (in this case, that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah). One article in *The Watchtower* points out that understanding is linked to moral disposition, as the reason these particular Jews comprehended but did not understand was because, as the Gospel writer emphasizes, they did not "have the love of God" in them (John 5:42; WTBTS 2009a: 20). I will unpack this moral disposition, as well as consider problems Witnesses understand to beset the process of giving understanding, further in the following chapter. This chapter, however, focuses on the conditions necessary for giving understanding; namely, the idea Ramil was pointing towards: evangelism should happen in one's first language, if at all possible.¹ This idea is deeply impactful

1 Compare to the Summer Institute of Linguistics's notion of "heart language," though Witnesses actively evangelize in pidgin and creole languages around the world (Handman 2007). For example, I know of a Witness couple from Cambridge working on translating Watch Tower material into Kolokwa, a Liberian pidgin.

in the day-to-day lives of Witnesses, as it structures how the preaching work unfolds around the world.

In considering how understanding might be achieved in different places on earth, among different people, and in different social contexts, Witnesses talk about “local needs.” “Local needs” as a concept does not have any specific doctrinal or orthopraxic definition, but Witnesses often talk about “addressing local needs” in their Field Service Meetings and the term has been a concern discussed during the midweekly meeting since at least 1970 (e.g., WTBTs 1970: 2),² this along with its frequent pedagogical deployment by Circuit Overseers (see below) during their training visits to congregations, during conventions, and in other pedagogical contexts, such as the advanced preaching methods courses for “pioneers.”³ What are the “needs” under discussion? While there might be many ways needs could be discussed, ultimately the needs in question always lead back to evangelism (even if obliquely), and therefore to the communication that leads to understanding. In other words, the “needs” are the needs relevant to giving an addressee understanding, including their social and cultural backgrounds, but most especially the need to preach in their first language. The “local” in local needs is the way these conditions are distributed in geographic space.

Local needs, as such, are the contextualized conditions in which people live, or what Witnesses often call “the world.” Rather than just lay out relevant histories of politics and language, to really get a sense of what Witnesses might mean by local needs and the factors they consider in formulating their evangelism on the ground, I begin this chapter by detailing Witnesses’ theology of “the world.” I then attempt to situate Bishkek in the world—or more precisely, as the reader will discover—in the “system of things.” As language is a particularly salient aspect of local needs in fostering communication that can give understanding, I also pay particular attention to language in Bishkek.

By taking the notion of understanding vis-à-vis local needs, we are able to see the ways in which Jehovah’s Witnesses allocate accountability for evangelism in geographic space. It is

2 “Local needs” became an increasingly common pedagogical feature of *Kingdom Ministry* (the midweekly meeting workbook) in the 80s and 90s, until it became an institutionalized monthly aspect of the meeting—that is to say the workbook delineated time in the meeting specifically to consider “local needs”—beginning in the May 1997 issue of the workbook.

3 Witnesses who take on more hours preaching than regular publishers.

easy enough to say this is done by carving up areas of the world into “territories,” language by language, until everywhere is accounted for. However, taking the theology of the world into account and what living “in the world” means gives nuance to how Witnesses allocate accountability for evangelism, by showing how the institution of accountability is responsive to geographically distributed political, social, and linguistic contexts. Thus, after situating Bishkek in the world, I detail how the preaching work is organized around the world, outlining the institution of accountability, from the upper echelons of the Society’s leadership to individual Witnesses on the ground, showing how the individual is ethically connected to the organization and to Jehovah God. I explain how this organization is responsive not only to the local needs of the world but to the linguistic abilities of local Witnesses and how responsibilities can be taken as individual Witnesses also evaluate their own abilities versus perceived “greater needs.” All of this allows me to arrive at the English Group, where Ramil, and so many others, adamantly insisted I attend, and describe the setting where the bulk of my fieldwork in Bishkek took place. In closing, I briefly consider how this context can be seen in light of the general aim I take up in this thesis of describing the way Witnesses’ conceptualize their evangelism.

The theology of the world: Parsing a Witness semiotics of difference⁴

Jehovah’s Witnesses use the English word “world” in their translation of the “Christian Greek Scriptures” (the “New Testament”) for almost all instances of the word “*ko’smos*.”⁵ Witnesses deploy “world” in three different ways:

1. “Humankind as a whole, apart from their moral condition.”
2. “The framework of human circumstances into which a person is born and in which he lives.”
3. “The mass of mankind apart from Jehovah’s approved servants” (WTBTS 2018d: 1205).

⁴ This section draws heavily on several sections in *Insight on the Scriptures* (WTBTS 2018d), including “World” (1205-10), “System of things” (1054-57), “Perfection” (602-7), and “Satan” (866-70). I cite this here, rather than throughout, for the sake of readability.

⁵ The singular exception being 1 Peter 3:3, which they understand as referencing a notion of “adornment,” as *ko’smos* is also the root for ideas like “cosmetic.”

Witnesses never use the term “world” theologically to denote the earth (which instead would be the Greek *ge*), instead it always refers to one of these three concepts. The first definition refers to all humankind as a fallen entity that needs to be saved from death, the condition given to all humans through Adam and Eve’s “rebellion” in the Garden of Eden (Romans 5:12). This notion of world-as-humankind is represented in verses such as, “For God loved the world so much that he gave his only-begotten Son” (John 3:16). The idea that God loves all humankind, Witnesses hold, should temper the other two definitions of “world.” My interlocutors are particularly keen to emphasize this to me because scholarly accounts—and I share this view—of the world are quite often overdone in their emphasis of separating Witnesses from ordinary folk. Witnesses certainly do this, as definition three exemplifies, but only in a moral sense. Most Witnesses live among, work with, and are related to people-in-the-world. That said, the third definition is vitally important to Witnesses, as the moral boundary between themselves as God’s people and everyone else is the only division in the world they really value. In other words, boundaries born of the second definition, such as race or ethnicity, are bankrupt categories for Jehovah’s Witnesses and within the congregation they pay these differences no heed. One primary point of this chapter is understanding that while this is the case, these sorts of difference are massively important for evangelism.

What does it mean to be God’s people? While all of humankind is necessarily Jehovah’s “possession,” since he is their Creator, his “special possession” (Titus 2:14) or “special property” (Malachi 3:17) denote “God’s people.” Particular people are “special,” or “set apart,” to Jehovah because these are those who, despite being born into and living in the conditions of the system of things, have voluntarily and consciously dedicated themselves to godly service, namely evangelism. This is conceptualized in terms of accountability. Anciently, this special possession was the tribe of Judah, but through Jesus, it became Christianity, and after the apostles’ deaths and the ensuing apostasy (2 Thessalonians 2:2-3), it became Jehovah’s Witnesses. More specifically, Witnesses understand the Bible as prophesying that in 1914 Jehovah enthroned Christ in heaven, where he began “the times of restoration of all things” (Acts 3:21), a period which will culminate in the New World. While the community of “Bible Students” that became Jehovah’s Witnesses began to organize in the 1870s, Witnesses understand that it was not until 1919 that

Jesus was able to completely sever the Watch Tower Society from “Christendom,” the word Witnesses use for “apostate Christianity,” restoring “pure worship” and marking the beginning of the Watch Tower Society as Jehovah’s earthly organization (WTBTS 2018e: 104-109; 2019a: 5).⁶ Thus, while all humankind—the world—are accountable to God, Jehovah’s people have a particular accountability to do his will and, since Adam and Eve’s “rebellion” in the Garden of Eden, his will has been to evangelize; it is in this sense that Witnesses are Jehovah’s Witnesses. This boundary between Witnesses as God’s people and the world is a moral boundary, as has long been discussed (cf. Zygmunt 1977: 53-54; Beckford 1978: 259-60), but one that—much like moral boundaries other forms of Christianity draw—is meant to be porous, an idea I flesh out in the following chapter.

The second definition of the world pertains to the idea that *ko’smos* is understood to be rooted in a Pythagorean notion of “order” or “arrangement,” but adding to its Greek roots, the notions of “system” or “structure.” The world, as such, is a “framework,” or conceptual model, of the contexts in which humans live. That is, the world is “human society,” and Witnesses understand its structures in explicitly abstract and sociological terms: society is fundamentally ordered along the lines of politics, economics,⁷ and religions. These are what Galatians 4:3 terms as “the elementary things of the world.” These “elementary things” are the social building blocks of human existence and Witnesses hold that it is easily demonstrable (as social science tells us) that human life is ordered, organized, systematized, or structured along these lines. Further still, as the second definition tells us, humans are born into systems. This is to say that humans are socialized or encultured by social systems, or as the verse in Galatians puts it, humans are “enslaved by the elementary things of the world.” This attention to temporality links this second

6 While most scholars trace Witnesses beginnings to the earliest days of Charles Taze Russell and his Bible Students, contemporary Jehovah’s Witnesses put more theological stock in 1919 as the fulfillment of the prophecy of restoration or in verses such as Malachi 3:1-4. 1919 marks the year when Witnesses understand Russell’s Bible Students truly became “Jehovah’s Witnesses,” even if they would not officially assume that title for more than another decade (in 1931). And, indeed, as Knox (2018: 37) notes, the 1920-30s were extremely formative years that saw the solidification of their contemporary evangelistic practice (primarily concerning the door-to-door work). These years were also very controversial seeing many leave the group and the formation of schismatic groups.

7 Economics is almost always glossed as either “consumerism” or “commercialism,” which are thinly veiled references to notions of global capitalism (e.g., WTBTS 2011b: 8), and it is understood that this critique of human economic systems will be relevant anywhere in the world today. Though, during the Cold War, Watch Tower literature frequently decried communism (as an economic system) just as insistently as it critiqued “consumerism” (aka capitalism; e.g., WTBTS 1966b), landing Witnesses in hot water on both sides of the Cold War (Knox 2013; 2018: 255).

definition of world to another Greek word found in the Bible: *aion*. “*Aion*,” which might be more conventionally rendered as “epoch” or “age,” is often taken to mean “the status quo,” and Witnesses translate it as “system of things.” Witnesses treat “system of things” as synonymous with this sociological notion of “the world,” but with an added emphasis on historical particularity. Because of the greater nuance—and because I more frequently heard my interlocutors use “system,” “this current system,” and “system of things” more frequently than “world”—I will use “system of things” henceforth.

The current system’s history began through Adam and Eve’s rebellion against Jehovah’s system. The meaning here is twofold. First, the elementary things of the system in which humankind lives are constructs of human origin. Second, Jehovah also creates systems that are ordered and governed (Hebrews 3:4). The Garden of Eden was such a system, as will be the New World (hence the name, “world,” here meaning definition two). Because these systems have government—or politics (see Ch. 4)—they are referred to as “theocratic order.” While the current system of things was created by Adam and Eve, as the account in the Genesis spells out, the system was orchestrated through the influence of Satan the Devil. As such, Witnesses understand the Bible as calling Satan “the god of this system of things” (2 Corinthians 4:5).⁸ Satan is “the one who causes division, hatred, and strife... the fomenter of war and the father of lies” (WTBTS 1997b: 17; see fig. 1.1). Enslavement to the system of things, as such, is “enslavement to corruption” (Romans 8:20-21), underscoring that the current system encultures morally corrupt behaviors in the sense that all humans—via Adam and Eve—are mired in sin and suffering (Romans 5:12).⁹ Opposite this is Jehovah who is “the God of peace and love”

8 The nuance here is critical. Satan is not the god of the world as in the first definition; the only gods of humankind are Jehovah God (or “Heavenly Father”) and Jesus Christ, who is “a god,” but is not God.

9 This suffering is the fault of the rebellion. Witness literature has a history of outrightly condemning various or all aspects of the system of things. However, Witnesses today take a more evenhanded approach to things. Thus, while Witnesses think human systems are fundamentally flawed, they understand human history as having produced plenty of benevolent religious leaders, political frameworks, and values. For example, Witnesses extol the various actors in the Reformation as both virtuous and necessary to create the sorts of political conditions that could bring about God’s organization on the earth again (e.g., WTBTS 2017c). Similarly, societies in the present moment can produce valuable knowledge. One example often turned to is climate science. Witnesses completely support the science that describes anthropogenic climate change, and they use this science when choosing locations for, designing, and constructing their infrastructure; Witnesses often emphasized that their new buildings take the environment seriously (WTBTS 2017e). Ultimately, however, Witnesses argue that while human society created the Anthropocene (which they would argue truly began when humanity’s parents left Eden), they will not be able to fix it (Ch. 4 discusses this “futility” in further detail).



Figure 1.1 - Images such as this one are common in Watch Tower media and may mislead the viewer-from-the-world that Satan controls individuals. Witnesses understand images such as this to represent Satan manipulating the system of things. Satan as “god of this system” is an important key to making sense of Witnesses’ semiotics of difference, but one that demands careful understanding. Image from tract “Who Really Controls the World.” See link or scan QR code for tract: <https://www.jw.org/en/library/books/control-world-tract/who-controls-the-world/>

(2 Corinthians 13:11), peace and love being the foundations of unity. In this sense, unity is definitional of theocratic order.

Even though Witnesses understand Jehovah to be a God that unifies, not divides, they understand the Bible as teaching that Jehovah is the source of linguistic difference. From Eden and throughout the antediluvian period, Witnesses understand humankind as having spoken one language and after the Flood, all humankind would have been part of one language community (Genesis 11:1; WTBTs 2018d: 202). Completely unified communication allowed all existing humankind to band together in a project opposite to God’s purpose shared to Noah to “be fruitful and become many and fill earth” (Genesis 9:11), echoing the purpose originally given in Eden. This project is often called “the Tower of Babel.”

The reason Babel was so offensive to Jehovah was not necessarily its religious aspects—as is often emphasized, though those were surely offensive—but was that this project sought to “centralize human society” (WTBTs 2018d: 202) and was therefore antithetical to his purpose.

Much like the human system before the Flood, this centralization project had the potential to make enslavement to the system so powerful that no one would choose to subject themselves to God. As such, Jehovah decided to remove the unifying power of a single language from human experience altogether. The Society writes, “by confusing their common language... [Jehovah] made impossible any coordinated work on their project and led to their scattering to all parts of the globe. The confusion of their language would also hinder or slow down future progress in a... God-defying direction” (ibid.).

Creating linguistic differentiation made organizing and working together both intellectually and practically difficult. Witnesses have something of a neo-Whorfian understanding of language, as language is understood to be a lens through which not only the world is apprehended but through which emotions and social relations are experienced and expressed. The purpose of introducing this “major divisive factor” (ibid.) into and between human societies—the only division Jehovah has ever directly implemented in the current system of things—is to “make it difficult to draw upon the accumulated knowledge of the different language groups formed—knowledge, not from God, but gained through human experience and research...” therefore “the confusion of human speech actually benefited human society in retarding the attainment of dangerous and hurtful goals” (ibid.).

While there was nothing initially hateful or necessarily violent about the confusion of the languages, as humans built up their systems once again—apprehending the world through the means of different languages—this added another layer of potential division for Satan to manipulate. This entangled language with politics, economics, and religion, just as it had always done, but by an order of magnitude greater, as the system of things was made plural and global. Because human beings apprehend the world around them based on localized aspects of the system of things into which they are born, Witnesses pay particular attention to where and how the addressees of their evangelism are situated in the system; evangelism should be responsive to the multiplicity of differences found in the system of things.

Locating Bishkek in the system of things

As such, it becomes imperative to locate Bishkek in the system of things to make sense of how Witnesses organize evangelism there. The elementary aspects of the system of things that Witnesses in Bishkek talked about more frequently than others were, first, the ideological legacies of Soviet Union, including notions of “nationality,” atheism, and antireligious politics, and, second, Islam in the post-Soviet era. As we will see, these are intertwined. Intersecting both of these issues is the Russian dichotomy *svoy* : *chuzhoy* (ours : alien). For example, consider the way Foma and Ira talked about the way locals in Bishkek perceived them as different:

We grew up in Bishkek and have lived our whole lives in Kyrgyzstan. Yet, once when we were walking to work by the Philharmonia [in the center of Bishkek], some young Russian person shouts at us in English:

“Where you from?”

We are constantly taken for foreigners [*inostrantsev*] on the street, as if we are not from Kyrgyzstan. And, honestly, it's true. We are alien [*chuzhiye*].

On the one hand, in the different tellings of this sort of incident, Foma and Ira registered surprise that they are perceived by local Kyrgyzstanis, both Kyrgyz *and* Russian, as *chuzhiye* (“other”). That is, they were sometimes surprised that even young Russians might mistake them for foreigners, since they both are ethnic Russians born and raised in the Bishkek area and had only left Kyrgyzstan once (to a Witness International Convention in Ukraine). On the other hand, however, Foma explained that the people's reaction should not be surprising because they were indeed different from the locals. He explained that this difference was intentional and cultivated on their part, but was perceived through the Russian dichotomous notion of “*svoy*” and “*chuzhoy*,” or “self, ours, same” and “alien, other, theirs.”

Expanding on Foma's explanation, *svoy* and *chuzhoy* are more than simple categories of difference in Russian. Because of the influence of Russian social theorists like Lev Gumilev, this sort of us-them juxtaposition has become infused into notions of ethnos, or “nationality,” in post-Soviet places, especially in Central Asia (Bassin 2016). That is, in 1924 the newly organized USSR mandated the boundaries that are still roughly in place today as the borders of the Central Asian states Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (along with

yet other state boundaries, but these are those central to the story here). These boundaries were artifices the Soviet Union created to administrate the establishment and solidification of “national,” or ethnic, identities, entangling language, kinship, economic, and religious practices. Ethnicity was seen by Soviet theorists to be an essential developmental steppingstone that would lead towards a fully-fledged Soviet identification and unification (and then, eventually, to its stateless utopian telos, as per Marxist doxa). Importantly, the boundaries were internal to the Soviet Union but were ossified as international boundaries in the 1990s.

Early Soviet theorists had a tendency to reify these boundaries, but through the influence of thinkers like Gumilev (1990), whose ethnological theory drew breath from notions of the “biosphere” that married the anthropological and the biogenetic (Bassin 2009: 876-77) and enlivened Soviet social theory in the 1970s, the *svoy*-ness and *chuzhoy*-ness of various boundaries were naturalized in his conception of *ethnos*. Accordingly, *svoy* and *chuzhoy* informed notions of ethnicity heavily pervade and influence cultural logics among non-Russian language communities in post-Soviet places (e.g., Siragusa 2018). Kyrgyzstan is no different, as David Gullette (2010: 140-41) has argued, Askar Akaev, the president of Kyrgyzstan from 1990—2005, was not at all subtle when invoking Gumilev’s *ethnos* in the service of formulating Kyrgyz ethnonationalism. Further, the dichotomy underpinning this idea of ethnicity turns on what Humphrey (2007: 2) argues is a connection between notions of a “social kind of freedom,” or the “security and well-being that result from living amongst one’s own people.” *Svoy* as secure and *chuzhoy* as risky or dangerous is implicitly the sort of thing Akaev was tapping into. But the ways security and danger are interwoven with the *svoy* : *chuzhoy* opposition concerns more than just projects of ethnonationalism, becoming particularly potent when taken up in perspectives on religion.

In Central Asia, religion—that is to say Islam—was simultaneously fundamental to Soviet Central Asian identities and overtly dismantled as part of Soviet atheism. In the first half of the 20th century, when Soviet theorists were constructing the ethnic categories that have now solidified, Islam was dually considered and even emphasized—for example, Soviet census data universally conflated Central Asian “ethnicity” with being “Muslim” (e.g., Bennigsen 1985). At the same time, from the earliest days of the Soviet Union, Marxist-Leninist ideology took aim

at religion, leading to deep complications in religious identity in the region, as religion was at once a naturalized part of ethnic categories and vilified in the same breath.

Religion plays a critical role in the us-them logics of the dichotomy, even more so now in contemporary Central Asian places, where there are divisive political tensions between ethnonationalist projects of state-making, the role of religion and religious freedom in these processes, and the ever-present fear of “extremism,” the latter of these being especially influenced by Euro-American geopolitics. Explaining the promulgation of these processes in Central Asia, Maria Louw (2018b: 85) writes that religion “in short, was—and is still now—ambiguously conceived as both a major source of morality, hope and sense of direction and, in its extreme or excessive forms, as a dangerous opium which brainwashes people with ready-made answers to life’s questions, bereaving them of their normal sense of moral judgment” (see also Louw 2013). In other words, the appropriate amount of *svoya* religion morally binds together ethnic ideologies and certain forms of Islam come to fill this role with sometimes heavy-handed influence from the state, as in Karimov’s government in Uzbekistan (see Louw 2018a: 82-3).¹⁰ *Svoya* religion, as such, can be an ideological tool of security, whereas *chuzhaya* religion is consistently flattened into something morally dangerous, repugnant, and extreme. The post-Soviet period amplifies this. As Louw (2018b: 85) points out, the fear was that the collapse of the Soviet Union would create a “moral vacuum” that could be filled with dangerous systems of belief: “Islamic extremists” and, I would add, what is often called “dangerous cults.” In Kyrgyzstan Islam is sometimes seen as generating moral security, but it is also sometimes seen as morally destructive. The latter is often the case when governmental actors attempt to maintain Kyrgyzstan’s status as the secular, pluralist state in the region, as demonstrated by a recent debacle concerning the hijab that played out on billboards across Bishkek (Nasritdinov and Esenamanova 2017).

This is all the more the case with Islamic minorities, which are typically coded as “extremist” (McBrien 2006), especially when tied with ethnic minorities, such as Dungans in Kyrgyzstan (Alff 2018: 183), or with various branches of Islam, such as Tablighi Jamaat, that are committed

10 Compare this to the Kremlin’s politics and contemporary Russian ethnonationalism’s relationship with Russian Orthodoxy (see Bassin 2016: 230).

to socio-religious transformation through notions of *hijra* and *dawah* (Nasritdinov 2018; Ismailbekova and Nasritdinov 2012). Along with Islamic minorities, Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as other religious communities, such as Baptists, are slotted as *chuzhiye* in Kyrgyzstan. For example, Pelkmans (2017: 89-90, 93) recounts an interview with a leader of the "Knowledge Society" in Bishkek, a Soviet-born society that organized scientific public lectures. The leader is a self-proclaimed atheist ideologue and tells Pelkmans about the Society's antireligion campaigning. The woman said, "We never went to the mosque or to the Orthodox church. Yes, we fought against religion, but mostly Jehovah's Witnesses and Baptists." Building on Pelkmans' analysis, we can see an interesting bifurcation. *Chuzhaya* religion in Soviet ideology was, first and foremost, situated in the Cold War, and "alien" came to mean "American." As such, Witnesses and Baptists became the focus of activists' ire because they were perceived as American, whereas the persecution of Islamic minorities seems to have been born of the post-Soviet era, especially post-9/11, where "extremism," rather than "American," became key political factor in making religion *chuzhaya*. This does not mean Witnesses are no longer seen as morally dangerous, simply that they are now coded as "extremist."

The political and ethical ramifications for this are significant, considering how the *svoy* : *chuzhoy* opposition formulates ethnicity. But also worth noting is how this ideology of religious othering has led to extreme persecution in Russia and Central Asia, which arguably intensifies a perception of religious experience as being alien (Pelkmans 2014), as Foma and Ira reiterated to me. It is exactly this entanglement that makes identifying and practicing as a Jehovah's Witness so fraught in Central Asia, and not only in places like Tajikistan or Uzbekistan where their religious practice is criminalized, but also in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan where the religion is *de jure* accepted but *de facto* considered morally dangerous. While perhaps not elaborated in these concise of terms, Witnesses are well aware of the ways in which they are perceived. This awareness becomes important in their responsibilities discussed in the following chapter, as religion itself can be a barrier to communication, making evangelism a sticky issue.

To locate Bishkek linguistically in the system of things, Witnesses in Kyrgyzstan, as do others, talked about linguistic diversity in terms of its history and its terrain, and the ways these two are entangled. The vast majority of Kyrgyzstan is dominated by the Tian Shan, a system of mountain

ranges north of the Taklamakan desert that span from the Altai Mountains in its north-eastern reaches and southwest to the Pamir and Alay Mountains, creating a border between Xinjiang, China and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but also Uzbekistan (with the exception of the Ferghana Valley), Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. Bishkek is seated at the northern foot of the Tian Shan in the southern most hills of the peneplain Kazakh Uplands and steppes farther to the north—one of the country's few lowland areas. Ethnographic accounts of Central Asia made during the imperial Russian administration in the mid-19th century concluded that the peoples of one larger language group were divided into two smaller linguistic communities. Those who lived in the peneplains and the steppe were “Kirgiz” (now Kazakh) and the people in the mountains were “Karakirgiz” (now Kyrgyz). The mountains were prominent in this early imperial thought, as Gullette (2010: 66) describes one ethnographer as calling the Karakirgiz the “*dikokamennye kirgiz*,” or “wild mountain Kyrgyz”¹¹ Accordingly, the early Soviet cartographers and scientists who administratively divvied up Central Asia, did so with the Tian Shan highlands in mind, as they built their initial interpretations of what would become the ethnolinguistic categories “Kazakh” and “Kyrgyz” directly on the highland/lowland division made by imperial Russians before them.¹²

The Tian Shan also create infrastructural bottlenecks that funnel people—and therefore languages—to Bishkek, and from Bishkek, into the mountains and the rest of the country, and beyond.¹³ This is true in a long *durée* sort of way, as the area where Bishkek now is was likely

11 Further, Gullette (2010: 76) alleges imperial Russian scholars and colonial administrators thought the Karakirgiz had “black skin” because of exposure in the high mountains where they lived, as “*kara*” means “black” in Kyrgyz. This racialized “wildness” is part and parcel of the way the mountains, as a topological feature, factor into ideologies of the “frontier,” as “emptiness and wildness do not have stable ontologies but are the unstable product of expansionist visions and fantasies” (Pelkmans 2021: 217).

12 This brief outline of 150 years of history is obviously wanting. For a thorough account of the formation of the contemporary Kyrgyz language community through the Russian imperial and Soviet eras, see Japir Duishembieva's (2015) masterful dissertation. See also Duishembieva (2020), which focuses more concretely on the early Soviet period.

13 Similarly, the country's “southern capital” Osh is in the eastern most edge of the Ferghana Valley, up against the Tian Shan, which divide it from Bishkek, but making it a similar infrastructural bottleneck (see Reeves 2017; 2014b), but with much more complex border politics (Reeves 2014a; 2007; Bichsel 2009; Megoran 2017). The mountains between Bishkek and Osh also mean the northern and the southern lowlands of the country have very different political, cultural, and—intersecting with the previous two—religious milieus. Talas is arguably similar, except that it is more of its own node, rather than a bottleneck, since it has only been connected to the rest of country for the last decade because it is entirely enclosed by mountains, except for a small border with Kazakhstan (Beyer 2016: xxii-xxiv).



Figure 1.2 - Aerial photograph of south Bishkek, with foothills and Tian Sian Mountains in background. The city funnels into the mountains. Photo by Mikhail Dudin, 2016.

first settled in the early 19th century by the Khoqand Khanate (an Uzbek khanate influential in Central Asia for most of the 18th and early-19th centuries) when they fortified an existing route on the Silk Roads. In other words, the Silk Roads for everything they were, first and foremost were routes through the mountains. The infrastructure that survives today—railways, roads, airports, canals, electrical grids, and so on—is largely of Soviet origin, but similar to the bygone Silk Roads, negotiated the mountains. That is swiftly changing, however, as the PRC’s “The



Silk Road Economic Belt,” launched by Xi Jinping in 2013, and which includes the “Belt and Road Initiative,” is rebuilding and creating new infrastructure throughout Kyrgyzstan (Dave and Kobayashi 2018), bring with it many Chinese speakers.

In the post-Soviet era, English has become increasingly important, both as a language of global commerce, and as a language of international aid and geopolitical conflict, particularly the United States’ war in Afghanistan. From December 2001 to June 2014 the US military operated an airbase in Bishkek that acted as staging area that was strategic in part because of the

mountains. The so-called “Transit Center at Manas” brought with it a mass of English-centric infrastructure. In more recent years there has been increasing development in an English-speaking ecotourism industry for “backpackers,” primarily from Europe, Australia, and the United States, but also other places (see Jenish 2018). In a different vein, since the 1990s, a number of Islamic revitalization projects have taken root in the more secular Kyrgyzstan. Most prominent among these is the recent refurbishment and construction of new mosques funded by the Turkish government (Balci 2018: 35-67). One such mosque is the Bishkek Central Mosque, completed in 2018, which was a substantial undertaking that took some six years to construct and purportedly over \$20 million USD (Esenamanova 2015: 188).

Bishkek in 2018-19 was a place of many languages. Kyrgyz and Russian predominated, due to the history of Russian colonialism. The importance of Russian in Bishkek, and throughout the country, cannot be understated, and not only in the way Russian-based logics like *svoy* and *chuzhoy* pervade other languages through contact with Soviet ideology. Instead, Russian remains important for practical and strategic reasons and most ethnic Kyrgyz speak Russian (Kosmarskaya 2015; Orusbaev, Mustajoki, and Protassova 2008; see also Fierman 2009). This is especially the case for Kyrgyzstan’s ethnic minorities, including a sizable Russian diaspora. Other deep pockets of (non-Russian speaking) language communities are also to be found in Bishkek, including Mandarin and Turkish.¹⁴ But the language communities in Bishkek are constantly shifting. Perhaps the most obvious example of this in Bishkek has been the way these three languages have emerged since Perestroika, but especially in the last 15 or so years. With an understanding of where Bishkek, and northern Kyrgyzstan more generally, sits within the system of things and with a sketch of their local needs, I can describe how Witnesses organize their preaching work to be responsive to those needs. But first, I will lay out how Witnesses organize evangelism more generally.

14 Of course, there are plenty other language communities in Bishkek, these are simply the ones Witnesses prioritized during my fieldwork.

Organizing evangelism

To reemphasize the lodestar verse for this thesis, Witnesses consider themselves accountable to God for “preach[ing] in all the inhabited earth” (Matthew 24:14). “All the inhabited earth” is quite literal and is taken to mean every location where humans dwell, including treacherous places and places where Jehovah’s Witnesses are not legally allowed to evangelize. One Witness joked when elaborating “inhabited” to me that the only places Witnesses do not evangelize are the North and South Poles—the punchline being, “But I guess we will at the South Pole soon because of Global Warming.” This is all to say that every inhabited square meter of the earth must be accounted for in Witness preaching, no matter how remote or low the population density, and according to the inhabitants’ local needs.

To organize evangelism in every inhabited place, Witnesses understand the Bible to lay out a global hierarchy (WTBTS 2019d: 24-29) that can organize the preaching work by allocating accountability on increasingly granular scales, from the whole world, to regions, to subregions, to congregations, to groups of Witnesses, and to individual Witnesses themselves. Each node on this chain of accountability has an institutional form: the World Headquarters, Branch Offices, Circuits, Congregations (and Groups), Field Service Groups, and then individual Witnesses or sets of Witnesses. I argue that one aspect of these institutions is the ordering of roles that provide oversight for accounting mechanisms. Contemporary Witnesses shy away from using the word “leadership,” typically calling these sorts of roles that allocate accountability “overseers.”

One of the primary things overseers do in all levels of the Society’s organization is take accounts of the preaching work. As I laid out above, most impactful for Witnesses’ day-to-day ministries are the overseers in the congregation, the body of elders. The “Governing Body,” or the “faithful and discreet slave” (Matthew 24:45-47), are the last link on the chain of accountability before Christ and Jehovah. While comprised of the most exemplary (see Ch. 5) men in the Society, the members of the Governing Body are understood to be just that, men—human beings, most of whom live at the Society’s “World Headquarters” (WHQ), spread through several campuses in New York in the United States. But they do hold a particular accountability—more than the everyday Witness—as they are the highest-level overseers in God’s earthly organization at the moment, accountable for allocating evangelism in every inhabited place.

The Governing Body allocates “Branch Offices” to provide oversight for the preaching work within geographic spaces that are either nationally or regionally delineated.¹⁵ The territories for which Branches are accountable are constantly shifting according to politics in the system of things, such as the Russian Federation’s disenfranchisement of Witness practice and the seizure of Witness property and assets in 2017 that required a shift in accountabilities to other Branches. But accountability also shifts for organizational reasons, such as the closure and reorganization of Branch Offices beginning in 2012-13 that happened as WHQ integrated technological administrative and translation methods that expedited the work of Branches, closing more than two dozen Branch Offices (WTBTS 2013a: 11-12).

The Branch Office, also commonly called “Bethel” (meaning “House of God”), is headed by a Branch Committee of a minimum of three elders chosen by the Governing Body. The Branch Committee is accountable for organizing every aspect of the preaching work, and therefore administers everything from the logistics of importing or printing Watch Tower literature to the maintenance of the Society’s buildings. To accomplish this, the Branch is comprised of various departments that works with the Branch Committee. Perhaps most important for my purposes here is the Service Department, which coordinates the formation and dissolution of congregations and groups of congregations called “circuits.”

The Branch Committee appoints an elder to be a Circuit Overseer (CO). The CO is accountable for the circuit. He gives the circuit’s congregations practical training in preaching and teaching, an outpouring of “spiritual food” to bolster the morale of the congregation, spiritually energizing them for Christian labor in the ministry, and is the congregation’s link to the Branch. To make it practical for a CO to visit all the congregations in the circuit twice a year (with each visit lasting one week), circuits are typically formed of 20 or fewer congregations. The Branch organizes congregations around the leadership of elders, who are accountable for the day-to-day “progress” of the preaching work, with the assistance of “spiritually-mature” brothers called “Ministerial Servants.” These elders are familiar with the local needs as they are—as one Witness put it, testing out an English idiom—“in the thick of it.” That is, the way in which the Branch

15 In cases where Branches are organized regionally, there are country-specific committees formed under the Branch Committee to attend to specific local needs and logistics of the preaching work in that country.

and the WHQ will identify local needs is also rooted in the reports given by Witnesses on the ground, both in terms of the statistical reports accounting for each congregation's hours spent preaching and the sorts of literature distributed (see Ch. 3), but also via qualitative reports rendered to COs. As such, in conjunction with the CO, the local elders work through what the local needs are with the Branch Committee on the formation and dissolution of congregations and groups.

A Branch forms circuits and congregations until there is an accountable congregation for every speech community in the inhabited area under a Branch's remit. In largely monolingual places organizing congregations and circuits is based in the relatively straightforward process of parcelling out "congregation territories," or the area that a congregation will be accountable for evangelizing, within the circuit. Of course, geographic conditions are taken into consideration: How far are Witnesses travelling? What types of transportation infrastructure exists in the area? Among myriad other issues, including consideration of the specific publishers that might be in a given congregation (do they have special needs, such as a mobility disability, or large families for whom travelling might be difficult). Typically, Witnesses who live in the catchment of a congregation's territory will worship and report their evangelism in that congregation—this is encouraged, but ultimately the decision of what congregation a Witness will attend is a personal choice. While due consideration is given by the Branch Committee to local needs, and this seems complicated, this process can be considered relatively "straightforward" because in majority monolingual areas, a given allotment of geographic space is covered by one circuit that is subdivided up amongst the circuit's congregations. As such, there can be little confusion as to one's responsibility for preaching, because the congregation is simply accountable for all the inhabitants that live within the boundaries of their territory.

Multilingual places, however, are more complex. In such countries or regions, the Branch Committee will organize circuits, and congregations within those circuits, to cover the local needs of each language. Circuits will be organized by language, but often, circuit territories—and therefore congregation territories—will overlap. This means that multiple congregations will be accountable for preaching to language communities within one geographic space. Congregations are organized not only according to local needs, but also in relation to local

needs vis-à-vis the local Witnesses' language abilities; congregations will only be organized in a particular language if there are Witnesses available who can preach and teach in that language. In cases where either there is a small local need or an insufficient number of local Witnesses who are speakers of a given language, rather than forming a full circuit for that language, the Branch Committee will form a "language group." Language groups will be attached to a parent congregation, and the group will usually be a part of the parent congregation's circuit.¹⁶ In practice, there are almost no truly monolingual areas, and the vast majority of circuits have groups. This is especially the case because of Witnesses' attention to deaf communities (e.g., Friedner 2015: 68-76; 2014: 47-48), an issue of language accessibility relevant the world over.

The territories of congregations and groups are further divided up into smaller territories, covering the area of the congregation's territory. These sub-territories are divided up among "Field Service Groups," which either work the territory as a group (as in larger congregations or in places with a greater density of Witnesses) or divide territories out among individuals within the group. Field Service Groups are overseen by the congregation's "service overseer," the elder in the congregation's "body of elders" concerned with directly working with the field service, and working with the "group overseers," elders that coordinate the work within each Field Service Group. As such, the group overseer is the most "on the ground" and closest to the action of day-to-day evangelism in the chain of accountability that extends from local publishers, to him, to Jehovah.

Parallel to the "formal" way Branches will consider the local language abilities of Witnesses, Witnesses on the ground identify special local needs they deem as being "greater needs." These needs can be local, as happened with Foma and Ira—a Russian Witness couple in the English Group who became some of my "key informants"—who decided to learn Russian Sign Language to fill a greater need in the Bishkek area in the late-90s. Foma and Ira reported that they noticed there was hardly any preaching happening among deaf communities at the time and decided to take the initiative and respond to this need. But greater needs can also be elsewhere. During the course of my fieldwork, I knew several Kyrgyz Witnesses who moved to Turkey expressly because they understood Turkey as having greater need of their ability to speak Turkish, than

16 In areas where circuits cover multiple countries (such as in Europe) groups are organized by country.

Kyrgyzstan had of their ability to speak Kyrgyz or Russian (or, for that matter, Turkish). I asked both these Witnesses why they would uproot their lives and move to Turkey and the answer echoed Foma and Ira's motivation, there was a need, and they were taking the responsibility to fill it. Whether considering the ways the preaching work is organized from the top-down by overseers at different institutional levels (i.e., the “formal” way), or the way individual Witnesses look for and fill greater needs, both are responsive to local needs, but in structurally different ways. I observed both methods of Witnesses “organizing to do Jehovah's will” in Bishkek.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Bishkek

Of the 87 Branches operating around the globe in 2018-19, the Branch Office in Kyrgyzstan was accountable for the evangelism of the whole of Kyrgyzstan. During the Soviet period, Witnesses in Kyrgyzstan were led by—as one Bethelite in Bishkek put it—local “responsible brothers,”¹⁷ but was generally accounted for by WHQ, then located in Brooklyn. In 1992 a Branch Committee of 18 elders was organized for the “Russia area” and a plot of land for a Branch Office was purchased on the site of a former Soviet sanatorium in Solnechnoye, on the outskirts of St. Petersburg (WTBTS 1997a). The Branch at Solnechnoye accounted for Kyrgyzstan until 2004, when a Branch Committee was formed in Bishkek, and the Office was completed in 2009 (see fig. 1.3). Also critical to the preaching work are the global flows of Watch Tower literature and a large part of the work that Branch Offices organize is allocating the logistics of these flows. During the Soviet period, Witnesses clandestinely printed their own literature, and beginning in 1992, received Russian-language literature printed in Germany. The first Kyrgyz-language tract was translated in Solnechnoye and produced in Germany in 1995. One Witness explained to me that the reason for this difference—and even the reason why there was no Branch in Kyrgyzstan until 2004—is because there simply were not (enough) Kyrgyz-speaking Witnesses. When this is paired with the fact that many Kyrgyz also speak Russian fluently, if not as a first language as is often the case, it simply was not expedient to publish in Kyrgyz at that time. This would correlate to the language in which congregations were organized in Kyrgyzstan, as most

17 Likely the “Country Committee,” though this brother did not specify.



Figure 1.3 - The Branch Office in Kyrgyzstan, located in Bishkek. Photo by author.

congregations then (and even now, at least in the north of the country) were Russian-speaking (see Ch. 4 for a history of how Witnesses came to be in Kyrgyzstan). Throughout the 2000s, and especially after the completion of the Branch Office, more Kyrgyz speaking Witnesses meant an increased capacity for evangelizing in Kyrgyz, and therefore an increased need for media and the organization of new congregations.¹⁸

In 2018-19 there was one Kyrgyz and one Russian circuit covering the 10 Kyrgyz and 12 Russian congregations in Bishkek and congregations in the wider Chuy oblast,¹⁹ such as in the cities Kant and Belovodskoye. The circuits completely overlapped in terms of territory,

18 While Watch Tower media is translated into Kyrgyz (from English; see Ch.2) at the Branch in Bishkek, it is still printed in Germany.

19 A type of administrative region common in post-Soviet places.

as there is no real division in the city for totally Kyrgyz-speaking or Russian-speaking areas. Accordingly, congregations overlapped in their territories, creating an added level of responsibility for Witnesses on the ground (see Ch. 2). The parent congregations of the groups in Bishkek were all Russian-speaking, with the exception of the Turkish Group, which was attached to a Kyrgyz-speaking congregation. Because the quotient of local needs and publishers' abilities was such that only groups were formed for RSL, Mandarin, Turkish, and English, their territories were massive, absorbing the whole of Bishkek and beyond.

This gives us a lay of the land of how Witness preaching is organized in Bishkek, but it also tells us how Witnesses' lives are structured around the preaching work. Because congregations are organized around evangelism in a particular language and territory, and because Witnesses typically—though not always, considering greater needs or the idiosyncratic needs of a Witness—participate in the congregation that covers where they live, Witnesses' everyday religious lives are profoundly shaped by the organization of evangelism. For example, the composition and local needs of a congregation determine with whom Witnesses will worship, who will train them in the ministry, who they will look to for spiritual and pastoral care, and, among many other things but perhaps most especially, where, with, and to whom individual Witnesses will evangelize. This is significant because, for most Witnesses, field service is the equivalent of part-time employment for how much time they spend doing it on a weekly basis. Precisely because the preaching work responds to local needs, religious life for Witnesses can be wildly different congregation to congregation, group to group. This is certainly the case with the English Group in Bishkek—a genuinely unique context for Witness evangelism.

The English Group

The English Group gravitated around Sabir and Jamilya. Sabir and Jamilya were something of a Witness power couple: they saw the development of the work in Kyrgyzstan as it budded during the USSR, they participated in the flowering of those buds during the 90s and 00s, they met and married during fulltime service in Bethel, and could see no life for themselves except in fulltime service to Jehovah. When they had to step down from fulltime service because of Jamilya's

health concerns (see Ch. 5), while they could not serve or preach as vigorously as they had done in the past, they sought some way to take on more responsibility. In other words, they sought out a greater need. Sabir and Jamilya had learned English through their many years of fulltime service, as English is the Society’s international language (see Ch. 2), which positioned them to be integral in identifying the need of English language preaching in Bishkek, communicating that need to overseers in the Branch Office via their congregation and Circuit Overseer. This helped the development of the English Group in Bishkek.

But what was the need exactly? The need, Sabir and Jamilya explained, was more than foreign businesspeople, diplomats and aid workers, and the ever-increasing presence of “backpackers” in the city. The need was based in a population of South Asian—primarily Pakistani and Indian, though also Bangladeshi—students who attended the various English language medical programs associated with the *Mezhdunarodnyy Universitet Kyrgyzstana* (International University of Kyrgyzstan; MUK). Some of these programs, such as the “International Higher School of Medicine,” have been in operation since the early 2000s, and offer a range of programs from pre-med to doctoral degrees, and a range of medical licenses. Others are much newer. For example, a general medicine program was created at MUK in 2017 under the auspices of the “Intergovernmental Kyrgyz-Pakistani Commission,” drawing in not only more Pakistani students, but international funds.²⁰ The MUK medical programs draw thousands of students from South Asia every year and enrollment exploded in the years leading up to my fieldwork. Correspondingly, Sabir and Jamilya explained that Witnesses in Bishkek identified the need brought about by the popularity of MUK’s programs.

To meet the need of witnessing to the thousands of medical students, the English Group had three Field Service Groups, two of which were the families of two elders in the group. The third Field Service Group was overseen by Sabir, and included the rest of the publishers in the English Group. These included: a large group of about 10 Kyrgyz women in their 20s and 30s; three male Bethelites in their 20s, one Kyrgyz and two Russian; one Russian woman in her 20s,

20 The landing page (accessed 21 August 2021) for the “International School of Medicine,” another such program at MUK, features a video that shows rows of South Asian medical students (replete with white lab coats) in classrooms, panning aerial shots of the campus, and the Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan flags waving side-by-side. See: <https://ism.iuk.kg/?en>.



(Top) Figure 1.4 - MUK. Photo by Mikhail Dudin, 2021.

(Bottom) Figure 1.5 - The English Group. Memorial of Christ's Death, 2019. Photo by author.

a friend of the group of Kyrgyz women; a male Russian teenager, who came to the group by himself; a group of three older Kyrgyz women who were all friends, and who taught English in school; a Kyrgyz woman and her young son; and finally, Foma and Ira. A smattering of other Bethelites would randomly attend the meetings, usually whilst visiting the country for a special project. Not including myself, my family, or the different MUK students they would bring to the Kingdom Hall, there was an average of 32 Jehovah's Witnesses that would attend weekly meetings, eight of whom were male. There was one regular student (and by this, I mean Bible student, though he was also a medical student) who attended meetings while I was in Bishkek. We will meet him in Chapter 4. Because of the number of Witnesses, and the vastness of the group's territory, many Witnesses in the English Group had their own territory.

While the English Group's territory encompassed the entire city—and beyond to other cities—the majority of the need clustered around MUK, as the majority of the students lived in towering, multistory *obshchezhitia* (Soviet-style “student hostels”) in the direct vicinity of the main campus of the university, in hosts of privately rented flats in the apartment blocks north of *Rabochiy Gorodok* and south of the *Birinchy May rayon* (in one of the central-most areas of the city), in between the campuses of MUK's “International School of Medicine,” and several newer student hostels associated with the University in the southeastern “microdistricts” of the city (primarily associated with the growth of the programs in 2017). The parent congregation was a Russian-speaking one that met in the Kingdom Hall that was part of the Branch Office complex, located some two miles west of the main campus of MUK and about a mile from MUK's eastern medical campuses.

By all accounts, Witnesses regarded the needs of their ministry to be unique in the city. Because there were only a couple of brothers in the congregations who were both qualified and capable of giving public talks (the sermon during the weekend meeting) in English, Sabir and one of the tech-savvy Bethelite brothers in the Group arranged it so we could watch a transmission of an English-language public talk given the previous day in a congregation in Florida or earlier that morning from a congregation in Australia. Similarly, during the meetings, rather than read *The Watchtower* or the texts for the Bible study during the midweekly meeting, we would listen to

pre-recorded audio versions of the texts in the JW Library app—the organization's mobile app that digitally houses the corpus of Watch Tower literature.

Many Witnesses in the Group were in the throes of learning English. These Witnesses admitted to me that it was difficult to get “spiritual nourishment” in the Group because the focus sometimes became comprehending the language, rather than understanding the content. One sister, Baktygul—one of the 20-something-year-old Kyrgyz women—confided that she was struggling and considered returning to her Kyrgyz congregation. Then, after one Sunday meeting, she told me in English (with some difficulty and long pauses) that she decided to stay. I asked her why, and she responded, at first in English and then in Russian as she became frustrated by trying to extemporaneously form a complex answer to my question,

“Today, the song we sang, I completely *understood* the words [in English singsong]: ‘Searching the world / For friends of peace in ev’ry nation ... / Wanting to leave / No stone unturned.’”²¹

She went on to explain that she could not leave a stone unturned and that she would persevere in her English studies. She was not alone. The extra work, Witnesses in the English Group told me, was worth it, especially since many of the students they worked with—even if they did not become Witnesses—would take the “seeds of truth” back with them to Pakistan and India, where the need was even greater.

Conclusion: Local context in focus

This chapter has outlined some of the key historical and social contexts for this thesis. But I frame that context by laying out the theology of the world. I do this in an attempt to take Witnesses' semiotics of difference seriously. This is not to discount “context,” but to put context into context, as it were. To this end, Will Rollason (2011) draws on Roy Wagner's (1975) classic thesis that anthropologists “invent” culture. Rollason keys in especially to how Wagner (*ibid.*: 37) describes context as a part of experience—but not just the experience of those anthropologists study—but the anthropologist's experience when writing ethnography. The issue, Rollason

21 The song may be heard here:

https://www.jw.org/finder?srcid=share&wtlocale=E&lank=pub-jwbon_201511_2_VIDEO

(2011: 486) tells us, is that the context seen by the ethnographer is not always the context understood by the anthropologist's interlocutor. Sometimes this is not so problematic, but at times, he writes, "the notion of context tends to enforce difference, even against the political aspirations of the people we try to understand" (ibid.; see also Candea 2011).

I see an incredible confluence of what I, as an anthropologist, might call context and what Witnesses call the system of things—of course, minus the devil and demons. That local needs of the system of things are understood to be the social and historical structures human beings are born into and which shape our perception sounds remarkably similar to numerous social theories. This is particularly helpful in making sense of how Witnesses take evangelism to be something that, ultimately, can share understanding. That is, communicating an understanding of truth turns on linguistic comprehension, yes, but also on the perceptions humans have by dint of their being born in the system of things. Evangelism, as such, must be responsive to local needs, and this is born out in the way Witnesses organize their preaching work. Those Witnesses who identify and respond to greater needs are not the only ones who take responsibility; joining in the preaching work even in a regular publisher's first language is their own responsibility. What is interesting, however, is that the way the organization accounts for the good news being preached in every language to every inhabitant of the earth, shapes the way those responsibilities play out on the ground. Context, and the communication of local needs, is vital.

But the danger is in taking this notion of context too far. While I mentioned above that the everyday practices of evangelism are different congregation to congregation, it would be incorrect to say that Witnesses around the world—in different parts of the system of things—are fundamentally different to one another. Witnesses, around the world, count themselves as God's people. Taking this claim seriously does not discount the fact that Witnesses are born and raised in the system of things. It is for this reason I devote so much space locating Bishkek in the system of things, even though the ethnographic examples of evangelism in this thesis are almost entirely of Witnesses preaching and teaching people from Pakistan and India. This tells us something of what it is to be a Witness in Kyrgyzstan, something which is essential to making

sense of how common ground might be made with a person-in-the-world, as I explore in the following chapter.

Chapter 2

THE INITIAL CALL

Witnesses call their first interaction with an individual person-in-the-world the “initial call.” This point of contact is critical in their conceptualization of evangelism because it is meant to frame all future interactions a publisher will have with that person, setting the tone and building a “groundwork” for subsequent interactions, called “return visits” and, eventually, “Bible studies.” In other words, the initial call is the first step in a pedagogical continuum leading towards becoming one of Jehovah’s Witnesses. This first encounter is not meant to give understanding—the knowing of truth that is the aim of evangelism writ large—but is first and foremost about setting up further interactions that *can* give understanding.

Although Witnesses do not expect understanding in the initial call, Witnesses *do expect* a response from the person-in-the-world. This chapter is concerned with describing the responsibilities publishers hold in the initial call, as well as the responsibilities they give the person-in-the-world and which the person must take in order to continue on towards becoming accountable. People-in-the-world take this responsibility by “listening.” But a person will only listen

if they are “rightly disposed.” This requires a methodology for “discerning” who is most likely to be rightly disposed. This methodology turns on a set of evaluations made about a person-in-the-world before, during, and after the initial call. All of this is “recorded” after the fact to help the publisher in identifying an appropriate course of action to take with that individual. Namely, that by weighing the response of the individual, Witnesses will prioritize a return visit if the person demonstrates that they “listened,” and by recording the person’s interests, will tailor their future visits to the needs of that individual.

In this chapter I will explore the initial call in three ways. First, I will consider the responsibilities and evaluations Witnesses must make before the initial call in what is called “search work.” “Search work” is not only about evaluating people to whom a Witness might preach, but assessing things and places, times and conditions, that might limit their ability to preach. Second, I will describe an initial call and set up the problem of what might be called the “impossibilities” of a person immediately understanding the message Witnesses are preaching because they are still “in the world.” This fundamentally constrains the sorts of responses a person can give. To better understand this, I draw on anthropological literature that considers the connection of knowledge and responsibility, arguing that often what these authors seem to mean when they discuss “responsibility” is quite likely, in the terms I have laid out herein, “accountability.” This builds out the way that a person-in-the-world is considered to be unaccountable and how “understanding” leads to accountability.

Third, I will consider the ways that the person-in-the-world, though figured to be unaccountable, is given responsibilities during the initial call. This turns on giving a witness to which the person-in-the-world responds. The publisher can then evaluate the response to “discern” the person’s “disposition.” To conclude, I explore the way Witnesses evaluate the interaction after the call, or what Witnesses call “identifying interests.” While some of the evaluation is recorded and reported back to the congregation, other information is recorded to help the Witness in preparing for future interactions with that particular individual. I use this to discuss the ways ethical evaluation can concern giving and taking responses, not just accounts.



Figure 2.1 - Territory Map Card. Photo by author.

Searching out the initial call

The initial call plays out in a publisher's territory. Most of the Witnesses in the English Group had their own territories or shared a territory with their spouse or family. As I described in chapter one, these territories divided up Bishkek at the level of the congregation. Within the congregation, territories are divvied up to make the preaching work manageable for smaller groups of Witnesses. For example, Foma and Ira shared a territory that was made up of approximately 15 city blocks (of various sizes) near the center of the city (see fig. 2.1). This territory was almost entirely apartment blocks and included the blocks where Foma and Ira lived, as well as where my family and I lived (we were neighbors, as chance would have it). While publishers regularly switch territories, they are not obliged to do so necessarily.

For example, when I arrived in the Group, Foma and Ira had been preaching in the same territory for about six months. Having one territory for a long time had its cons, Ira explained.

It could get monotonous. But one of the pros, Ira said, is that there was a lot of continuity both for them and for the people they met in the territory. They became recognizable figures in the area that people knew, and Ira and Foma could notice the small changes in the population, something Foma noted was not easy to do in an urban environment, where things seemed to always be changing. This they compared to experience they had preaching fulltime in the rural Jalal-Abad region in the south of Kyrgyzstan in 2010. They argued that in rural areas it was easier to achieve this sort of familiarity with the place and the people inhabiting it, even when one's territory was larger, because one's presence as a Witness was conspicuous and could be immediately identifiable as peculiar. For them, having an urban territory for a longer period compensated for the anonymity and fast-paced tempo of urban life.

Initial calls do not just happen. They must, in any case, be sought out. The various methods of preaching play a determining role in how publishers search out the initial call. Put otherwise, preaching methodologies are concerned with different ways of seeking out the initial call. The primary method Witnesses use is to “call on” people in their homes for a short visit. It is for this reason termed an “initial call.” This focus on the “house-to-house” or “door-to-door” ministry was explained to me by one publisher as “Jesus Christ’s way of preaching and teaching,” referencing verses like Acts 5:42. Further still, this is what is meant by “inhabited earth” (Matthew 24:14), as “homes” are the places humans inhabit. “Jesus’s way” of preaching house-to-house has long been the central Watch Tower preaching methodology, reaching back to the earliest days of the Society, as from at least 1881 the Society used “colporteurs” to distribute books and *Zion’s Watch Tower* (WTBTS 1993b: 210), a practice of door-to-door literature distribution that has its roots in the early-20th century in the United States (e.g., Hazard 2019).

While preaching at peoples’ homes is preferred, Witnesses argue that in the 21st century, people are not always found at home, especially in urban places, and while preaching means “imitating Jesus and his apostles in their approach to the disciple-making work,” it also means “keeping abreast of the changing times and the varying circumstances of the people in our territory” (WTBTS 2019d: 90). In 2013 the Society introduced “Special Metropolitan Public Witnessing,” a program organized at the level of the Branch Office that consists of preaching with literature carts, desks, or booths in high-traffic areas in urban places. This program also

formalized other forms of “Public witnessing” that use similar methods but are organized by the congregation (see WTBTS 2013e).¹ “Public witnessing” as a broader category sweeps up with it not only preaching with literature carts, but any sort of “search” that happens on the streets of cities (often also called “street witnessing”), such as in businesses, markets, public transit, and so on. In either public witnessing or the house-to-house ministry, the point is to reach as many people as possible in an initial, face-to-face interaction.

As I noted in the previous chapter, in largely monolingual areas, this might be relatively straightforward, and simply involves the methodological preaching to everyone in the congregation’s territory. In multilingual areas, however, there is an added level of complexity to seeking out initial calls, sometimes called “search work” (WTBTS 2012a). While search work is coordinated between congregations when a publisher finds people who speak another congregation’s language, Witness training literature explains “the primary responsibility to find people to whom you can preach [in your language] rests with your congregation or group” (ibid.: 5). When conducting the search work, publishers must therefore be responsive to the local needs of their territory.

This involves levels of evaluation before an initial call is engaged. While the primary responsibility of Witnesses during search work is finding people who speak their territory’s language, Witnesses also evaluate other contextual issues that might impede a potential initial call. One particularly eloquent publisher described these sorts of issues to me as “barriers to Kingdom communication.” To illustrate this, consider how Azamat, a twentysomething Kyrgyz man serving in Bethel, and Safargul, a Kyrgyz woman in her 50s who had been involved in the general English-language evangelism in Bishkek for many years, took me street witnessing with them.

Search work on Jash Gvardiya Boulevard

We planned to go preaching in a park near my flat—frequently visited by MUK students on cool, summer Saturday mornings—after a meeting in the Kingdom Hall, deciding to walk the 1.5

1 These sorts of practices were widespread even before the Society began “trialing” Special Metropolitan Public Witnessing in 2011. These trials just represented the formalization and institutionalization of these methods, including the creation of a host of new materials, such as mobile literature carts (see Ch. 3).

miles to the parks on Jash Gvardiya Boulevard rather than take a *marshrutka* so Azamat could demonstrate preaching along the way. The streets were just starting to fill with people bustling from place to place as we started our walk to Jash Gvardiya. My normal route home would have saved some distance by cutting through the Osh Bazaar. Azamat, however, suggested we instead go down a quieter side road that circuitously looped the Bazaar. People at the Bazaar, Safargul explained, even on its outskirts, were too busy to listen. Azamat added that it is not just that people are too busy, but that there were too many people in too tight quarters in the Bazaar—density adding its own barrier to communication. Once on the side street, we saw a middle-aged woman walking toward the market. Azamat stopped and made eye contact with the woman, said “hello” in Kyrgyz, “*Salamatsızbl!*”

She responded but did not stop, walking quickly into the market.

“She is busy,” Azamat told me, “You see, this is why I avoid the bazaar—too busy, too loud for service.” Safargul explained that in any case, she was Kyrgyz, and that our territory was English. I asked how they knew she was Kyrgyz. Azamat shrugged, “She looks Kyrgyz.”

We continued until we saw an old man with an askew *qalpaq* (a felt, crowned cap) and flushed cheeks, walking slowly towards us. Azamat shook his head, uttering under his breath (in English), “Drunk.” We walked for some time, chatting along the way, but the only person we saw on the deserted side street was an elderly woman. “Russian,” Azamat interjected mid-sentence, shaking his head before continuing to explain that we had to get to the park before it got too hot, otherwise the heat would make it so no one would want to talk with us (it was already pushing 30°C).

Finally, we made it to the green space along Jash Gvardiya we intended to visit, and we began to walk up and down the park’s paths, shaded from the late morning sun by the trees lining the boulevard. After two hours of walking, sitting on benches, and (unsuccessfully) trying to find English-speakers, Azamat decided it was time for lunch. He added as we left, explaining that people would not listen when they were hungry. And, in any case, that he could not preach on an empty stomach.

Searching for speakers and barriers to Kingdom communication

The search work for speakers of a publisher's language, as illustrated above, seemed to turn on racialized markers. Azamat, for example, disqualified the old woman because she simply "looked Russian." This method becomes particularly salient in finding MUK students: anyone who "looks Indian" is slotted as an English speaker, whatever their ethnicity, first language, or ability to speak English. Whiteness alone is not enough to determine English-speaking tourists—as Russians are also often white—but the European, Australian, and American "backpackers" that could frequently be found milling about tourist attractions in the city *looked different* than Russians as well, because they generally "dress like backpackers" and "look European" (as opposed to Russian). Other racialized markers were used in the house-to-house work as well, as Ira emphasized, "You can smell their cooking quite distinctly in the building." By which she meant that whilst searching for MUK students in an apartment building where none were known to live, the scent of South Asian cooking could lead her to them. It should be noted, Watch Tower literature does not recommend or condone these sorts of methods of evaluation in the search work, but I found them to be widespread in my observations and interviews. I should also note that it did not seem to be the case that these methods of racialization were intended to exclude, but rather to include, as per the very nature of what it was they were up to.

Immediately before a publisher begins a call, as we see in the scene with Azamat and Safargul, is also a time for responding to contexts that unfold on the ground, evaluating what barriers to communication might exist in that particular situation. For example, Azamat was very concerned that we get moving and not waste any time getting to the park (where the MUK students might be found) before the day got too hot. The weather is a factor to consider whilst preaching and illustrates what might be thought of as "environmental" barriers. While Witnesses preach no matter the weather, Azamat explained that they would not do any *public* witnessing during inclement weather. In extreme heat, or cold or heavy rain or snow, people would likely not stop to have a conversation. On these sorts of days, they would escape the elements by preaching door-to-door in apartment buildings, doing return visits, or Bible studies.

The Osh Bazaar itself could be considered an environmental barrier. The environment of bazaars, as Azamat and Safargul indicated, is too busy and densely populated to preach effec-

tively (cf Spector 2017). This is not always the case, however, as some Witnesses reported to me that Bishkek's bazaars were a favorite place to preach, since they could always find people there, and would focus on preaching to traders and porters in the market. Despite the fact that these people were working, these laborers would not be too busy to talk because, as one publisher put it, the bazaar is an "informal workplace" (cf Rudaz 2020) conducive to conversation. For the publishers in the English Group, the Universities' various campuses, like the Bazaar, were often considered to be places not suitable for preaching because students were likely to be busy when on campus. Noise and other distractions were mentioned in other contexts as well. For example, I would often meet with some of the younger Witnesses in the English Group, and other congregations, in Bishkek's many shopping malls. We would meet here out of convenience, but the publishers would always avoid the noisier parts of the mall so they could also do some preaching. Part of setting up the initial call is finding the right space and time to preach.

While bazaars and shopping malls may not be to every Witnesses' taste for preaching, they are widely accepted as suitable locations for evangelism (WTBTS 2008b; 2020a: 9-10). There are places, however, with environments that represent a totalizing barrier to preaching. These are places not only where the environment is filled with distractions but that there is a very low probability that the "rightly disposed" (see below) would even be there. For example, Witnesses understand sporting events to be dominated by drunkenness, violence, and commercialism. During the 2018 World Cup there were many gatherings in Bishkek to watch the games, especially since they were hosted in Russia. I asked some Witnesses brothers with whom I sometimes played football if they would try preaching at any of these sorts of events. They told me quite seriously that preaching at football matches was impossible because the games were hotbeds of "alcoholism, debauchery, and nationalism." Similar to sporting events, bars, night-clubs, political rallies, concerts, protests, and similarly charged or intoxicating public events are viewed as being too rooted in Satan's system to facilitate effective preaching.

Returning to the scene above, Azamat also pointed out that time of day can represent a barrier. People, for example, would be less likely to listen if they answer the door during a mealtime, early morning, late in the evening, or on a holiday (a cultural barrier in its own right). Further, during working hours on weekdays many people cannot be found at home. These barriers

vary from place to place and population to population. For example, Witnesses in the English Group were keenly aware of MUK term times, exam times, and the structure of the various degree programs. They even knew precise details, such as what courses might be taken at what year in a program, giving a sense of how long a student might have left in Bishkek before returning to Pakistan or India—important if the medical student would progress along the continuum towards becoming a Witness. This attention to detail enabled publishers to know that, for example, Sunday afternoons (otherwise considered by Witnesses one of the best times for preaching) might be a prime studying time for their would-be student listeners. Therefore, on Sunday afternoons they would engage other evangelistic pursuits and instead on weekday evenings during the middle of the term might find the students more relaxed and eager for conversation.

Further, while we walked and talked in the park along Jash Gvardiya, Azamat told me that “drunkards like that man on the street are never worth preaching to.” He explained that drinking alcohol is not the issue—he drinks alcohol, to the dismay of some of his more pious Muslim relatives—but that being drunk prevents communication. That is to say that the drunk man might, under other circumstances, be a suitable candidate for an initial call but that his current state of being would not yield a productive interaction.

This sort of barrier is idiosyncratic and is imagined to involve the life situation of the individual. Identifying idiosyncratic barriers requires the greatest level of responsiveness on the part of the publisher, as there is no certain structural knowledge born of the system of things that can cue what might be unique about a person’s situation. Idiosyncratic barriers could involve a whole host of things pertinent to the individual life of a person, not just drunkenness. Perhaps foremost among these is “busyness,” something my interlocutors frequently brought up as hindering people from engaging their preaching, especially the MUK students who were particularly busy. Witnesses understand that people do not plan to meet them, and that any evangelistic interaction represents a spontaneous interruption to whatever the person-in-the-world was doing or planning to do. Therefore, they try to minimize this barrier by keeping the initial call short and by discerning times when people are not as busy—such as the publishers in the English Group do with the MUK students—but this is never entirely possible, since

people do not uniformly conform to singular schedules. Likewise, despite some reliance on stereotypes, Witnesses maintain that stereotypes are never entirely accurate and need to be tempered by understanding the life experiences of individual people.

Sabir once emphasized to me that this responsive attention to the details of the situation in which an initial call might unfold is particularly what makes face-to-face evangelism, as done in public witnessing or the house-to-house ministry, truly imitative of Christ's or the apostle's preaching. For example, Sabir pointed to Matthew 13:2, where Jesus goes by the seaside and preaches. Because "such large crowds gathered" to listen to him, Jesus boarded a boat and preached from the water to the crowd. Sabir asked me why Jesus would have done that. I shrugged a noncommittal response and he pointed out the study note for the verse in the *New World Translation*, which explains, "Along the shore of the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum, there is a spot that forms a natural amphitheater. The good acoustic properties of this location would have allowed a large crowd to hear Jesus speak to them from the boat." His point being that Jesus attended to the details of the environment in which he was preaching and made the most of it.

"We," Sabir said resolutely, "should preach like Jesus."

The initial call

Now that I have described some of the work that goes into setting up the initial call, we are ready to consider the call itself. I will first describe one initial call I observed in the house-to-house ministry with Foma and Ira and a conversation I had with them afterwards. I will then argue that an important aspect of the initial call is that the person-in-the-world cannot understand preaching for what it is in Witnesses' "evangelistic framework." Further, I describe how that the person-in-the-world cannot understand the content of the message Witnesses preach during the initial call, though they might comprehend the words uttered, because Witnesses speak in what they call "theocratic language." Drawing on Foma's explanation, I call these the two problematics the "impossibilities" of understanding in the initial call.

House-to-house preaching with Foma (Celina's initial call)

Foma, Ira, and I were preaching in an apartment block that housed many MUK students. One of the tasks for the day, Foma told me, was to make a return visit to Vikram, a third-year medical student from a city in Madhya Pradesh in central India. More specifically, we were conducting a special preaching “campaign” ahead of the “Memorial of Christ’s death,” a yearly “commemoration” of Jesus’s death held on Nisan 14 (that is, Passover), to which non-Witnesses are encouraged to attend (WTBTS 2013g). Witnesses widely “advertise” Memorial in the weeks leading up to it by distributing invitations and showing videos on smartphones and tablets. Thus, though it was late March and Memorial was not until 19 April, we found ourselves actively engaged in the campaign.

The plan was to catch up with Vikram and see if we could convince him to come to Memorial, Foma indicating he had been the year previous. Foma was going to do the talking and show the video, which he had prepared for by memorizing most of the audio of a training video in English, and Ira was going to “place” the invitation (see Ch. 3). Foma’s ability to speak English seemed to wildly fluctuate. Memorizing key phrases he might use in preaching was critical both to how he studied English and to the way he used English during field service. For this campaign, Foma had studied a training video that had accompanied a recent midweekly meeting.² His speech in the following encounter replicates much of the video dialogue precisely because he had memorized it, watching the video repeatedly and then drilling pronunciation with me in preparation (in this case, the word “commemoration”). This technique, which was not unique to Foma in the English Group, combined with the use of JW Language (a preaching-oriented language learning mobile app), meant that many of the speakers in the English Group often produced the same sorts of talk. With a grin, Foma said that I was there to interpret if he got stuck.

Foma showed me where Vikram lived on the small map of their assigned territory they carried with their territory map card (see fig. 2.2). They carried these maps with them whilst in the field ministry and it was one of several ways they kept notes about their preaching efforts. We stood

² See video:

https://www.jw.org/en/library/videos/#en/mediaitems/VODSampleConversations/pub-mwbv_201903_5_VIDEO

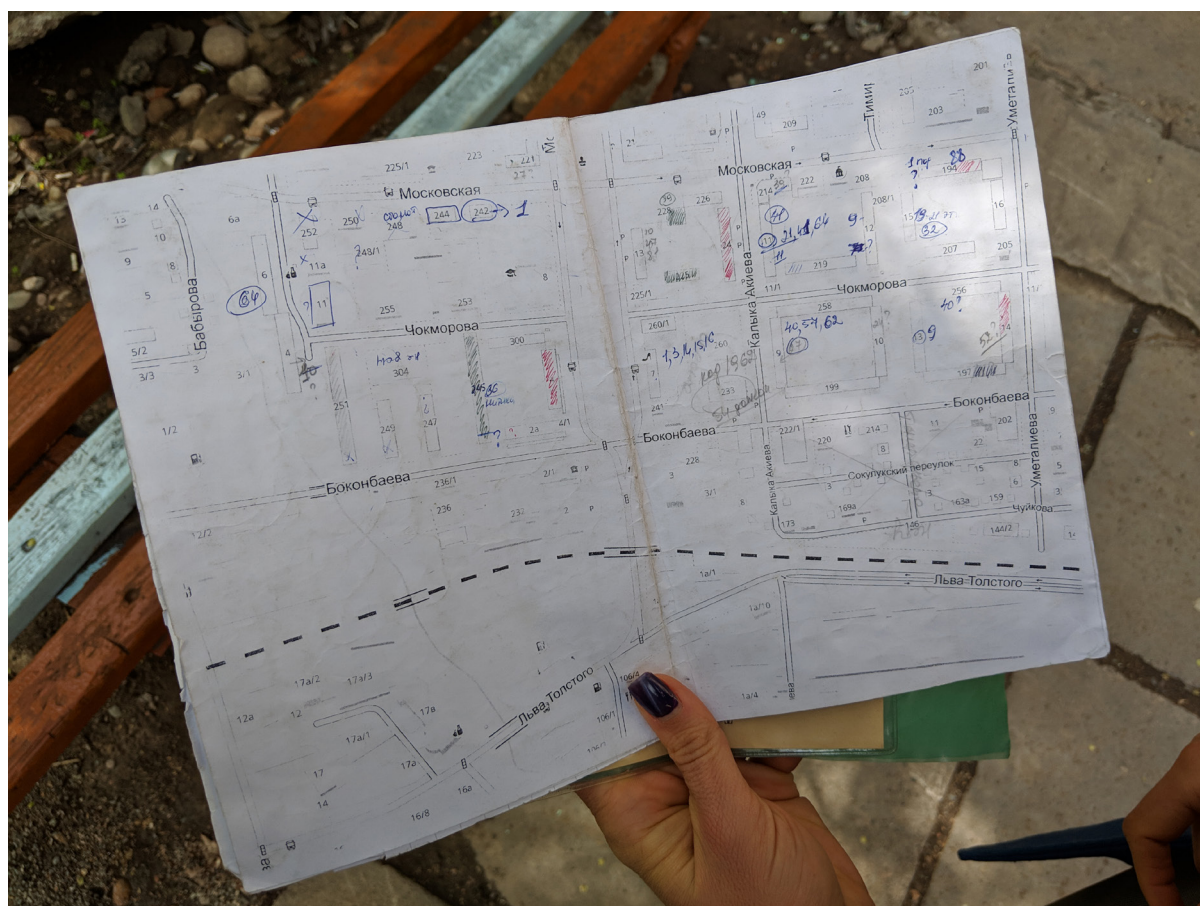


Figure 2.2 - The map Ira uses to notate where they have been searching. Photo by author.

in front of the entrance to the building, examining the map, Foma double-checked Vikram's apartment number. Next to where the entrance of the building was on the map, notated in Ira's handwriting, was simply the number "88." Foma muttered, "Okay, 88. You ready?" Ira and I nodded.

With that we walked up to the *domaphone*³ and Foma called number 87. No answer. Instead, Foma rang 86. No answer. And then 85. Finally, someone answered. Previously, Foma had explained that he often used this "trick" because the MUK students rarely answered their *domaphone*.

"Who's there?" a burly voice, distorted by the *domaphone*, spoke out in Russian.

Foma replied in very polite Russian and an official voice, "Hello! Excuse me, could you please tell me if there are any foreigner students who live in your entrance? We have important infor-

3 A two-way communication system like a door phone, common on Soviet-style apartment blocks.

mation for the students about an upcoming meeting.”

Instead of a response, we heard the *domaphone* hang up and the magnetic catch on the door click open. Foma pulled it open and held it as we all went inside. We walked up several flights of stairs to 88 and Foma knocked on the door. After some audible shuffling in the flat, the door cracked a sliver, revealing half the face of a young Indian woman. She seemed quite shocked to see us and showed no recognition that she had ever met Foma or Ira. They did not seem to recognize her either.

Foma started in English, “Hello, my name is Foma. Does Vikram still live here?”

“No, I don’t know Vikram,” the woman responded.

“Are you a student here too?” Foma asked.

“No, but my boyfriend is,” she said, opening the door a bit wider to reveal her full face. A cross dangled visibly from a simple golden chain around her neck.

“Ah, you are Christian?” Foma asks, indicating the cross.

The woman, touching the cross and covering it with her fingers, spoke hesitantly, “Yes...”

“This is good to hear. Do you read the Bible?”

The woman looked from Foma to Ira—who smiled at her—then responded, “Of course.”

“Wonderful. We are in the area today inviting people to a very important event happening on Friday April 19. Millions of people around the world will come to this meeting to commemorate the death of Jesus Christ. This is your personal invitation to the meeting.” Ira held out the invitation. The woman looked at it through the crack in the door, but then opened open the door the rest of the way and took the bifold invitation from Ira, opening it and looking it over.

After letting her look at the invitation for a moment, Foma continued, “We would like to show you one very important video, it is only one and half minutes. The video explains about why the meeting is so important.”

“Yes, okay,” the woman said, nodding. Foma, who was holding their iPad, had the video ready to play before we got to the door. He pressed play, and the video, coming to life on the screen of

the tablet, began, “Imagine a world filled with peace, free from suffering...”⁴ The voice is set over piano music and the video shows images of blissful children and parents of all races frolicking on a beach and in different beautiful settings. The video explains there is a waiting paradise made possible by Jesus’s sacrifice and that Jesus’s biblical injunction to “commemorate” his death still holds true today. The video ends with the narrator again inviting the viewer to the Memorial meeting.

Foma nodded, powering down the iPad, “Yes. We hope to see you there.” The woman looked up at us but said nothing. After a moment, Foma continued, “My name is Foma, and my wife Ira, and my friend Danny.” He pointed to us in turn, then asked affably, “What’s your name?”

“My name is Celina.”

“Okay, thank you Celina. Next time we talk maybe we can look at what the Bible says ‘who God is.’ Are you usually home around this time?”

“Oh, okay. I don’t know. I guess so.”

“Okay. Sounds good. Thank you. It was nice to meet you. Bye-bye,” Foma exuded a string of phrases.

“Bye.” Celina said, looking at the invitation. She closed the door, and we heard the click of the deadbolt echo in the concrete stairwell. We descended the stairs to leave, but Foma stopped partway between floors.

Fumbling with his phone to take a quick note, he asked, “How do you spell Celina?”

Two “impossibilities” in the initial call: The “evangelistic frame” and “theocratic language”

After our morning in the special campaign, we availed ourselves to Foma and Ira’s flat for some warming tea—it had been a soggy morning and somewhat chilly. We sat sipping our tea, munching sandwiches, and I interviewed them about what I had just witnessed. Despite having visited several apartments, both for initial calls and for return visits, to invite people to Memorial, Celina’s interaction stood out because it seemed to me to be the most responsive—in the Christ-like way discussed above—since Foma and Ira were quite clearly expecting

⁴ See video:

<https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/memorial/remember-jesus-death/>

to meet Vikram but were suddenly face-to-face with someone new. As we discussed this, Ira emphasized that “holy spirit”⁵ played a role in how things turn out. This is important because it delineates that while Witnesses may be responsible in the initial call to attend to detail as best they can, Jehovah’s spirit is also responsible for “impelling” situations to shake out in special ways, or for certain encounters to happen at all. This, Ira explained, is how we found Celina and how Foma was able to utter the words in English. Further, I choose to consider Celina’s initial call here because, as an example, it fleshes out a point I made above, that a publisher’s preaching methodology (such as but not limited to public witnessing or the house-to-house work) shapes the contours of the initial call. This is specifically the case in the house-to-house work because the very fact that the person is found *at home* is understood to control for a lot of the other barriers I described might beset the search work on the street, as in the example on Jash Gvardiya Boulevard. This is another reason Witnesses prefer preaching on doorsteps.

I was particularly interested to see what Foma and Ira thought Celina made of the initial call. I asked them if they thought Celina understood the encounter as “preaching.” Both of them laughed into their mugs of steaming tea. Ira gently said, “How could she know?” What came from our conversation is the notion that people-in-the-world do not have any real conception of evangelism, much less the “initial call,” at least, as Witnesses configure it. There is no way for them to grasp the theological importance of evangelizing or what Witnesses imagine it to look like. Ira explained that “You must preach to actually understand the ministry.” In other words, only Witnesses, or their students, can know what evangelism really is. Foma accented this, saying several times in his explanation, “It is impossible she understood.” This was the case even though Celina reported that she is Christian and reads the Bible, and therefore presumably would have some notion of what “evangelism” might be. But this notion of evangelism could not be the full extent of theological connections Witness evangelism holds.

In fact, this latter point—that people-in-the-world might have their own conception of what preaching is—might further confound the problem. On one end of the spectrum, in a place like Kyrgyzstan tropes about “doorstep evangelism” do not seem as diffused as they might be in other

5 That is, Jehovah’s active force, rejecting what they call the “Trinitarian” notion that the “Holy Ghost” is a personage as unbiblical (WTBTS 1989: 20-23).

contexts (such as in the West), and even for people who might be acquainted with these tropes, they are being encountered in completely different circumstances as to be utterly confusing, or even infuriating. For example, one day I followed two publishers from a Russian congregation whose territory partially overlapped Foma and Ira's. These publishers were walking up and down the street near a supermarket, stopping people along the way as they attempted to begin an initial call. After an encounter, I would stop the person the publishers had spoken with to see what they made of the interaction. One elderly Russian woman's reaction, registering at once confusion and annoyance, best sums up the majority of the responses I received, "I was talking with members of a sect?!" («*Ya razgovarivala s sektantami?!*») Despite the fact that these publishers introduced themselves as Jehovah's Witnesses, there was often no connection between their being "Witnesses" («*Svideteli*») to tropes of "Jehovahists" («*Iyegovisty*»)⁶, or to the interaction as "evangelism."

On the other end of the spectrum, a person-in-the-world might recognize what Witnesses were doing as "evangelism," though perhaps more usually glossed in terms of being a "missionary" or "proselytizing," but these are still not what Witnesses imagine they are really up to. I once observed this when Anvar, a young Witness who worked as a guide taking English-speaking tourists into the mountains near Bishkek, tried to casually preach to some European backpackers. On a hike with Anvar and a couple of his clients from Belgium, we were taking a break on a saddle overlooking a mountainous lake fed by a small glacier, when Anvar casually started some "informal preaching" (WTBTS 2010). Anvar had been talking about how he had hiked to this saddle year after year and had watched as the glacier, which once dominated the scene, had receded until it was a small cap of ice in the shadow of the mountain. One of the Belgian hikers lamented, "Ah, some things we have ruined will never come back." Anvar countered with a question, "God created the earth, do you believe he has the power to make it better?" The Belgian hiker, laughing, said, "What, are you a missionary or something?" Even though Anvar had not announced himself (as yet) as one of Jehovah's Witnesses, the European hiker recognized the form of talk as some kind of evangelism. His tone suggested he was not

6 «*Iyegovist*» [Jehovahist] is a pejorative for Jehovah's Witnesses common in post-Soviet places. The slur is likely born of Soviet academia, since the term was used among Soviet sociologists and religious studies scholars (e.g., Moskalenko 1961).

interested, but Anvar answered anyway that he was one of Jehovah's Witnesses. The hikers immediately started talking in Flemish and laughing, ignoring Anvar, who looked at me with raised eyebrows. Whatever they thought about this sort of interaction, it certainly was not what Anvar understood himself to be doing.

The MUK students came from such wildly different contexts that their reactions to evangelism could range between these two poles. Some reactions suggested they were more on the side of the spectrum that had some conception of a "missionary encounter" (though none ever openly laughed at Witnesses as did those Belgian backpackers, at least that I ever saw). Some, however, and without the derisive overtones of Soviet-Atheist ideology, were as confused about what was going on as the elderly Russian woman. Most, it seemed, like Celina, were skeptical of the interaction at first—this was especially true of women—and then mostly silent throughout the rest of the interaction.

The problem—or the "impossibility," to coopt Foma's word—as Jehovah's Witnesses understand it, is that they are faced with communicating during the initial call with people who are still enslaved to the system of things and therefore cannot see "things as they really are" (a common phrase I heard in the field; see WTBTS 2018d: 1132). Even if a person is acquainted with the Bible, as Celina reported she was, they will not have let the Bible "speak for itself" (see Ch. 3), and therefore will not see things as they really are. This is borne out especially in the idea expressed by Foma and Ira that Celina—or any of their other addressees—could have no idea what was really going on during the initial call. I heard this impossibility echoed in the Kingdom Hall during many Field Service Meetings and in other interviews. I consider this impossibility as being a lapse in what Goffman (1974) calls "frames." That is that the people-in-the-world have no frame, or perhaps even the wrong frame, with which to make sense of the interaction as "evangelism." Seeing what the Witnesses were doing, such as calling people on *domaphones* or stopping them on the street, as "evangelism" requires seeing the interaction through the Witnesses' "evangelistic frame." This, however, was impossible, as my Witness interlocutors pointed out, because there is no way to inhabit this frame without being a Witness.⁷

⁷ This was gently reiterated to me on numerous occasions, as my Witness friends would point out that I misunderstood some aspect of the preaching work. I concede that I am still missing the point.

During our conversation in their apartment, Foma took this one step further, adding a second “impossibility” to the first. He explained that Witnesses speak in “theocratic language,” and the-person-in-the-world might comprehend the words they said during the initial call, but they could not *actually* understand them. Theocratic language is the reversal of Jehovah’s division of the languages I described in the last chapter. That is, on the day of Pentecost Jehovah gave Christ’s disciples the ability to speak and understand other languages, doing in reverse what he had done at Babel, uniting multiple languages into one social body. “From [the day of Pentecost] on,” the Society writes, “God’s covenant people were a multilingual people, but the barrier created by language difference was overcome because their minds were filled with common or mutual language of the truth” (WTBTS 2018d: 204). This, Witnesses argue, continues for God’s people today and is the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy in Zephaniah 3:9, “For then I will change the language of the peoples to a pure language, so that all of them may call on the name of Jehovah, to serve him shoulder to shoulder.”

Theocratic language is pure in that it is based in “a correct understanding of the [Bible’s] truth about God’s Kingdom and how it will sanctify Jehovah’s name, vindicate his sovereignty, and bring eternal blessings to faithful mankind” (WTBTS 2008: 22a).⁸ This “language” is not conceived of by Witnesses as a standardized language, though it is understood to be linguistic. It is best conceived of as functioning as a register of language that is what Marco Jacquement (2016; 2005) calls “transidiomatic.” Jacquement argues that contemporary language practices are often “deterritorialized,” whereas many analytic takes on language difference reify linguistic boundaries that may not matter to a community of speakers. He calls this the “xenoglossic need to share and communicate to all” (Jacquement 2005: 273). I call the theocratic register Witnesses speak “transidiomatic” because Witnesses enregister it in every standardized language in which they work.⁹ Theocratic enregisterment coopts the meaning of languages in the system of things

8 Because of the verse in Zephaniah, many Watch Tower publications refer to this phenomenon as “pure language.” I have found that Witnesses most often use “pure language” and “theocratic language” as synonymous metalinguistic categories (e.g., WTBTS 1953). I use “theocratic language” here because that is what I heard more frequently in the field and because it is useful in linking the register to notions of theocracy that become important later in the thesis.

9 Barchas-Lichtenstein (2013: 151-64) uses “transidiomatic” in the same way to different effect, as she is concerned with “authoritative discourses” created by a center that controls a periphery, following common themes in current anthropological literature (Robbins 2013b). While her analysis is good for some things, one problem it creates is to emphasize the *locality* of Witnesses in their own community rather than in the system of things, thereby writing

and reworks it according to “the truth,” specifically found in the Bible, but also in the creation of a practical lexicon used for conceptualizing evangelism.¹⁰

This enables deterritorialized communication between Witnesses that speak the theocratic register in different standardized languages. However, when Witnesses speak in a theocratic register with a person-in-the-world, even though they share a standardized language and mutual comprehension is possible, there will be a whole world of understanding necessarily foreclosed to the addressee because they do speak that register. Sometimes, however, even comprehension becomes difficult. For example, consider hearing a Witness utter “system of things” on your doorstep without having read the previous chapter. Witnesses are well aware of this and attempt to tailor their lexical uses of the register in the initial call as to make their speech as comprehensible as possible. But because theocratic language is the pure language of Bible truth, and because the whole point of evangelism is to preach the good news contained in the Bible, completely bracketing theocratic terms is ultimately impossible. As Foma told me, “When talking about the Bible with people you have to speak theocratic language. It is impossible not to speak it. Truth is truth.” The problem, he accented, is that this means their interlocutors could comprehend “some things” in the interaction, “but they can’t catch the true meaning.” The evangelistic frame is therefore predicated on speaking theocratic language because it attempts to communicate that truth.

To summarize, there seems to be two impossibilities foreclosing understanding during the initial call. First, a person-in-the-world cannot recognize the frame of the interaction. Second, the person-in-the-world cannot access the full content of the Witnesses’ preaching. At first blush, it may seem that if the initial call is beset by these impossibilities, then why all the fuss about making sure evangelism takes place in the addressee’s first language? The answer to this, though obvious enough, is that a common language affords the possibility of communication in the first place. If a person-in-the-world is going to learn the truth—and they can—they have to also learn how to speak, as Harding (2000) convincingly tells us. For the person becoming a Witness, this specifically will involve coming to understand theocratic language. This process,

off their political project from the start. In any case, I came to Jacquement’s “transidiomatic” through Barchas-Lichtenstein’s research.

10 Susan Gal (2015) reviews the role converts play in enregisterment in Christian missionization.

however, cannot be instantaneous—there is no modern-day equivalent to the conversion of Saul—and for there to be any sort of response on the part of the addressee during the initial call, the preaching must be in a language they can comprehend. It is because this work of learning to speak (or to believe) is so arduous (see Ch. 4), and further because the way language socialization in the system of things shapes one's perception (WTBTS 2008a: 22; see Ch. 4), Witnesses are responsible to preach to people in their first language.

Knowledge and unaccountability

Foma leaned back into his worn sofa and exclaimed, “O-ho! And now you can see why so many times we try to preach to people they don't listen!” This was Foma's conclusion to his ruminations about what they thought Celina made of their initial call. The idea he elaborated was that most people-in-the-world will not enter the continuum towards becoming accountable; most initial calls end with the addressee walking away or closing the door. And this necessarily makes sense, if it were otherwise, there would be a lot more Jehovah's Witnesses. Instead, because evangelism falls outside the interactional frames a person-in-the-world understands, the call is understood to necessarily interrupt their daily life, as I discussed above. Sometimes this interruption to the person-in-the-world's daily routine is met with annoyance, seen less as an interruption and more as an incursion. As such, the initial call can also be met with anger, and even violence.

Most often, however, the initial call is simply met with what my Witness interlocutors termed a “lack of interest.” The interruption is met not even with ambivalence, but with disregard. What my interlocutors emphasized is that disinterest—along with all other infelicitous ends of an initial call—stems from the fact that the person-in-the-world does not understand “things as they really are.” If they could only just understand, they would be more interested. This leans into the way Witnesses morally differentiate between themselves and “the world.”

The reader will remember the third definition of “world” from the previous chapter (see Ch. 1) as concerning the moral boundary between Witnesses as Jehovah's people and the rest of the world as lacking that “moral condition.” I expounded how this moral condition was coupled

to Witnesses' sense of accountability to God, particularly for evangelism. It seems to me that being accountable to God in this sense is directly linked to knowledge. This observation is not novel. Jane Hill and Judith Irvine (1993) have argued that accountability¹¹ and knowledge are deeply intertwined in social interaction, specifically as speakers claim or use knowledge in different ways. The moral use of knowledge in social interaction they call "evidence" (see Ch. 3). In this way publishers giving "understanding" to a person-in-the-world turns on producing evidence they can comprehend and then, bit by bit, understand. This focus helpfully accents that the foundation of the moral boundary between Christian and non-Christian, accountable and unaccountable, is a difference in knowledge. Witnesses are those who know the truth and evangelism as a process of social interaction deploys that knowledge particular ways, shaped, as I have explained, by the initial impossibility of understanding.

To elaborate this point, I turn to the work of Anna Strhan. Strhan (2015) describes the way that Evangelical Anglicans in London are at pains to identify themselves as "aliens and strangers in this world"—terms identical to those I explored in the previous chapter. For Strhan (*ibid.*: 31) the claim to be "different from the world" is not an impermeable moral boundary, but it is a boundary that is intended to be unidirectionally transited. In other words, the Christian boundary with the world is a *porous* moral boundary and evangelism is the process that percolates individuals through that boundary, giving them knowledge and, therefore, accountability.

Inspiration for this insightful observation she indebts to Georg Simmel's 1909 essay *Bridge and Door* (Simmel 1994). Simmel's essay entertains the idea that a fundamental aspect of humankind is our ability to "connect and separate" and that the activities of connecting and separating are always related, as something cannot be connected until it is separated. The operations of separating and then connecting is, Simmel holds, a basic way human understand the world around them, and which manifests itself materially in architectural forms. Simmel describes the need for a bridge as being predicated on the opposite bank of a river having been identified (an act of separation) and the building of the bridge as connecting the separated

11 Hill and Irvine use "responsibility" throughout their volume, *Responsibility and evidence in oral discourse*. This is a great example of the need for disambiguation of the terms "accountability" and "responsibility." Throughout the introduction to the volume there are examples that could perhaps be taken as responsibility. However, Hill and Irvine (1993: 4) clearly had in mind what I identified as accountability, as they want to delineate agency, or claims of authorship or speakership (moral personhood) and (extra-)legal dispute.

banks. The bridge is an open form of connection, uniting two spaces together. Different to the bridge, Simmel describes a door as a closed form of differentiation (i.e., between inside and outside), connecting together the infinite, boundaryless outdoors and the finite, bounded indoors, emphasizing the separation rather than the connectivity of the bridge, as doors are meant to be closed and the act of closing the door makes that separation all the more palpable.

Strhan (2015: 31) argues that the boundary between Christian/non-Christian is a door precisely because it is meant to be entered and the act of evangelism is the beckoning attempts of Christians to invite others to come in. Doors are meant to be passed through. This is often how Christians imagine verses like Matthew 7:14. Once indoors, one can, of course leave the building—move house, as it were—but Strhan emphasizes that often the point is to stay in the building.¹² The discursive work Christians do to persuade people to come indoors is knowledge in action and it must be true that those to whom they are circulating the gospel must not already have that knowledge or else they would already be indoors. It is perhaps not a coincidence then that the theocratic turn of phrase Witnesses use for conversion is to “come *into* the truth” (or, alternatively, being “born *in* the truth”).

But to further expand Strhan’s analysis of Simmel, the idea that the out-of-doors is infinite, whereas the indoors is finite is quite helpful because it exactly states the idea that entering the door makes one countable. Being counted, being in the doors of Christianity, as Strhan argues “knots [the Christian self] into relationships of accountability that encourage them to keep going in their faith” (ibid.: 68). This drive to “keep going” seems rooted in what Simmel (1994: 7) calls “finite unity” and is bound together because it is juxtaposed to the boundarylessness and, perhaps, uncertainty of the outdoors and the “sure knowledge” of being indoors in God’s Kingdom (see WTBT 2019e: 3-4). However, people who are outdoors, or people-in-the-world, are unaccountable in that they are, quite literally, uncountable. At least from a human perspective (cf. Matthew 10:30), there is no literal way to count every person living (or who has

12 Pelkmans (2009) “temporary conversion” is an interesting example of when the entrance/exit to Christianity might be more like a revolving door, as people in certain cultural contexts may come in and out the door many times for strategic reasons. Simmel (1994: 7) emphasizes that individuals are free to enter and exit doors, leaving possible this sort of strategy.

ever lived). But they are unaccountable also because they lack access to the knowledge that is contained within the doors of God's Kingdom.

Unaccountability here, to be clear, does not mean that people-in-the-world are not accountable to God at all, but specifically that they are unaccountable for the knowledge associated with “being indoors.” More generally, unaccountability also need not always be associated with a lack of knowledge, or even a “knower” *per se*, as in the case of being an agent (Laidlaw 2013: 186-87). Unaccountability, in the former sense as being associated with a lack of knowledge, gets at the heart of the impossibilities of understanding during the initial call. Despite being unaccountable, however, Witnesses—Foma and Ira including—expect the person-in-the-world to be responsible. Further still, the impossibilities shape both the responsibilities of the person-in-the-world and the publisher during the initial call. After an addressee has been sought out and an initial call begun, the primary responsibility of the publisher is to evaluate the responses of their addressee.

Evaluating responses: Discerning *who* are the “rightly disposed”

I mentioned what some unfavorable responses from a person-in-the-world might be, but what would constitute a favorable response to the initial call? Watch Tower literature explains that the initial call is seeking out those who are “rightly disposed for everlasting life” (Acts 13:48). An article in *The Watchtower* asks the question, “How can we know who are ‘rightly disposed for everlasting life,’ and how can we find them?” The article gives the answer, “The only way to find those people is to give a witness. ... We do not expect insincere people, haughty individuals, or those with no spiritual inclination to respond favorably to the good news. We are looking for people who are honest, humble, and hungry for the truth” (WTBTS 2018g: 12). The first idea encapsulated here is that determining whether a person is rightly disposed cannot happen before the initial call. It can only happen after “a witness is given.”

At the risk of pushing Simmel's analogy too far, one way to visualize this might be to think of the publisher going “outdoors” to beckon people to come “indoors.” The problem is that when publishers are outdoors, the person-in-the-world cannot see the building to which the

publishers are pointing. So, what they will do is show the person a picture of the building, but the person-in-the-world cannot make heads or tails of what is in the image. Witnesses know that this will be the case, but perhaps *something* in the image will be intriguing to the person. The image in this analogy is the witness publishers give in the initial call. Sometimes, as in Celina's initial call, this witness is literally an image, as we showed her video. But this might also be the words the Witness utters in the interaction, though these are profoundly entangled (see Ch. 3).

I asked Sabir what this quote from *The Watchtower* meant, how Witnesses might assess if a person is “honest, humble, and hungry for the truth,” to which might be added “sheeplike” (1993a), “submissive” (2019f), and “deserving” (Matthew 10:11). Sabir explained that this would be evident in how the person responded. If the person “listened,” then that demonstrated embryonic forms of these various virtues, and the potential for discipleship (WTBTS 2019c: 15-16). Listening, for Sabir, was not just “listening” in the sense of “agreement.” Listening, instead was anything *but* the disinterest of shutting the door, walking briskly away, or other obviously negative reactions. Instead, as we discussed the article, Sabir explained that being a “listener” is more about a pre-cultivated willingness to engage something they (the addressee) do not and (for the time being) cannot understand. Or, as Sabir put it, the listener has “a curiosity to learn more,” language common in Watch Tower media. In this sense, I understand the witness as giving the person-in-the-world responsibility. If they take that responsibility by curiously engaging the witness, they are a “listener.” But a person-in-the-world can only take up this role if the publisher gives a witness.

Sabir was very clear that the type of life one lived as a person-in-the-world mattered in the taking up of this role, and the reason a person may not be curious was because of their “habits.” In this sense, I understand Witnesses’ “right disposition” in terms of Laidlaw’s (2013: 73) reading of Aristotelian habituation in that

the cultivation of virtuous dispositions is not the same as the inculcation of automatic bodily responses or mechanical habit, and does not take place merely through repetition or rote learning and nor does it result in the cumulative suppression of freedom to do otherwise in the future. Rather, habituation is ‘simply what happens when one repeatedly decides in the same way’ and so becomes more practised and confident in doing so.

Watch Tower theology *does* claim that the system of things produces the sort of habituation that is mechanical, rote, and automatic and that this is characteristic of the unfreedoms of the slavery, bondage, or oppression by Satan and sin—a theme with deep roots in Watch Tower theology (Russell 1889; WTBTS 1952; 2018h; 2018c: 871-72). Put otherwise, a person who is deeply vested in the system of things “makes no investigations” (Psalm 10:4) and will not take the responsibility of being a listener given by the witness.¹³ Despite this, Witnesses believe every human has the potential to be rightly disposed because God created humankind with a “conscience,” or the capacity for self-evaluation and cultivation (WTBTS 2018c: 500-02).

That all human beings have the potential to be listeners accentuates the moral impetus behind the notion that Witnesses are accountable for “every inhabitant” of the earth to truly mean every human being. This, however, has to be qualified against two finite amounts of time, and the fact that while all humans begin with God-given conscience, that conscience can be clouded by the system of things. First, a publisher is limited by how many hours in a day they can physically preach before they tire, or before they must attend to some other thing, such as family responsibilities or earning a livelihood. Second, the current system of things is presently ending. This temporal boundedness lends, Sabir unfolded to me as we talked about listeners, a pervasive “urgency” to the preaching work (2 Timothy 4:2). Part of this, he explained, was a prioritization of who they would spend their limited time evangelizing (see also WTBTS 2012c). This prioritization is the theological reason for the sort of evaluation under discussion.

The responsibility of “discernment”

To evaluate with urgency and generosity, however, takes finesse, as a listener’s curiosity to learn more is not always gushing or pronounced. For example, as we discussed our interaction with Celina, Foma and Ira reiterated to me that they were both sure that Celina was, in fact, a listener. This was expressed in that they thought she *did* listen. Celina did not close the door on us and further she even demonstrated her curiosity by gradually opening the door, until it was wide open. In their talk about Celina, it seemed to me that Foma and Ira evaluated her right

13 Sabir qualified this verse heavily, which fully reads, “the wicked man makes no investigations,” emphasizing that just because someone did not appear to listen in the initial call does not make them “wicked,” since only God could make that sort of judgment (see difference between “unrighteous” and “wicked”; see Conclusion).

disposition by anything but what she said, though it did not hurt that she agreed to watch the video and that she did not protest when Foma said we would return. Instead, they were more keen to emphasize her general demeanor, facial expressions, and gestures. And that she opened the door (this was brought up many times).

These were all responses that signaled Celina's "position or alignment in what is occurring" (Goffman 1981: 35).¹⁴ Attending to these sorts of minute communicative features and imbuing them with meaning is swept up in notions of "discernment" in Watch Tower training literature. For example, "Not all communication is verbal. A certain topic may produce a change in a student's facial expression or tone of voice... Do not ignore these signs. They are glimpses of the inner person" (WTBTS 2001: 259). Discerning the content of speech becomes gradually more important in subsequent visits, and especially during Bible studies.¹⁵ However, because of the impossibilities of understanding during the initial call, the content of responses is mostly irrelevant. The same text on discernment explicates,

The way you react to what you hear also requires discernment. Remember that your objective is to understand people so that you can determine what Bible-based information is likely to motivate them. Quickly suppress any urge to expose the wrongness of their viewpoints. Instead, be alert to discern the feelings behind the words. Then you will know how to respond.

The publisher's objective in discernment is understanding the feelings of their listener, which requires the publisher to not pay attention to the words themselves but to the "inner person." This glimpse of the inner person reveals if the person is rightly disposed and will listen, no matter the "wrongness" of the content of their speech. This might be thought of as what Goffman (1974: 202-10) calls "disattending," as the content of their speech largely falls outside

14 Part of his definition of "response." Notions of "position" and "alignment" are thoroughly built out in notions of "stancetaking" (see Du Bois 2007).

15 This text on discernment I am referencing refers explicitly to Bible studies, but Sabir and Foma informed me that the pedagogical principle should be applied in preaching generally. The text is a workbook, *Benefit from Theocratic Ministry School Education*, that includes a series of lessons on effective ministerial pedagogy a publisher is to complete under the instruction of one of the congregation's elders. Partway into my fieldwork, *Benefit* was replaced with a new, significantly more succinct booklet, *Apply Yourself to Reading and Teaching* (26 pages compared to 293), and accompanying video lessons (see: <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/publication/r1/lp-e/th>).

of the frame of the call by dint of their being unaccountable. Discernment, as such, is evaluating responses and knowing what *not to* respond, just as much as knowing what is worth noting.

Conclusion: “Identifying interests”

After Celina’s initial call, while we were still in the stairwell of the apartment building, Foma took out his phone and typed a quick note. “Apt 88. Celina. Boyfriend student. Christian reads Bible. Video. Memorial inv.” Foma kept these notes, organized by building number and street name, on his phone and Ira, cross referencing Foma’s notes, kept the territory map up to date with minimal notation. I asked Foma what he wrote, and he walked me through his shorthand. He explained that he noted that we had shown a video and given her the Memorial invitation. This was important because he and Ira would total up the number of videos shown and invitations given (as well as other media, see on “placements” Ch. 3), as well as the total number of hours they spent preaching, number of return visits, and Bible studies conducted in a monthly “Field Service Report” given to the body of elders in the congregation. Notating what was done in the call now would help when they later made the report. The other notes, including her name, that she had mentioned she is not a student but that her boyfriend is, and that she is a Christian who reads the Bible, Foma explained, are there to help them when they visit her again. Also important here was that Foma had asked Celina if she was normally home at the time of our visit, but Ira explained that they would only note that down if she was not usually available at that time, since they did field service on Saturday mornings.

All of the things Foma notated point to return visits. This is because the initial call is never meant to be a one-off event but is meant to be the groundwork for future calls. It is the opening of a dialogue with a person-in-the-world. As such, Witness field service materials emphasize that making note of important information gleaned in the initial call can not only help to structure future visits, as we will explore when Foma and Ira plan Celina’s first return visit in the following chapter, but will help the listener in future interactions know that the publisher is “sincere” and “cares.” This information is talked about as “interests,” and is part and parcel of

“Jesus’s way” of preaching, as future interactions should be responsive to the person’s individual needs for understanding.

An important part of the post-call evaluations, therefore, is the identification of the listener’s “interests.” “Interests” in this sense are any part of the witness that the listener responded to. However, because the “wrongness” of their view can be disattended, “interests” are any aspect of the call that provoked some sort of response, even if it was simply a response to a question the publishers asked. For example, in other calls we made the morning we met Celina, we invited others to attend the same Memorial meeting, but during some of those calls, Foma would ask our medical student addressees what they thought about the video. One medical student said in response to the depiction of Paradise in the video, “It looks so beautiful.” This could be identified as an “interest” for this particular student, and indeed, Foma recorded it in his phone, “Paradise. Beautiful.” This could be the substance for future calls. Celina was also understood as giving a favorable response, even though she hardly said anything at all. The responses do not have to be elaborate to identify potential interests. Celina’s simple affirmative response to her being a Christian was enough to identify this as a potential interest and, as we will see, becomes very important in how her first return visit takes shape.

At first glance, “evaluation” most readily applies to accountability. In this sense evaluating is a judgment made in a specific institutionalized settings and according to social procedures. But this sort of judgment usually has significant implications for the human subject. Further, accounts—as a form of evaluation—are also temporally disconnected from the event at hand as the rendering of the account is its own, isolatable event that describes past happenings. That is, accounts act as a punctuation mark, concluding a temporal sequence. So, are the evaluations Witnesses make before, during, and after the initial call a form of “accounting”? I do not think so.

The idea of evaluation as punctuation is temporally antithetical to what the initial call is supposed to do. Namely, Witnesses understand the initial call to be the beginning of a longer dialogue. The analytical desire to chop up interaction into isolated events is not the way

Witnesses imagine evangelistic interaction.¹⁶ This is why at the beginning of the chapter I said the initial call, return visits, and Bible studies as falling on a continuum. Each “interaction” publishers have with a person who is becoming accountable should be seen less in isolation and more as part of a larger, continuing interaction, something like how a string of written correspondences mailed back forth stretches an interaction out through time. An interesting example of this is how Witnesses reflect on the fact that so many of their calls are met with seeming disinterest, or even antagonism or annoyance. In these cases, Witnesses understand themselves to be “planting seeds,” a notion which has its roots in Jesus’s “illustration” (the theocratic lexical formulation of “parable”) in Matthew 13 about the seeds and the sower. The idea is that when people-in-the-world seem to not respond to their witness, it is simply that they have not responded *yet*. Rather than precluding them from the possibility of a response, the “seeds” (the witness given) lay dormant and will potentially be taken up, planted, grown, and nurtured at some future point. This stretches the interaction out indefinitely, until the person finally responds (though that may not be in this life, as we will see in the Conclusion).

The evaluations in the initial call all are meant to point towards the continuance of the interaction. Therefore, the evaluation of a person’s disposition is never final and Witnesses in no way consider the sorts of assessment in the search work or whilst preaching to be at all a form of “judgment.” Of course, these are judgments in the conventional sense of the word, in that they are processes of ethical reasoning. What Witnesses mean, however, is that these evaluations are not what I will call in Chapter 5 “accountability events,” or the sorts of judgment made by God that *are* punctuation marks and that have elaborated institutional procedures and rituals. This is even the case for identifying interests, which as an evaluative process looks back to the start of this larger interaction. That said, the numbers the Witnesses take down—how many placements, hours, and so on—for the Field Service Report, *those* are evaluations in terms of accounts. But it should be noted that this sort of accounting has nothing to do with the individual interactional process of the person-in-the-world becoming accountable *per se*.

16 A point of comparison here might be the way Goffman (1981: 35) tell us that responses “are meant to be given attention by others now, that is, to be assessed, appreciated, understood at the current moment.” This would suggest that what the *now* is of the “current moment” is relative to the interactional frame to hand.

Whether planting seeds or discerning right disposition, publishers expect their addressee to respond. This expectation, however, turns on the publishers giving the person-in-the-world responsibility in the evangelistic frame. Publishers do this by giving their addressee something to respond to. This is the “witness,” or the “image of the indoors,” and while the person-in-the-world might not be able to really make sense of the image entirely, certain aspects of the image maybe intriguing to them. That these “interests” are to be “recorded” seems like some form of account, but interests can change, and the record is not meant to be durable. Instead, Witnesses identify interests in order to plan how the interaction will be continued during return visits.

Chapter 3

RETURN VISITS

The Thursday after Foma, Ira, and I met Celina, Foma texted me and asked if I wanted to come along for her first return visit. He told me to meet him at his house so we could prepare for the visit. When I got there, Foma, Ira, and I sat on the edge of their bed, which doubled as a sofa in their small one-room flat, and Foma explained that they had chosen this particular day—rather than Saturday, the day they typically did field service—to visit Celina because it was a time they most likely could meet her boyfriend, who she had said was a student. Because the boyfriend was gone last Saturday morning, Foma figured that by calling at a different time they might find him home.

Regarding what content they would cover, Foma explained that Watch Tower literature encourages publishers to leave a question with listeners during each visit to consider together the next time they meet. This question would be found in whatever media they distributed—or “placed”—with their listener, so the person could read or watch the material on their own, and then discuss it with the publishers during the next visit. During Celina’s initial call, we

had placed the video and the Memorial invitation. But Foma pointed out that he had also mentioned to Celina what we would cover during the next visit. Foma had said, after asking Celina's name, "Next time we talk maybe we can look at what the Bible says, 'who God is.'" Framing the next visit, Foma explained, was important in building groundwork as it told the listener what to expect.

The topic, "Who is God?", was drawn from the most recent "Public Edition" of *The Watchtower*, they explained, showing me a copy of the magazine. Ira reasoned that this would be a great topic to cover with Celina since, as a Christian, she already knew God but could come to know God better through answering the questions listed in the first article of the issue, such as, "What is God's name?" or "What is he like?" (WTBTS 2019g: 3-4). But first, to build up to these questions, they said they would ask "does it matter if you know God?" (the first question in the first article of the issue) and show what the Bible says. This would be helpful, Ira explained, both to preface what Celina would read in *The Watchtower* and to help her realize that while she believes in God, she has more to learn about him. But first, she needed to know *why* she should know him. Plus, Foma added, if the boyfriend was home, this would not be a bad place to start with him since they did not know if he was a Christian too.

This time Foma skipped his "trick" and directly rang Celina's number on the *domaphone*. She answered after two rings. Foma announced it was us and told her that we had a magazine to give her. When we got up to the apartment, Celina was ready to welcome us inside and we stood in entryway with the door to the landing slightly ajar. While Foma was still saying hello, another young Indian woman appeared from an adjoining room. Celina introduced the woman saying, "This is my flat-mate, Meera. She is also Christian. I told her about meeting you last week." With that—all of us huddled in the small entry of the flat—Foma leap into his "presentation." What struck me was that whole visit turned on giving the copy of the magazine to Celina and Meera, much as the initial call seemed to be centered on showing Celina the video and giving her the invitation to Memorial. Foma's presentation consisted of reading a paragraph from the article in *The Watchtower* and some Bible verses. These verses were either read directly from the magazine itself or from the JW Library app on their iPad. After reiterating that the magazine

was indeed for them, that we would be coming back to visit, and that next time we would study the next question in the magazine, Foma ended the meeting, and we took our leave.

“That was just litter”: Return visits and why “placement” matters

After exiting the building, Foma, Ira, and I sat on a bench in the courtyard of the Soviet apartment block and talked about the visit. I asked them why “placing” *The Watchtower* mattered—why was there an emphasis on leaving something with their listener? “Placing” or “placement” refers to the practice of distributing Watch Tower media, especially tracts, booklets, magazines, and, especially over the last five years, videos shown on smartphones and tablets. As Foma told Celina over the *domaphone*, the media was the excuse for the visit. The distribution of media is perhaps the most ubiquitous trope used to justify return visits and features prominently in Witness evangelistic practice as a method of getting to know the individual(s), building rapport, and cultivating their interest (WTBTS 2014b). And importantly, the listener’s acceptance of the media, first in the initial call, and then in subsequent visits, is an indication that they are rightly disposed (WTBTS 2003b: 8).

As we sat on the bench, Foma answered my question about why placement matters by explaining that leaving *The Watchtower* and other media was critical because it plays an “instrumental role” in how listeners learn the truth. These material artifacts are central to Witness evangelistic methodology and have been since the inception of The Watch Tower Society. In 1881, Charles Taze Russell organized the first iteration of the Watch Tower Society to handle a burgeoning number of publications he and his Bible Students began producing in the 1870s, including *Zion’s Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence*, the forerunner of today’s *The Watchtower*, a series of Russell’s theological treatises, and tracts to advertise the former publications as well as none less than the arrival of God’s Kingdom (WTBTS 1993b: 575-576). These early publications were centered on lending the reader access to the truth contained in the Bible. Just as in those early publications, the print and digital material used in Witness evangelism today always points towards the Bible.

Publishers were, up until 2016, encouraged to make at least monthly return visits to place the monthly issue of the “Public Edition”¹ of *The Watchtower*. In 2016, the “Public Edition” was reduced from monthly issue to bi-monthly and then to quarterly in 2018. The distribution of print media such as *The Watchtower* is still enormously important in field service, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, but the reduction in the number of issues published a year was to incorporate the use of digital media, especially videos, alongside print whilst preaching and teaching, just as we saw in Celina’s initial call. As such, the reduction in the number of issues in print mirrors an increase of the production of digital audiovisual content that can be shown on smartphones and tablets.² The integration of video and print media is to make “Bible truth” accessible to listeners in the 21st century. Or as Ira put it, “people these days understand things better through watching and listening instead of just reading.” As such, all the publishers I observed in my fieldwork used smartphones and tablets to show videos alongside a corpus of print media they call the “Teaching Toolbox,” including tracts, magazines (*The Watchtower* and *Awake!*), booklets and brochures, books, invitations, and contact cards.

Placed media, whether print or digital, both provides the substance of the witness given during return visits³ and gives the listener something to respond to on their own terms and in their own time. These media have always been portable and circulatable—indeed, distribution was figured into their very design—but the advent of mobile computing has brought audiovisual media to the doorstep, and the Witnesses I knew in Bishkek frequently used tablets and smartphones while evangelizing to show video clips.⁴

Even with the increased use of video, print media remain integral to return visits because they can be placed in tactile and visual ways different to how a listener might sensorially engage digital materials shared to their device. For example, while preaching with Pasha, a 19-year-old publisher moonlighting as a web-designer, and his friend Grigoriy, an older brother from

1 The magazine used for study on weekend meetings is a different edition of *The Watchtower*.

2 See (53:25), for example, on the announcement of a new audiovisual production studio in upstate New York announced in October 2019 and to be completed by 2026:
https://www.jw.org/en/library/videos/#en/mediaitems/StudioMonthlyPrograms/pub-jwb_202001_1_VIDEO.

3 But also at any other stage of the pedagogical continuum.

4 Though, to be fair, use of portable technological instruments in evangelism is not new, as Witnesses in the first half of the 20th century preached door-to-door with gramophones, and not only in the US (e.g., WTBS 2005: 18).

Pasha's Russian congregation,⁵ I noticed how after they showed an MUK student a video on a smartphone, and even helped the listener download JW Library on their own phone, Pasha still insisted on giving the listener a print copy of *The Watchtower*. Indeed, this happened to me on several occasions as well when I visited new congregations: despite having JW Library on my phone, publishers would attempt to send me away with print copies of various media. This, Pasha and Grigoriy emphasized, is to make it more likely the listener would engage the content on their own (at home), as the material form of the media would physically remind them to do so. But showing the video was also important because "people today watch so many videos—they understand the world through screens... videos will better touch their hearts." That is to say that while the Witnesses I knew felt that print media's form was important and that print deserved continued use in their evangelistic method, digital media are becoming increasingly necessary in teaching the modern person-in-the-world.

The placement of media interestingly intersects with return visits when the publishers do not find the "householder" at home—a quite common occurrence. When their listener is not home (or otherwise does not answer the door) publishers will typically leave a tract, invitation, or contact card in the door or in their mailbox (Soviet-style apartment blocks have banks of mailboxes in the entrance). That is, if a listener was not home, Foma would gently tuck a tract or card with a note at eye height ("so it wouldn't be missed") in the door. Or, if that was not possible—either due to the design of the door or because of a fear that nosy neighbors might take the tract and bin it prematurely—we would slip the materials into the flat's mailbox below.

Returning to my conversation with Foma and Ira on the bench after we visited Celina, I told them about how once while walking along Jash Gvardiya Boulevard I had found a Jehovah's Witness invitation left on a bench. I asked them if this was a form of "placement," in the terms I have been discussing here. They were so confused that I had to show them a picture of the invitation on my phone for them to understand what I was talking about (see fig. 3.1). Ira took my phone and responded, looking at the picture with a frown, "No. Probably someone took the invitation from some Witnesses and then left it on that bench." Witnesses, she expounded,

5 That is, Pasha's family attended a Russian congregation in a different part of Bishkek, while Pasha attended the English Group.



Figure 3.1 - Invitation on bench, as I found it. Photo by author.

never leave materials simply to be discovered because “teaching requires a Witness.”⁶ I laughed, explaining how I had left the invitation where it was on the bench. I thought that if I took it, I would be interrupting some publisher’s preaching activities or, perhaps, preventing someone from being divinely led to find the card and thereby potentially God’s Kingdom.

Foma laughed too. “No,” he said, “That was just litter.”

This raises an important question: if Witnesses programmatically leave media unattended at doorsteps—and they do—how was that invitation I discovered on the bench “just litter?” When I pointed this out, Ira responded that while Teaching Tools are central because they convey knowledge, any form of media is insufficient for evangelism by itself:

It is just like mathematics. Anyone can learn mathematics from a textbook, but to truly understand mathematics one needs a good teacher. It is the same with the Truth. Anyone can read the Bible, and many do read it. But just consider the

⁶ This took clarification in Russian, as Ira uttered “witness” in English, and I was curious if she meant a “witness” or a “Witness.” She said both worked, but that she intended the latter.

Orthodox. They supposedly read the Bible and they clearly do not understand it.

Ira accentuated that while it was important that Celina and Meera, and any of their other listeners, read *The Watchtower* and the Bible on their own *to learn*, it was just as important that they meet with them to discuss what they read *to understand*. Ira explained that this was so they could respond to the listener and check what they were learning to make sure they were understanding. Ira concluded, “We have been commissioned as followers of Jesus Christ to go preach [Matthew 28:19]. So, we can’t leave it to books!” Understanding requires a teacher. Vice versa, she explained, “A teacher needs her books to explain tricky subjects.” The textbooks are still required reading to pass a test.

By taking up the question “why placement matters?” in this chapter I will outline how return visits are serial meetings that cultivate a listener’s interests into what I call a “student-teacher relationship.” This focus on media outlines how the responsibilities of evangelism are distributed in return visits between the publisher, the listener, and the responsibilities media are given in cultivating interest. The publishers’ responsibilities lie in being a “teacher” not just a “preacher.” Teaching turns, as Ira emphasized, on the formation of a relationship with a student through educational materials—namely the media of the Teaching Toolbox—and is comprised of a tripartite method of offering instruction, explanation, and proof. The teaching tools, as such, help the teacher give the listener the responsibility of learning to “let the Bible interpret itself” Return visits morph into Bible studies when the listener takes up this responsibility and *asks for further explanation*. I will discuss each of these in turn.

“A preacher proclaims, but a teacher does more”

Central to the “impossibilities” of understanding I laid out in the previous chapter is a clash of evidential strategies and how sources of knowledge are validated. That is, even for the rightly disposed, the publisher’s witness is not authoritative as being from one of Jehovah’s Witnesses. This is why the person-in-the-world can perhaps comprehend something of the content of the message, but they cannot yet understand it as the truth. Witnesses argue that this is because people-in-the-world do not know “things as they really are.” While the witness may not be

immediately authoritative for the listener, they will have curiously engaged some aspect of it. Return visits are meant to cultivate that interest, fleshing out a shared frame that in tandem makes the Witnesses *Jehovah's*—that is, renders them authoritative—and begins to give understanding to the listener.

To further refine the definition of preaching I give in the introduction to this thesis, preaching and teaching can be differentiated. Both concern evangelistic methodology but preaching concerns “making proclamations” (WTBTS 2018b: 671) and teaching concerns the giving of understanding. Proclamations are official, that is to say authoritative, utterances of things as they really are. Hence, Witnesses are *Jehovah's* Witnesses. It is the proclamatory aspect of witnesses given that are un-understandable to the person-in-the-world but that they must respond to in the initial call. The Society outlines the key difference between preaching and teaching as methods, and teaching's central role in return visits, as: “A preacher proclaims, but a teacher does more. He instructs, explains, and offers proof. One way we teach others is by making return visits on interested ones with a view to starting Bible studies with them” (WTBTS 2003b: 8).

Teaching, as such, is based on proclamatory talk both in that it builds on the groundwork established in the initial call but also in that teachers continue using proclamatory talk. Sabir explained to me that a “good teacher always gives a witness.” Meaning that witnesses, as utterances of truth, continue to be important while constructing a shared frame with the listener. But teaching is more than proclamation and includes instruction, explanation, and the offering of proof, all of which prepares the rightly disposed to start studying the Bible with one of Jehovah's Witnesses. I will consider instruction and proof here in turn and return to explanation in the conclusion of this chapter.

Instruction: Knowledge, accountability, and death

My interlocutors argued that their method of instruction is laid out in the Bible in deontological and soteriological terms. “Jehovah is the ‘Grand Instructor’ of his people (Isaiah 30:20), and *those who receive his instruction are under obligation to act in harmony with it*” (WTBTS 2018c: 1208; emphasis added). Instruction, both in the cosmic sense indicated here, and as mediated by Witnesses while teaching, makes one accountable to God for *received* knowledge—in other

words, “understanding.” Giving understanding is therefore a prime responsibility of the teacher, noting that the responsibility to be discerning still applies. The stakes of understanding are high, as failure to live up to the obligation received through instruction results in death.

Death in Witness theology does not mean damnation and hellfire. Death is the eternal cessation of being. Witnesses do not believe the Bible teaches of a “hell” as commonly conceived in other forms of Christianity (ibid.: 1086-87), only a common human “grave.”⁷ Witnesses understand human life to be biological processes created by God and sparked into action by his spirit (e.g., how they understand Genesis 2:7), or what Witnesses sometimes call his “active force.” That is, human life—our very consciousness—started with this spark, powering a beating heart and breathing lungs, and ends when it flickers out. One Witness put it to quite bluntly, “Your consciousness is simply just neurons animated by God’s active force” (see WTBTS 1998b: 49-72). There is no human spirit or soul that preexisted life on earth or survives death, as figured in many Christian theologies, and when one dies, their body returns to the dust from whence it was created. The end is perceived by the dying as infinite black, the loss of consciousness as if asleep (1 Corinthians 15:20).

So, the stakes of accountability for receiving understanding in instruction are grave (quite literally). These consequences form the ethical ground on which the teacher-listener relationship forms. Sabir and Jamilya expounded this relationship by studying Ezekiel 33:1-9 with me. In these verses, God’s voice describes how accountability is allocated in instruction: if a person-in-the-world hears the message and understands it but does not heed it, they are accountable (verses 2-5); if the “watchman” (the publisher) does not preach (in the proclamatory sense discussed above), Jehovah will hold the watchman accountable (6); if the watchman only preaches to people-in-the-world but does not implore or teach them to change their ways, the watchman will be accountable (7-8); but the person who is warned (preached to), understands (was taught), and refuses, will be guilty, but the watchman will have saved their own life (9). Sabir and Jamilya emphasized that because the good news is “lifesaving knowledge” (WTBTS 2018c: 347), one is not only accountable for the understanding one receives through

7 Based on the Hebrew *she’ohl*’ (see WTBTS 2018d: 922). Witness theology understands the “afterlife” in much the same terms as scholarship that views it as an “invention,” rather than having any sort of Jewish ancestry (e.g., Bremmer 2002).

instruction but the instruction one gives with equally serious consequences.⁸ If a Witness passes up an opportunity to preach, Jehovah will “ask his blood back from the watchman” (verse 6). Similarly, if a Witness only preaches but does not teach, again, Jehovah will hold the Witness accountable for the person’s “blood” (verse 8).⁹

This, perhaps, is one reason Witnesses have such expansive discourses on pedagogical method and actively train for instruction. The training I observed on a weekly basis included everything from mastering the content that would be taught to training how to utter truth to be maximally convincing to the listener. The latter included practicing speaking “conversationally” through work on voice and gesture, the use of illustrations in instruction, accurate reading, explaining scripture, use of visual aids and numbers of other metapragmatic categories (WTBTS 2018a). Witnesses contend that Jesus’ teaching was authoritative because it was “logical, thought-provoking, ... and meaningful ... to his listeners,” employing the sorts of aforementioned metapragmatics, but also because of his “intimate relationship with his Father,” because he was keenly aware of the “background and reasoning of others,” and because he taught in their language (WTBTS 2018d: 1071-2). Persuasive instruction relies on wordcraft, yes, but also an intimate personal relationship with Jehovah God and an in-depth knowledge of the language, culture, and psychology of those being taught.

Proof: Accurately understanding the evidence in the Bible

The Bible and Bible literature are central to Witness methodologies of how to develop the listener’s understanding because they offer “proof” for faith in Jehovah and an understanding of things as they really are. “Faith,” writes Paul, “is the assured expectation of things hoped for, the evident demonstration of realities though not beheld” (Hebrews 11:1). Based on this rendering of Pauline epistemology, Watch Tower theology understands faith to be based on “concrete evidence” (WTBTS 2018c: 803-5). That is, evidence in the Bible (and Bible literature) indexes concrete phenomena found in the empirically knowable world, namely the world *qua*

8 As noted in the previous chapter, Sabir was quick to qualify that the majority of people that refuse instruction now do not *really* understand and will have a chance—in better conditions—to receive instruction later (see Conclusion). In other words, people-in-the-world can be considered unaccountable, even if they hear preaching or even receive some teaching. Things change, however, after baptism (see Ch. 5).

9 Witnesses call the negative frame of accountability for preaching and teaching “bloodguilt” (see Ch. 5).

creation, extrabiblical historical and archaeological material, God's providence for his people (both current and Biblical), and the reliability and veracity of the fulfillment of Biblical prophecies. But it also indexes "things as they really are," which includes all of the unseeable aspects of religion (i.e., Witnesses do not claim to see God but understand the Bible as pointing to his existence). The latter also qualifies the former, as seeing things as they really are puts scientific, historical, and archaeological evidence into perspective.

While Witnesses hold that evidence in the Bible is readily available, life in the system of things renders scriptural proof "difficult to understand" (2 Peter 3:16; WTBTS 1957; WTBTS 1974: 338). Consider this opening line of a Public Talk given by Frank, an African-American brother in a congregation in Florida, "The proof in the Bible is obvious. But often people have a hard time understanding what the Bible really says."¹⁰ After the meeting, I turned to Jamilya, who was sitting next to me, and asked her if *she* thought if it was difficult to understand the proof in the Bible. She immediately responded, "No. I think God's word is very simple. It is easy to understand." Upon further discussion, she argued that what made it difficult to understand were "all of the untrue things Satan puts in the world—all of his lies... This makes the truth difficult to understand." Satan's influence in the system of things obscures the indexical connections between the Bible and both the seeable and unseeable world.

However, the Bible can and should be "accurately" understood (Colossians 1:10; WTBTS 1966a). But it can only be understood this way through intensive exegetical work that peels away the misunderstandings inculcated by Satan's system of things, revealing Biblical evidence for what it is: truth. The crux of instruction as the exercise that builds a shared frame in Witness evangelism is the process of relearning how to see evidence by "letting the Bible interpret itself"

10 As I noted in Chapter one, the "Public Talk," or sermon, given on the weekend meeting in the English Group was sometimes a pre-recorded from a congregation in Florida or in Australia.

“Letting the Bible interpret itself”: Hermeneutical reasoning, inscription, and the problem of evidence and authority

Witnesses understand their media as the result of a history of intellectual labor contesting false readings of the Bible and is designed to make correct-understanding of the Bible accessible to the average reader—the listener in the return visit—through the publication of various forms of media. One pamphlet that has been a staple in the Teaching Toolbox since its publication in 2014 describes the centrality of the Society’s hermeneutical reasoning this way,

[Jehovah] foretold that during ‘the time of the end, the true knowledge would become abundant.’ (Daniel 12:4) In 1870 a small group of truth-seekers recognized that many church doctrines were not Scriptural. Therefore, they began searching for an understanding of the Bible’s original teachings, and Jehovah blessed them with spiritual insight... Those earnest Bible Students, our predecessors, pursued a method of study that we still use today. They discussed the Bible subject by subject. When they came across a Bible passage that was difficult to understand, they looked for other verses to explain it. When they arrived at a conclusion that harmonized with the rest of the Scriptures, they wrote it down. By thus letting the Bible interpret itself, they rediscovered the truth about God’s name and Kingdom... Their search set them free from many false beliefs and practices. (WTBTS 2014d: 3)¹¹

Watch Tower media, or the collective writings produced through “reasoning from the scriptures,” is crafted to thoroughly help others study the Bible in the same subject-by-subject way, validating individual aspects of the Bible not against other exegetical work, scholarship or tradition (at least in the first instance) but against itself. In this way, this method of studying the Bible can be thought of as a “self-evidential” hermeneutics (cf. Crapanzano 2000: 75-83).

Du Bois (1986: 322-3) attempts to operationalize the commonsensical notion “self-evident,” as in a proposition that puts the hearer “directly in touch with the evidence,” to instead take on the technical definition that self-evident utterances are those in which the evidence is found in the utterance itself. To build on the discussion of the problem of evidence and authority discussed in the introduction, Du Bois takes religious utterances as inherently self-evident

11 Other publications (e.g., WTBTS 2006a) note that this line of hermeneutical reasoning has deeper roots, noting that the history of comparing “scripture with scripture” comes into the Society via George Storrs, one of the founding figures of the Society. Storrs seems to have derived this style of reasoning from the theological writings of Henry Grew, a pastor in Philadelphia in the early 19th century (see also WTBTS 2013d: 28).

because the utterances do not index anything that he understands as empirically verifiable through the typical evidential strategies in standardized language. That is, Du Bois argues that religious language needs more than grammaticalized evidentiality *because* evidentiality relies primarily on visuality.

The hearer of the religious utterance is always left to take the speaker at their word, because (ostensibly) the only method for validating what was uttered rests in the utterance itself, or perhaps in the speaker's political position. Ilana Mushin (2001: 28-33) points out that the reason Chafe's (1986: 263)—writing in the same edited volume as Du Bois—formulation of evidence that considers utterances of belief is “problematic” is because he strictly understands belief as lacking a definitive source of knowledge, induction being the only “mode of knowing” evidence. I extend Mushin's critique of Chafe to Du Bois' conception of evidence in religious utterance. Knowers of religious knowledge usually claim it has a source.

Further, Dell Hymes (1981: 305-6) calls this sort of self-evidence a “circle of validation” when analyzing “pronouncements” in myth. That is that pronouncements—or “proclamations”—are to be believed because they were uttered by particular individuals in particular social roles. This isn't wrong. But the problem for evangelism is that the authoritativeness of that social role is not yet recognized as such by the addressee: this is the problem of evidence and authority in evangelism.

Mushin (2001: 30) offers a way out, pointing out that religious utterance must have some basis in evidence (in the empirically knowable world). Indeed, religious knowledge is not conjured out of nothing in the evangelistic encounter, just as religious “ideas are not transmitted telepathically” (Keane 2008: 230). Mushin, in her work more generally, argues for an understanding of “evidential strategies,” which includes the strategies speaking communities develop to communicate attitudes towards sources of knowledge.

I argue that teaching generally, and instruction specifically, is the fundamental Witness evidential strategy that aims to convince the listener to let the Bible interpret itself. Instruction makes teaching authoritative through the ways Witnesses use localized linguistic and cultural knowledge, as well as through discerning idiosyncratic feelings beneath the potentially “wrong” content of their addressee's speech and seeing their ethical disposition, to tailor universalized

pedagogical methods to a particular listener. This unfolds slowly over the course of many return visits. But Witness instruction is also made authoritative in that previous Witnesses wrote down what they learned in their subject-by-subject study of the Bible, creating the corpus of media Witnesses use in their teaching that lays bare the connections between the Bible, the empirically observable world, and things as they really are.

The ultimate piece of Watch Tower media is not a “written” text but is the *New World Translation* (NWT) of the Bible. The NWT is a translation of the Bible completed by the Society in 1960 after some 12 years of labor and revision that notably uses “Jehovah” in all instances where the Tetragrammaton appears in the Hebrew scriptures.¹² Interpretative features such as this are meant to clearly attribute authorship of the Bible to God (WTBTS 2015a: 10-11). As Sabir articulated firmly to me when I asked him why I ought to study the Bible using the NWT, whereas I typically use the King James Version in my personal study: “Danny, you know other translations of the Bible remove God’s name? Your King James Bible uses ‘LORD’ instead of Jehovah. And the [Russian] Synodal Bible ‘*Gospod*’”. These translations use other words even though the Hebrew used the Tetragrammaton... JHVH, you know? Jehovah. We need to be specific!” Sabir, as well as other Witnesses I knew, generally emphasized “being specific” in studying the Bible, but in this case, specificity is of paramount importance for Jehovah’s Witnesses, as the “depersonalization” of un-naming God in the scriptures is tantamount to removing him from them entirely (Sabir underscored that Satan’s influence in this regard “should be obvious”). Further, Witnesses argue that the specificity of God’s name helps make the Bible more understandable in general, aside from inherently helping the reader come to know Jehovah better (WTBTS 2006c: 25-26).

But the Society produces more material than the NWT. This “Bible literature”¹³ is understood to be different to the NWT. Foma put it this way, “Bible literature examines the Scriptures and helps one to understand them properly. It quotes the Bible and talks about it. But reading *The Watchtower* cannot replace regular Bible study.” He explained at length how the Bible is difficult

12 Including in the “Greek Scriptures” (The New Testament). The Society argues this is generally accepted as being historically accurate (WTBTS 1985: 278-79), pointing toward biblical scholarship that holds that the writers of the Greek Scriptures likely continued using the Tetragrammaton (e.g., Howard 1977).

13 “Bible Literature” in this sense is both print and digital and can refer to both textual and nontextual materials.

to understand (in the terms discussed above) and that true understanding requires one to study the Bible, subject by subject, in the same way other Witnesses have. To further clarify, Witnesses do not claim that God wrote—or even inspired (like scripture)¹⁴—Watch Tower media. This is such a sticking point because it is easy to collapse the authorial responsibility of the NWT project with other publications like *The Watchtower*. It is for this reason that anthropologists and sociologists have misprized *The Watchtower* and other Watch Tower media as being “quasi-scriptural” (Barchas-Lichtenstein 2013: 166) or “as significant... as the Bible” (Holden 2002: 67). While it is true that Watch Tower media is essential to understanding Bible truth as I have been arguing, Witnesses do not understand it to be holy writ.

A different way Witnesses deal with this problem is to not disclose the authors of any particular piece of literature, both safeguarding the theological point that Jehovah is the author of the Bible and lending Watch Tower media authority. That is, the erasure of authorship institutionalizes the utterances of other, removed, or possibly “detached” Witnesses (Candea et al 2015), making them the utterances of “God’s earthly organization” writ large (but not holy). Institutionalization in this sense both standardizes enregisterment (Agha 2007: 61) and “inscribes” (Ricoeur 1976) commensurate meaning in theocratic language translational processes, as meaning becomes fixed in English,¹⁵ though not immutably so, in various media forms. This shores up Witness language use and sharpens the moral boundaries of the community vis-à-vis the world through a politics of enregisterment (see Ch. 4 on theopolitics). Theocratic language, the reader will remember, is more than just language use, it is the “common or mutual language of the truth” (WTBTS 2018d: 204). The institutionalization and inscription of theocratic language in Watch Tower media is a matter of authorizing particular understandings of the Bible—the Bible as

14 The “spiritual insight” described above is understood to be different to “inspiration” proper. That is, pace Schmalz’s (1994) well intentioned critique of Festingerian analyses of Jehovah’s Witnesses that blur “Biblical prophecy” and Russell’s hermeneutical reasoning, Witnesses do not understand their media (though blessed by Jehovah) to be prophetic (WTBTS 2018c: 1202-07). The primary difference being that “insight” into the Bible is *authored* by humans and therefore open to correction, whereas “inspiration” is text directly authored by God (through human instruments). Watch Tower theology is staunchly “cessationist” and holds that revelation and prophetism ended with the death of the Apostles.

15 In the absence of language universals (Silverstein 2003), Susan Gal (2015: 234) tell us that “dominant languages” can provide an institutionalized method for commensuration in translation. Witnesses argue that this was true of Greek during the time of Jesus’ ministry and that their use of English in “modern times” mirrors that process of using an “international language” for commensurate meaning making across languages in God’s organization (e.g., WTBTS 1953: 230).

it *ought* to be understood. This authority is bound up in the media's responsibility to guide listeners to a correct interpretation of the Bible.

Ricoeur (1976: 26) notes that inscription never can fully capture the context of dialogic interaction. To this point, both the Bible and Bible literature are always limited in that they fundamentally lack the capacity to perceive the context in which they are placed. This is a limitation that applies to any form of inscription, not just writing. Neither the Bible nor Watch Tower media can evaluate how a reader-cum-listener is receiving knowledge. That evaluation is part and parcel of the responsibility of the Witness to discern the educational needs of the listener. Conversely, without the inscribed media, the Witnesses' teaching is not authoritative. Inscribed evidence gives knowledge but not understanding. Without the teacher placing the media—including the Bible—these inscribed forms are not responsible: they are literally unable to respond. The combined responsibilities of teacher and text (or video) give the listener the opportunity, visit by visit, to take up the responsibility of letting the Bible interpret itself.

Structure of the return visit

To show how the responsibilities of the Witness and Watch Tower media depend on one another in giving the listener this responsibility, I will lay out the “structure” of a typical return visit that turns on the placement of media. This structure is not a rigid framework but can be identified in the training materials that cover return visits studied in midweekly meetings, during field service meetings, and at Witness conventions.¹⁶ This framework includes: planning the return visit; framing the visit at the doorstep; reading from the Bible aloud with the listener; instructing through illustration; the placement of Watch Tower media; and framing the next visit. I depict the structure of the return visit to underscore the centrality of media in the teaching that happens during return visits. I will draw on Celina's first return visit as an example of this structure.

¹⁶ That is, one can observe this structure in the training materials. The particular way I have divided up the structure for analysis are my own.

Planning

Before going to Celina's flat, Foma invited me to come over to observe how he and Ira would normally plan a return visit. Quite obviously, my being there seriously distorted what preparation would normally look like: not only because of what we talked about, which I have partially described above, but because of Foma and Ira's familiarity and intimacy. They have been married for 20 years and preaching together for even longer (many Witnesses do field service together as part of their courtship). Moreover, they have been engaged in fulltime service for the majority of that time and preaching and teaching together is a fundamental part of their relationship. As such, their presentation of "preparation" for Celina's return visit was just that: a presentation. This was because, as Ira put it with a laugh, "We've been doing service together for so long we sometimes don't even need to say anything to know what the other is thinking. One mind, one heart."

Embedded in the broader context of Ira's response and her and Foma's relationship is Jehovah. That is to say, a major part of planning return visits—much as preaching and teaching more generally—is prayer, meditation, and the mediation of Jehovah through his spirit and through angels. For example, finding Celina—a rightly disposed Christian—instead of Vikram was not happenstance but was Jehovah working through his instruments. Similarly, meeting Meera in the first return visit instead of meeting Celina's boyfriend, was a sign of Jehovah's intervention yet again guiding their preaching work.

Despite the difficulties of ethnographically describing planning and the ways that relationships and Jehovah play into preparation, how planning for return visits is written about across dozens of Watch Tower publications (published as far back as the 1970s) is instructive of how Witnesses practically approach preparation. Most of what is written homes in on ascertaining what media is to be placed, as with the copy of *The Watchtower* Foma and Ira based Celina's visit around, or on utilizing "information featured in the magazine the person already has" to orient the visit (WTBTS 2008c: 4).

Recognizing what media will be placed or has already been placed is essential to planning because that media forms the conceptual backbone for the visit, connects separate visits together, and, through both text and image, invites the reader to "seek further explanation" (see below)

from the publisher during future return visits. All of these points are drawn together in the idea that the placed media is explicitly positioned to be cited and referenced by both publisher and listener during return visits (and beyond). In other words, the publishers will instruct by reading from the Bible and media they have placed that discusses the topic at hand—but frequently, the verses in the Bible that will be read during the visit appear in the placed media itself. This is not because visits are somehow rote but is indicative of the self-evidential hermeneutics I described above. The media will be left with the listener and they can interrogate it on their own terms and in their own time, beginning the subject-by-subject study of the Bible, and reference the placed media when asking the publisher for explanations in future visits. The placement of literature therefore forms the basis for the “citational practice” (Goodman, Tomlinson, and Richland 2014: 455) upon which the transmission of knowledge in Witness evangelism turns.

The Society designs these media with citational practices in mind, attending specifically to the ways that print media will engage the ecologies of digital media on the ground, and vice versa, creating connections between modalities of media Madianou and Miller (2012) call “polymedia.” For example, all print media have QR codes on them that invite readers to collapse the print and digital into a conglomerated form of media by calling forth (nearly endless) varieties of content on jw.org through the lens of the camera on their phone. Further, images dominate these materials in both their print and digital iterations. The Witness graphic designers—Sabir among them—and the committees in the worldwide headquarters in New York that decide both the subject matter and positioning of these images do so in a way that Sabir told me, “Makes the text come alive for the reader and invites them to consider the Bible’s message more deeply.”

Frequently, as noted by Joseph Webster (2022), these images pair with text to connect visions of eschatological violence with the lived realities of everyday life (natural disasters, crime, violence, pandemics, and so on) and are meant to communicate (with apocalyptic urgency!) the rapid advance of Armageddon. Images, as such, are meant to be combined with text and the words of the Witness to give a maximal semiotic oeuvre to stimulate the listener’s curiosity. Videos as an audiovisual experience intensify this by making images move and adding sonic

depth. What I learned from Sabir's experience serving as a graphic designer¹⁷ is that design features, including QR codes and images, are part and parcel of the way that Kingdom media are meant to elicit responses from listeners both during and in between return visits. In other words, these features—by design—make media responsible for helping create these connections for the reader.

Another important aspect of planning, and one that dictates the choice of *what* literature is placed, is assessing how the publishers will “cultivate interest” specifically in relation to that literature (WTBTS 1992b). If part of the discerning work of the initial call was to identify and notate a listener's interests as the points of alignment that will act as ways to breach the boundaries between theocratic and worldly frames and languages, cultivation is the “labor, care, or study” (ibid.) that publishers need to put into their instruction in return visits to tear down more of these boundaries for the listener. For example, consider the justification Foma gave for why they would place that particular issue of *The Watchtower*: “Celina is a Christian. Telling someone who doesn't believe in God that God's name is Jehovah is much less likely to arouse interest than it would in someone who already believes in God.” In other words, Celina's “being Christian” was the interest that could be cultivated by teaching her the name of God. This is particularly important because many of the MUK students were not Christian and the tourists in Bishkek were likely to be nominally Christian at best. Alternatively, a Muslim could negatively react to such a proclamation. Cultivating interest is achieved by attending to the small details of the interactions on doorsteps, such as noting a cross worn, and is maximized in return visits as the publishers carefully select either which media, or even which parts of media, will be used to teach and will be placed with the listener.

While in Celina's case preparation was relatively straightforward for Foma and Ira, Sabir and Jamilya told me that not every return visit was so easy to prepare for. “Sometimes,” Jamilya told me, “People will have serious problems or have questions that are very difficult to answer.” She recounted how in these instances—especially when they had already been at the door talking for more than a few minutes—she found it favorable to promise to research these questions or

17 Witnesses do not use this term *per se*. Sabir, who worked in Bethel since the late 90s, described his work as “universalization,” consisting primarily of producing the layout design and typesetting for Russian and, eventually, Kyrgyz publications.

to think on a person's situation and to come back some other time to answer them. "This gives me time to find the right articles in our magazines and Bible passages to help the person." This, however, takes time outside of the visit, requiring the publisher to research answers for the listener. This technique of identifying media to place through study and care is not restricted to return visits and is frequently used in Bible studies as well. I remember how during Sabir and Jamilya's Bible studies with my family how Sabir, biting his lower lip with a sharp intake of air, would say, "Ooo, Danny. I don't know the answer to that question—let me research it and we'll discuss it next time." In any case, the selected media would come to structure at least that visit, and usually several consecutive visits as well.

Frame visit

Framing the visit consists of how to resume the interaction that began in the initial call. This is often where the distribution of media is used as a justification for the meeting. But the framing also serves to set up the rest of the visit. Because of the architecture of "doorsteps" in the stairwell of the Soviet-style apartment block where Celina lived, Foma's framing of her return visit took place in two parts. First, outside talking through the *domaphone* to Celina, Foma told her that we had a magazine for her. Second, in the entryway, after introducing us to Meera, Foma began his presentation: "... not everyone believes [in God] in the same way. Does it matter that we know God? What do you think?" This proclamation-question combination directly references the first article in *The Watchtower* Ira had tucked in her bag for Celina and Meera. This media was selected because Foma and Ira thought it corresponded to her interests as a Christian and would therefore be likely something she could respond to. Further, just as we planned beforehand, this framing question puts the visit on a trajectory to placing the magazine with her. Very often, as in this case, the framing for the visit will be lifted directly from the media being placed, as the questions Foma gave were almost word-for-word taken from *The Watchtower* (see WTBTS 2019g: 3).

Read Bible verse

After asking the framing question, "Does it matter that we know God?" Celina gave a simple answer, "Of course, it matters." Foma then said, "Yes, it matters very much. The Bible answers

this question in John 17:3. Would you mind reading this for us?” The verse, like the question, was drawn directly from the magazine. Ira had Meera read the verse from the Bible on her tablet.

This framework, of asking a question then having the Bible “answer it,” is a cornerstone in Watch Tower pedagogy. It is visible in every publication, is a feature of the way they study during meetings in the Kingdom Hall, and can be heard in the videos the Society produces. It is also how Witnesses begin to slowly teach the listener that the Bible is an authoritative form of proof. Specifically, as evidence, it is *The Bible* that “answers” questions posed by the publisher. This puts the listener into dialogue with the Bible, giving the Bible the responsibility to answer the question. After Meera read the verse, Foma reiterated the question he had framed the visit with, asking, “So, why is it important that we know God?” Restating the question in this way urges the listener to look for an answer in the verse that was just read, continuing the dialogue. In response to the question, Celina who read along with Meera, answered immediately, “To have everlasting life.”¹⁸

If Celina had given some other answer to the question, the publisher’s responsibility is to disattend the “wrongness,” and point the listener back to the text. I would test this with Sabir when we would read the Bible together. He would introduce a verse with a question, we would read it, and I would purposely give an incorrect answer. Rather than focus on the content of my incorrect answer, he would reread some part of the verse and move the conversation along, usually revisiting that material in a future visit.

While my analysis above underscores the importance of Bible literature, having the listener read from the Bible *aloud* is considered to be the most important aspect of instruction in return visits. Indeed, reading the Bible aloud is central in Bible studies, as well as for regular publishers in congregational life or for “family worship” at home (WTBTS 2018d: 713-4; Revelations 1:3). Witnesses understand the utterance of scripture, more so than silent recitation, to be critical in gaining understanding. This is related to Sabir’s focus on specificity. Indeed, many times during our studies, he or Jamilya would point to a Bible verse, and I would briefly skim it,

18 As an aside, this also is how listeners learn the lexical register of theocratic language. Most English translations of John 17:3 use the phrase “eternal life” not “everlasting life.”

before attempting to respond, to which Sabir would respond, “No! Read the verse!” Reading aloud—especially them having *me* read the verse aloud—forced me to go slowly and trained my focus. This, combined with the questions given by the Witness bracketing the reading of the verse, focuses the listener on the text in a way that, as Sabir put it, “Let’s the Bible speak for itself.” It is through this sort of Bible reading on doorsteps that the Witness offers the Bible as proof and begins to remap evidential strategies.

Instruction

Instruction helps the listener learn to recognize the Bible as proof. It does so by attempting to make meaningful the answer given by the Bible through the publisher’s localized knowledge and their evaluation of listener’s interests and disposition. One of the most common ways of doing this recommended in Watch Tower training materials is through offering an “illustration.” Foma made an illustration immediately after Celina answered the restated framing question. He said, “That’s right. But we can’t just know that there is a God, we have to come to know him.” Foma paused for a moment, then continued, “if you just know a person’s name does that mean you’re their friend?” When Celina said no, Foma then asked them, “What do you need to know to be someone’s friend?” They then briefly discussed what a person needs to know about someone to be their friend.

Foma and Ira later explained that they had used this same illustration many times precisely because, as Ira told me, “Friendship is something everyone can understand, even a child.” Foma showed me a note he had in his phone that was a list of his favorite illustrations in Russian—his project was translating them all into English. Having illustrations prepared beforehand is important, he explained, to make sure that the publisher is ready to help a listener understand the Bible. Amplifying this responsibility to prepare illustrations beforehand was the fact that Foma and Ira were preaching in English, a language they were still very much in the throes of learning. Further, many of the illustrations he showed me in his note, as well as the many illustrations I witnessed given during meetings in the Kingdom Hall or heard in conversations with other publishers, are tooled to reference common experiences a person-in-the-world would understand. For this reason, illustrations are the heart of instruction. They are attempts to get around the impossibilities of understanding, to build a common frame based on the text read

in the Bible. Ira said, “Illustrations are supposed to make you think deeper about what the Bible said.”

Foma explained that the friendship illustration was meant to help Celina think more deeply about the verse, which told her why it was important to know God. That is, he said, to help her start to reflect on the question, “How well *do* I know God?” Illustrations in this way are used to connect ideas together. In response to Celina and Meera’s example of what it takes to be someone’s friend, Foma said, “Yes. This is true. So, to have everlasting life we need to know God in this way—we must know what God likes and hates, who God is. We need to know these things. I want to give you this one short magazine that has some Bible verses in it that can help us learn these things.” Ira produced the issue of *The Watchtower* out of her bag and handed it to Celina. Foma then had them read a paragraph titled “What is God’s name?” that explained that the Bible tells us that his name is “Jehovah.” The answer to the question Foma’s illustration posed was in *The Watchtower*.

Place media

Foma set up his illustration as a way to move directly into the text of *The Watchtower*. Whereas placing media in the initial call may only involve the piece of media—a tract, for example—media placement in return visits follows this sort of movement from reading in the Bible to reading Bible literature. This is to center the Bible as the text under discussion and to emphasize the ways that Bible literature points back to the Bible, rather than making Watch Tower media the focus of attention.

This is a perpetual concern in Witness evangelism. For example, during a talk at a regional convention during the late summer of 2018 that gathered half of the Russian-speaking congregations in Bishkek (as well as the English Group), one speaker noted that while placing literature is of great importance, “conversing with people” is more important. The point he was making was that it is easy to become distracted by placing Bible literature, rather than focusing on the person with whom the literature is being placed. He said, “Remember to ask yourself why you are giving the tract or showing the video in the first place!” This ties back into the planning and preparation for the return visit: planning requires thinking not only about how the Bible literature might cultivate interest, but how to develop a conversation with the person about the

subject being studied. Because the literature is meant to be cited, it then is the node that draws out this conversation across multiple visitations.

The actual “placement” of the media refers to the way it is contextualized for the listener. Foma and Ira did this by reading with Celina and Meera directly from *The Watchtower*. Other possibilities may include explaining how the text functions as an object for study. Most commonly this involves pointing out the pervasive question/answer structure of paragraphs found in most text-based Watch Tower media. Understanding how the media as an object functions is critical for it to be meaningfully engaged outside the visit and helps the listener prepare for there to be a *next* return visit.

Frame next visit

The Watchtower did this on Celina’s doorstep as Foma pointed out how the article continued the topic they were discussing and said, “Next time we can answer the question, ‘Why God’s name matters?’” This framing of the next visit connects the future meeting to the current visit, leaving an unanswered question to respond to next time. Ira pointed out later that placing questions alongside the literature is also meant to “make people think after we leave.” But, importantly, the placement of Bible literature that will help the listener find the answer to the framing question for next time provides a justification for another meeting. Media is responsible for tying together meetings in a way that will help cultivate interest towards the listener becoming a Bible student.

Media responsibility, human accountability

Of course, return visits are rarely so neat as I have described here. However, the general notions of planning, framing, and the movement from reading in the Bible to instruction to placing Bible literature is common enough to be recognizable across visits, not to mention is much more easily identified in the much less messy way return visits are depicted in Watch Tower literature and drilled during roleplays in the Kingdom Hall. What is particularly important, however, is that breaking down return visits reveals how the placement of Watch Tower media distributes responsibility in return visits.

A focus on the media in Watch Tower preaching methodology is revealing because it puts in stark contrast the responsibilities the Bible, Witnesses, and the listener take in return visits. As can be seen in the planning of return visits, Watch Tower media is responsible for helping the Witness to know how to structure the visit and give them a range of Bible verses relevant to the subject being taught. But more than being responsible for structuring the visit, Witnesses understand media to be responding in the interaction. That is, the Bible, via Bible literature, is figured as “answering questions.”

“Let’s see what *The Watchtower* says,” the prelude to the utterance, “We see the Bible says...” was Sabir’s constant refrain while he was teaching me. Indeed, I was hard pressed to ever get Sabir to take his own stance on anything, and he would near constantly cite Bible literature, through which, he would point to the Bible. The Bible, as Jehovah’s literal words, and Bible literature, as inscribed and institutionalized hermeneutical reasoning, are thusly designed and produced to be part of the conversation in return visits. One humorous example of this is a video on jw.org that anthropomorphically portrays the perspective of a literature cart, who in a song reminiscent of Broadway, proclaims to the viewer: “If you could see what I see!”¹⁹ In particular the cart sings, “If you could hear what I hear / When [the people] see things they’ve never had a chance to see.” While the song is obviously meant to be taken in jest, Witnesses do understand their media to be imbued with the responsibility of bringing people to understand things they “never had a chance to see” by (quite literally) “answering their questions,” as Sabir would say.

The Watchtower, however, not only answers questions for listeners, but it also asks its own questions. In my meetings with Sabir and Jamilya, just as I saw in the visit to Celina, their questions were indistinguishable from the ones being asked by the literature I was given. Ultimately, because the media asking the questions was citing the Bible, and the Bible is God’s inscribed words, by answering the questions, they understood me as responding to Jehovah. Indeed, by avoiding my questions about his own stance, Sabir was maintaining the integrity of what could be seen as a chain of reported speech linking Watch Tower media (via the publisher)

19 Literature carts, or “public witnessing carts,” are carts used in public witnessing. See: <https://www.jw.org/en/library/music-songs/original-songs/if-you-could-see-what-i-see/?content=video>.

to Jehovah. It was very clear, therefore, that I was meant to respond. The questions given by Bible literature are not rhetorical: they are designed to elicit a response from the listener. Answering the questions is the metric by which Witnesses can begin to evaluate not just the *way* listeners respond, but *what* they are saying as well. This assessment of the transmission of knowledge in teaching gives responsibilities to both the listener (i.e., to respond in turn) and to the publisher (i.e., to evaluate the responses). The placed media pushes the interaction forward into the future, connecting together subsequent return visits as part of one, larger educational interaction.

This is to say that the placement of media works to point the listener back to verses in the Bible after the visit.²⁰ Foma put it this way: “People don’t know the Bible that well and will easily forget what we read to them, Bible literature helps the person to recall what was said and to help them find the verses we read to them.” The media, both because it contains the citations from the Bible referenced during the visit, and because those verses are sometimes even reproduced in the media itself, help draw the listener’s attention to particular parts of the Bible, cultivating interest in those aspects of the truth. But more than this, the media both textually and visually (and sonically, in the case of audiovisual materials) continues the work of creating evidential connections between what the listener reads in the Bible and “things as they really are,” beginning with phenomena in the system of things with which the listener is familiar.

Witnesses argue that it is especially the imagery in Watch Tower media that does the heavy lifting in connecting Bible evidence to “real-world” phenomena. Yes, text is emphasized in drawing out explanations, but my interlocutors contended that the images in *The Watchtower*, *Awake!*, and in their tracts are poignant touchstones connecting experiences people have in the system of things to the way things actually are, as described in the Bible. These images are not just depictions of the apocalypse. Indeed, I found more frequently in my fieldwork that publishers pointed to the many images of transcendent beauty, harmony, and love—of peace—that are replete in Watch Tower media. The publishers would use these “encouraging images,” as Sabir put it, to show right-relations not only as they are expected to be in the New World but as they are *now* in Kingdom Halls around the world. I often heard publishers, pointing to the images

20 Compare to what Goffman calls the “backward reach” of responses (Goffman 1981: 42; cf 1974: 503-6).

in *The Watchtower* or in videos, tell their listeners just “how beautiful” paradise will be. Indeed, smiles and happiness seem to shine more brightly from the images in Watch Tower media than the horrors of the imminent apocalypse. My interlocutors understood this hopeful imagery to be even more evocative (and therefore capable of giving the listener responsibility) than depictions of violence (though those certainly exist in Watch Tower media), asking the listener to respond: “Why are they so happy?” and “How do I obtain that peace?” This responsibility is baked into how Witnesses create their media. Even the cart sings, “I’m *designed to catch their eye*.”²¹

Media, as such, is responsible for eliciting responses from the listener. By calling the invitation I found on the bench “just litter,” Foma was telling me that *that* particular media could not be responsible. The media was figured as being incapable of doing the work it needed to do *without* what might be thought of as the “activating work” of placement. What I mean is that the problem with leaving the invitation on the bench was not that the invitation was left to do work on its own, but it is precisely how and *where* it was left that mattered. Ira put it this way as we sat on that bench in the courtyard of Celina’s apartment block, “If I came by this bench earlier and put an invitation on it, and then you came now and picked it up, how would I ever know *you* picked it up and *where* to find you?” Placed media, as such, can be understood as part of what Irvine (1996: 142-6) calls the “deictic field,” as the media has a pronomial quality. Or, just as with pronouns, without context the evidence in the Bible and Bible literature are empty signifiers. That is, following Irvine’s Benvenistian claim that the speaking *I* and *You* is constitutive of subjectivity in a particular field of deixis, the deictics of placement make Bible literature the agent of Jehovah’s word the Bible.²²

The Bible, via Bible literature, therefore, is understood as connecting people to Jehovah. But these inscribed forms are latent connections, waiting to be made active during the evangelistic interaction. Further, these connections can only be activated during the return visit, since the

21 To be fair, the design of imagery on literature carts is meant to draw people-in-the-world into an initial call in the public setting, but I imagine were the Society to create a variant of the video that featured a singing copy of *The Watchtower*, the magazine might descant about its design in similar fashion.

22 I use agent here in Laidlaw’s (2013: 194-6) sense of agency as the relational processes that distribute responsibility. Others have pointed out that deixis can index nonhuman entities, whether or not they speak (e.g., Urban 1989: 29). Further still, evidence—such as the Bible and Bible literature are figured to be—is often considered in terms of deixis (Hanks 2014; Mushin 2001).

purpose of evangelism is to fully establish connection between individual people and God.²³ Place, namely people's doorsteps, is what makes connections latent and full of potential. Placement, or the Witness being at the doorstep doing the placing, is what makes the media responsible. With the media in place, all other parties become able to respond in the interaction as well—including Jehovah's spirit and angels. Remember, in Foma and Ira's eyes it was divine influence that was responsible for finding Celina and Meera in the first place. Responsibility in Witness evangelism is given and taken in place and face to face.

As I described above, for Witnesses this is because instruction is the evaluative work that changes the transmission of knowledge into the transmission of understanding. That is, the listener can only respond to the knowledge contained in Watch Tower media (and, accordingly, in the Bible passages cited) if there is someone there evaluating the response, checking that the understanding is in fact *understood*. This is done through a combination of reading passages in the Bible and Watch Tower media, asking questions, giving witnesses, and asking increasingly granular questions to ascertain the felicitous communication of the knowledge.

Instruction, as the point where the rubber of placing media meets the road of the interaction, allocates accountability to the publisher and gives the listener the possibility to become accountable. For the Witness, this is accountability to Jehovah in his role as “the Grand Instructor,” is for their localized role as teacher—the accountability they took on at dedication and baptism (see Ch. 5). Witnesses will be held to account for their preaching and teaching work. Did the publishers—the watchmen Sabir pointed to in Ezekiel—both warn (preach) and implore (teach)? Did they make return visits? Did they do so sufficiently, zealously, and with love? Did they fulfill their responsibilities to discern and instruct? This instruction gives listeners, as yet unaccountable, the opportunity to become accountable.

This points to another major difference between responsibility and accountability in Witness evangelism. While every link on the chain of communication from God to the listener is responsible for something, including material objects and divine entities, only the publisher and the listener can be considered as (becoming) accountable to God. To wit, only human subjects are

23 Hence, seemingly “one off” initial calls are understood as “planting seeds” that lie dormant until some future return visit.

accountable to God.²⁴ The Bible cannot be held to account in the same way evidence cannot be held accountable in a court of law. In Western legal praxis, one responsibility of evidence is to be “reliable,” but those involved in procuring the evidence are accountable for it (Philips 1993). While Watch Tower media itself cannot be held to account, as it is only the inscribed words of other Witnesses, the Witnesses who were involved in the creation of these media are accountable for it.

The creation of media as what I will call “circulatable witnesses” (see Ch. 5), is considered in a positive frame of accountability. For example, during the many years Sabir was involved with the graphic design and typesetting of *The Watchtower* and other publications, he did not often preach or teach for want of time. Does that make him an unfaithful watchman on the tower? I put the question to him as we studied those verses in the Ezekiel, asking him about his service in Bethel and the fact that he did not get to “share in the field service” as often as if he was preaching fulltime. His response was that helping to create the Bible literature used by publishers all over Kyrgyzstan, and other places where Kyrgyz-language literature was needed, was just as important. That is, he chose to take a different set of responsibilities (at that time) than those of preaching and teaching describe here, but that these responsibilities can be counted as evangelism all the same.

“The humble ones ask for further explanation”: Accepting the authority of God’s teachers

To conclude this chapter, I return to “explanation,” the third aspect of teaching mentioned above alongside “instruction” and “proof.” One Watch Tower source discusses Jesus’ use of “illustrations” in his instruction as having “moved the humble ones to ask for *further explanation*; the proud refused to do so” (WTBTS 1971: 814; emphasis added). I use “explanation” as a heuristic²⁵ for understanding how Witnesses consider instruction to be rooted in “association” with those who already understand (WTBTS 2018d: 1140) and is therefore based in the habitu-

24 This is nuanced, as Witnesses understand the Bible to teach that angels, demons, and Satan are held to account as well (e.g., Jude 1:6; WTBTS 2018c: 106-8). I take up this nuance in part in chapter 5.

25 That is, “explanation” is not a theocratic language term like “instruction.”

ation of particular relationships (WTBTS 1950). This is, on the one hand, the teacher's relationship to the Grand Instructor, God, habituated through continually teaching and training for the teaching work. On the other hand, this is the relationship cultivated between student and teacher, as the listener's interests are cultivated towards a shared frame of things as they really are.

"The humble ones" who asked Jesus for more explanation are none other than the rightly disposed. "Let the one who has ears listen" (Matthew 13:9) is not a foreordination—a theological concept that turns on there being some sort of pre-human, spiritual existence—but a submissiveness cultivated before the point of the initial call that enables the person to listen. This "humility" enables the rightly disposed to seek out publishers for explanation when they engage the imagery and text of Watch Tower media. These interests are cultivated by publishers until the listener is "moved" to "ask for further explanation."

Asking for explanation begins to ossify the teacher-student relationship, as it is understood as implicitly meaning that the listener accepts the publisher's teaching as authoritative. To recall the problem of authority and evidence, evangelism rests on the evidential strategies evangelists develop to communicate authority across linguistic, cultural, and religious boundaries. Through what I have presented in this chapter, I argue that instruction and the placement of media in return visits are how authority is communicated in Witness evangelism. Just as with Jesus, Witnesses understand that as listeners come to see publishers as teachers, they will ask them for explanation; the onus to study the Bible—and ultimately to convert—is on the listener. Return visits, as such, are always aimed at initiating Bible studies, turning listeners into students. But the *kairos* for *when* the transition to Bible studies should happen is based in the listener taking the responsibility of *asking for further explanation*.

Chapter 4

BIBLE STUDIES

“Overturning strongly entrenched things”: An introduction to Bible studies

The previous chapter explored how teaching—as the distribution of responsibilities through placing literature, pedagogical instruction, and explanation as the creation of a teacher-student relationship—is geared towards giving understanding. Understanding comes as the listener takes more responsibility during return visits through engaging both the Witnesses and, importantly, the texts Witnesses place, foremost among which being the *New World Translation* of the Bible. However, asking for explanation is the first *act* a listener can make that demonstrates they are beginning to understand; it is the first step towards becoming accountable to God. Accordingly, listeners become Bible students when they begin to act (that is to say, *respond*) on the understanding they are given through instruction. This pedagogical process—instruc-

tion, explanation, and responding to evidence—continues throughout one’s Bible studies and towards baptism.

The acquisition of “true,” “Bible-based,” or “divine” knowledge and understanding constitutes part of the “divine education” (WTBTS 2009b) or “theocratic education”¹ received through Bible studies and the “association” of explanation and instruction in the teacher-student relationship. Witnesses call this process “making disciples.” But these are intensely difficult, heart-rending, and laborious processes that uproot the “-in-the-world” part of the person. Just as the Battle at Armageddon will clear the present system of things off the face of the earth to make room for a new system, this education is meant to obliterate the world in the person. As such, just like Armageddon, this education is sometimes conceived in Watch Tower literature as being “spiritual warfare.”

The NWT rendering of 2 Corinthians 10:4-5 (emphasis added) reads,

“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not wage warfare according to what we are in the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly, but powerful by God for *overturning strongly entrenched things*. For we are overturning reasonings and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are bringing every thought into captivity to make it obedient to the Christ.”

What is interesting here is less the militaristic illustration and more the notion of “overturning strongly entrenched things,” which is the purpose of theocratic education (WTBTS 2009b: 22). But what *things* are strongly entrenched? Humans, the world over, are bound up in and held captive by “tradition” and “the elementary *things* of the world” (Colossians 2:8). These elementary things are both the material elements that make up the system of things as well as the philosophies and ideologies that undergird them. “Entrenched” is understood as referencing the processes by which the elements of the system come into the very being of individual humans, perhaps something like “socialization” in the social sciences.

1 This should not be confused with the “theocratic education” received at specialized “schools”—what might be thought of the Witness equivalent to seminaries—for Witnesses who are taking on fulltime service, such as “Pioneer Service School,” or the even more specialized “School for Kingdom Evangelizers,” which take place at the local level, and “Watchtower Bible School of Gilead,” which is the premier Witness theocratic education, course given upon invitation at the Witnesses’ educational campus in Patterson, New York. Instead, theocratic education in the sense that I am using it here refers, most basically, to the training Witnesses do during midweekly meetings in the Kingdom Hall (see WTBTS 2001).

But, in the Bible, Paul argues that—no matter how strongly entrenched these things are—there is a way out. He writes, “And stop being molded by this system of things but be transformed by *making your mind over*” (Romans 12:2). Witnesses understand that the transformations of overturning strongly entrenched things not only concern visible virtuous changes (stopping “immoral conduct” or “unwholesome speech”) that the teacher can observe, but interior ethical changes in the mind, including human “thinking faculties” and “our mental inclination, attitude, and power of reason” (WTBTS 2013c: 19). But while “the mind” refers to psychological and neurological processes (remember, humans do not have a spirit, “just neurons”), and while Witnesses do often talk about people “changing their mind,” Witnesses’ theory of mind is certainly embodied as understanding gained through the Bible should be made into “useful habits.”

Theocratic education breaks down this embodiment and reveals it for what “it really is,” taking the preconscious things of the world and making them conscious, reforming the desires of the heart. While reading the Bible is necessary to overturn strongly entrenched things because it provides the moral impetus to makeover minds and is the ultimate source of truth, it is insufficient for theocratic education to be effective because the student must put to work the things they read in order for their learning to be “made powerful by God.” This is not to downplay the central importance of studying the Bible, but to say that the reading of scripture must be accompanied by the student taking seriously the responsibilities outlined therein through action (often termed “application”). Nor should it lessen the way that knowledge gained through (rigorous) study of the Bible is the egg from which future accountability hatches. Jehovah’s Witnesses certainly emphasize knowledge acquisition through studying the text of the Bible through Bible literature, as I have just described, but simply reading the Bible together with Witnesses is *not* the aim of Bible studies. Foma gave it to me this way (and I have heard it the same way from numerous others), “Danny, you can’t just read the Bible without applying its instruction.” Foma means that study and application must be concurrent in theocratic education. I think of this simultaneous reading and application of Bible study as “lived hermeneutics.”²

2 This is perhaps comparable to Augustine’s “participation,” which links together divinity and (particular) human beings through “divinization” (see Hill 2016: 38; cf WTBTS 2018c: 639).

As such, outlining the actual textual encounter is of little interest, as it would largely repeat ground covered in the previous chapter: Bible studies turn on the same sort of distribution of responsibilities among media, teachers, and students/listeners. Just as in return visits, Watch Tower texts are responsible for letting the Bible interpret itself, which it does through the asking and answering of questions, teachers are responsible for instruction and placement—though this expands in practical ways—and students are responsible for asking for explanation and submitting to the instruction given. But the study itself is also less noteworthy because it seems that the real ethical action happens parallel to the student’s text-based knowledge acquisition. What is interesting is the way that through conducting Bible studies Witnesses start to make the student aware of new responsibilities and how responding (or not) to the calls made in the Bible (through Watch Tower media) make the student accountable to Jehovah and, in turn, how accountability is used to coax the student into taking up more responsibilities.

There are many ways the new responsibilities students are meant to take on in Bible studies could be explored. That is to say, the ways the “-in-the-world” is drawn out of a person are manifold, from redefining the responsibilities one has to people-*still*-in-the-world (e.g., avoiding “bad associations”) or to taking up new responsibilities in the congregation (e.g., attending multiple meetings a week), and much more. In this chapter I will focus on one aspect of theocratic education: the ways that the student learns to respond to the world along an ethical paradigm Witnesses call “Christian neutrality.”

The responsibilities of Christian neutrality are critical for the student to learn and put into practice because “maintaining neutrality” is the ethical and political ground for how Witnesses’ understand they can persuade without coercion and convince without pressure during Bible studies. That is, fundamental to understanding Witnesses’ conceptions of Bible studies—and evangelism more generally—is the idea that in order to truly overturn strongly entrenched things, the publisher can in no wise be part of the political structures in the system of things. This draws on their ethics of persuasion. Witnesses argue that “subjecting” oneself to the Kingdom of God must be not only voluntary but “informed,” whereas the political structures in the system of things (i.e., governments, states, kingdoms, as so on) are understood to be foisted on people whether they like it or not, and whether they understand it or not. Thus, to not be coercive

during Bible studies Witnesses avoid “mixed messages” (Scott and Griffiths 2005) by maintain their “Christian neutrality.” However, recalling Ira’s statement that “you must preach to actually understand the ministry,” and because to be a Witness is to be accountable for evangelism, Witnesses understand that of the many responsibilities a Bible student must take up, starting to preach is the most important. This requires Witnesses to help the student to take up preaching as the means of submitting to the Kingdom and therefore uprooting politics entrenched by the system of things as they become an “unbaptized publisher.”

This chapter will specifically make the connection between the theology underpinning neutrality and the uptake of evangelism by the student through exploring the story of Matt, an MUK medical student from Lahore, and how he became an unbaptized publisher through his Bible studies with Dima. To make the full impact of this change legible, I will lay out how Witness conceptions of sovereignty intersect with their problematizations of coercion in evangelism as they attempt to avoid any possibility of mixed messages. As a case study of the constraints of being a Kingdom evangelizer, I will lay out the history of how Jehovah’s Witnesses began preaching in Kyrgyzstan and show the ways “evangelization” can be considered different from “missionization,” despite the ubiquitous conflation of “missions” and “evangelism” in anthropological literature. I will then describe how Matt’s learning to master the responsibilities of neutrality inverts the way that being a listener was predicated on responsibility without accountability, as the unbaptized publisher is becoming accountable without fully being able to live out the responsibilities of neutrality as they are still in process of overturning strongly entrenched things.

Matt publishing in the Kingdom Hall

Matt was a third-year medical student at MUK from Lahore. While there were many other “students” who periodically came during my time in Bishkek, he was the only Bible student in the English group who was considered to be “progressing.” I first met Matt by sitting next to him in the Kingdom Hall. After the meeting we rode the same bus back towards the center of Bishkek. As we rode along, I asked him if Matt was his “real name,” or if he had some other name.

Matt said, “Yes, my name is Matthew, like the Bible. You see, my family is Christian, coming from Pakistan—in my country your name says a lot about you, and I have a Christian name.” Our conversation turned to his Christian upbringing and his choice to become a physician, including the choice to do the medical program at MUK (rather than a program in Pakistan or somewhere else). He said that his move to Bishkek was unsettling and that he had a difficult time adjusting, especially since he couldn’t find a church to attend. There was some impetus to do this, Matt said, because his parents were constantly asking if he was going to church. Before he found one, Sabir and Jamilya found him, and after he told them that he was searching for a church to go to, they invited him to the Kingdom Hall. Matt then became a regular at weekend meetings in the English Group.

That was only weeks after Matt arrived in Bishkek, so the majority of his time in the city had also been spent attending weekly meetings at the Kingdom Hall and studying the Bible on and off again, at first with Sabir and Jamilya and later with Dima, a brother in his early thirties who served fulltime in Bethel, and the youngest elder in the congregation. During the course of my time in the English Group, Matt became increasingly active in the meetings, and began to more regularly study the Bible with Dima, usually right after the weekend meeting, either in the emptying Kingdom Hall or in Dima’s office in the adjacent Branch Office complex. Matt’s activity in the meetings reflected not only his increased study with Dima, but his own study of *The Watchtower* in preparation for weekly meetings, as his commentary during *The Watchtower* study increased in both frequency and depth. This paralleled a broader change in Matt. When I first met him, Matt’s interest in attending the Kingdom Hall was simply to fill the void where his church in Lahore used to be, and to assuage his parents’ worries for his “spiritual health.” Months later, however, I asked Matt what he would do when he moved back to Lahore—would he continue meeting with Jehovah’s Witnesses, or go back to his old church? He said he planned to continue.

One Sunday almost seven months after I met him, Matt, Dima, and I were sitting at the back of the Kingdom Hall chatting before the meeting, when Jamilya turned up with three Pakistani medical students. Matt, despite being mid-sentence, immediately stood up and walked over to the other students, halting our conversation. Dima and I shared a glance and followed him

over. Jamilya, smiling, introduced the students in English to the three of us. After ascertaining they all spoke Urdu, Matt took over the conversation and left the rest of us behind. It became apparent though—and he later confirmed—that Matt was explaining what would happen during the meeting, as he gestured to the seats in the room, the lectern and microphones in the front of the hall, the television mounted to the wall, and the “year text” on the wall, “Those hoping in Jehovah will regain power” (Isaiah 40:31). Jamilya, Dima, and I stood by, though we didn’t understand what was said. This conversation continued as we all drifted into seats, waiting for the meeting to begin, the three MUK students sitting between Jamilya and Matt. Dima and I sat next to Matt.

Throughout the meeting Matt oriented the three Pakistani visitors, cuing them into different aspects of the meeting: that they should stand for the song and that the words would appear on the television at the front of the hall; to remain standing during the prayer immediately following the song and the proper comportment of bowing one’s head; and, perhaps most importantly, helping them navigate the copies of *The Watchtower* Jamilya distributed to them, showing them what article was being studied that day, how the text was divided into numbered paragraphs framed with questions. Occasionally, Jamilya and Matt would lean back, meeting eyes behind the students’ backs, as Jamilya would give an encouraging smile. Or, Jamilya might briefly ask for Matt’s help in explaining something in Urdu to the student closer to her. Above all else, Matt was more involved in the meeting than he usually would have been: Matt raised his hand to give commentary on multiple paragraphs (he normally might give only one comment—if that); he offered to read several on the verses cited in *The Watchtower* article (only on occasion would he read); he sang out during the songs (this was surprising, as I had never heard him sing before); he clapped more vigorously after the public talk; and Matt performed a keen attention to detail throughout the meeting (no slouching in his seat or furtive glances at the notifications on his phone).

Afterwards, Matt talked with the students for some time, both while seated in the Hall and in the foyer. During this time, Matt led the conversation—which was primarily in Urdu—and Jamilya, Dima, and I stood by. When other Witnesses would come up, Matt introduced them. Occasionally, Matt would look over to Jamilya and ask a question. Jamilya, smiling would

answer Matt, who would turn and give the answer again to the three students in Urdu—despite the fact that they understood what Jamilya said in English, as was evinced by the fact that sometimes they would respond to Jamilya in English, bypassing Matt.

Much like these three students' experienced, during a person's first attendance in a Kingdom Hall a Witness will accompany them through the meeting. Jamilya explained that this was "to help the people we invite feel welcome and to understand the meeting." Further, she explained, this was also to give them publications—especially *The Watchtower*, as weekend meetings revolve around studying an article in the magazine—and help them understand how the study functions (see WTBTS 2016b). Sabir added, "You might remember... attending a meeting for the first time can be overwhelming. It helps to have someone you recognize by your side to help you through the meeting and introduce you to other people and answer your questions." He wasn't wrong: despite the welcoming nature of the Witnesses who invited me to my first experience in a Kingdom Hall, I still felt incredibly intimidated by the experience. Having Miroslav sit by me during that meeting was very comforting. It also formed a tight relationship between me and Miroslav, as he is still one of my closest Witness friends.

Two weeks after this experience, Matt showed up at the Kingdom Hall with two of his classmates in tow. When I saw them, I was already sitting in the near-empty Hall in my usual seat along the back wall. Matt, catching my eye as he walked in, beckoned me over with a casual jab of his chin. I approached with a friendly smile and Matt said in English, "Danny, I want you to meet two of my friends from my course, Amrick and Tarsem." We shook hands and chatted for a bit about their studies. They were both in same course as Matt and were also first-years, but had apparently met at the gym. As we chatted, more Witnesses gathered round and listened. The gathering crowd was visibly discomforting Amrick and Tarsem, so when I asked the pair a question like, "Where are you from?" Tarsem's quick, truncated response was simply, "India." Luckily, before things could get much more awkward, Matt ushered Amrick and Tarsem to some seats directly in front of where I usually sat.

Returning to my bag, I sat down behind Matt, Amrick, and Tarsem, as the Witnesses who had congregated around them dispersed about the Hall. Later, Dima mentioned to me that the reason the Witnesses were so curious was because no one recognized Amrick or Tarsem,

leaving the question, who invited them? Quite luckily, as I was seated directly behind them, I could both easily see and hear how Matt guided Amrick and Tarsem during the meeting, and in turn how Matt interacted with Dima.

As Matt led the two students to sit down, Dima had scurried back out into the foyer to retrieve a current issue of *The Watchtower* for them, placing it on Matt's lap. Matt was in the middle of explaining the structure of the meeting to Amrick and Tarsem but acknowledged Dima's action by picking up *The Watchtower*, almost on cue, to describe *The Watchtower* study portion of the meeting, in which the congregation would listen to a reading of the article and—he explained, opening the magazine to show them today's article—answer questions for each paragraph. He showed how the article was structured with questions, indicating them with his finger, and how the answers were neatly tucked into the paragraphs we would read together. Matt then placed *The Watchtower* with Amrick, who was seated closer to him, saying, "You can keep this. It is yours."

During the meeting, Matt's explanations, which helped to establish a teacher-student relationship, mirrored those he had received himself. That is, Matt was parroting theocratic language (Ch. 2) he had heard his own teachers use, as he began to take up the register's lexicon, as well as the social relations of a teacher. But teaching is more than speaking, as placement matters just as much (Ch. 3), and Matt (with Dima's assistance), placed *The Watchtower* with Amrick and Tarsem. Not only did Matt model his words and actions on what he had seen his teachers do, throughout the meeting he checked in with Dima and asked questions when his classmates' enquiries exceeded his knowledge. For example, during *The Watchtower* study, Amrick asked about circumcision (a topic covered in that day's article, see WTBTS 2018f) to which Matt didn't have a quick or precise answer, Dima who was attentively overseeing the interaction, leaned over and whispered to Matt to tell Amrick that they could discuss it after the meeting. After the meeting, Dima promised to answer Amrick's question.

Later that week, when I saw Dima, I asked what he thought about Matt bringing his university friends. Dima—who was usually quite stoic—grinned and his eyes lit up as he told me that he was excited because Matt had expressed an interest in coming along for field service. His excitement was not so much for Amrick and Tarsem, but for Matt and his personal progression.

As we talked, Dima explained that the more a rightly disposed person studies the Bible, their natural response will be to take up the preaching work. He said, “I mean—Matt is already becoming a different person.” Dima pointed towards the differences I had already noticed, primarily how he was more involved in meetings and that his involvement in their Bible studies had also intensified.³ “But,” Dima told me, “The biggest way he has changed is his character to other people—by talking with those guys he showed us his true Christian character.”

I asked Dima what he meant. He said, “Do you remember how we were talking to Matt about his friends at the university that one time?” Dima was hearkening back to a conversation we had with Matt many months earlier, where Matt told us that he was having trouble making friends at the university because he “only wanted to be friends with other Christians.” This, Dima revealed, belied a more strongly entrenched issue. He pointed out that the problem was not that Matt didn’t want to make friends with non-Christians (consider the Witness thinking about not “associating” with the world [WTBTS 2015e) but that being Christian in Pakistan brought along with it a particular culture, history, and politics—most particularly the entanglement of religious and caste politics (cf. Fuchs and Fuchs 2019). This was a problem because Matt might inadvertently smuggle in interreligious, caste, and other forms of politics into his preaching and teaching, which would violate the ethical basis of Witness evangelism, namely, only being partisan to the Kingdom of God and refusing to be party to divisions in the system of things. To fully grasp the breadth of this problem, I will consider Witnesses’ theology of the Kingdom of God and “Christian neutrality.”

The futility of human governance

Miroslav, the Witness who sat with me during my first time in a Kingdom Hall, was a middle-aged man who loved cats, playing jazz on the piano, and figured himself to be something of a

3 At one point a few weeks after I met Matt, I asked if he was okay if I came along to his Bible studies. Matt did not mind at all, and we asked Dima together if it would be okay. Dima hesitantly consented. However, Dima texted me afterwards saying that he had noticed Matt was not as engaged as normal and he blamed my presence. For the sake of Matt’s progression, Dima asked that I not come along anymore. This was really the only opportunity I had to attend someone else’s Bible study—but it doesn’t appear that it would have been structurally at all different to the way Bible studies were conducted with me and my family, just implemented differently along the lines of interest and barriers to Kingdom communication (Ch. 2).

philosopher. Miroslav and his family lived in a small city in the northeast of Kyrgyzstan, in a private home with a small orchard. One day we sat in his garden discussing politics, especially poverty and climate change, two very salient topics locally, since most of the local population was poor and the glaciers in the surrounding mountains were rapidly disappearing. His argument: there was no fixing these issues with the application of any known—or knowable—form of human government or economic system.

At one point in the conversation Miroslav asked an interesting question, “Why do you think academics and politicians still think Marx—a philosopher who lived 150 years ago—why are his theories still relevant today?” I was taken aback. Because Miroslav was clearly building up to something, I prompted him to continue by raising my eyebrows, aping a shrug. He said,

“Because the world is still dealing with the same sorts of problems it was 150 years ago, and those were in principle the same problems of 1, 2, even 3,000 years ago... even since the beginning. Yes, in every epoch of human history, humankind has attempted new ways to deal with the same problem. Marx himself thought up socialism and look what came of our ‘communist experiment’.

[He said ‘communist experiment’ in English, gesturing towards the ramshackle private houses surrounding his and the silhouette of a dilapidated, early Soviet three-story apartment building, set against the mountains with melting ice.]

“But what is the problem? The problem is that human experiments in governance are *always doomed from the start* [*zaraneye obrechnennoye na neudachu*]. Marx never had a chance, nor Lenin for that matter.”⁴ [He laughs heartily.]

Human trials in developing what Miroslav called “systems of governance” are always futile simulations of true government. The only way to truly deal with poverty and climate change—serious, horrific, and *very real* dangers Miroslav argued (cf. Douglas 1992: 29)—was to have a “real government.” A theocracy. I start my discussion of neutrality with the notion of governance and God’s sovereignty because neutrality, as we will see, is not an apolitical stance, but is rooted in an allegiance to theocracy, defining the (theo)political and ethical responsibilities of Kingdom evangelizers. Starting here illuminates what is at stake in the transformation Dima

4 Compare Miroslav’s argument to McBrien and Pelkmans’ (2008) argument about the inversion of Marxian ideological approaches to religion (cf. Pelkmans 2017: 77-101).

argues Matt was undergoing, and what it would mean that he was attempting to take on the responsibilities of an unbaptized publisher.

Positing that “God’s Kingdom” is a literal government is central to understanding God’s sovereignty and is a notion that has deep roots in Watch Tower theology, beginning with Charles Taze Russell’s writings (e.g., Russell 1889). In Russell’s work there are myriad statements that make plain the idea that God *allows* humankind (and Satan) to rule itself so that “the world might... learn the futility of its own efforts at self-government” (ibid.: 75). This theological thread has been thoroughly developed in the nearly 150 years since Russell started writing, leading Witnesses to understand Adam and Eve’s disobedience to be rooted in a challenge to God’s sovereignty.

To provide a full picture of theocracy, I need to flesh out Witnesses’ cosmological understanding of what other Christians often call “the Fall.”⁵ Jehovah created humans as part of the earth and “commissioned” them to “fill the earth and subdue it and have in subjection every living thing” (Genesis 1:28). This commission is understood to be eternal and Adam and Eve, and by extension the human family they would create, would live forever caring for the earth, extending the paradisiacal conditions in which they were placed in the Garden of Eden to the whole of God’s creation. This is “God’s government” as it was originally intended. First and foremost, this government was founded upon willing subjection to God. That is, the “tree of knowledge of good and bad” (Genesis 2:16-17) represents Jehovah’s being the moral arbitrator of the universe; constraints were not thrust upon Adam and Eve, but God gave them the freedom to choose if they would subject themselves (and therefore the earth and its inhabitants) to Jehovah, or not. Jehovah warned that the consequence of not choosing his constraints—choosing “moral independence”—would result in death. Their “challenge,” though orchestrated by Satan, did nothing to actually imperil God’s supremacy—something Witnesses hold to be impossible—but questioned the “*rightfulness, deservedness, and righteousness* of God’s sovereignty” (WTBTS 2018d: 1010; emphasis original). Adam and Eve were, most basically, arguing

5 The theological sketch I provide here is composited from several sources in Watch Tower media (see WTBTS 2014c; 2017b), as well as Bible studies with Witnesses in Kyrgyzstan and Cambridge. As with other aspects of theocratic language (Ch. 2), Witnesses lexically demarcate their theology from “Christendom” by eschewing “traditional” Christian language. Therefore this is not called “the Fall” by Witnesses.

that they didn't need God's rulership to create paradise; Satan told Eve that they could create their own moralities *and* still have paradise (with no consequence of death). They were laying out their own terms of accountability. They would be like God after all (Genesis 3:5).

To establish the futility of all other forms of governance, Jehovah allowed humankind to rule themselves to prove to the “universe” (WTBTS 2018d: 1009) that he was the only functional and moral sovereign. In effect, this traded a universal accountability for a continually fracturing debate between humans about how accountability ought to be enforced and by what means (cf. Douglas 1992: 30). Joseph Rutherford's⁶ writings, especially in the 1920s-30s, amplified this notion that God's Kingdom is the only “desirable government” (Rutherford 1924). To this point, Rutherford focused much of his writings on human suffering. For example, poverty (Rutherford 1929) and war (Rutherford 1935)—tremendously salient topics in American life during the period (and since, and not just American)—are the direct outcome of human-satanic attempts at making institutions of accountability. Rutherford's era saw the solidification of a reading of the Bible that conceptualized both the political and economic structures that were crippled in the early twentieth century Europe and America not as exigencies or exceptions but as emblematic of human rule since its inception in the Garden. In other words, human history is one of violence, oppression, and suffering—and these problems mean humankind is failing in their responsibilities to care for God's creation.⁷ As Miroslav pointed out, Witnesses understand all human attempts at governance (even democracy) to be rooted in Adam and Eve's long experiment in human moral autonomy, when the only path to peace and paradise is through submission to theocracy.

God, Witnesses understand, will not let humans flounder indefinitely. Witnesses believe that in 1914 Jesus was seated on his heavenly throne, ushering in the end times.⁸ The apocalypse will destroy the system of things and make the earth ready for the implementation of the first perfect

6 The second leader of the Society after Russell's death.

7 Witnesses decried environmental and animal exploitation as early the 1950s (e.g., WTBTS 1954: 421); the violence of human governance is not anthropocentric.

8 The way Witnesses understand Christ's accession to the throne of a “heavenly government” in 1914 vis-à-vis the future installment of this government over the earth proper can be understood in terms similar to the “already/not yet” (e.g., Bialecki 2017: 37-44), which Hardin (2016: 382) nicely connects to Bielo's (2011a) study of “emerging evangelicalism.”

government on earth since Eden. This government (both as now governing “God’s organization,” or the worldwide organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses, and in its full, future form during the millennium) dually proves the goodness and merit of Jehovah’s sovereignty as the earth will be able to regain paradisiacal conditions (see Daniel 2:44).

“Conflicts between factions of the world”: Theocracy and theopolitics

With this in mind, I turn to “Christian neutrality.” One Watch Tower publication defines neutrality as:

The position of those who do not take sides with or give support to either of two or more contending parties. It is a fact of ancient and modern-day history that in every nation and under all circumstances true Christians have endeavored to maintain complete neutrality as to *conflicts between factions of the world*.
(WTBTS 1985: 269-70; emphasis added)

Neutrality, as such, is an approach to human institutions—elements of the system of things. Whereas the theology of the world outlined in Chapter 1 revealed how Witnesses are “no part of the world” (John 17:16) who are “under obligation to spurn the spirit of the world—its aims, ambitions, and hopes as well as its selfish ways” (WTBTS 1993b: 188), neutrality specifically defines how Witnesses respond to the inevitable conflicts that arise when human attempts at governance go pear shaped. But neutrality is not only a stance towards the overtly political, such as parties, governments, or states, or towards the obviously pear shaped. Neutrality concerns all *conflicts between factions of the world*, casting a broad net over what might be “political.” This includes more recognizable concepts such as racism or nationalism. But even things as seemingly innocuous as championing a regional sports team could be seen as taking sides in a worldly division (see Ch. 2). Further still, neutrality concerns not taking sides or identifying with *any* faction in the world, even if it is not currently contentious.

There is a tendency among academics to understand neutrality as “apolitical”—despite the theological concept never being discussed in Watch Tower literature as such⁹—and therefore

⁹ Consider how “apolitical” only appears in Watch Tower literature a handful of times when the Society is quoting journalists, academics, and legal proceedings (e.g., WTBTS 1982: 7; 1992c: 28; 1997a: 22), with the exception of

is always suspect because there can only ever be an “*ostensible* detachment from politics” (Knox 2018: 61; emphasis mine). This understanding is incorrect. Jehovah’s Witnesses are not attempting to carve out portions of life that are “non-political,” and even if they were, I am not convinced neutrality should be ethnographically described in such terms, as Candea (2011) has convincingly argued. Instead, Witnesses fully recognize the political problems of the world—and as my conversation with Miroslav demonstrates, they even theorize them—but they involve themselves in a different political project, one which scholars often refuse to acknowledge as a legitimate political position: theocracy. Neutrality, as such, has been described as “anti-secular” (Nyíri 2003: 297), having “a profound hostility towards the ideology and governance of the state” (Knox 2018: 61; cf. Holden 2002: 26). This “neutrality-*cum*-apolitical” sort of perspective has two unfortunate side effects.¹⁰ First, it restricts analysis to “the political” (as understood by [atheist] social science), that is to say their relation to secular states, thereby tending to crop out a wide range of what is rejected by Witnesses on the grounds of neutrality (such as supporting a football team). Second, but not unrelated, it automatically sidelines any consideration of theocracy as a legitimate political identity. This is important because, for Witnesses, theocracy is the *real* answer to politics, which has profound consequences for how Witnesses conceptualize the ethics and politics of persuasion in evangelism, especially teaching. Teaching is based, as I laid out above, on a relationship. Just as with asking for explanation, to become accountable in the grand sense—to become one of Jehovah’s Witnesses—the student must take responsibility. Coercion, whether social, political, or material, negates this possibility because it changes *responses* to *reactions*.

Jolene Chu and Tharcisse Seminega (*Forthcoming*), two Jehovah’s Witness scholars, point their readers towards C. J. Cadoux’s (1919) *The Early Christian Attitude to War: A contribution to the history of Christian ethics* as plainly spelling out how first century Christians and Jesus considered coercion. Cadoux, a Congregationalist theologian with connections to the Quakers

one article in *Awake!* (WTBTS 1986a: 12). A notable exception to this is an academic article by Jolene Chu (2004: 321), a researcher at the Society’s headquarters, in which she describes the first-century church as “apolitical.”

10 Though, to be fair, this analytic tension between Witnesses and secular states (and society) has generated a lot of scrupulous scholarship on Jehovah’s Witnesses, especially as concerns Witnesses and legal regimes (e.g., Knox 2018; Peters 2002), the Holocaust (e.g., Garbe 2008; Hesse 2001), European states (e.g., Besier and Stokłosa 2016; 2018), and the Soviet Union (e.g., Baran 2014; Knox 2011).

(see Kaye 1988), argues that Jesus did not advance God's kingdom through "political or coercive means" (Cadoux 1919: 26). This, for Cadoux, is a matter of authority and power. Human sovereignty is always maintained through violence—that is, through war, death, slavery, and imprisonment, or what might be thought of as the violence of human "apparatuses of security" (Foucault 2007) that are "exercised over all men indiscriminately whether they like it or not" (Cadoux 1919: 29). Cadoux's theology posits that security offered by human sovereignty is always built on the blood and bones of others who had no choice in the matter and is thereby inherently unstable. Coercion uses violence to *cause* particular effects; this submission is not conscious, it is reactive. Persuasion in the Kingdom of God, on the other hand, is an invitation and is "exercised only over those who willingly submit to it" (ibid.).

As representatives of the Kingdom of God, Witnesses understand that if their evangelism is in any way coercive, it would not in fact be *God's*. That is, those who claim to evangelize in the name of God but compel people to submit to the Kingdom through violence, are hypocrites (cf. ibid.: 2). Witnesses contend that the violence of hypocrisy includes more than just physical force, but any sort of deception or ulterior motive (WTBTS 2018c: 1164-5)—this goes beyond Cadoux, who might have agreed, but whose work focused on physical violence. Indeed, Satan's deceiving Eve in the Garden of Eden is emblematic of the violence of hypocritical and coercive evangelism (WTBTS 2015b: 8-9).

Critically, Cadoux's analysis turns on Jesus being the divine actor who—after people willingly submit—exercises authority. But whereas Cadoux holds that violence is incompatible with Jesus's teaching, Witnesses do not. Neutrality, therefore, should not be understood as pacifism, as Witnesses' vision of divine moral authority includes the right to violence. This includes performing the various accountings—or judgments—of who should be counted part of Jehovah's Kingdom, and who will not be counted (i.e., destroyed). One such reckoning is the imminent Battle at Armageddon, in which Jesus and the angels will appear and destroy the world. This is violent. But it *can* be done without hypocrisy because the accountant is divine. Humans can have no role in this. When Witnesses talk about the futility of human government, this is precisely what they are getting at: power in the hands of humans leads to unjust violence. Theocracy's politics, on the other hand, is just, right, and moral.

Theocracy's politics are still politics but they are theopolitics. To be clear, Witnesses do not use the terms "politics" or "theopolitics" to describe the Kingdom of God. However, I suggest the latter is a way to understand the former, since Witness understand the Kingdom of God to be a literal government. While Jehovah's Witnesses certainly talk of theocracy—and consider their core identity as being part of a divine government (e.g., Holden 2002: 120-1)—to my knowledge they do not use "theopolitics" to describe the techniques of the government of God. However, I find the term helpful, especially as developed by Samuel Hayim Brody (2018), who reads the theological-philosophical writings of Martin Buber as developing "theopolitics" as a "deep inversion" of Carl Schmitt's (2005) "political theology," and—by extension—as an inversion of the ways political theology has been deployed by scholars of religion (e.g., Marshall 2014: S352). That is, Brody (2018: 4; emphasis mine) writes, "Where political theology deploys the power of the divine in the service of the authoritarian state, theopolitics denies any possibility of truly legitimizing institutional *human* power."¹¹ Theopolitics is, for those who submit to it, the delegitimization of *human* institutions—secular or not.¹² I find "theopolitics" helpful in understanding Witness neutrality because it at once accentuates that it is a critique and rejection of the moral authority of *all* institutions of human power *while also* underscoring that this critique is not detached or made from nowhere (that is, apolitical), but is made from the standpoint and politics of theocracy.

Returning to the teacher-student relationship, we can now see why it is a relationship that associates the person-in-the-world with God's Kingdom and that it does so, as Cadoux tells us—and as we saw in the previous chapter—by giving them (the addressee of evangelism) the responsibility to submit to God's sovereignty. Theocratic education, therefore, must be rooted in the "Christian ethics" of neutrality: The addressee can in no way perceive or receive their association with their teacher as being somehow entangled with the politics of the world, lest hypocrisy and coercion sneak in the back door. Hypocrisy adversely effects the accountability of

11 Brody goes on to say that whereas political theology deals with fascism, theopolitics is its "anarchistic antipode," making the connection between Buber and nineteenth century libertarian socialist philosophy. Though promising, a deeper comparison of Buber's critique of liberalism and late nineteenth century Watch Tower theology exceeds the scope of this thesis.

12 To be clear, Witnesses understand themselves to be in "relative subjection" to current political powers (Romans 13:1-7). I mean delegitimization in a grand, cosmological sense.

the evangelizer and coercion, of any sort, negates the possibility of the addressee of evangelism becoming accountable as they would not be able to submit themselves to theocratic rule. The moral authority of the hypocritical and coercive message claims or pretends to be theopolitics (divine) but is actually political theology (human).

Mixed messages

Jeffery Cox (2005: 15-16) has called the competing authorial claims or religious communities and political powers “mixed messages,” as missionaries in colonial settings were split between “religion and imperial power.” That is, Cox describes how nineteenth century British missionaries in India did not imagine themselves to be in any way connected to what he calls “the brute realities of military conquest and cultural aggression.” Despite efforts by British missionaries to claim neutrality, Indian Christians (prefiguring postcolonial scholarship by nearly a century), critiqued these claims, arguing that it was impossible for British missionaries to escape their social position and completely transcend the power asymmetries between the missionaries and their local Christian brothers and sisters. Because the British missionaries were bound up in the mechanics of colonization, their moral authority as missionaries always contained “mixed messages” for Indian converts, as their authority was at once rooted in their Britishness *and* in Christianity.

Witnesses have a similar “mixed messages” understanding of what they call “Christendom,” as well as all other religious institutions—Islam, for example. That is, Witnesses understand other religions to be necessarily coercive and hypocritical because—try as they might—they can never quite disassociate themselves from worldly identities that lend them power; their moral authority can always be located in the system of things *and* in their religious claims. As I sat with Miroslav in his garden chatting about neutrality, we heard echoes of the muezzin reciting the Adhan from the mosque a few hundred meters away. Miroslav took a small sip of his nonalcoholic beer and nodded in the direction of the amplified voice calling people to prayer,

“Do you know who built that mosque? The mosque, and many like it here and around Kyrgyzstan, were funded by the Turkish government. So, tell me, when Islamic teachers tell people what to do, or—you know *fatwas*?—when people

read fatwas, or when the *dawatchi*¹³ go door-to-door and preach, do people listen because of powers in the world or in Allah? They are one and the same.

“In this is the fundamental difference between Jehovah’s organization and these religious organizations: their authority—their power—is in the world. So people find their teaching persuasive (or credible; *ubeditel’noye*) because there are some kind of benefits (*vygody*). These might be social or political, or in some way make better their material circumstances. There is nothing similar to gain by becoming one of Jehovah’s Witnesses. After all, we’re not rich, nor do we have political power. What is more, the world hates us—as you’ll know.”

Miroslav picked up his phone and fiddled with JW Library for a second before showing me a verse in English: Matthew 24:9, “Then people will hand you over to tribulation and will kill you, and you will be hated by all the nations on account of my name.” Miroslav used this verse to talk about current and historical persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses around the world. But it is also relevant to his own ministry. Miroslav argued that there could be no way a person in Kyrgyzstan could have mixed messages about his ministry precisely because of how Witnesses first came to be in Kyrgyzstan at all.

From *Karlag* to Kyrgyzstan: Religious transmission without the mission

Missionaries or other emissaries from Jehovah’s Witnesses were not sent to Central Asia by the Society but by Stalin. Beginning as early as 1949, Witnesses from the Western reaches of the Soviet Union¹⁴ were detained and sent to *Karlag* (Karaganda Corrective Labor Camp; *Karagandinskiy ispravitel’no-trudovoy lager’*) in the northern parts of what is now Kazakhstan, among other gulags scattered throughout the USSR. Life in *Karlag*, and other gulags, did nothing to deter Witnesses from preaching, and Witnesses both openly preached and clandestinely

13 *Dawatchi* is a hybrid from the Urdu *dawat*, which in Kyrgyzstan refers to what Pelkmans (2017: 104) calls a Tablighi Jamaat “proselytizing tour,” plus the Kyrgyz suffix *-chi*, or the “doer of an action.” Pelkmans (ibid.: 102-23) describes the context of Tablighi Jamaat, a conservative Islamic piety movement that has practitioners (“proselytizers”) around the world, but who are especially active in Kyrgyzstan (see also: Biard 2017; Ismailbekova and Nasritdinov 2012; Pelkmans 2021). While *dawatchi* are specific to this movement, I believe Miroslav meant any sort of *da’wah* practice, because he was seemingly only vaguely aware of Tablighi.

14 Including Western Ukraine, Moldova, and the Baltic states, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. See Artem’ev (2010: 58) and Baran (2014, *passim*, but especially chapters 3 and 4) for details; or WTBS [Berdibaev] (2018) for a personal account by Beishenbai Berdibaev, a Witness from Tokmok, Kyrgyzstan.

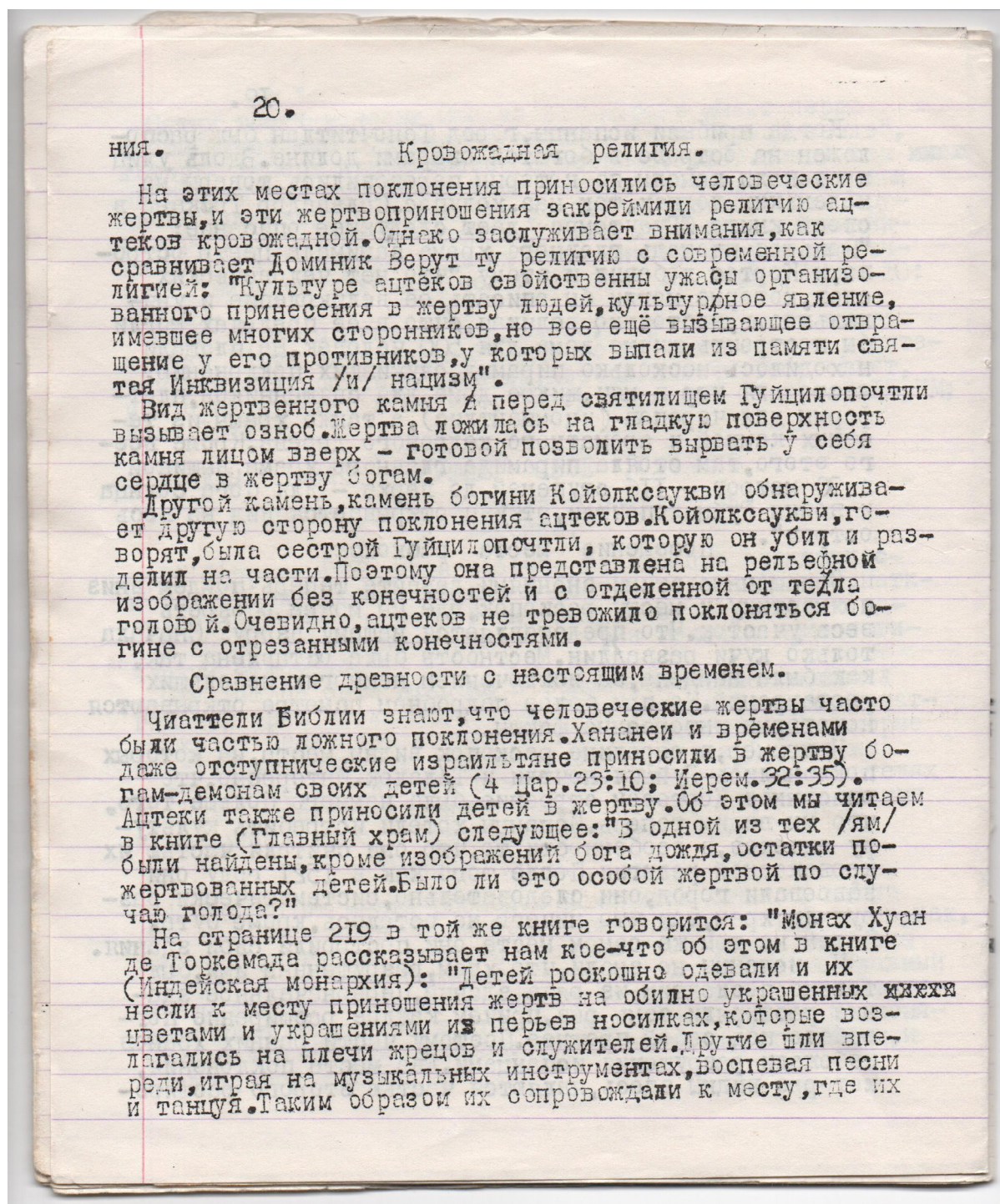


Figure 4.1 - Photo of a page from a samizdat copy of the October 1987 *Awake!*. Bible literature was reproduced in secret on typewriters and disguised in common notebooks during the Soviet period. Photo by author.

traded samizdat literature, copied from Watch Tower literature smuggled in from the West (see fig. 4.1). After Witnesses left camps like Karlag, rather than immediately returning west, many stayed in the *krai* regions where the gulags were situated. Whether or not these Witnesses were obliged by the Soviet state to stay in exile (e.g., Baran 2014: 80), Witnesses who were interned

at Karlag explained that they chose to stay in areas around Karlag, such as Dolinka. As more disciples were made in the sprawling area surround Karaganda, Witnesses decided to spread out further into Kazakhstan—where there was “greater need” (WTBTS 2015c).

Miroslav, an ethnic Russian, was born in a small village in southern Kazakhstan in 1969. While his parents were party members, his grandmother told him stories about the Bible. Miroslav told me he had always been intensely interested in religion, even as a boy, and always chatted with his grandmother and read anything he could get his hands on. So, when he bumped into Jehovah’s Witnesses in his village as a young teenager in the early 80s, he keenly listened to their message and was soon baptized. Miroslav told me that those first Witnesses he had met moved there from Dolinka after they had finished their sentences at Karlag.

A few years later, in 1987, the Witnesses who had taught Miroslav told him about brothers they knew living in Kyrgyzstan, and the greater need they had for young, energetic, and zealous publishers. That same year Miroslav decided to move to a small city in northeastern Kyrgyzstan, the same place where I would later meet him. Miroslav found there a small group of Witnesses. Only a few of these were locals, the majority were Russian and German¹⁵ Witnesses who had relocated from Kazakhstan as early as the late 1970s. One of these men, who would become Miroslav’s father-in-law, was an experienced elder named Iosif,¹⁶ who after release from Karlag settled with his family in a village some distance south of Karaganda, in central Kazakhstan, and later was part of the first group of Witnesses to move to this area of Kyrgyzstan. Many [Kyrgyz] Witnesses I met in this area directly connected their becoming Witnesses to Iosif’s ministry.

During one of our first conversations, I asked Iosif if he was either asked or called to move to Kyrgyzstan, or if it was a directive given by leadership. He laughed and explained that this is never the case. “We are never told where to serve in the ministry,” he told me, “The Bible simply tells us we must preach!” Iosif told me that he was arrested in Saratov in the 60s for being a “parasite”¹⁷ and was exiled to Kazakhstan for several years of forced labor. Iosif said that

15 While many of these were Volga Germans, others with non-Russian eastern European heritage were also commonly called “Germans” by Witnesses.

16 He transliterates his name as “Iosif,” it is pronounced *Yo-sif*.

17 Witnesses in the Soviet Union were often prosecuted for evangelizing, distributing literature, and meeting together (see Baran 2014), but were sometimes tried for other reasons as well, as may have been the case for Iosif

Satan's attempts to destroy Jehovah's organization through evil rulers always instead succeeds in bolstering the numbers of Jehovah's Witnesses, comparing the growth of the Society in postwar Europe to the way "Stalin's gulags brought the Truth to Central Asia."

Further, Iosif argued that it would have been impossible for the "faithful and discreet slave"¹⁸ to send them "directions" even if there were any, as publishers in the USSR had little contact with Witnesses from around the world and no direct contact with the organization's headquarters in the United States until after perestroika. Such were the times and technologies.¹⁹ What contact there was through the Iron Curtain was limited, slow, and indirect, primarily through the borderlands in Ukrainian and Moldovan SSRs (cf. Baran 2014, p. 111). Most of this contact happened through mail or personally delivered notes (both of which were often confiscated, causing the flow of information to be sporadic), the emphasis in such communications was on getting new exemplars of literature to reproduce and reporting publishing figures.²⁰ Staying in exile, and the subsequent southerly movements throughout Central Asia, was based in a feeling of greater need and not in a missionary mandate from Witness (especially "Western" Witness) leadership. Nor did Witnesses stay and spread throughout Central Asia simply because of Soviet anti-religious politics (though the state's intention was clear, as Baran describes), their motivation lay in a dedication to Jehovah's preaching work in the places of greatest need.

This brief digression through Witness history is helpful when considering Miroslav's point about the ethics and politics of evangelism: the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses reveals their theopolitics. That is, Jehovah's Witnesses arrived in Central Asia not only after Russians had already colonized it, but they were *brought* there as prisoners of the state. This later point is centrally important, because it undergirds the fact that Witnesses had quite literally no political or economic power while in Karlag, and little to speak of after, *except* the power drawn from

(see Fitzpatrick 2006: 403-4). Iosif explained that he was evangelizing instead of working, leading to his being labeled a "parasite."

18 The "anointed class" directly accountable to Jesus for the "administration" (Ephesians 1:10) of the "great crowd" on earth today (see WTBT 2013h; 1973: 331-63; see Conclusion), or the Governing Body (see Ch. 1).

19 Compare to Witnesses in Russia who now can regularly communicate with other Witnesses and receive up-to-date digital literature, even with recent crackdowns on access to Witness websites by the Kremlin

20 Baran (2014) details this throughout chapter three of her book, especially noting the increase in communication during the liberalizations of the Khrushchev era, emphasizing the increase of publishers sending back reports, in a general flow of literature coming in and reports going out.

theocracy. There was no recourse to the “West” generally, as Knox (2018: 251-55; 2013) demonstrates that Witnesses were the enemy of the state on both sides of the Cold War (a fact of which Witnesses were keenly aware). Furthermore, there was not even recourse to Witnesses in the West to give money, support, or anything else, besides copies of copies of literature once printed in Germany. This is particularly important because from it we can understand that theocracy still has infrastructure, which we learn from Handman (2018) is foundational to religious circulation, most frequently through the mission.

Unbinding evangelization from missionization

I have a hard time conceiving of Witness evangelism in “mission” terms. This is quite literal: as we just saw, Witness religious transmission quite often happens without a mission *per se*. But further, thinking of Jehovah’s Witnesses in terms of a “mission” would not take seriously their theopolitical project of neutrality. “Missions,” especially in anthropological literature, have come to mean the “colonial mission,” and anthropologists have described the many ways missionaries have done much more than evangelize whilst building missions. To wit, missions build more than churches, as they also bring in the materials and ideologies, politics and economics, medicines and technologies endemic to the global north. That projects of missionization are part and parcel of broader processes of modernity, capitalism, and colonialism has seen wide-ranging attention in anthropology, perhaps most famously by Jean and John Comaroff (1991; 1997) in their two-volume work on Christian missionization in southern Africa. Since at least the 1980s anthropologists have written about missionary entanglements with different forms of colonialism—consider, for example, Bielo’s (2013) thorough bibliography. While some have taken missionaries to be fully-fledged colonial agents employing evangelism as an ideological tool instrumentalized by Euro-American states to control indigenous populations (e.g., Beidelman 1982), others have pushed back on such totalizing representations of colonialism and missions (Eves 1996; Cox 2005; Rutherford 2006; Straight 2008). However, no matter the representation of the missionaries, anthropologists describe them in terms of missionization,

focusing on the politics and economics of building missions rather than the preaching and teaching of religion (cf. Cox 2005: 13).

This is certainly the case with older anthropological works on Christianity, such as Thomas Beidelman's (1982) *Colonial Evangelism: A socio-historical study of an East African mission at the grassroots*, which is widely considered to be one of the first critical anthropological examinations of Christian missionaries. In *Colonial Evangelism*, Beidelman presents us with an examination of a single mission and its missionaries, the Church Missionary Society (CMS), along with all of the administrative and infrastructural projects implicit in the mission, including the building and operation of mission stations, shops, schools, houses, kitchens, and so on. The focus of the book, ultimately, is less about evangelism and more about what Cox (2005: 8-13) calls the "postcolonial master narrative." While this does not build an anthropology of evangelism in the terms I lay out above (see Introduction), what Beidelman's focus does well is bring to the fore the materiality of the mission. Elsewhere Beidelman (1981: 76) makes the argument that the material infrastructures of the mission, along with all of "modern industrial society," provided "the economic and political underpinnings for their [CMS's] proselytizing."

That is, in Beidelman's historical accounting it is precisely the mission and its attendant infrastructure that make evangelism possible. Missionaries *missionize* by building up the colonial material systems and political conditions that undergird evangelism. Handman (2018) has recently discussed something quite similar. As noted in the Introduction, Handman forwards the idea that anthropologists should attend to "Christian cultures of circulation," which she understands to describe the ways Christian language spreads around the world through the circulation of material and political networks. Cultures of circulation are revealed, Handman (ibid.: 155) contends, through anthropological "analyses of materiality and the material forms that inhibit or enable the circulation of commodities, bureaucratic forms, or Christian narratives." Importantly, this brings to the fore how missionization is a wholly colonial enterprise: Handman (ibid.) writes, "As Johannes Fabian (1986: 8) noted long ago about the circulation and diffusion of Swahili under colonialism, 'A language never spreads like a liquid, nor even like a disease or a rumor.'"

She writes that whereas in almost all ethnographies of Christianity published in the 80s and 90s were concerned with the colonial/missionary encounter, the emergence of the anthropology of Christianity in the early 2000s either elides missionaries in ethnographic accounts altogether or relegates them to what she smartly calls the “missionary prologue.” This, she argues, was part of how the anthropology of Christianity got itself off the ground: by framing itself against analyses of the colonial/missionary encounter, anthropologists studying Christianity were to demonstrate the ways that “local people were now doing something new or unique with Christianity” (Handman 2018:151). I would take this a step further and argue that this move was necessary so anthropologists could begin to take Christian belief seriously. But, as Handman points out, doing so brushed missionaries under the rug, evangelism (for the most part) along with it. She argues for a revitalization of the study of missionaries/evangelisms in the anthropology of Christianity that would create a “rapprochement” (ibid.: 154) between it and the anthropology of colonial missionization. It seems important to reiterate this here (and that I wholeheartedly agree with Handman on this point), that critical histories of missions and missionization are essential to an anthropological accounting of Christianity.

That said, while evangelism may *always* be underpinned by materiality and material forms by dint of it being a form of human communication, it is just as important to emphasize that evangelism is not (a) the materiality or material forms itself and (b) that those material forms are not always necessarily colonial, nor even *missional*. (a) is relatively straightforward and could be summed up as “talk about the Bible isn’t the Bible itself”; (b) is a bit more complex and is entirely dependent on the Christian culture of circulation to hand (and it is important to note that Handman does postulate her analytic in the plural, *cultures* of circulation). I insist that much clarity would be brought to anthropological analyses of missionaries and evangelism by disaggregating the two concepts, especially since it seems frivolous to try and disentangle “mission” from “colonialism.” While it is true that some missionaries may evangelize, it is not true that all evangelizers missionize. In other words, differentiating between missionization and evangelization allows us to understand with greater nuance the Christian cultures of circulation that rely on materials and institutions that are not the (colonial) mission.

I submit my brief description of how Witnesses came to evangelize in Kyrgyzstan as an example of one such culture of circulation divorced from any notion of colonialism or mission. Further, this is a great example of how circulation happens when infrastructures are extremely constricted, as the material forms upon which Witness evangelism is based (Ch. 3) were exceedingly rare and even dangerous to possess. But the instance I have outlined herein could be compared to the way Witnesses have circulated in other contexts. For example, consider Zoe Knox's (2018: 80-9) recent historical account of the circulation of the Watch Tower Society in Nyasaland (present-day Malawi) at the beginning of the 20th century. She details the history of Joseph Booth, an itinerant English "missionary" and one of his students, Elliot Kenan Kamwana, and the way their evangelism laid the groundwork for the Society's considerable growth in southern Africa during the first half of the twentieth century.

Groundwork here is quite literally about widely circulating Watch Tower literature, as Booth had a working correspondence with Charles Taze Russell and the Society, taking on their theology, and distributing their publications. Importantly Booth and Kamwana operated outside of any mission (despite taking on the title of "missionary") and were very successful, much to the chagrin of the Livingstonia Mission. A colonial missionary report suggests that in ten months between 1908 and 1909, 10,000 Indigenous people from the Livingstonia Mission were baptized into the Watch Tower movement (ibid.: 80). Knox suggests that it is perhaps due to Booth and Kamwana's perspicuously anticolonial politics and evangelical praxis that they were rejected by the colonial mission, even exiling Kamwana (ibid.: 81). And, while Watch Tower theology assuredly denounces colonialism and racism as exemplifying the evil of human politics, they also eventually rejected Booth and Kamwana²¹ precisely because they tended towards direct action, and therefore political theology, instead of theocracy.²²

What is fascinating about Booth and Kamwana is that they evangelized on a massive scale—if the Livingstonia Mission's report of 10,000 is to be believed—yet they did so without and against the materiality of the colonial mission. Their evangelism was still underpinned by material

21 Knox (2018: 82) notes, referencing an archive of Booth's papers that he broke with the Society, whereas the Society claims the reverse.

22 And it is exactly this point that some lament, as they see Watch Tower theology as *almost* antiracist, but ultimately falling short (and therefore reproducing racism), precisely because it is not political theology (e.g., Heyward 2012).

forms, namely the Watch Tower's publications and theology. However, and this is what is fascinating, even after Booth and Kamwana cut ties with the Watch Tower Society they continued to use and circulate their publications. This caused a number of denominational schisms that, as Knox (2018: 82-3) artfully lays out, were only legible to the colonial governments as being part of the Society precisely because of their material forms. Over the next 50 years, the entanglement of Booth and Kamwana's groups led both to a boom of growth amongst Witnesses (orthodox) *and* the cementing of the two as one in the public's eye, leading to the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Malawi in the late 60s and early 70s. This shows how a "missionary," who was not really part of any mission, circulated Watch Tower material in and around, but never through, the colonial mission, with effects that echoed throughout the 20th century and effected the lives of tens of thousands of Witnesses in southern Africa.

To my knowledge, there are no debates in the anthropology of missionization or Christianity that define "missionary" as an analytic category—it is just taken for granted that we know what a "Christian missionary" is. There are ethnographic arguments surrounding the issue of what missionaries might or might not be to particular Christian denominations, which include a variety of topics such as: laity, women, and Indigenous missionaries (Beidelman 1981); the relationship of the missionary to their church (Shapiro 1987); missionary as linguist (Errington 2001); "missional" Evangelicals (Bielo 2011b); missionaries as arbitrators of international aid (Hearn 2002); reverse missionaries (Klair 2020; Knibbe 2011; Van Dijk 2002) and, short-term missionaries (Birth 2006; Howell 2012; Zehner 2006). However, the comparative category "missionary" (especially when the doubly confusing metacategory "Christian" is stapled to it) becomes particularly troublesome because there is often slippage between ethnographic specificity and comparative generality. One is never quite sure what "Christian missionary" is being referenced in the abstract without some sort of definite comparative category.

While Handman's call for a renewed interest in missions and colonialism is spot on, her rapprochement reifies the conflation: evangelist = missionary. Thus, as anthropologists of Christianity look to reengage the mission, taking missionization and evangelization to be separate (though often married) phenomena will do much work in elucidating the politics and ethics of the "contact zones" (Pratt 1992) between colonial and religious practices and spaces,

and make sense of the material forms that undergird extra-colonial Christian cultures of circulation. I propose that the “missionary” category is fundamentally rooted in “the mission,” which broadly conceived is an infrastructural project: as Handman brilliantly tells us, missions (often of the colonial variety) are the political and economic backbone of the circulation of Christian beliefs and materials. However, defining missions separate from evangelism allows the analyst to more clearly see missions that are not necessarily evangelical and, vice versa, evangelisms that circulate using other infrastructures.

In the context of this thesis, this differentiation between evangelization and missionization is critical because it helps to analytically emphasize the ways that Jehovah’s Witnesses work to maintain neutrality so as to not send mixed messages to their students. Again, just as neutrality is the fundamental ethical basis for evangelism more generally—not just Bible studies—it is important to keep in mind that Jehovah’s Witnesses are not missionaries in the sense that I have described here. Witnesses are concerned with the building up of infrastructure, but it is a much different infrastructure than the ones developed by Christendom and other religious communities that “proselytize” (in Kyrgyzstan, namely Islam). This is why Jehovah’s Witnesses have so carefully constructed their own worldwide publishing infrastructure that relies—for the most part—on their own labor and strives to be detached from other economic systems.²³ This is to say that, for Witnesses, the only work that can be done now is the theocratic work of educating people-in-the-world and they circulate material forms to that specific end. Therefore, Witnesses do not engage in public humanitarian aid—though they love their fellow humans—and they offer no political, economic, or social succor to anyone except those already in the Kingdom.²⁴ Furthermore, they rigorously work with baptismal candidates and will not allow a person to become a Witness if the elders evaluating the candidate think that they are getting baptized with mixed intentions.

It also puts into striking relief how Witnesses see *other* forms of religious transmission: all other religions send mixed message *because* they mix missionization and evangelization. Indeed, it

23 I contend that this is an “eschatological infrastructure,” which can never be fully detached from state (worldly) infrastructures (i.e., roads, internets, and so on), but works to transduce them into Kingdom material forms (Isaiah 60:16; WTBTs 2011a: 315-16). This will be the subject of my postdoctoral research.

24 Witnesses do engage in humanitarian aid but only for Jehovah’s Witnesses and their families. What I mean is that they do not donate to charities or participate in ecumenical religious humanitarian projects.

was from anthropologically considering this proposition that my thinking on subject was born. For example, as we sat in his garden, I explained to Miroslav how anthropologists—indirectly referencing Beidelman (1982: 6)—have this notion that Christian missionaries work through “psychic domination” to colonize “heart and mind as well as body.” Miroslav completely agreed, saying, “Missionaries [in Christendom] may have good intentions, but they ultimately just sew division and hate.” When I asked him why this is the case, he explained that it is because the missions of Christendom are always entangled with colonialism, nationalism, and other political formations. As Cadoux tells us, they are premised on human violence. Or, as I have argued, they are based in political theology. “But,” Miroslav told me, “We just tell people what the Bible says and give people the choice. We maintain Christian neutrality.”

Matt the “unbaptized publisher”

Matt’s personal history, being raised a Christian in Pakistan, meant that the theocratic education in Dima’s Bible studies needed to do a lot of work to overturn strongly entrenched political and religious identities Matt held. First, as Witnesses attest in testimonials in the pages of *The Watchtower* (WTBTS 2013b) and in Watch Tower audiovisual media (WTBTS 2016d), studying the Bible is the first step of making conscious their entanglement with a faction in the world. A white Witness from South Africa notes of her racist upbringing toward black Africans, “I was trapped in a mindset of prejudice and did not even realize it. That attitude began to change, however, once I started to study the Bible” (WTBTS 2013b: 5). I have heard countless similar testimonials of Kyrgyz and Uzbek Witnesses in Bishkek—Kyrgyz ethnonationalism is the spring of much ethnic violence and prejudice in contemporary Kyrgyzstan (Ismailbekova 2013; McBrien 2011; Rezvani 2013)—that locate “Bible principles” drawn forth from particular Bible verses (e.g., Acts 10: 34, 35) as driving the theocratic education that makes apparent the divisions of the world. Dima directly attributed Matt’s changes to reading the Bible—and Matt did as well. He said, “I never knew so much was in the Bible until I studying with *The Watchtower*.” This amplifies the importance of the responsibilities Watch Tower media holds in letting the Bible speak for itself (Ch. 3).

Further, these testimonies, and the way such topics are written about in Watch Tower media, always rely on the theology of God's sovereignty discussed above, which foregrounds the futility of human attempts at accountability. Articles in *The Watchtower*, such as the one I just referenced, typically use the failures of political activism and government to effect lasting peace as a foil against which they set theocratic principles and ethics. Dima reported that his approach would be no different. By reading scriptures with Matt, he could then point Matt to any number of Watch Tower articles or videos that would show human efforts to causally solve the problem of divisions in the world to be ultimately ineffective. That is, bit by bit, the theology I outlined above is taught to the student, but theocratic pedagogy does this by showing the student how political action is frivolous and teaching this will always be tailored to the political entrenchments of the student.

However, what *really* constitutes the work of theocratic education is the application of the principles learned in the Bible; taking up the responsibilities learned in the Bible is what "makes over" a person's mind, or at least demonstrates that it has been to their teachers. This must be done in tandem with studying the Bible and the two continually feedback into each other, but—just like the publisher giving the witness must precede the response of the person-in-the-world in the initial call—reading the Bible must come first, otherwise one would not know God's principles. However, as I have argued above, knowledge is connected to responsibility *in processes that give* accountability. In Chapter 2 we saw that responsibility can traverse forms of accountability, as people-in-the-world can take up the responsibilities of listening without understanding or recognizing the validity of Witnesses' form of accountability (that is, we can now say, theocracy). In Chapter 3 we saw that as listeners began to understand, new knowledge transduced the kind of responsibility they took up, as the listener's responses (namely, asking for explanation) began to make the person-in-the-world accountable to God. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, this is fundamental to the ethics of theopolitics, as God's supremacy is founded on subjects who willingly and consciously submit to his rule. The submissive quality of the listener is changed into conscious submission to theocratic rule.

What is particular to Bible studies is that the student already has some amount of understanding and is in the process of becoming accountable. Whereas during return visits, the listener

was necessarily unaccountable for the responsibilities of the interaction, the student's position is different. The student's responsibilities, as they are concurrently being persuaded by their teacher and consciously submitting to theocratic rule, change to Kingdom responsibilities—even though they are only partially accountable. Witnesses have a name for this identity: the “unbaptized publisher.” The reader will remember that “publisher” is one of Witnesses' aliases for the set of responsibilities they take up as one of Jehovah's Witnesses, namely the responsibilities to evangelize. However, baptism is the ritual event that marks a person as fully accountable to Jehovah. So, the *unbaptized publisher* is a publisher (i.e., a person taking up a certain set of responsibilities) who is not yet totally accountable (i.e., baptized).

Witnesses mobilize the new prospect of accountability to teach students in a way that is slightly different from their teaching of listeners. In Bible studies, (future) accountability is used to help persuade the student to take responsible action in increasingly intentional ways.²⁵ That is, the student is perpetually made aware through the lived hermeneutics of Bible studies of their partial accountability, pointing out the areas in their lives where they need to make changes. Accountability is the persuasive tool that, as it were, identifies the areas of one's mind that need to be made over (riffing on Paul's words in Romans) and motivates the overturning of strongly entrenched things. Indeed, this might be one way to understand how every thought can be made captive and obedient to Jesus (2 Corinthians 10:5; see above).

On the one hand, Dima conceptualized this process in terms of his explicit attempts to help Matt see the futility in attempting to politically solve the persecution of Christians in Pakistan, or even holding onto such identities at all—a process we cannot see because it happened over the course of many months in private Bible studies. But Dima also held that it was the very act of bringing students to the Kingdom Hall that signaled that Matt was *really* becoming accountable. This was observable to the anthropologist as well. After Matt's first conversation in Urdu in the Kingdom Hall, Dima—as well as others in the congregation—overtly made efforts to commend him for talking with the visitors. Dima relayed that he similarly made efforts to remind Matt of that experience in their private conversations and studies. These actions, Dima explained, were

25 Remember, for Witnesses intentionality is always tied to accountability, but not always to responsibility (cf. Laidlaw 2013: 196).

geared toward supporting Matt's eventual choice to take part in the ministry himself, which he finally did by bringing his university friends with him to the Kingdom Hall. But, perhaps most importantly, Matt asked Dima how he could start participating more in the field ministry. In doing so Matt became an unbaptized publisher, submitting to Jehovah and evincing a serious advancement towards becoming accountable, even though his life experience pointed him towards taking sides in the system of things. But, for Dima at least, Matt's bringing Tarsem and Amrick to the Kingdom Hall showed that he was willing to set aside prejudices he learned in the world and take up the responsibilities of neutrality.

Chapter 5

BAPTISM

“Christian water baptism,” as Witnesses call it, is a symbol of the act of becoming accountable to Jehovah; the act of complete immersion in water is a symbol of an individual making “a personal dedication to Jehovah to serve him as disciples of his Son” (WTBTS 2002b: 115). Thus, while baptism is perhaps more frequently talked about—especially by non-Witnesses—as the watershed in conversion, for Witnesses it is in fact subsequent and subordinate to dedication. Dedication, as such, is the moment in which one is marked accountable and one’s baptism publicly signifies that accountability to the corporate body of God’s people.

Dedication is a solemn prayer offered to Jehovah by the “baptismal candidate” that is the result of conversion, the result of ethical pedagogy that made a person-in-the-world into a listener and a listener into a student. To be morally efficacious—to truly be the consequence of conversion as the result of the moral learning that took place during one’s Bible studies—this prayer must be sincere (WTBTS 1955: 379-380), necessitating that it be free of coercion and be based in the acquisition of understanding “Bible truth.” Dedication, as such, is “not a matter of



Spread 5.1 - "Baptism as spectacle."

Top left and bottom left: Images taken during the 2019 "International Convention" in Athens, Greece. Before the candidates were baptized, they made a full circuit around the stadium to thunderous applause.

Top right: Baptism at regional convention at a Bishkek Kingdom Hall in 2019. The pool was set up behind the Kingdom Hall and was taken down after the convention. A web camera transmitted video of the baptisms to



the Kingdom Hall so more publishers could spectate, much as is demonstrated in the other images.
Bottom right: As viewed from afar, at a regional convention in 2018 at the “Assembly Hall” in Bishkek.
All photos by author.

the emotions... it is a calmly considered matter in the light of facts” (ibid.: 379). This weighing of Bible knowledge results in a “vow”—that is, a “solemn promise made to God to perform some act... enter some service... of one’s own free will” (WTBTS 2018d: 1162)—to be an “ordained minister of Jehovah” (WTBTS 2017d: 6). The vow to be an ordained minister is a commitment to take up the responsibilities of preaching and teaching described in this thesis. As I laid out in the previous chapter, this centers on recognizing the sovereignty of God and submitting to Jehovah’s theocratic order, as evangelism is ethically and theopolitically premised on Christian neutrality.

Dedication is about making subjects of the Kingdom of God. Following Caroline Humphrey’s (2008) notion of the subject as the “entity” that is the “centre of reflection, intentionality, and decision” (Bodenhorn, Holbraad, and Laidlaw 2018: 8), the overarching argument of this thesis has been that accountability is a fundamental part of ethical subjectivity. I have shown how, in the eyes of Witnesses, people-in-the-world lack ethical subjectivity and are—therefore—unaccountable (Ch. 2). I have examined the moralizing pedagogical processes through which people-in-the-world, degree by degree, make themselves into ethical subjects by becoming accountable to God (Ch. 3 and 4). This arc focuses on the individual, accountable subject.

However, these subjects cannot ethically exist unto themselves, but must be connected together through the “Christian congregation” (WTBTS 2002a). Often Christians are talked about as “members” of a “body” (1 Corinthians 12:14-26). Baptized publishers are subjects of the Kingdom of God. Herein lies the whole importance of water baptism: it signifies, not to the world, but to the attending Witnesses at the baptism that the individual has made their dedication to Jehovah and become accountable. These baptisms (most often, and under ideal circumstances¹) happen at conventions of varying sizes and are made into a spectacle (see spread 5.1).

1 Baptisms can and do take place under less-than-ideal circumstances. The most extreme of which I heard was from one Bible student in Tajikistan, who after learning about neutrality, refused to comply with Tajikistan’s conscription laws. He was subsequently imprisoned. During his pretrial internment, the student expressed his desire to be baptized. After his court hearing in Dushanbe, he was sentenced to a penal colony in an undisclosed location. The elders, deeming the student eligible for baptism, found out the location of the penal colony, intercepted the transport convoy taking the student there, bribed the guards, and baptized the student in a canal next to the road. I have heard similar stories of clandestine baptisms in the context of the USSR. Consider also how during the COVID-19 pandemic, Assembly Halls (a building larger than a Kingdom Hall for local conventions) around the world have been closed. Accordingly, baptisms have happened in other places. For example, during the time of writing the Witnesses I study the Bible with here in Cambridge baptized a man in their garden swimming pool.

It is for this reason I decided to title this chapter “Baptism” rather than “Dedication.” Baptism deals in symbols that have different theological meanings. But socially, the ritual connects together the newly accountable to the already accountable as co-subjects of the Kingdom of God through the aesthetics of the spectacle. To wit, dedication deals with the accountability of the individual subject, but—as we will see over the course of this chapter—baptism deals with the accountability of co-subjects in God’s earthly institution. This is particularly important to Witnesses, as they hold that “the Bible clearly shows that nations and individuals must render an account to the Sovereign Lord Jehovah” (WTBTS 1996a: 15). Baptism, as such, embodies accountability at the scale of the individual *and* the nation.

In this chapter I will investigate some of the ways accountability is embodied, and what that embodiment means for God’s organization. I will begin by detailing what exactly the student becomes accountable for at dedication, or what they are promising to do, by reviewing how Witnesses understand themselves to be accountable to Jehovah for evangelism. The need for evangelism began with the rebellion of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; all humans who have ever lived need to hear the “good news.” But Witnesses understand evangelism as doing more work than just the communication of salvation to human beings, as has been the focus to this point in the thesis. Evangelism is also about vindicating Jehovah’s “good name.” “Vindication,” in this sense, also ties back to the rebellion. In the Garden Satan tempted Eve by “slandering God’s name, in effect telling [her] that Jehovah is a liar” (WTBTS 2020b: 4). Adam, Eve and some of the angels(-*cum*-demons) bought into Satan’s lie, necessitating the need to vindicate Jehovah’s name. Witnesses argue that when they are conducting public witnessing, on the streets of cities next to their literature carts, they are not only engaging in the search work (Ch. 2) but are vindicating Jehovah’s name by giving a witness “to the nations” (Acts 9:15; Ephesians 3:8), even when they are not speaking. But this “vindication”—as in the story of Job—is not only found in the circulation of textual proof, but in the embodiment of *being* a witness.

To illustrate the embodiment of accountability—or what might be called an “embodied witness”—I will describe how Witnesses refuse blood transfusions as a way of living out their dedication to Jehovah. That is, by making the decision to refuse blood, through being

“exemplary” (Robbins 2018), Witnesses are embodying their accountability to Jehovah, even if they lose their body in the process. To think through this sort of decision and its implications for the accountability of the human subject, I will consider the notion of “event-decisions” (Humphrey 2008), describing how “extraordinary happenings” make “circulatable witnesses.” However, for Witnesses, embodying accountability and being embodied witnesses is not only about the extraordinary but can include the mundane—things as trivial as dressing for field service. To conclude, I will discuss how events—such as baptism or refusing blood transfusions—are forms of accounting I call “accountability events,” but that these do not preclude the everyday importance of taking responsibility as “ordinary witnesses” to vindicate Jehovah’s good name.

Ordained ministers: Accounting for field service

As I was trying to get a lay of the land after arriving in Bishkek in April 2018, Rahkmet—my Bethelite contact who helped arrange things for my arrival in Kyrgyzstan—explained to me when I asked how many Witnesses there were in Kyrgyzstan, “Well this is an interesting thing to consider. For example, last year [2017] we had a little over 5,000 publishers, but we had almost twice that attend Christ’s Memorial. But in order to be counted as one of Jehovah’s Witnesses, you have to be regularly partaking of the ministry” (compare WTBTs 2017a: 4). This accords with Watch Tower literature, which frequently writes, “all who are *counted as* Jehovah’s witnesses² are active preachers of the good news” (WTBTs 1959: 722; emphasis mine; see also, WTBTs 1987; 1995; 2019d: 82). The reader will remember that “accountability” is the ability to be counted as part of God’s organization as an institutionalized form of reckoning. The regular doing of evangelism is therefore the primary metric by which a publisher’s responsibilities are measured after baptism.

Before 1935, the “Anointed class”—the elect who will serve in the theocracy with Jesus during the millennium—were solely accountable for evangelism and the processes of preaching and

2 In late-March, early-April 1976, the Society began using “Witnesses” instead of “witnesses” in its publications. Thus, from 1931-1976 it was “Jehovah’s witnesses” and from 1976 on, “Jehovah’s Witnesses” (e.g., WTBTs 1976b: 199; 1976a: 3). This change has no official theological explanation.

teaching were principally concerned with finding other members of the 144,000 (i.e., other members of the elect). The 144,000 described in Revelation 14:1-20 is not understood to be a figurative number, but indicates the precise number of the elect, who will rule with Jesus in heaven as “kings and priests” as part of the theocratic order over the New World (WTBTS 2021). However, in 1935, at a convention held in Washington D.C., Rutherford announced a critical, new theological understanding that stands as a pivotal climacteric, changing both who could evangelize and who could be evangelized. During this convention Rutherford’s sermon, published in the August issues of *The Watchtower* (WTBTS 1935a; 1935b),³ announced that the “great crowd” (then talked about as the “great multitude” and “Jonadabs”) mentioned in Revelations 7:9 had theretofore been misunderstood as a “spiritual second class” to the Anointed (WTBTS 1998a). The great crowd referred to those who “love God” and are “sincere” but who are not Anointed to serve in the theocratic government, emphasizing that they were therefore not obligated to preach (WTBTS 1935a: 228).

This redefinition fundamentally changed the object of evangelism, as preaching was no longer about finding the 144,000 elect, but for “searching out” all those who were willing to “consecrate”⁴ themselves to Jehovah for an eternal earthly life to be ruled over by theocratic order. In other words, evangelism became about finding the rightly disposed who could be persuaded to submit, not just the elect. Shortly after the August 1935 issues this developed further, as the notion that it was just the Anointed finding those with an “earthly hope” was amended because the great crowd “do not remain mum [after learning about the kingdom], but vigorously join Jehovah’s witnesses... in crying out the kingdom message” (WTBTS 1935f: 333) and subsequently evangelism was shored up as the great crowd’s obligation alongside the Anointed class (WTBTS 1936: 58; 1938: 39-40). Later, Watch Tower publications would stop

3 Scholars point towards this two-part series as expounding this change of doctrine (e.g., Chryssides 2016: 94-5), but this new notion of the “great multitude” is expounded further in September and October’s issues in a three-part series titled “Prisoners” (WTBTS 1935c; 1935d; 1935e) and beyond. That is, while the summer of 1935 was the theological turning point, this doctrine had long been debated amongst Watch Tower leadership (consider Rutherford’s [1931; 1932; 1932] three-volume book *Vindication*) and was continually developed, and continues to be as “light is shed” on the Bible (WTBTS 1993b: 120-148).

4 That is to say “dedicate.” Later Watch Tower publications would delineate a doctrinal difference between “consecration” and “dedication,” the former applying to the Anointed (which appropriately means consecrated) and the latter applying to all others in the great crowd (e.g., WTBTS 1955: 380). However, this differentiation was not completely worked out in 1935.

differentiating between the Anointed class as “Witnesses” and “their companions,” or “the great crowd,” calling all those who dedicated themselves to God “Jehovah’s witnesses” (beginning WTBTs 1946: 22).

Today all Witnesses—in order to be counted as Witnesses—around the world must take up the responsibilities of evangelism I have laid out in Chapters 2-4, responsibilities that extend recursively throughout their life.⁵ The accounting of the responsibilities of evangelism is not left until Final Judgment and Witnesses account for their preaching and teaching every month in a standardized and bureaucratized form of accountancy called the “Field Service Report” (WTBTs 2019d: 80-82), which counts:

- The number of print and digital placements,
- Videos shown,
- number of calls made in return visits,
- different Bible studies conducted (i.e., not the total number of studies, but number of students),
- and an “accurate” number of hours spent preaching both in the door-to-door service or any other form of formal or informal publishing, even down to 15-minute intervals.

These reports are given to one of the elders (Congregation Secretary) in the congregation, who tracks and collates them, passing up a cumulative report to the Branch Office,⁶ and which hours are published annually in the Service Year Report. As discussed above, this collection of data emphasizes the importance of the congregation as the central institution in Jehovah’s organization. The “Congregation’s Publisher Record” is collation of an individual’s reports and is passed from congregation to congregation, if a Witness is to move house or otherwise switch congregations (but is not reported to the Branch Office as part of the statistical accounting).

It was through this form of accountancy that Rakhmet could answer with certainty the number of accountable publishers in 2017 (there were in fact 5,235—WTBTs 2017a). Witnesses must report at least one hour (or 15 minutes, under special circumstances) a month to be consid-

⁵ Witnesses, as they become more “spiritually mature,” may desire to take up further responsibilities and make specific commitments for preaching. These commitments are either to specific numbers of hours, or to specific preaching projects or capacities, the latter of which usually are associated with a living stipend. These include “Auxiliary Pioneer,” “Regular Pioneer,” “Special Pioneer,” and “Missionary.”

⁶ That is, information about individual Witnesses is not reported to the Branch Office, only a total report of the statistics from each congregation.

ered a “regular publisher” and thereby be counted as one of Jehovah’s Witnesses. This regular check on a publisher’s responsibilities to preach and teach, to make placements, and so on, is conceptualized as a way to help publishers live up to the intense (and continual) responsibilities of evangelism they took on at dedication and baptism. This accounting of evangelism is used to identify problems that might hinder the preaching work *and* is used to motivate individual publishers in their personal ministries.

When I knew him in Bishkek, Sabir had been preaching and teaching since he was 24, when he “found the Truth,” and Jamilya, who is 14 years younger than him, had been preaching since she was almost 10 (her parents became Witnesses when she was young). Together they had dedicated their lives to special service assignments, even serving together in Branch Offices in Russia and Kyrgyzstan. Sabir said that they had never considered their preaching responsibilities to be strenuous, until suddenly, they were. In 2015, Jamilya became seriously ill and was confined to bed rest, and Sabir had to take up extra shifts to afford her expensive medical treatments. He said, “We went from preaching about 70 hours a month to preaching maybe 4... sometimes fewer... The first month I ever reported null, my morale completely fell. Now it is better, even though Jamilya is still sick.” Jamilya’s pained smile told a different story, and she opened up about how she was still struggling with the idea that her illness would perpetually (as far as she knew) limit her physical capacity for field service.

These physical limitations were not counted against Jamilya and Sabir when they reported their monthly preaching, so when I asked Sabir if their sporadic preaching meant he was an “irregular” publisher, he laughed a response, “No, we’re regular—the situation is irregular.” He continued to explain that categories like “irregular publisher” (missing a month’s report or reporting no hours spent publishing) and “inactive publisher” (several continuous months of not publishing) are not meant to be the substance for punitive action. That is, this form of accounting was remedial, but not in a pejorative sense, instead in the sense of offering a remedy, such as offering instruction or pastoral care—almost always through recourse to what “the Bible says.” Though these monthly accountings can cause discomfort (as Sabir and Jamilya told me), they are not to be confused with the finality of Jehovah’s judgments. These monthly accounts are to provide “spiritual assistance” to those experiencing “weakness” in the congregation (WTBTS

2013f: 29-30). The categories “irregular” and “inactive,” in Sabir’s eyes, were therefore also not censorious, but were in place so elders could identify where spiritual assistance was required in the congregation.

These accounts transcend the individual publisher, however, as the reports also serve to “accurately” record the activities of “congregations as a whole” (WTBTS 2019d: 84), providing data that demonstrate how the “witness to all the nations” is progressing towards its New World conclusion. This model demonstrated by the Bible, as scripture is understood to be a historical accounting of God’s people *and* an account of “the nations” of the earth (WTBTS 1996a). This should be understood in the context of Jehovah’s sovereignty, as I described in the previous chapter, in that God’s people are a testament against the futility of human self-governance. In this sense, God instrumentalizes his people as witnesses on evangelical scales far greater than the interactional ones I considered above and should macro-sociological scales—in the case of human nations—but also on a cosmic scale, as God’s people collectively stand to be witnesses to angels, demons, and even Satan the Devil himself. The interactional-level data collected in a congregation therefore are concentrated into national, and ultimately global, statistics, providing an account that “vindicates” God.

Vindication and proclamation

Whereas the purpose of interactional-scale evangelism is to convince individuals to become accountable, institutions and cosmic entities are always taken to be already accountable. Convincing “nations,” or even demons or Satan, seems absurd. Instead, this socio-cosmic scale of evangelism is about “vindicating the good name of Jehovah” and issuing proof against the lie that originated in the Garden of Eden. This is an important aspect of evangelism for Jehovah’s Witnesses and at times it has even been proclaimed to be the primary point of evangelism, with salvation being secondary. This decentering of salvation in evangelism is important in understanding the way Witnesses understand the more proclamatory aspect of announcing the good news, including in the door-to-door ministry and in other forms of public Witnessing.

For example, Pasha—the 19-year-old Russian in the English Group—once texted me asking if I wanted to meet up for his field service. I was quite excited about this, as direct invitations to come along preaching were rare, and asked where I should meet him. We planned to meet at the Philharmonia in the center of Bishkek. When I arrived, despite their being a sizable crowd of young people hanging around the grand Soviet courtyard in front of the Philharmonia, skateboarding and riding BMX, I could easily spot Pasha, as he was the only person there wearing a white button-up shirt and tie. I approached his lanky-but-polished form and he greeted me with his characteristic, “Hello bro!” and half handshake, half hug. I asked him where we would be going, to which he responded by gesturing widely with his arms to the courtyard and boulevard beyond.

We chatted in our normal blend of English and Russian, and we walked and talked, as we often would, on a range of subjects from serials on Netflix we enjoyed to theological concepts. We wandered far—both around the Philharmonia campus and beyond, circuiting up and down Prospekt Chuy, from the Philharmonia to the GUM shopping mall (my phone later told me we walked some 8 miles). We stopped and ate lunch, enjoyed an ice cream on a bench, and drank copious amounts of *kvas* from street vendors. Despite the fact that we had not actually talked with anyone, I did notice when we were saying our goodbyes that Pasha brought up the app he used on his phone to track his hours preaching and resolutely push the “STOP” button, which then logged his time in tabular form—easy to later transpose to his Field Service Report.

I did not say anything the first time this happened supposing that perhaps he was considering the time spent talking to *me* as his time preaching. But some weeks later, Pasha texted me again and asked for me to come out. I did and the same sort of experience ensued. This happened a few times, before I finally asked, “Pash, don’t get me wrong, I love to hang out with you and chat, but is this really field service?” I had been “street witnessing” before and had seen others do it (see Ch. 2), so I had some basis for my suspicions. Rather than make a defense that we had talked to *some* people (to be fair, in our subsequent walks, he had), he proceeded to explain that simply *being* in the public square was evangelism. He said, “See, here in Kyrgyzstan we’re prevented from having literature carts, but doing this, we can *be* literature carts.” He looked at me sincerely then laughed, “No, really—I am serious, bro.”

I have withheld one crucial descriptor until this point: the whole time we walked around, Pasha had carried around a Public Edition of *The Watchtower* held—somewhat awkwardly—facing cover out and in such a way as to be easily readable by passers-by.

This can be understood, as I discussed in Chapter 3, as allocating the responsibility of initiating the conversation in the initial call to the materials and the onlooking people-in-the-world—this is standard practice for literature carts, and Witnesses are instructed that while standing next to literature carts they are not to initiate conversations with passers-by but to respond to their questions. Pasha was adapting this practice to another form of public witnessing called “street witnessing,” where Witnesses cold-contact people on the street. Certainly, Pasha’s innovation is not widespread, nor is it orthodox. However, when I talked with him more about it—as we walked the streets of Bishkek, ties dancing back and forth—Pasha said something that is quite telling, “When Jehovah’s Witnesses are out in public they are witnessing, even when they aren’t opening their mouths.” Pressing him further, he said with some exasperation, “It wouldn’t even matter if no one talked to us.” For Pasha, simply being in public spaces *as a Jehovah’s Witness* was witnessing.

Pasha was not as clear, and came up short, when I asked him to whom he was witnessing if no one talked to him. But other Witnesses fleshed this idea out when I asked them about this sort of experience by telling them a “hypothetical vignette” (Hickman 2011: 144⁷) followed up by an unstructured interview. I would pose a story such as:

“A pair of Witnesses are standing by a literature cart in a big city. They dutifully stood by the cart, smiling and acting approachable. They stood for the amount of time they planned, then packed up, but while they stood there no one talked with them.”

I would then ask questions such as, “Did these Witnesses give a witness?” Without exception, Witnesses told me yes. Ira, for example, answered by quoting to me Matthew 5:16, “Let your light shine before men, so that they may see your fine works and give glory to your Father who is in the heavens.” She explained that these Witnesses were showing the world their fine works

7 Hickman uses this method as part of a psychological framework to ethnographically capture moral justifications. While I do not adopt his framework, I find the method useful in eliciting talk about preaching because this sort of conversation echoes the hypothetical situations in Witnesses’ “illustrations” (see Ch. 3).

through their public witnessing. But, more importantly she said, “This action [public witnessing] gives glory to Jehovah and sanctifies his name.”

Of course, “vindication of Jehovah’s name”—what Ira rendered as “sanctification”—is often considered in logocentric terms: it is the literal teaching of Jehovah’s name to the people “of all nations.” Both Pasha’s example and the literature cart witnessing on which it was based do work to convince others, or plant seeds for future interactions, but these methods for preaching also embodied ways of vindicating Jehovah’s name in more-than-interactional frames. In this way, the door-to-door ministry could also be considered in these sorts of proclamatory terms, not because of the interactions themselves, but because the ministerial form imitates “Jesus’s way” of preaching (Ch. 3). It seems to me that most frequently, this cosmic scale of evangelism makes use of the Witnesses’ bodies instead of their words.

Embodied witnesses: Aesthetics and evangelism

Omri Elisha’s (2018) study of “praise dance” is a particularly vivid example of what might be thought of as “embodied witnesses,” as Christian women of color in New York City “dance the word.” Elisha describes the women’s dancing as a vehicle of both testimony and liturgical worship. Importantly in his analysis, the women dancers are “speaking,” as religious language is “‘inscribed’ by motion on the surface of their bodies” (Elisha 2018: 383). Elisha points out that these dancers’ “devotional and aesthetic practices” are “techniques of entextualization” (ibid.: 384) as embodiment semiotically replicates the words of textual objects (in this case, the Bible; cf. Tomlinson 2014: 2). That said, the aesthetics of dance (Elisha says, the “form of ‘art’”) are at once more constrained than discursive and textual modes of preaching *and* are more affectively expressive; visual aesthetics convey more than what is or can be conveyed in words but in ways that are symbolically less expansive.

In Elisha’s analysis, the praise dancers are represented as speaking through their movements, requiring the movements to have a specific addressee—the spectator. He lets us know that the addressees are intentionally selected by the speaker-*cum*-dancer, even from among a crowd of co-spectators (Elisha 2018: 387). However, when the dancers “present their bodies to God as a

‘living sacrifice’” (ibid.: 384)—or, as he quotes one dancer from a different church in New York City, “This [dancing] is all to glorify Him” (Elisha 2017: 79)—the specific addressee falls outside of the observable gaze of the anthropologist. Even more, dancing can be morally fraught, and praise dancers are working to “‘reclaim’ dance from Satan” (Elisha 2018: 381) in what might be thought of as “semiotic transduction” (Keane 2013) as it is the purification and reclamation that empower dance as an aesthetic form. It is on the level of aesthetics that I see communication happening in embodied evangelism, rather than a consideration of aesthetics as crypto-linguistic interactions. Embodied witnesses are meant to convince not only specific addressees as individuals (both human and spiritual) but are meant to persuade the nations.

What we see from Elisha’s accounts of religious dance is that this form of evangelistic communication is embodied and follows what Birgit Meyer (2009: 13; 2010) has called “sensational forms” in that, as Elisha (2017: 78) puts it, “human interactions with God are inconceivable without material channels that allow worshipers to experience the divine as real and immediate.” Sensational forms “bind and bond believers with each other” (Meyer 2009: 13) through embodied “sensory engagement of humans with the divine.” Importantly, Meyer argues that sensational forms take shape within a given set of religious politics that are necessarily a foundational part of ethics and values. This notion of sensational form does a lot of work to illuminate the ways which Elisha’s interlocutors’ (gendered) bodies take up aesthetic⁸ registers in communication with the divine.

I will now trace out one way Witnesses embody witnesses on sociological and cosmic scales by considering the ways their bodies are made into “circulatable witnesses.”

Blood, Bishkek, Bengaluru

Miroslav cracked open a “Baltika 0,” one of the more popular nonalcoholic beers sold in Kyrgyzstan, and took a sip that turned into a deep quaff. He wiped his lips on his sleeve and said, “The doctor told us it is serious. Likely colon cancer. Iosif will have to go to Bishkek to find out more from the oncologist, but likely, they’ll have to go somewhere else to receive

8 A term that is, as Meyer (2009: 6) argues, rooted in Aristotelian *aisthesis* rather than Kantian notions of beauty.

treatment—India probably.” Iosif, Miroslav’s father-in-law, had been sick for a couple weeks before the doctors in the provincial hospital supposed that it might be cancer. I asked Miroslav why India? Why wouldn’t the oncologists in Bishkek be enough to treat the cancer? Was it a matter of severity?

Miroslav took another giant gulp, finishing the can, and smashed it into the garden table so it flattened. He cracked open another one, taking another drink before answering, as if the 0.0% beer would take the edge off of the conversation.

“So, the thing is, I mean, they have serious oncology departments—they even train Indian medical students in the city—but no doctors in Bishkek will agree to do the surgery without a blood transfusion. It will be just like when it was with all the others. We’ve seen it time and again. The doctors just will not do the surgeries without blood. So, we’ll go to India. There our brothers have arranged with doctors who were trained in Europe to do surgeries without blood. India is the closest place.”

The next day Miroslav drove with Iosif, a short, active man in his mid-seventies, and his wife Luba to Bishkek. It was a grueling nine-hour drive in a car with no air conditioning and a shot suspension over potholed roads, and on a hot summer’s day. Iosif, by the time he got to Bishkek, was not in good shape. I did not hear from Miroslav nor Iosif—despite my occasional attempts to make contact—for three months. Then, out of the blue, Iosif sent me a text inviting me to come to visit so we could go relax in the mountains and so he could tell me what happened with his cancer. When I finally made it out to see him, we met up and got ready to go to the mountains. Iosif and Luba then unfolded the rest of the drama to me as we rode in the car.

Things moved very quickly after they got to Bishkek. The next morning, they went to see a specialist who did a full colonoscopy and said that they would need to do a colectomy. However, the specialist matter-of-factly informed them, there was no chance of a successful surgery being conducted without a perioperative blood transfusion. Iosif tried to explain to the specialist that he would not accept a blood transfusion before, during, or after the operation—a conversation that apparently ended with the specialist becoming quite agitated with him, yelling that “if he

wanted to commit suicide there were easier ways to do it.” It turned out that even among the private clinics in Bishkek, doctors refused to do the operation without a blood transfusion.⁹

Blood transfusions, in Witness readings of the Bible, are not acceptable on the grounds that in Leviticus the Law given to Moses states that “If any man eats any sort of blood, I will certainly set my face against the one who is eating the blood, and I will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Leviticus 17:10-11). “Eating” in this sense is extrapolated to mean “used to sustain the body.” That is, any sort of blood—other than one’s own—used to sustain the body is mortiferous, whether one survives surgery or not, because it is an infraction of Jehovah’s law. Even one’s own blood becomes a morally fraught issue, as the Law states that “when preparing animal flesh to eat, the blood ought to be poured out on the ground,” meaning that any blood that leaves the body should be disposed of and not stored. This extends the notion of eating blood to “preoperative autologous blood donation,” or the procedure of a patient depositing some of their own blood before a surgery.

Since the decades following the 1950s, when the Watch Tower Society took a more hard-line stance on the use of one’s own blood for tests and other procedures, hematological science has become drastically more complicated.¹⁰ New techniques that employ fractions of the four components of blood, or other developments such as “hemodilution,” in which immediately before an operation a quantity of the patient’s blood is removed and replaced with a “volume expander,” are becoming more common. Over the last twenty years or so, while the Society continues to maintain a clear cut stance against blood transfusions in general, including preoperative autologous blood donation, other techniques involving fractions of blood components, hemodilution, cell salvage, and a host of other, constantly developing treatments have become what is known among Witnesses as “a matter of conscience.” This means that individual Witnesses, based on their study of the Bible, should make their own choice as to whether these techniques constitute an infraction of Jehovah’s law.

9 This is despite a history of clinical observational studies beginning in the late 1980s that conclude that perioperative allogenic blood transfusions decrease the overall survival rate of colorectal cancers (Aguilar-Nascimento, Zampieri-Filho, and Bordin 2021). My Witness friends were keenly aware of this sort of research and blamed Kyrgyzstan’s post-Soviet medical system as relying on out-of-date operative techniques.

10 For a full accounting of the historical development of the Witnesses’ stance on blood transfusions, see Knox (2018: 149-88). For an ethnographic account of Witnesses blood transfusion refusal in biomedical landscapes in Germany, see Rajtar (2016).

In Iosif's case, the only options being offered him were not matters of conscience—there were no alternative treatments available—and, as such, there was no hard choice to make. “Blood transfusions are simply against Jehovah's will,” Iosif explained, “I would rather die than get a blood transfusion. I didn't even have to think of what to say to the doctors.” Luba laughed, “It is true. In fact, the way he so quickly answered the doctors is probably what strongly aggravated them.” Iosif grinned sheepishly.

During the time when Iosif was making appointments with private clinics in Bishkek, he was also consulting with Witnesses at the Branch Office. The Witnesses at the Branch Office were very familiar with this sort of situation: Iosif was not the first to need a lifesaving operation without a blood transfusion and these brothers were keenly aware that there were no surgeons in Bishkek willing to operate without blood. Based on the likely prognosis of the cancer, the brothers recommended a doctor in Bengaluru, India who was known to be highly successful with colectomies without blood transfusions, deploying surgical techniques that prevent blood loss during the operation. The Branch Office arranged for everything—and with haste! Tickets were purchased for Iosif and Luba for the following week. Due to other similar incidents, the Branch Office was familiar with the Indian visa procedures and quickly procured visas for them. Witnesses were contacted in Bengaluru and every needful thing was arranged while Iosif rested. Shortly after finding out that a moral operation in Kyrgyzstan was impossible, Iosif and his wife were on a plane to India.

Iosif explained that the trip to Bengaluru, especially with a stopover in Delhi, was excruciating but having every detail arranged for them made the journey manageable, despite his deteriorating condition. When they landed in Bengaluru, a brother from the local Branch Office met them at the airport and took them to India's Bethel. Bethels are operated communally, and those who work in Bethel live there also, meaning that Bethels have apartments, some of which are made available for (non-Bethelite) Witnesses in extenuating circumstances. Iosif and Luba lived in Bethel before going to the hospital, being doted on by local brothers and sisters. There was one brother there that knew some Russian (Iosif and Luba knew little English), so they could communicate on some level with the local brothers and sisters, but Iosif said there was no lapse in communication (compare Ch. 2), and Luba said it was obvious that they were being

loved and taken care of. After about a week in Bethel, they were told that the doctor would be able to do the surgery and they were taken to the hospital.

Because of Iosif's age, and the complexities of the surgery, Iosif had to stay in the hospital for some three weeks after the surgery. This time included long stretches where Iosif and Luba were stuck at the hospital as local Witnesses could not spend all their time with them. Iosif and Luba said they relished this time, however, during which they cultivated relationships with people in the ward. Luba said she brought half a suitcase filled with sweets that she distributed piece-by-piece to children in the ward. Luba then monologued for a while about an amazing opportunity they had to share a witness in the hospital, she said, "While we were in the ward, there was a woman who came every day to change Iosif's bedpan and sheets and clean the room. No one would talk to her—it was so very sad. The first day we were there, I tried talking to her and it was a complete failure. She would not speak at all. She would just freeze or turn and quickly leave. One day I tried giving her the candy. At first, she would not take it, but eventually she did! I could never talk with her, because I don't speak their language, but I know I showed her Jehovah's love."

Iosif grinned ear to ear during Luba's story and the conversation took a very different turn. Iosif picked up where Luba left off, explaining that he was so happy that they had to go to Bengaluru for the treatment because it provided them with so many opportunities to preach. Iosif started telling me that the day before he was admitted to the hospital, the Bethel brothers took him out to evangelize with a literature cart, passing out tracts and booklets while the Indian brothers preached. This became the highlight of their "Indian holiday," as Iosif called it.

I attempted redirecting the conversation back to the surgery, anxious to know how his recovery went—and more about the specifics of the operative techniques used by the surgeons. Iosif waived his hand, saying, "It was completely fine. The doctor was fantastic. There was a translator that they had to use to confirm with me that I was okay to proceed with the surgery. There was no resistance or arguments, and they did not try to persuade me to get a transfusion. It is a testament to the preaching work our brothers in India have done to find such doctor. My survival testifies of Jehovah's law, now they can use my story too when they preach." He continued, "If I had died, I would have died as a witness of Jehovah's law." No matter what his

body would have testified, all he had to lose was his life. When I pointed this out to him, he chuckled and said, “No, Danny, I would have lived... An operation isn’t lifesaving, not really.” What Iosif meant by saying his possible death could be a witness deserves to be unpacked.

Bloodguilt and exemplars

To really understand Iosif’s story, I must briefly lay out the notion of “bloodguilt” in Witness theology (WTBTS 2018c: 346-47), which can be understood in three primary ways. (1) Bloodguilt, in the first instance, is the Mosaic law against the “shedding of innocent blood.”¹¹ (2) It also includes “eating blood,” as I described earlier. That is, by either literally eating blood (e.g., food like black pudding) or by receiving a blood transfusion (allogenic or autologous), one takes on bloodguilt (a hyper-specific form of accountability to God). (3) Finally, there is a third version of bloodguilt that concerns evangelism: The kingdom message Witnesses proclaim is understood to be “lifesaving.” This is because the world is soon to be destroyed and life in the New World is contingent. As such, giving and being a witness is the only truly proper lifesaving work, even if you lose your life whilst doing it. Although all humankind will be resurrected, only those who have received a witness and responded to it in kind will be saved at the “final test” (see Conclusion). Losing your life doing this “lifesaving work” is particularly virtuous (John 15:13; 1 John 3:16).¹²

Often, Witnesses will point to Paul as an “exemplar” (see below) of preaching, referencing him as saying, “I am clean from the blood of all men, for I have not held back from telling you all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:26-27). In this way, bloodguilt can constitute a sort of “sin of omission” (Numbers 15:22; James 4:17; WTBTS 2004¹³) for a Witness who has an opportunity to preach but does not take it on with Pauline zeal, or at least an imitation of this exemplary form of the value. I think that there are at least two ways this third notion of bloodguilt can

11 Not killing writ large. Witnesses point to verses like Exodus 22:2 for justifiable killing.

12 Witnesses understand the Greek term *mar'tys* (or martyr) meant in Biblical times to be a witness or be one who gives testimony (WTBTS 2003a: 9-10). I thank Jolene Chu for this point.

13 I provide a number of citations here because “sin of omission”—in my experience—is on the outskirts of theocratic language lexical usage and I want to ensure that the concept underpinning the idea is squarely consistent with a Witness reading of the Bible, because of the phrase’s popular usage in other Christian registers.

apply to Iosif's experience refusing to receive a blood transfusion during his colectomy. First, there are the typical ways he zealously evangelized. Even when Iosif was really sick before his operation, he still painted a smile on his face and went out preaching: he preached on the airplane, he preached before his surgery, and he preached in the hospital. Iosif told me that he simply could not pass up an opportunity to give a witness. However, I think that there is another way that Iosif's refusal of a blood transfusion can be seen as more than just his preaching during his journey to Bengaluru and back again to Bishkek. And that is through Iosif's example of zeal and submission.

Joel Robbins (2018: 176-80) argues for a "theory of exemplars" in which individual subjects become exemplary through actions that realize values to such an extent that they "solicit a special kind of attention or demand for appreciation from people." Robbins holds that values motivate individual actions, but in the course of everyday life these actions either fulfill values that are not important enough to warrant attention or praise, or because of conflicting values, some actions cannot be fully realized as exemplary. Some actions, however, stand out in the way that they are socially generative and impactful—such actions are exemplary. Importantly, Robbins (*ibid.*: 180; emphasis added) notes, "Exemplars... are *social forms* that realize a value to such a full extent. It is as *embodied* in exemplars in this way that values most forcefully or tangibly exist in social life." Exemplarity, as such, binds together *ideas* and *material* in the human subject.¹⁴ Consider the striking parallel between Robbins' remarks here and those inspired by Meyer's notion of religious aestheticism described above.¹⁵ Because of this, I find it useful to take exemplary action as being so impactful because of its embodied form. This is helpful in illuminating the ways that Iosif's refusal of perioperative blood can be seen as embodied evangelism.

The idea that Iosif's body survived the operation removing his cancer without perioperative blood becomes a narrative symbol that can be used in varying degrees of abstraction and scale for evangelism. The closest to Iosif's person, and also the least symbolic and the most inter-

14 Robbins (2018: 180) draws on Humphrey (1997) to argue that institutions—most frequently ritual—can also be exemplars. Anthropological notions of religious institutions are firmly rooted in Durkheimian notions of material objects (Asad 1993; Keane 2007).

15 Laidlaw (2013: 86) makes a similar point about "visual images and aesthetic forms" when discussing Robbins' earlier take on exemplars.

actional, is the way Iosif will go about evangelism for the rest of his life: his continued bodily existence will mediate how he talks to others when preaching and teaching. This is the case both in the sense that he will perhaps never be quite as fit as he once was, but also in a narrative sense, as he draws on his experience when preaching and teaching. One degree further removed, his decision will be used as an example of values like “zeal” in the teaching of those around him: such as Luba and Miroslav, or among his friends and fellow brothers and sisters in his community in rural Kyrgyzstan where he is well-known and loved. But, as an example in their witnessing, Iosif’s surviving body is increasingly used as an example of the benefits of living Jehovah’s law (value = “submission”; Ch. 4), and the way biomedical science confirms Biblical Truth (i.e., the idea that contemporary scientific opinion that perioperative allogenic blood transfusions are detrimental to long term survivability of colorectal cancer patients converges with Jehovah’s law). As an exemplar, Iosif is divorced from his decision—that is, divorced from his subject—because what matters is the exemplary form, not him.

The further away from him his story circulates, the more Iosif’s example is depersonalized. Iosif and Luba saw this as brimming with potential, as his example could be used to preach to legal and biomedical systems. Iosif said, “Now our brothers when they meet with medical professionals can use my experience as a case study, among the many other examples they have, plus medical research, showing that you do not need a blood transfusion to perform a successful operation.” What Iosif is referencing here are groups of elders that are trained in providing information about Witnesses’ stance on blood transfusions and nonblood treatment alternatives called “Hospital Liaison Committees” (HLC from hereon). HLCs are organized regionally under the direction of the Branch Office, drawing experienced, well-spoken, and spiritually mature elders from different congregations. Specifically, HLCs are in charge of contacting doctors, hospitals, and surgeons, trying to find ones that are amenable before a patient even sees the doctor, as well as giving advice about the local biomedical context to Witnesses in crisis, helping them to navigate their illness, and what are sometimes oppositional encounters with doctors. But HLCs also make presentations and trainings for doctors and professional bodies on Witness theology and moral operative techniques.

I once got the chance to accompany an HLC member to meet up with a doctor at a popular clinic in Bishkek. The HLC representative brought a portfolio that contained printed copies of various medical reviews concerning Witness beliefs on the “issue of blood,” translated in both Russian and English, as well as a literature review pointing towards studies that recommend blood alternatives and surgical techniques that are more careful to contain the patient’s loss of blood. When we arrived at the clinic, an orderly escorted us to the doctor’s personal office, directing us to sit and wait for the doctor who would be with us shortly. We sat waiting in a regal office filled with warm light filtered by orange curtains, surrounded by medical books, and a comically slack-jawed model skeleton. The HLC representative and I sat quietly, the portfolio resting in his lap. We stood when the doctor—an older Kyrgyz man—entered and he greeted us with a firm handshake, a professional smile, and a Moscow accent (the interaction took place in Russian).

The short presentation that followed centered not on the materials in the portfolio *per se*, but on building rapport with the doctor, a brief explanation of their beliefs, and a simple a witness: “We have thousands of adherents of our religion who—all over the world—have undergone medical procedures without blood transfusion—even here in Kyrgyzstan.” The doctor—who the HLC rep later explained was something more of the clinic’s medical director—wasted no time and asked that Witnesses come and give a training meeting in the hospital for his staff that would focus on Witnesses’ experience in preoperative and intraoperative care when blood transfusions might be deemed necessary by medical personnel. They exchanged details and the rep left the portfolio with the doctor. The entire exchange took fewer than ten minutes and we were back outside the clinic on the dusty Bishkek pavement.

The witness the HLC rep gave was not intended to convert the doctor but was intended to effect change at an institutional level. Further, Iosif’s body is exactly the sort of body that is wrapped up in the thousands of bodies the HLC rep referenced. That is, were the doctor to ask, Iosif’s treatment and operation could be brought forward as an example. Further, such examples *would* be the primary pedagogical device in the future training they planned to organize. But, it would not matter if it was Iosif’s example, or some other example, because exemplarity at this scale is less about the subject and more about form. Accordingly, this scale

of evangelism is intended not to convert medical professionals—though surely this would not be a bad thing—but to “convert” the institution to be more amenable to Jehovah’s people. Iosif, and the countless exemplars referenced by statements in Watch Tower media that begin “When the Witness with the... [insert ailment] refused blood” (e.g., WTBTs 1990: 23), are figured by Witnesses to have just as much evidential force in making systemic change as peer-reviewed research. Exemplar narratives and peer-reviewed articles are juxtaposed in HLC presentations. However, this level of example abstracts Iosif’s experience significantly, to the point that he is simply an embodied moral form—moral material to make a point. In this way, Iosif’s idea that he could be a “case study” was an accurate understanding of what happens with his example the further afield it travels. Interestingly, in scalar ways, this is also where the exemplar proves to be particularly *forceful*, in Robbins’ words, in eliciting social change (as opposed to individual conversion), but it seems exemplars lose their subjectivity in the process.

Another way examples like Iosif’s travel is through publication in *The Watchtower* and other Watch Tower media (e.g., WTBTs [Ridley] 2020). Tomlinson (2007: 716) offhandedly calls stories that can be transmitted “circulatable narratives.” Tomlinson’s comment is helpful because stories like Iosif’s must undergo this level of abstraction as to make the narrative’s symbolism compact and circulatable. This process, it seems to me, most frequently involves a reduction of the named, knowable Witness, to a bodily witness—a righteous body that can be an example. This should not be confused with the “quasi-invented models of moral qualities” Humphrey (1997: 39) describes as being part and parcel of the Maoist “hijacking” of the Mongolian forms of exemplarity. That is, abstraction in this sense is not duplicitous, but simply that, much as Elisha pointed out that aesthetics both affectively liberates and constrains communication, the symbols need reduction to be circulatable. This requires Witnesses to shed the context of the subject, creating a “circulatable witness.”

Ultimately, however, the point Iosif wanted to make to me was not about the blood transfusion at all. He kept circling back to the idea that biomedicine was not lifesaving—not really. He said, “Look—this may be hard for you to understand, but since you’ll be writing about this, you must completely apprehend what I am saying. It would not have matter had I died under the surgeon’s knife... I would be a witness.” And not just any witness—Jehovah’s witness.

Iosif explained over the course of our day out together that ultimately the only lifesaving force was God and that humans vainly attempt to imitate this power, but will always fall short. Iosif recognized that if he had died during or as a result of the operation, his example would not be as compelling in HLC-sorts of settings. But even had he died, and his example not been persuasive in HLC contexts, Iosif still felt that his decision to forego blood transfusions would have been a witness. This sort of witness would have been to “glorify God” and to demonstrate that there were people on the earth that would willingly subject themselves—even at the risk of their own lives—to Jehovah’s rule. This latter sense is precisely the notion of vindication I explored earlier. These sorts of “witnesses”—or examples—are aesthetic forms that work to *actually* change the world. Vindicating Jehovah’s name through the bearing out of theocracy on earth again is the only true change, everything else is just reiterations of the same old lie Satan told Eve in the Garden.

Baptism, blood, and the extraordinary happening

What is notable about Iosif’s experience, as with any time doctors recommend blood transfusion, is that it was an out-of-the-ordinary circumstance. That is, it is something of an event. Caroline Humphrey (2008: 360), thinking with the philosophy of Alain Badiou, writes that the event is “an extraordinary happening that brings about a rupture of previous knowledge(s). It proposes new truth.” This rupture is, she takes from Badiou (2007), a “pure break with the becoming of the world” that is “made by action” (Humphrey 2008: 360). Action, that is to say decision making, makes the individual subject (“if only for a time” [ibid.: 359]). Humphrey, departing from Badiou, hedges the total-ness of rupture and novelty, arguing that what really matters for subjectivity is the decision. As such, she comes to call these sorts of events “decision-events.” The would-be Witness patient who is recommended a blood transfusion must make a choice. As Iosif’s experience demonstrates, this sort of decision-event is the sort of happening that makes exemplars.

Humphrey’s conceptualization of the decision-event turns on the imputation of intentions, and, as Bodenhorn, Holbraad, and Laidlaw (2018: 7) point out, there is a string of continuity

between her scholarship in which she works on “the careful delineation of human intentionality” through both theory and ethnography, which Humphrey contrasts against Latour’s (2005) “multiple individual” and Strathern’s (2005) “dividual.” This is particularly important to note because of the traction “dividuality” has had in recent work in the anthropology of Christianity (Bialecki and Daswani 2015). For Iosif, rejecting a blood transfusion makes plain an individual’s intention, precisely because death is on the line and there is no obvious benefit to refusing a transfusion, especially when, as he put it, “Doctors, the ones you are supposed to trust with your life, are telling you to do something you know is morally reprehensible.” Still, the only possible intention, Iosif held, was obedience to God.

Further, it is easy to see Witness dedication/baptism as a “decision-event” precisely because of the emphasis Witnesses put on the intentionality and decisiveness that must characterize the decision and which is dually checked by a baptismal candidate’s teachers and the elders of the congregation. This intentionality is fundamentally important because it is figured to be the impetus for lasting change and ensures the rupture with the world doesn’t imminently heal itself. Further, baptism-*qua*-event is singular as Humphrey would have it: a person is only ever baptized a Witness once. And, most importantly, baptism marks the individual’s becoming an accountable subject.

It would seem, then, that the extraordinary conditions that make baptism or rejecting blood transfusions event-decisions are inextricably the same conditions that make subjects into circulatable witnesses—thereby producing the sociological and cosmic scales of embodied witness. For example, images of baptism like those above proliferate over “JW” networks on Instagram. However, I also showed above that Witnesses consider more everyday notions of evangelism as witnessing on these scales as well. That is to say, even though it was not a standardized form of Witness evangelism, there was certainly nothing extraordinary about the way that Pasha and I circuitously walked Prospekt Chuy. Further, I mentioned above that any form of preaching could be seen as proclaiming truth and vindicating the good name of Jehovah in ways that do not directly work for the salvation of their immediate addressee.

I find the way that Veena Das (2018) builds on Humphrey’s theory of the subject quite instructive. Das, in her analysis, cashes in Badiou for Wittgenstein to show how the subject is formed

in the ordinary, not (though I would add “only”) in the extraordinary, as in Humphrey’s (2008) formulation.¹⁶ Aside from Humphrey’s adoption of Badiou’s event, Das’s issue with Humphrey’s subject can be paraphrased as “subjects are not heroes.” I might qualify her point by saying, as Robbins (2018: 179) explains in the same volume, that not all subjects are exemplary and that many decisions (though assuredly made by subjects) are banal and simply not that important. Or, as Das (2018: 65) writes, subjectivity is not (only) formed through “a single decision moment when they [the would-be subject] opt for this or that version of the self, but rather the cultivation of a faith that their ordinary lives are worthy of being counted and that they can work on making their everyday count.”

Ordinary witnesses: Dress to glorify God

If the overall way that Witnesses’ responsibilities of evangelism “count”—or are actions made ethical—is to witness and be witnesses in all that they do, then I think it should be illuminating to consider how Witnesses wear clothing. That is, the ways Witnesses dress stands as an ordinary example that can be juxtaposed to the extraordinariness of baptism or rejecting blood transfusions, but that still does work on more-than-interactional scales of evangelism, as Witnesses’ “style of dress glorifies God” (WTBTS 2016a).

I have made reference throughout the chapters of this thesis to the ways Witnesses dress. Further, the reader may even have seen Witnesses preaching in public places and have some idea of the way that they dress during their everyday evangelism: men wear button-up collared shirts, ties, slacks, jackets (usually), and polishable shoes; women wear conservative skirts and blouses, or dresses, and practical shoes (that is, not heels). Men quite often do not have beards, though this depends on context (in Kyrgyzstan Witness men would not have beards but might have mustaches). Hairstyles should be practical and conservative. Clothing for men and

16 Das is emphatic in her insistence in the ordinary at the expense of the extraordinary. I do not think it is either/or. Instead, I want to demonstrate that we need not leave an ethnographic context to find examples of ethical life that is reflective *and* that is tacit, or that is characterized by a “reflective distance” (see Laidlaw 2018: 183-84), even though Das ruminates that her differences with Humphrey might be due to ethnographic context.

women should be “modest,”¹⁷ that is to say not sheer or too tightly fitted, but also that it should not display wealth or class. All in all, clothing should be neutral, avoiding fads and extremes, yet should be “modern” and comely—above all, dress should be practical for field service.

When Witnesses discuss their dress, or when it is written about in *The Watchtower*, emphasis is given to considering the effect one’s dress can have on others. This is not only in a sense that connects types of dress to sexual arousal, but that their dress should “identify” them as “God’s ministers.” The idea is that the aesthetic form—to return to the idea I unpacked above—should be one of good taste, cleanliness, simplicity, and (perhaps) practicality because their bodily image is God’s reputation. That is, because Witnesses are Jehovah’s witnesses, the way they appear in public, whether expressly “in field service” or not, is representative of his reputation. “Reputation” or “name,” stemming from Bible verses like Proverbs 22:1, is the notion that individuals ought to cultivate a local knowledge of “who” they are (their subject) based on their repetitious action and habit. But also that they are accountable for Jehovah’s reputation because, as his people, they bear his name. As such, Witnesses should “do all things for God’s glory” (1 Corinthians 10:31). Dress, as such, is squarely a witness on more-than-interactional scales, as it visually, and continually, testifies of what kind God’s people are to both nations and the cosmos—but in a very everyday sense.

All that is very reflective for the publisher. However, getting dressed, in the everyday sense of it, is something that is in most instances far from reflective. In all the time I spend around Witnesses, even though dress was seemingly very coordinated, it was never really discussed, aside from the usual sorts of everyday exclamations one might hear, such as two sisters meeting in the foyer of a Kingdom Hall and one proclaiming, “Oooo! I love your dress! It is so beautiful.” Or, perhaps, a brother commenting on another brother’s tie. Getting dressed is simply a normal part of everyday life—as it likely is for most people—but choosing clothes might unfold a bit differently for ordinary Witnesses.

17 Historically, ideas of modesty would of course be more gendered, but as a recent article in *The Watchtower* points out, “the same basic standard applies to Christian men” (WTBTS 2016a: 17). But such moves should not be viewed in a progressive (in worldly political terms) light, as the Society condemns unisex or gender-neutral clothing in the same article.

After several months in the field, Foma—who I had become quite close with—said to me one day, “Danny, you have a good form, but you’re a bit chubby (*pukhlyy*). Come to the gym with us.” Foma and Ira were very active, and regularly worked out. We came to an arrangement that my wife, Ashley, and I would pay for their gym membership (a total of about £30 for a six-month membership) in trade for them training with us—as a nerdy academic type, I didn’t know the first thing about lifting weights. Three times a week after our kids had gone to school and I finished my daily study in the Bible and *The Watchtower*, Ashley and I would meet Foma and Ira on the street corner between our apartment blocks and walk together to the gym that was one block away. Because the gym was so close, Ashley and I usually just wore our sports clothes out to meet Foma and Ira—this spared us having to use the small gym’s paltry changing facilities. We noted that this was common practice among many of the gym’s patrons. Foma and Ira, however, without fail, always wore their nice, everyday clothing (not necessarily a suit for Foma, but definitely something dressy) to meet us for the short walk there, changing into their workout kit, and then changing again to walk with us home. Getting dressed to be presentable in public was an important, if unsaid, aspect of their ordinary routine.

Of course, dress can also apply to the event. At Regional Conventions and International Conventions, Witnesses will travel and stay in large groups in hotels days—sometimes weeks—before and after the several days of meetings. “Dressing up” is common at these sorts of meetings, as some Witnesses—in a curious break from their otherwise staunch divides with the world—will adorn themselves in “traditional” attire, or the forms of dress prominent in the part of the system of things they were raised in (i.e., wearing a “Kyrgyz dress”). Even for Witnesses who do not do this, making sure they are wearing their best outfits is definitely part of getting ready for local conventions, and certainly International Conventions. In 2019, I met some of the “delegates” from around Kyrgyzstan who would attend an International Convention in Athens, Greece. For one sister who was attending, equally as important to her as sorting out her Schengen visa was making sure she had just the right dress for each day of her trip. The difference, however, between these examples is illuminated in Das’s words that the singular decisions for how to dress at these events is one thing but *being* counted as one of Jehovah’s

witnesses (note the capitalization) is made up in the repetitious decisions of getting dressed each day. Reputations are not made at conventions, but in all the days in between.

Accountability events and ordinary responsibilities: Making things count

Accountability is event driven. Baptism could be considered axiomatic of this as it is the event of becoming accountable to God. I am not arguing that all events entail accountability, but that accounts as reckonings are necessarily events. On the other hand, responsibility, to co-opt the way Das brilliantly puts it, is the ethical work done to make actions count. The debate concerning the ordinariness of ethics is, as Laidlaw (2018) puts it, one of the fault lines in the anthropology of ethics. While I decidedly fall on a middle ground approach to this theoretical division, it seems to me that as important aspects of ethical life, a major difference between accountability and responsibility lies in their temporality. Namely that accounts are events, sometimes extraordinary like the cosmic judgments of God, but also more mundane, such as the monthly accounting of hours spent publishing. Responsibilities, on the other hand, can fall anywhere on the spectrum of the ordinary, playing out in the situations and ordinary lives of people, such as the daily ways Witnesses are responsible to preach and teach the Kingdom news and Jehovah's name, but also in more eventful happenings, such as rejecting a blood transfusion. Most particularly, these temporalities intersect, as Das points out to us, as responsibilities are about making actions count.

In this chapter I have attempted to describe how the responsibilities of evangelism that baptized Witnesses becomes accountable for include more than the interactional process described in Chapters 2-4 (i.e., the process that is concerned with making individual accountable subjects). There is a direct relation between the dialogic interactions that make up the ethical pedagogy of return visits and Bible studies and becoming an accountable subject. This is because ethical pedagogy relies on making reflective whatever processes are at play—it creates understanding, as Witnesses say. This interactional process plays out differently for different individuals according to their own proclivities, personal histories, and situation in the system of things—creating a plethora of possible configurations of the responsibilities of evangelism.

These processes culminate in the dedication of an individual, as a person makes vows to God and thereby becomes accountable to him.

However, after dedication, a person is still baptized. Baptism's significance lies in that it is a form of communicating to God's people at large that the baptized is taking up the responsibilities of evangelism. This is interesting because Witnesses' linguistic ideology does not, as Robbins (2001) has argued for the Urapmin, question the veracity of language, for language is the only possible way to access truth, although that language must be coupled with reflective use. The aesthetics of baptism as ritual communication bind together subjects as God's people. No single Witness (or witness) can be held to account for the reputation of Jehovah's organization, they are accumulatively accountable as an institution. As Jehovah's agents, they all answer to him as an institutional whole. Because Witnesses as a whole are accountable to Jehovah not only for evangelism that converts individuals but for vindicating his name on social and cosmic scales, their evangelistic responsibilities include more than knocking doors and placing Watch Tower media. While I hold that this means we can see practices like rejecting blood transfusions as evangelism, understanding the ways that Witnesses are collectively accountable as God's people has other important consequences.

Foremost among these is the way the Watch Tower Society builds up its massive publishing infrastructure that is used to produce and circulate the material upon which their evangelism rests. The building and maintenance of this infrastructure, which includes everything from printing factories and warehouses to production and animation studios to theological seminars, is done by Witnesses who take being institutionally accountable so seriously that they dedicate their lives to fulltime service. This is no small venture and concerns more than just Witnesses, as the coming and going of these sorts of buildings involves interacting with "the world" through contract law, intellectual property rights, and forms of revenue; they entail the flow and logistics of materials; and the organization of bodies. All this indubitably shapes the broader communities in which Witness infrastructure is placed (Handman and Opas 2019), a topic that deserves further investigation.

But for the creation and maintenance of the whole institution, no *individual* Witness is accountable to God. They all are.

Conclusion

RESURRECTION

I described in the Introduction that the aim of this thesis is to demonstrate how Witnesses conceptualize evangelism. This builds on Handman's (2018) call for a focus on evangelism in the anthropology of Christianity, which she argues is central to many Christian experiences. This could be considered an understatement for Jehovah's Witnesses, for whom the bread and butter of their religious experience *is* evangelizing. Witness evangelism is about making disciples who are accountable to Jehovah God as part of his people. To make the ethical commitments entailed in the theorizing, methodologizing, and ordinary practices of witnessing clear, I have argued that Witness evangelism is best understood by ethnographically differentiating "accountability" and "responsibility."

In practice, the processes of evangelism are certainly messier than I make them appear in this thesis. The same could be said of Watch Tower pedagogical material itself. The skeletal framework I have drawn in this thesis came primarily from the workbook series used during midweekly meetings, *Our Christian Life and Ministry*, including the terms "initial call," "return

visits,” and “Bible studies.”¹ During the midweekly meeting, Witnesses study a portion of the workbook called “Apply Yourself to the Field Ministry” that turns on what Witnesses call “demonstrations.” Demonstrations are short, prepared roleplays in which two publishers (one playing a Witness, one a listener) act out how initial calls, return visits, and Bible studies might ideally be performed in field service. During “Apply yourself” there are three demonstrations, each presented by different pairs of Witnesses, usually showing some mix of calls, visits, and studies. More recently, one of these demonstrations, in lieu of a live roleplay, will be a short video viewed by the congregation. My Witness interlocutors understand that demonstrations specifically, and the framework provided by training materials generally, do not exactly reflect the reality they all encounter on the streets of Bishkek. In field service or during Bible studies, publishers have to *apply* methodologies, a wholly different exercise to training in a Kingdom Hall.

“Applying yourself,” Witnesses told me, was responding to the best of their ability to the unknown situations that would arise in the ministry. The framework was there to help them organize and make sense of the situations they would encounter, but, as Foma noted to me as we walked from apartment block to apartment block one morning, searching out medical students, “Training builds confidence, but experience in field service is much dearer.” “Experience” is more valuable because it allows the publisher to discern the needs of the individual that might trouble the framework. For example, is it still an initial call if the person had “seeds planted” through previous initial calls or even though previous Bible studies? Does the process restart? For the most part, I think Witnesses say that it does, but the educational process may progress more quickly. Even if a person has studied with Witnesses before, however, Witnesses might reread a book with them to “make sure they understand *everything*.” The framework still matters, but it can be tailored to the listener or student. Thus, a person-in-the-world who is already *asking for further explanation* could be ready to immediately start Bible studies. My framing evangelism in terms of responsibilities is an attempt to depict the reflective ways Witnesses consider preaching and teaching as having a universal framework that can be encoded in workbooks, videos, and demonstrations, but which can also be applied to the particularity of social and

1 See: <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/library/r1/lp-e/all-publications/meeting-workbooks>

historical contexts as well as the contexts of individual interactions. I attempt to provide a way to see how Witnesses think of their evangelism as flexible and responsive in ways that can deal with a *world* of divisions, not to mention individual idiosyncrasies.

It is Witnesses' understanding that they are accountable to Jehovah for evangelism, however, that gives rise to the need for a framework in the first place. If evangelism were less central to Jehovah's Witnesses than it is, as it might be argued is the case with some other Christian communities (though, of course, it is still important in many), evangelism might look more *ad hoc*. Instead of piecemeal preaching, Witnesses strive for rigor and consistency in making sure they can reach as many people as possible and educate them with an understanding of the truth. This is because for Witnesses being accountable for evangelism is precisely what makes them God's people. Being a Christian, for Witnesses, *is* to evangelize. The arc of the thesis shows this accountability on the level of individual human subjects as they become evangelizers. But I have also shown how this is the case for Jehovah's Witnesses on the scale of being "God's people." Together, as a "nation," they are accountable for being witnesses.

Accountability and responsibility meet in the way the stories of individual Witnesses play out. Taking an instance of what Witnesses call "greater need" such as the English Group, shows this in fascinating ways. There is no one particular reason why a group of Russian and Kyrgyz Jehovah's Witnesses *individually* took the responsibility to preach in English, except that each Witness was responding to the need, on the ground, in Bishkek, as thousands of Pakistani and Indian medical students moved into the city over the last several years. That is, no one made these Witnesses join the English Group—most Witnesses simply attend the congregation that evangelizes in their first language according to the congregation's territory. But responding to greater needs is a profound part of how the Witnesses in the English Group strove to be *good* witnesses. Namely, as they saw the need for English-language preaching grow in Bishkek, the Witnesses in the English Group had evaluated their own potential to meet that need, either because they already spoke English for some other reason, or because they counted themselves able and willing to try and learn to speak it.

Responding to the needs of English speakers in Bishkek has deeply practical consequences for how these Witnesses spend their days, as well as who they spend their days with. In this way

the intersection of accountability and responsibility is also how congregations are formed, not just as an idea, but *who* is in the congregation, and in what sorts of ways they will be preaching together—witnesses are neither made nor given alone. This, perhaps more than any other institutional arrangement in the Witnesses' global organization, has the greatest impact on their day-to-day lives, as it is at the level of the congregation that evangelism meets the constraints of preaching in the system of things. It is the site where God's Kingdom is built.

Accountability for evangelism and the responsibilities of evangelism also have material importance for the institutions Jehovah's Witnesses create. This manifests itself through the intricate infrastructures that undergird the production, logistics, and circulation of their religious media. These infrastructures are little understood by scholars of Jehovah's Witnesses, except to say that they exist. These processes and relationships, however, deserve far greater attention than they have received because of *how important* media are in Witness evangelism. Namely, the responsibility these media have in "awakening" interest in a person-in-the-world, cultivating interest in listeners, making over a student's mind, or maintaining a publisher's own commitment through giving them "spiritual nourishment."

Further, these infrastructures represent a massive financial undertaking, in the purchasing of land, materials, and so on, all on top of the logistical costs of shipping print media around the world and hosting an increasingly video-heavy website. Further still, Witness do as much of the work of conceptualizing, building, and maintaining these infrastructures as possible themselves. From coding graphic design computer software, to welding trusses on building structures, to growing potatoes, to preparing legal briefs—there are Witnesses that do work considered to "support" the field ministry. This work is the labor of building God's Kingdom, equally as important as knocking doors and conducting Bible studies.

Considering that the preaching and teaching work is central not only to what it means to be a Witness, but the ends to which they are willing to go to make sure that the "good news of the Kingdom will be preached in all the inhabited earth," it is quite interesting to note the last clause of my lodestar verse: "...and then the end will come." This "end" refers specifically to the end of the world, the destruction of the system of things at Armageddon. This begs the question, what does the apocalypse mean for evangelism? To conclude this thesis, I would like to answer this

question in terms of what the timing of accountability events in an eschatological frame might mean for the everyday responsibilities of Witnesses after resurrection. I argue that by pushing the temporal limits of the way Witnesses conceptualize evangelism we can see something *more* about Witnesses' preaching in the here and now.

Witness eschatology and theology of resurrection

The contemporary world is already ending.² Though Witnesses do not put a hard date on when, or even if “the end times” will be a singular event, the nations of the world will soon band together under the UN and “proclaim ‘peace and security’” (1 Thessalonians 5:3). Suddenly after this, the “Great Tribulation” will begin. The Great Tribulation has two phases: the destruction of (false) religion and an all-out attack on God’s people. This will be followed by “the war of the great day of God the Almighty” (Revelation 16:14)—or Armageddon—and the total destruction of the system of things. Disasters and catastrophes—pandemics, climate change, and so on—and human struggles such as war or economic exploitation, are often associated with how the world might “end.” However, for Witnesses, these are instead signs of how far humans have parted from Jehovah’s purpose for the earth (that is, for it to be a paradise for humans under *his* order). None of these anthropogenic problems will destroy the system of things (the world), however. They just destroy the earth (WTBTS 1986c: 34-35). Armageddon, on the other hand, will destroy the system of things but not the earth. The “war” will be carried out by Jesus and angels on Jehovah’s behalf, and therefore can be so adroit in its destruction.

The destruction of the system of things has two parts. First, is the more easily recognizable “fire and sulfur” raining down from heaven (Ezekiel 38:21-22) that makes for so much dramatic and violent imagery. The purpose of the destruction, my Witness interlocutors have explained, is to

2 There is not space here to describe all the intricacies of Witness sign reading and apocalyptic expectation, especially not in historical perspective, or given the events unfolding at the time of writing. For a brief introduction to the way Witnesses see the events of the 20th century, as well as events of particular significance in the last 20 years, mapped onto the “time of the end,” see the following recent articles in *The Watchtower* (WTBTS 2020c; 2020d). For a video that spells out this chronology in relation to Daniel 11-12 and Russia, see: https://www.jw.org/en/library/videos/#en/mediaitems/VODBibleAccounts/pub-jwb-080_10_VIDEO

For a consideration of how the Russian invasion of Ukraine factors into their apocalyptic expectation, see: <https://www.jw.org/en/library/series/more-topics/russia-invades-ukraine-bible-meaning-hope/>

put an end to the material structures of the system of things so that in the immediate aftermath of Armageddon's destruction no emergent human power can rise again, as has happened time and again throughout human history (WTBTS 2012b: 6-7). This clears the ground for a new system.

The second part, perhaps not generally associated with how "the world" ends, is Christ's binding Satan and his demons in the abyss for the duration of the millennium (Revelation 20:1-3). This is also necessary to end the structural conditions of the system of things, as Satan and demons manipulate humankind in the proliferation and promulgation of corruptive and divisive systems, contra God's order. This will prevent Satan from manipulating systems, as he has proved he can even lead humans to ruin perfect systems, such as with Adam and Eve.

With Satan bound and human systems broken, Christ will build up a new system without intervention. This system is characterized as paradise, where there is plenty for all, there is no more oppression, violence, or injustice. All of the horrors of this system are done away. But most importantly, death is vanquished. Those who survive Armageddon will die no more. But conquering death does not just mean that "millions now living will never die,"³ but that Christ will resurrect the dead.

Witness theology posits two kinds of resurrection. The "first resurrection," or the "heavenly resurrection," brings to life the 144,000 who will assist Christ in governing the theocracy (Revelation 14:1). The other resurrection is the "earthly resurrection" for the "great crowd," over whom the theocracy will rule in the millennium. The earthly resurrection consists of the "resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous" (Acts 24:15). Righteous and unrighteous here correlate to accountability and unaccountability in the current system of things, or those who knew and lived the truth, and those who did not because they lacked knowledge. Those who knew the truth but *did not* live it are the "wicked." By dint of the knowledge required to be wicked, many Witnesses consider this to refer to apostates, or those like Adam and Eve. Although, some of my Witness interlocutors would make room amongst the wicked for others, such as politicians, or those who, as one Witness told me, "Jehovah knows would never change." In either case, the idea being elaborated is that the wicked were those whose minds were not

3 The title of a classic book by Rutherford (1920), the Society's second leader.

just molded by the system of things (Romans 12:2; Ch. 4), but whose minds became part of the system itself (1 John 2:15-17). The wicked, at death, simply stop existing.

The 144,000 who regain life at the first resurrection are similar to the wicked in that both are accounted for at their deaths. Death, in other words, is the accountability event during which Jehovah counts them either among the (eternally) dead or the (heavenly) living, based on the account of their life. The idea that the anointed 144,000 are not accountable but already accounted for underpins the logic that their quantity is a scripturally defined and exact number, not a metaphor. That is, they are judged specially by the King, Jesus Christ, who allocates the 144,000. The accountable and the unaccountable, however, are *not yet* accounted for—there is still time for the accountable to forsake their responsibilities and the unaccountable to make over their minds and become accountable for helping others to do the same. This is what the millennium is for, at the end of which is the final accountability event: Judgment.

New world, new scrolls

“Millions, even billions, will be resurrected from the dead and offered the opportunity to live forever in Paradise!” (WTBTS 2018e: 209).⁴ This sentence, from a recent book that considers the resurrection of the unrighteous, turns on an important verb: offer. This “offering” is evangelism in the same sense I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, or “the communication of salvation,” in that it is offering them life *forever* in Paradise. The resurrected will live in the paradisiacal conditions of the new world under the theocratic reign of Christ and the 144,000, but there is still “the final test” at the end of the millennium. In other words, resurrection is not salvation. This answers the question “after the end comes, what then for evangelism?” The answer is that evangelism continues!

But this question is actually not quite precise enough. Remember, Witnesses are not just evangelizers in general, they are preachers and teachers, theorizing *how* they should communicate salvation in rigorous fashion. They are methodologists. So, what then happens to *preaching*

4 *Insight on the Scriptures* claims that this could be, for all intents and purposes, nearly all of humankind that has ever lived (according to their Bible-based age of the planet), a number they put at approximately 20 billion (WTBTS 2018d: 793).

in the millennium? This question is rooted in asking what happens to the responsibilities of evangelism in the conditions of the new, theocratic system of things. With the now “old” system of things fully destroyed, including the binding of Satan and his demons, there are no more structural divisions that Witnesses will have to respond to. This accentuates that many of the responsibilities of evangelism in the here-and-now deal directly with adapting to the constraints and opportunities of the system of things.

The global preaching work is organized language by language specifically according to local needs, the identification and exploration of which is the responsibility of publishers on the ground. Interactions in the initial call require publishers to identify potential and changing environmental, structural, and idiosyncratic barriers to communication and respond to them with discernment. Return visits are made, but people cannot always be found, requiring publishers to take responsibility in creative and technological ways. Indeed, this being one of the primary reasons new digital media are emphasized in Witness pedagogy, or that preaching methodology must “[keep] abreast of the changing times and the varying circumstances of the people” in the current system of things (WTBTS 2019d: 90). The Witnesses’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a brilliant example of this, as Witnesses continue to preach, but in new ways considered to be responsible given the public health risks of normal face-to-face evangelism. These have included letter writing and telephone calls, but (ever more importantly) conducting return visits and Bible studies over video chat.

Further, Bible studies, during the pandemic or at any other time, require the publisher to teach gently and persistently as they guide their student in becoming accountable. But this requires finesse because students must make their own minds over. At the same time Witnesses are trying to help, the system of things, manipulated by Satan and demons, pulls the student back into its structures of politics, economics, and false religion—and also into social structures that crosscut all of these siloed aspects of the system of things, such as kinship. One’s family might be just as strong an influence hindering one’s progression towards becoming accountable, but often in ways that are entangled with religion, politics, or economics. The responsibilities of evangelism *now* are primarily about giving understanding according to needs that are shaped by facets of particular locations in the *current* system of things.

Back to the future. Considering that the millennium will not have these sorts of structural divides, there will be no *local* needs. There will simply be the *need* for understanding, everywhere on earth. However, as Jena Barchas-Lichtenstein (2013: 242-273) has described, many Witnesses think that the need for understanding will continue to be rooted in the languages humans spoke on earth during the present system. Barchas-Lichtenstein's Chontal-speaking⁵ Witnesses in Oaxaca, Mexico emphatically described to her that in the resurrection they would preach to and teach their ancestral dead specifically in Chontal. I also often heard similar things in Kyrgyzstan, when talking with Russian-speaking ethnic Kyrgyz about "why they feel they should learn Kyrgyz." Indeed, this is the exact question Barchas-Lichtenstein takes up in her dissertation, only swap Kyrgyz for Chontal and Russian for Spanish. And this, Barchas-Lichtenstein (2013: 258) underscores, is at odds with Watch Tower theology that states in no uncertain terms that language barriers will be dispelled with the end of the system of things.

I think there is a way to see both the claims of continued language difference after the resurrection some Witnesses make and the claim Witness theology decidedly makes of a post-resurrection universal language as not mutually exclusive. The destruction of the system of things destroys the structures of the world, including language difference, but not the minds of individual humans. Human minds, born of the system of things and molded by its structures, especially by language, necessarily retain that worldly shape after resurrection. This must be the case, otherwise minds would not have to be remade, the very purpose of the millennium. Barchas-Lichtenstein (2013: 151-52) herself describes in detail how Witnesses' metalinguistic commentary represents language difference *in this system of things* in "neo-Whorfian terms" as it focuses on how "each... language requires different thought patterns" (WTBTS 2008a: 22). As such, it would be logical to assume that even if all resurrected humankind communicates in one singular language (see WTBTS 1986b: 176), these "thought patterns" imbued by the system of things would remain and could potentially be better deciphered by speakers that shared linguistic experience (and therefore mental schemata) in the "old" system of things.

5 Her dissertation considers many issues surrounding the Highland Oaxaca Chontal language and her focus, arguably, lies with language, rather than Jehovah's Witnesses *per se*. That said, she provides an amazing account of the sorts of the (theocratic language) utterances Witnesses in this place make.

In any case, just as I showed in Chapter 2, Foma's "impossibilities" of communicating "understanding things as they really are" would still apply, as the people-in-the-*new-world* would yet lack the frame to understand what is truly "going on" in millennial evangelism and further would not yet have access to the "vocabularies," "thought patterns," and "grammars" of theocratic language (WTBTS 2008a: 22). Theocratic language is enregistered in standardized languages through the special knowledge relationships that come from access to "truth," and the linguistic changes that submitting to that truth render on the speaker's mind. Because the unrighteous still need to learn the truth, despite speaking a universal language (much as the common languages in the initial call), they would not understand the register of theocratic speech simply because they were resurrected. They still need to be convinced, and publishers who shared a mutual language in the system of things might be more persuasive because they can draw on their past experiences. Getting caught up in precisely *what* language Witnesses will speak misses the point of what Witnesses will be speaking *about* in the millennium, namely that they will be evangelizing. If we consider what evangelizing necessarily means for their prospective resurrected addressees, that it presumes a lack of access to the truth, we can see that Foma's impossibilities would still apply.

This understanding was born out in many interviews where I specifically asked Witnesses what the preaching work would look like in the new world. The answers were usually hedged at first but then my interlocutors elaborated that they thought it would likely look much as it does today, only better. It would be better for the reason I have already outlined: the people they would be evangelizing would not have to do deal with Satan's interventions in understanding the truth. Many Witnesses told me it was logical that they would still have to find people, initiate contact, return to them ("We'll still have to eat and sleep!" one Witness proclaimed), and study with them, but that the exact responsibilities of evangelism were unclear.

One thing, however, was definitely clear. Sabir explained to me that their current methods of preaching and teaching are taken directly from the text of the Bible. Similarly, in the new world, Jehovah would give "new scrolls" and that Christ would use these to give structure to millennial theocratic education. In our discussion he used an article in *The Watchtower*, which tells us that these "new scrolls" will "be opened to give us direction" (WTBTS 2016c: 22). Sabir reasoned

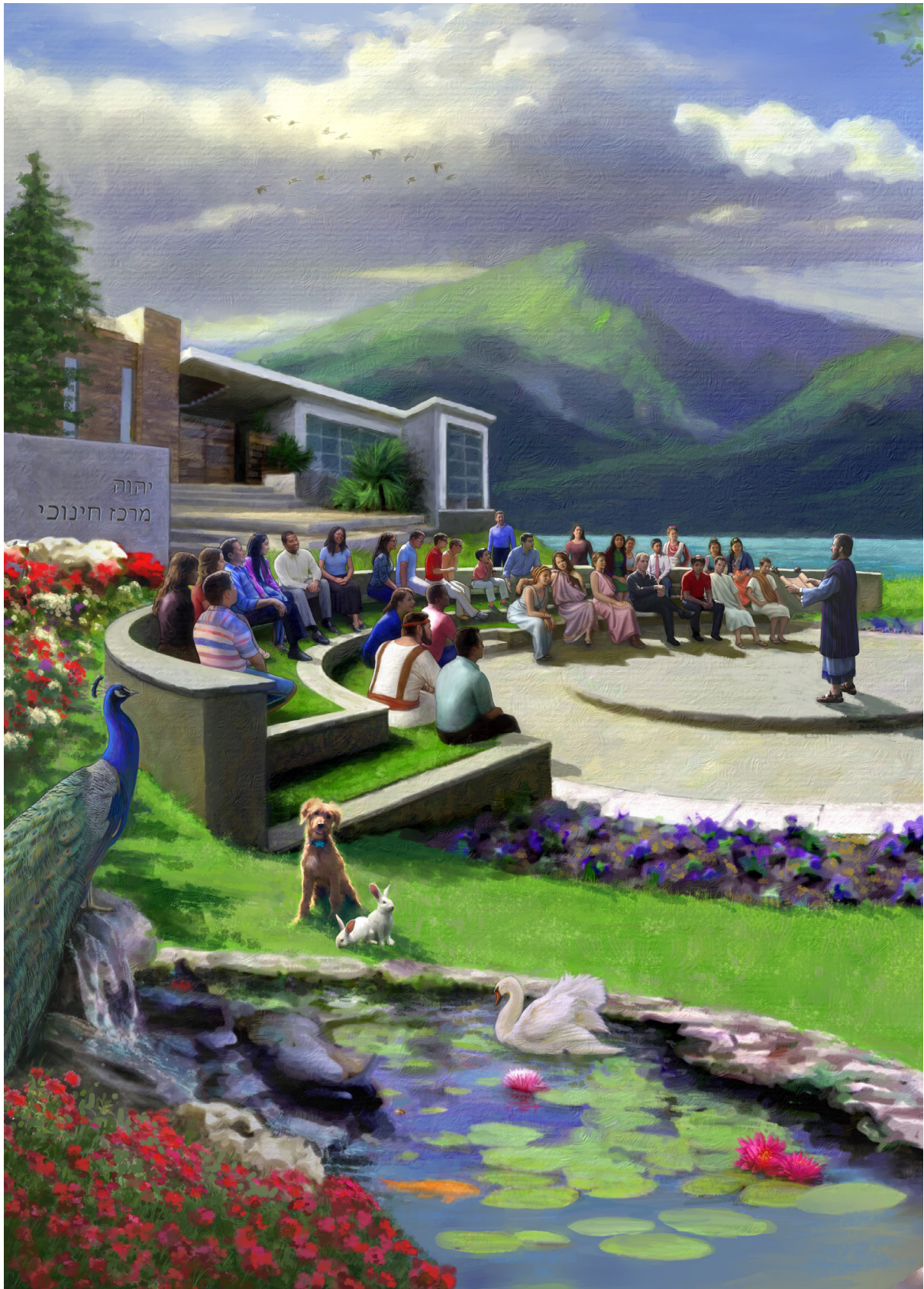


Figure 6.1 - Detail from "The New Scrolls—A Grand Educational Work Ahead," by Ed Salazar. Digital Art painted in 2017, 40 x 40 inches.

with me that under Jesus Christ's "educational program," as the article puts it, new scrolls would give new directions regarding the preaching and teaching work. Put simply, Jesus Christ would help Witnesses learn how to best partake in the educational program at that time and how to impart those new understandings to the unrighteous; a new world and new scrolls, means new responsibilities for evangelism. This would enliven the current methodological framework I have described in this thesis. Sabir exclaimed, "We have much to look forward to!"

While the precise nature of these new responsibilities is less clear, the status of accountability is much more theologically concrete. During *this* system of things, people are of four sorts, or "classes," as Witnesses sometimes call them, and, as I mentioned above, they can be divided into two corresponding pairs: those whose judgment, or accounting, is at death and those who are still (un)accountable in the resurrection. The (un)accountable are more interesting to consider for my purposes here because they are, during the millennium, still progressing towards what Witness eschatology deems the last accountability event.

The purpose of evangelism, both now and in its millennial form, is to make as many people ready for this final accounting at the end of the millennium as possible. The breadth of this work, meant to "educate" every person who has ever lived, is hugely important. This is because accounts given at the end of the millennium reveal if an individual has chosen submission to Jehovah's rule. If they have not, the account results in the discontinuance of their existence. Sabir tried to impress upon me just how generous this was, in his view, compared to the "hell" he claimed was ubiquitous in other religions; a hell where the wicked eternally suffer. The truth, Sabir explained, is that Jehovah loved humankind enough to make sure they could be, whether in this life or the next, given every chance for a full understanding and the choice for life, as well as a merciful end to those who choose otherwise. "Hellfire," he told me, "Blames people who had no knowledge and tortures them forever. How could a 'loving God' do that?"

Thus, in the New World there are no unaccountable persons, there are only the accountable and the becoming accountable. The unrighteous, in other words, are those who were unaccountable in life, but after resurrection immediately started becoming accountable. But the population of people becoming accountable becomes fewer and fewer as the millennial education of humankind progresses from a "small river" to a "mighty torrent," as some imagery

in Ezekiel 47:1-12 puts it (see WTBTS 2018e: 202-10). This goes on until all are accountable and then the end comes, again. But this time for real.

On the last day of the millennium, Christ will hand over rulership to Jehovah and Satan the demons will be unbound from the abyss for a “final test” of the completely accountable humankind. Those who falter, will die a final death, and be vanquished forever with Satan and the demons. Those who choose submission at that final accountability event will live forever on a paradisiacal earth with their God.

Perfect virtue, eternal responsibilities

At eternity’s doorstep, will responsibility and accountability be vanquished with the Devil and those who refuse submission? No. Rather than taking the responsibilities of evangelism, which work will be completed and accounted for, Jehovah’s people (now everyone living) will go from being accountable as Witnesses to that original accountability given in the Garden of Eden to fill and subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28), bringing with it a host of new responsibilities.

When discussing this concept with Miroslav over tea one evening, I asked him, “So... I mean you’re supposed to be alive for eternity, right? Subduing the earth can’t take that long, can it? What are you supposed to do when that’s done? Won’t eternity be... boring?” His response came in two forms, one that is orthodox and another that is theologically speculative—but, as far as I can tell, held by not a few Witnesses. First, Miroslav explained that while humans would never die in their resurrected form, both during the millennium and after, they would still need to eat and work to tend to the animals and plants of the earth, maintain buildings, and attend to all the domestic things of human life. That is, Adam and Eve’s accountability for “subduing the earth” meant they were responsible for, first extending the conditions of the Garden of Eden around the entire earth; then, second, maintaining those paradisiacal conditions around the earth for eternity. This would be humanity’s second go, as it were, at taking up the responsibilities of the mission outlined in Genesis. This work would require just as much responsiveness as dealing with Satan’s system of things or making over human minds in the millennium, as,



Figure 6.2 - Miroslav's photo of the TRAPPIST-1 system. Photo by author.

Miroslav pointed out, anyone who has planted and tended a garden will know (he gestured out the window to the apple trees in his own garden)—taking care is responsibility.

Miroslav's second explanation for how the responsibilities of filling and subduing the earth could be eternally continuous takes a turn for the cosmic. Hanging on the wall of Miroslav's family room, above his piano and next to a small, framed print of *Starry Night*, was a crookedly-hung picture comparing the TRAPPIST-1 system and our Solar system (see fig. 6.2). Miroslav put down his tea and walked me over to inspect the photograph. He said, "Do you know what this is." I frankly did not and asked him to explain. A flicker of joy flashed across his eyes as he began to describe that the TRAPPIST-1 system (in his estimation) was one of the most promising systems for human colonization because at least six of its seven known terrestrial planets are in the "Goldilocks Zone."⁶ Miroslav looked away from the photo and into

6 The range of orbital distances from a star scientists project most likely to be suitable for being inhabited. "This planet is *just: right!*" Miroslav joked in English.

my eyes and said, “All the seeable universe is God’s creation. *All*. Including the TRAPPIST-1 system. Thus, Jehovah’s command to subdue the earth applies to *all habitable planets* in the whole universe, not just this solar system, or even our galaxy.” He looks back at the photo and resolutely pointed at the image of our Earth, saying, “Not just *this* earth.”⁷

For Miroslav, the responsibility to subdue the earth could be infinitely continuous because humans would need to first perfect *this* earth, then build the technologies to travel to yet other planets to do the same there. Space is infinite, he reasoned with me, therefore there were endless possibilities. The reason I bring this fantastic vision for humankind into analysis is to accentuate that responsibility can never stagnate. Or, in Miroslav’s words, “In paradise there will *always* be work to do.” Because the final test at the end of the millennium is the last reckoning, accountability for all intents and purposes becomes a thing of the past and therefore humankind’s responsibility to subdue the earth must always be continuously in motion as matter of course. To continue in responsibility forever without the need for accountability is the very meaning of Witnesses’ notion of “everlasting life.”

Eternally continuous responsibility is possible because humans at that point will perfectly love Jehovah alleviating the need for future accounts. Theoretically, Witness theology holds, people could still rebel against God at some point after the final test, this being essentially what Adam and Eve did. But this, they reason, will likely not happen because the difference between Adam and Eve and those future humans—maybe you and me, dear reader—is we will have lived one human lifetime in this world, been resurrected, and lived a hundred other lifetimes in paradise perfecting ourselves. We will have the advantage, from their perspective, of having cultivated perfect ethical selves before eternity (see WTBTs 2006b).

As such, responsibility at that point will be motivated by virtue alone. Contrasting this with the responsibilities of evangelism explored in this thesis is quite revealing because they are also motivated by virtue, as is even the case for the rightly disposed person-in-the-world in their first contact with one of Jehovah’s Witnesses. But they are also always motivated by the future

7 This conversation went on for some time. Further he explained, Jehovah did not create any other humans or “intelligent life,” thereby justifying the needs to fill and subdue exoplanets. Further I will say that my interest in this conversation could not be contained, much to the exasperation of Miroslav’s wife and daughter, who told me not to indulge him. Jon Bialecki (2020) might have something to say about my own interest in such theological speculation.

account they will have to render to Jehovah. That is, as put in Deuteronomy 6:13, “Jehovah your God you should fear, and him you should serve.” This fear is a “an awe and a profound reverence for the Creator and a wholesome dread of displeasing him. This fear of incurring his displeasure is a result of appreciation of his loving-kindness and goodness together with *the realization that he is the Supreme Judge*” (WTBTS 2018c: 818; emphasis added). This realization and “appreciation” of one’s accountability to God is what stimulates people to become one of Jehovah’s witnesses in both this world and the new one.

This should not be read as an apology for those who describe the Society as controlling Witnesses with fear. Instead, what I want to emphasize is that fear of Jehovah is the reason in “reasoned practice” (Laidlaw 2013: 73-76), not the virtue itself, and Witnesses hold, therefore that fearing God leads to true freedom by helping to cultivate virtues among the (un)accountable (John 8:32). Freedom, as such, is not freedom without accountability (WTBTS 1992a). This fear is the profundity of rationalizing and appreciating one’s accountability to God. While fear is in place to lead to self-reflection and self-evaluation, and therefore to obtain freedom, it does not guarantee virtue, which comes from continual ethical work, or repeatedly taking responsibility. Even the dedicated Christian, Witnesses tell us the Bible teaches, will always be unable to be fully virtuous, even after a realization of their own accountability and dedication to Jehovah because of the structural conditions of the current system. Unperfected humans will always fail in their responsibilities on some level. But, during life, through repentance and begging forgiveness, Jesus rectifies the shortfalls in their personal account (1 John 2:1-2). The virtue Christian subjects cultivate, as such, is never perfect on its own. Fear of displeasing Jehovah alongside imperfectly cultivated virtues like love is the ethical logic of Witnesses’ responsibilities of evangelism *now*. But perfected humans entering eternity will be completely responsible because of the ethical work carried out in the millennium.

Such humans will be the embodiment of perfect virtue, whether they are bound to the earth, or whether they are among the stars. 🌌

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