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Sept./Oct. 2003
 Volume 17,
 Numbers 9, 10

Virtual Experiment

The Truth vs. the truth

by Stephen Cox

Can the Truth survive the Internet?

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This is a story about American values, Bulgaria's policy on human rights, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, and the strange and unforeseen persistence of truth in our allegedly postmodern age.

In this age (so it is said), there is room for data and opinion and diverse points of view, but none at all for simple "truth" — a term that must never be invoked unless it is surrounded by a guard of scare-quotes and qualifying phrases. Among the advanced thinkers of the late 20th century, fear of truth rose to the level of hysteria. The dean of postmodern theorists, Jean-François Lyotard, habitually associated "truth" with the threat of "terror." Similar language was adopted by practitioners of deconstruction, critical theory, and the militantly relativist species of religious studies, cultural studies, and identity politics. Today, the term of choice may not be "terror"; it may be "oppression," "domination," or the more stylish "hegemony." But whatever words are used, Truth is clearly on the defensive within the American intelligentsia.

And there are good reasons for the suspicion of truth.

The 20th century was an era of lies — enormous, ridiculous lies, the lies of fascism, communism, and "scientific" racism — lies that were retailed as objective truths by intellectual and political authorities who used them to maintain their power and make it appear legitimate. It is possible to argue that if we are ever to escape from Authority, we must first escape from Truth; and that is precisely what postmodern thinkers argue.

According to the most optimistic of these thinkers, however, a means of escape has now been discovered, a way of making the lies and pretenses of established authority yield to the reality of diverse points of view

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and heterogeneous "language games." This means of escape is the Internet, the most efficient device ever invented for confronting "truth" with kaleidoscopic opinions and perspectives. The net can connect anyone to anyone, anyone's game to anyone else's. It is incredibly cheap, incredibly easy to use, incredibly powerful.

In postmodern circles there are, indeed, suspicions of the Internet, as there are of truth, suspicions centering on its service to "globalization" and "consumer capitalism." But to theorists who have moved beyond leftist clichés, the Internet seems, in the words of one of the host of webpages devoted to the topic, a "direct embodiment" of postmodernism.

A generation ago, in the Neoplastic Era of electronic technology, Ralph Ellison compared modern American culture to a phonograph record. Both of them operated on the principle of "random accessibility": everyone has access to anything — just drop the needle. It was an apt metaphor, but the Internet is much greater than a metaphor. It provides the maximum degree of accessibility, and it provides something more. You don't sit passively in front of the Internet; you use it to make things: business deals, political movements, marriages, communities of shared eccentricities.

You can also use it to make trouble. The day has come when every large institution in the world depends on the Internet to do its business. That is another way of saying that every large institution is continually exposed to electronic penetration and attack by competitors, dissidents, rebels, and spies. There could not be a better environment for the subversion of institutions and ideas. The Internet is hospitable to opinion and information; it is not hospitable to authority and authority's best friend, the "truth."

Or so it might appear. It's at least a plausible hypothesis. But we need a test case, an example of some crucial conflict between the Internet and a formidable, institutionally embodied "truth." I have found such a case.

There is a large American institution whose very name for itself is "the Truth." With about 2 million adherents in the United States and about 15 million in the world (6.3 million of them active adherents), it is the second-largest of America's native-born religions. The Mormons are ahead in numbers, but even they are less impressively authoritarian than the organization to which I refer: the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, whose followers are known as Jehovah's Witnesses. Now, however, the Witnesses are locked in mortal

combat with the forces of dissent, and the field of battle is the Internet. The outcome of the struggle is undecided, but its shape is definite, and it has a lot to teach us about postmodern ideas of truth and authority.

Who Are They?

Who are Jehovah's Witnesses? That is a difficult question for most people to answer. The Witnesses are the least known of America's large minority groups. They do not vote, they do not congregate in Utah, they do not operate colleges, hospitals, or newspapers. They have no dealings with any other religious sect, tradition, or tendency, refraining even from celebrating the "pagan" holidays of Christmas and Easter. Their only visible folkway is a habit of materializing on people's doorsteps to "place" a copy of the Watchtower magazine.

But there is a heavy irony about their isolation and invisibility. At every stage of their history, they have assimilated leading features of the surrounding society, features that self-isolation has preserved and replicated in exaggerated, ultimately self-subverting forms, like the quaint, helpless fauna that inhabit remote islands. Another irony is that the Witnesses' system of authority began with the attempt of a solitary dissident to escape from the confines of "Christendom."

The inventor of the Watchtower Society, Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), owned a small chain of men's clothing stores in Pittsburgh. In his spare time, he studied the Bible. A lover of progress and enlightenment, he found himself unable to accept the intellectual discipline of historic Christianity. He rejected the doctrines of the trinity and the immortal soul; in his book *The New Creation* (1904), he even compromised with the theory of evolution. So far, he was a typical 19th-century rationalist. Yet he could not agree with the newly fashionable "higher criticism" and its rationalist attack on the Bible's coherence, inspiration, and authority. He proposed to fight rationalism with rationalism. He would defend the Bible on scientific grounds.

Unfortunately, science, for him, was largely a matter of calculations and measurements. The crucial thing was the Bible's use of numbers. He became convinced that he had discovered the number system of Bible prophecy, and that the numbers tallied perfectly not only with the known events of history but also (oddly but happily) with the dimensions of the Great Pyramid, God's "stone witness" in the land of Egypt. He outlined God's plans in an elaborate and beautiful diagram,

studded with symbolic pyramids, called the "Chart of the Ages." His mathematics demonstrated that history would soon culminate in God's restoration of the earthly paradise. And he started calling his movement the Truth. It was "Science . . . springing from the Word of God."

Russell wasn't the only prophet of the millennium. Most of his ideas about history originated in America's vast, amorphous Second Advent movement. His followers and the Seventh-Day Adventists are the major living descendants of the remarkable people who in the mid-19th century roused America by proclaiming that the second coming or "advent" of Christ would soon occur. But Russell's own group, once started, developed in complete independence from any other. Russell was a good writer and public speaker and an energetic self-advertiser. Hundreds of newspapers reprinted his sermons; millions of people bought his books. His journal, "Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence," began in 1879 with a circulation of 6,000; its current circulation is well over 20,000,000.

His great mistake, a mistake that would be repeated several times in Watchtower history, was the prediction of a specific date for the end of the world. He thought it would all be over by the end of 1914. Something did happen in 1914, but it wasn't quite the end of the world. After Russell died, his disciples reassessed his arithmetic. They affirmed its truth, while altering its specifics. The Watchtower Society eventually decided that 1914 was right, but it was right because it marked Christ's (invisible) second coming, which Russell thought had happened in 1874. The end of the world would happen later. Other predictions located it in 1918, 1925, 1942, and 1975. The failure of these forecasts led to defections, sometimes to massive ones; but the people who stayed (and they are the only people who really matter to any organization) were those who still believed that, in principle, such events were subject to rational calculation. And who better to do the calculations than the experts at the Watchtower Society?

Russell's era was the Witnesses' Age of Reason. The next Watchtower president, Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1869–1942), presided over the Age of Politics. Rutherford, universally known as Judge Rutherford, was a lawyer who had served as a temporary judge in Boonville, Missouri. He had, in addition, campaigned for William Jennings Bryan, apostle of Free Silver and other Progressive causes. Like Bryan, he cast himself in the prophetic mode and crusaded against the power of big capital. Like Bryan, he also opposed America's entry into World War I. His opposition to the war and military service led to his imprisonment for nine months on

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(palpably false) charges of sedition. He became, with some reason, a vigorous enemy of secular authority.

Russell had regarded history as a process of reconciliation between God and man. Rutherford saw it as a battle between God's government, the Theocracy, and Satan's government, the tyrannical nation-states, greedy capitalists, and power-mad churches, a battle that would end in the slaughter of everyone who was not on the side of Theocracy. This essentially political conception guided his reorganization of Russellism. In the "holy nation," as Rutherford called the Watchtower movement, congregational church government was replaced by "theocratic" mandates. He decreed that all local officials would henceforth be appointed by Watchtower headquarters, and congregations would be called "companies," as in "military companies." He changed the name of the movement itself from Bible Students (too generic) to Jehovah's Witnesses (a legalistic term of his own coinage).

Rutherford's slogan was "Advertise, Advertise, Advertise the King and His Kingdom!" His advertising style was crude but marvelously theatrical. He wrote a book called "Millions Now Living Will Never Die." He sent his followers into the streets wearing sandwich boards that said, "Religion Is a Snare and a Racket" (the Watchtower movement was not a mere "religion"). He published cartoons depicting porcine priests and Satanic politicians. He took to the radio, rivaling Father Coughlin in blistering attacks on the government. His sound-trucks (some of them armored) toured North America, blaring his speeches to unwilling ears. He staged huge conventions that, like the legislatures of totalitarian states, unanimously approved the bombastic "resolutions" the leader wrote on their behalf. To distinguish the practices of the Theocracy from those of Satan's Organization, he outlawed the celebration of birthdays, Christmas, and Easter, and the use of the cross in worship. He decided that flag-salutes, voting, and enlisting in the army were treason to Theocracy, and he outlawed them, too. Everyone in the Watchtower movement was required to participate in "service," selling Rutherford's books and ideas to the general public. Dissenters were purged and publicly denounced. There was one Truth, and Judge Rutherford was its prophet.

Rutherford's career was a parody (if it is possible to parody such things) of the extremist political tendencies of the era. When he died in 1942 at his San Diego residence — an estate intended as the capital of the resurrected patriarchs' millennial regime, but equipped, for the present, with secret shelters against enemy attack — it was obvious that he had outlived his time.

In ensuing years, the Watchtower Society learned to behave less like a political cult and more like a modern corporation — while retaining most of Rutherford's doctrines and all of his authority.

Every stereotype has its archetype. Sloan Wilson supplied the stereotype of America's corporate culture in the title of his novel "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" (1955). The archetype had appeared some years before. N. H. Knorr (1905–1977), Rutherford's successor as president of the Watchtower Society, literally was the man in the gray flannel suit. Like Rutherford, he exerted complete corporate control; but whereas Rutherford put his personal stamp on everything, Knorr wouldn't even sign his own name. All Watchtower literature was now produced anonymously, by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc. All directives were communicated, in a vague but decisive way, by "the Society." Maximum standardization was achieved: all effort was concentrated on house-to-house distribution of literature, the kind of thing that almost anyone can do. The rebarbative doctrines of Rutherford's time were massaged into truth-bites bland enough to be marketed everywhere in the world where people were attracted to American goods.

The Watchtower assumed the shape of a multinational firm, with scores of branches and tens of thousands of local outlets, all as much alike, wherever they were, as so many McDonald's restaurants. The Watchtower's factories and offices towered over Brooklyn Heights; Wall Street traders practiced divination on the daily messages of the Watchtower's neon signs. And the Watchtower moved with the times. In the 1970s, it followed the precedent of other large American corporations: it cultivated a blander style of management and a spiffier public image. It replaced its imperial presidency with a web of committees, and it replaced the stodgy look of its books and magazines, a style formed in reaction to the excesses of the Rutherford period, with pastel graphics and a friendly, though insistent, use of multicultural images and rhetoric, capitalizing especially on the Society's success in wooing African Americans.

Its statistical self-confidence blinded it to its limitations. The movement was severely burdened by its past. While it struggled to make itself inviting to everyone, it was cursed with ordinances against participation in virtually all civic customs and virtually all religious practices except selling Watchtower literature and hearing it expounded. The Witnesses' niggling, estranging regulations made them appear absurd, especially to their own young people.

Still more embarrassing — deadly, in fact — was the

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Society's notorious "blood ban," its belief that blood transfusions constitute a violation of God's law against eating blood (Genesis 9:4). The belief was inspired by the Society's Rutherford-era war on "so-called medical science" (a branch of Satan's empire) and became one of the most prominent fixations of the Watchtower movement. Receiving a transfusion, or permitting one's child to do so, was a D.O. (disfellowshipping offence); and to be disfellowshipped was to be thrown out of the Truth and shunned by one's friends and relatives. For five decades, the "blood ban" took a steady toll of believers' lives. It is still doing so.

Another embarrassing feature of the Truth, and its mathematics, resurfaced dangerously in the 1960s, when the Society added up some more numbers and predicted that the current order of things would end in 1975. This time, the calculations were simpler, clearer, and even more compelling than Russell's. They led to a tremendous revival of devotion within the Witness community. Many people who had drifted away raced back; many Witnesses sacrificed promising careers to work full time spreading the good news of the world's forthcoming end.

The world obstinately endured, and the Witnesses' effort to recover from the resulting public relations disaster brought yet another old characteristic to the fore — the Society's custom, dating back to Russell's use of the term "present truth," of treating every falsification of its prophecies as a sign that the Truth itself is advancing. Not everyone accepted this paradoxical (or, to borrow Lyotard's word, "paralogical") idea of truth as something that simultaneously moves and maintains its fixed location at Watchtower headquarters. Several hundred thousand Witnesses dropped out; others were expelled after a failed attempt at doctrinal reform by Raymond Franz, a member of the Society's august Governing Body.

The organization survived, in large part because of its ability to restrict communications. Anyone who made "apostate" remarks or carried "apostate" news was immediately disfellowshipped and shunned. Of course, if you wanted to attack the Truth, you could go write a book about it (Franz wrote two of them), but the market was small. It was pretty much restricted to Jehovah's Witnesses, and Witnesses were under orders never to read apostate books. In any event, that kind of reading material had to be sought, usually with difficulty; it did not just turn up on your doorstep, like the Watchtower. Dissidents came to the Witnesses' conventions and tried to pass out their own literature, most of which was thrown away. They conducted direct-mail campaigns, with little more effect than the

appearance of cartoons in Watchtower publications showing pieces of apostate mail whizzing into the trash can.

Then the Internet was born.

Appearance of the Antichrist

Suppose you were a devout Jehovah's Witness and you had just hooked up to the Internet. What would be the first thing you'd do? You'd sit down in front of the computer and type in "Watchtower" or "Jehovah's Witnesses." And what you'd see on your screen would be: "Questions for Jehovah's Witnesses," "Answering the Jehovah's Witnesses," "False Prophecies of Jehovah's Witnesses," "Beyond Jehovah's Witnesses," "Watchtower Observer," "Free Minds, Inc." — row upon row of opposition pages and sites. If you clicked onto one of those sites, you would be amazed and disgusted, but also, perhaps, enticed, especially if you had ever harbored any nagging doubts about the Truth or any secret resentments against authority in general.

A state-of-the-art opposition website is a supermarket of information and opinion, offering Watchtower news, personal experiences of former Witnesses, humor, facts about the Watchtower's colorful history (the subject of systematic suppression and distortion by the Society), analysis of the Society's unique methods of biblical interpretation, psychological and procedural advice for people who want to leave the Watchtower, and, of course, links to other opposition sites.

Opposition sites have achieved a virtual monopoly on the sale of back-dated Watchtower publications, literature that the Society considers too full of embarrassing Old Truths to be marketed to anyone, even for reasons of nostalgia. And if print technology is too low-tech for you, CD-ROMs are also for sale. One thin disk will give you a treasury of the Society's outdated speculations about the fast-approaching showdown between labor and capital (Russell, "The Battle of Armageddon," 1912), the prophetic significance of the Lackawanna Railroad (Clayton J. Woodworth, et al., "The Finished Mystery," 1917), the inadvisability of marriage, now that Armageddon is so close (Rutherford, Children, 1941), and hundreds of other topics.

A number of apostate sites target the blood ban, the most vulnerable spot in the Watchtower's defenses. The most influential of these sites has been "New Light on Blood," the propaganda machine of a secret society of Witnesses whose aim is a radical reform of the Watchtower organization. The Associated Jehovah's

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Witnesses for Reform on Blood is composed of people from many countries, and it appears to have high-level contacts within the official organization. Its power stems from the fact that its existence is largely electronic and "virtual." It can gather facts, it can infiltrate the official organization, it can alert the mass media, it can warn wavering Witnesses that they are in danger of "bloodguilt" (the most terrible thing you can say to a Witness) if they fail to oppose the ban on blood; it can do all this and still evade the identification and punishment of its members. Never has insurrection been so easy: "If you want to remain anonymous, use an anonymous remailer like this one."

But are there no loyal forces in cyberspace? When the Internet first became widely accessible, loyal websites proliferated. Individual Witnesses saw the new technology as an opportunity to communicate with fellow believers in an unofficial way. The Watchtower had always quashed independent Witness publications. Truth had to flow in one direction only — out from the Society's editorial offices and down to the local congregations. Even loyalists welcomed a break from that routine. But while print technology could be easily policed, the Internet could not; so the Society issued warnings about the "spiritual pornography" to be found in cyberspace and rumbled sadly about the ease with which people become addicted to the Internet and start neglecting kingdom service. Some loyal websites took the cue and vanished.

Yet even the Society was no match for the Internet. It found that the public press considered the net a principal source of information, and it didn't want anybody turning to apostate websites for information about the Watchtower itself. So it made the momentous decision to create its own website. While acknowledging the existence of "other sites" that "express favorable or unfavorable opinions about us," watchtower.org proclaimed itself the only "authoritative source about the beliefs, teachings, and activities of Jehovah's Witnesses."

The official site offers a variety of best-foot-forward articles ("Five Ways to Improve the Quality of Your Life," "When No One Will Be Poor," "The Marvelous New World of God's Making"). But it's not all sunshine. The apostate sites have always been a very present absence at the official one, much of which is continuously devoted to a defense of the blood ban. Publicly attacked for maintaining a harmful and illiberal policy, the Society responds with articles about health and freedom: "Blood — Vital for Life," "Quality Alternatives to Transfusion," "Blood: Whose Choice and Whose Conscience?" and "You Have the Right to Choose."

The Society was learning the law of the Internet: the net is an agent of mainstream American values — freedom, competition, adequate public debate. To state that law in another way: there isn't much point in creating a website to announce that you know everything and that if other people don't agree, they can just get lost. When you enter the Web, you get stuck to the rules of dialogue. And that is what happened to the Watchtower Society. Not only did it have to speak of rights instead of "theocratic" orders, but its involvement with the Web authorized its followers to exercise their own right to electronic dialogue.

During the late 1990s, hundreds of loyal websites blossomed, mostly innocuous and controversy-free: personal sites that discussed the happiness of selling Witness literature, offered snapshots of family trips, and made sure to include a link to watchtower.org. Other loyal sites featured chatrooms and bulletin boards, carefully monitored to exclude comments that were not "upbuilding." Some offered anti-apostate material. One delightful chat-oriented site presented a page called the "Paradise Earth Ban List," a lake of digital fire reserved for people "who have broken the rules and are banned from #paradise_earth." Few of the loyal sites seemed to be much encumbered by visitors.

A site that became very active indeed was H2O (Hourglass2 Outpost). Created in late 1996, its International Open Forum served, during the next five years or so — a long time on the Internet — as the primary meeting place for Internet-friendly Witnesses, and a model of the Internet's negotiations with Truth and Authority. Clicking onto the Forum's message board, Witnesses were greeted by a babel of electronic voices loud enough to make any postmodern thinker believe that the millennium had indeed arrived. Occasionally, monitors announced that they had removed somebody's post because it was abusive or non-"upbuilding," but their anxiety seemed to result principally from a desire to keep both dissenters and loyalists coming to the site. There was no institutional truth in sight, even the truth about who owned the forum. Just as the Watchtower Society replicated the anonymity of the corporation, so H2O replicated the anonymity of the Society.

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All Watchtower**

That symmetry, or irony, was not much appreciated by loyalists who clicked onto this "Witness" site, only to find their most cherished beliefs under attack by correspondents called "Dred Scott," "Sceptic's Soapbox," "Liberal Elder," and "Crunchy Frog." The board was regularly swept by urgent demands to know "who runs this site?" And there was always someone

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produced
anonymously.**

who volunteered to rescue unsuspecting loyalists by letting them know that:

"HOURGLASS 2 IS AN APOSTATE WEBSITE. IF YOU READ BETWEEN THE LINES, VERY CAREFULLY, YOU WILL SEE THAT THE INDIVIDUALS WHO RUN THIS WEBSITE ARE APOSTATE."

Those warnings were posted just as anonymously as anything else. Few loyalists wanted the Society to know that they frequented a site that was also frequented by apostates.

H2O's packaging betrayed no apostasy. Its sponsors sometimes posted "Dear brothers & sisters" messages to warn, perhaps with ironic intention, that "H2O is no more inspired or able to protect you from apostates, than is the Watchtower Society." That did not allay loyalist suspicions that H2O was a front for the Blood Reform group. On the board itself, loyalists accused apostates of setting up websites in order to trace the electronic addresses of loyal correspondents and get them in trouble with the Society. Apostates, in turn, accused the Society of setting up pseudo-apostate sites in order to get the addresses of pseudo-loyalists and disfellowship them. Meanwhile, loyalists accused other loyalists of disloyalty, and a loyalist intellectual attempted to convince everyone that God himself is "the Master of Deception," cunningly testing his servants with truths that look like lies. Adding to the mix were people who kept coming up with "news" from "inside the org," news intended either to inspirit Watchtower subversives with prophecies of reform, to dispirit them with false prophecies, or simply to spread the terror of being uncovered: the Society knows who you are! You will soon be disfellowshipped!

Birth of the Social Contract

The Witnesses' Internet wars might, at first glance, seem like nothing but battles of spy vs. spy, of polarized and mutually parodic ideologues — the "atheists" vs. the "Society men." Closer inspection showed "a continuous spectrum of opinion" (as one H2O participant put it), the kind of spectrum that appears in any large community of talkers and listeners. H2O and its sibling sites presented Jehovah's Witnesses with their first opportunity to become that kind of community, and the experiment was well worth watching — not just as a test of the Witnesses' reactions but also as a test of postmodern ideas.

Contrary to the assumptions and hopes of postmodernists who looked to cyberspace for the long-

promised transvaluation of all values, the revolution of the Internet turned out to be the revolution of a type of normalcy. It continually reinstated the "spontaneous order" that Friedrich Hayek considered the significant achievement of a free society. Even H2O was not just so many anonymous people presenting diverse points of view. It was a social order characterized by a division of labor.

On any board as popular as H2O, the "lurkers" or observers outnumber the active posters. On H2O, the posters were further divided by ideology. But that's not the only important thing. Regular posters developed specialized roles. Some were demagogues, provocateurs, advocates for the intellectually handicapped, or professional cynics and victims. Others took on the practical job of telling other people how to handle their software and maintain their websites. Still others became historians canvassing the records of the Witness movement for absurd or instructive facts, sociologists analyzing the behavior of Witness subgroups, lawyers providing advice about the complicated procedures of the Watchtower "judicial" system, psychologists picking up the pieces that the lawyers left behind, salesmen promoting some great new notion or some great new link, dramatists, storytellers, satirists, and comedians turning the Witness experience into works of literary art. Every social role represented someone's attempt to earn the currency of the Internet — the attention and respect of other people. Together, these roles approximated the patterning of a real community.

The virtual community was almost entirely anonymous, but it's clear that some of its members were a lot better known to one another than they were to their Witness families and friends. The obsessive privacy of modern communities is often regarded as the enemy of public life. At H2O, however, one could see that privacy creates the margin of safety that individuals need if they are to discover any life at all. The plastic computer case signified both privacy and power.

"[I]n 1995 when I bought my first computer (Mac 8100) I realized what I had been associated with [in the Watchtower]. . . . It was then that a big part of myself was freed. The Internet did indeed save my 'soul.'

It was more than a question of discovering the facts about the Watchtower movement. People on the net discovered talents that they never knew they had, and they got a chance to cultivate them. Many began their involvement as naive lurkers and loyalists, only to be drawn into dialogue and develop a role as thinkers and

The failure of the world to end in 1975 brought back the Society's custom of treating every falsification of its prophecies as a sign that the Truth itself is advancing.

writers — often, I would add, acute and forceful thinkers, and writers of charm and wit.

These charming, intelligent, irritating, not infrequently hostile strangers also discovered a conception of the social contract that is older than Hayekian or even Lockean ideas of the free society. Its locus classicus is the passage in Sophocles' "Antigone" where Haemon suddenly realizes what is wrong with his authoritarian father: "You want to talk but never to hear and listen.

Tell that to the Watchtower Society. But you can also tell it to patrons of the Internet who threaten other patrons, call them morons and fools, distract them with irrelevant issues, or simply lie about the facts. On H2O, as on any other website, people who kept doing these things suffered the worst civil penalty that an individualist society can inflict: they stopped being taken seriously.

The Internet's version of the social contract was based on the perceived interests of the participants, not on institutional hegemony or agreement about substantive issues. Was this a vindication of postmodernist ideas about the abandonment of truth and authority?

Resurgence of Truth

Not at all. The sudden, spontaneous evolution of Witness websites was entirely the product of private individuals' concern with the authority of old-fashioned truth. The dissidents spent their time and energy trying, as they frequently said, "to tell the truth about the Truth." The loyalists who appeared on disloyal sites had the same idea. They were sufficiently motivated by the pursuit of truth to risk a bad conscience and discipline by their own religious organization for engaging in dialogue with its opponents. People on both sides were trying to live up to the demands of a simple but practical theory, one of the oldest theories in the world: the correspondence theory of truth.

Nearly everyone involved in the Watchtower wars agreed on the simple idea that truth corresponds to ascertainable fact, and falsehood doesn't. Set aside, for the moment, all the symmetries and ironies, debates and paranoias among the pro-Watchtower and anti-Watchtower forces. The question that drew thousands of people into the arena of electronic debate was not a matter of unrelated perspectives and relativistic principles. It was much more straightforward: Did the Watchtower Society's ideas about the world, and about itself, correspond to facts?

"Rick," one of the anonymous people responsible for the

H2O board, conceded that issues are usually not "black and white"; still, he suggested, "truth will reveal itself to those who never stop seeking it." Everyone else seemed to agree. If someone could have convinced the Internet debaters that the search for truth was just an amusing language game or a search for diverse opinions, none of them would have stayed on the board. What drew the virtual community together was the conviction that ideas can be found that make a recognizable match with fact.

This conviction easily transcended all boundaries of class, gender, ethnicity, national culture, and current religious convictions. Prominent among the participants in the great Internet debate were African Americans, Norwegians, Venezuelans, Finns, Australians, militant atheists, born-again Christians, wealthy businessmen, impoverished single moms, physicians, janitors, and the blandest of general Americans. They all took the universal Internet community so much for granted that no one even mentioned multiculturalism or reflected, in the style of the Disney Corporation, that "it's a small world, after all." Again, if you're looking for a vindication of the free society as Americans have traditionally understood it, this is a good place to start. But it's important to repeat that the net is not just a way of saying things; it's also a way of doing things. All sides in the Watchtower controversy now seem to accept the fact that the virtual community has a serious impact on the real community. Dramatic evidence began appearing in 1998, with the Bulgarian Blood Battle.

The Watchtower Society had been scuffling with the government of Bulgaria since 1994. The issues were blood transfusions and military service. The government believed that the Witnesses' blood ban was a threat to public health. The Witnesses believed that the government's reluctance to exempt them from military service was an infringement of liberty. One thing led to another, and the Watchtower Society haled Bulgaria before the European Commission of Human Rights. Negotiations followed, and in early March, 1998, the legal dispute was amicably settled. Bulgaria agreed to give the Witnesses conscientious objector status, and the Watchtower Society agreed not to impose "any control or sanction" on Witnesses who received blood transfusions. Anyone who read the agreement would conclude that the blood ban was lifted, at least for Bulgarians.

In times past, such a portentous change would never have caused a ripple in the Society's international organization, because it would never have received any publicity. In the 1960s and 1970s, Witnesses in Mexico

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were allowed to exempt themselves from military service by purchasing a little card indicating that they had "served," while Witnesses in Malawi, who knew nothing about events in Mexico, suffered horrible persecution for refusing to buy a little card indicating that they were "members" of the ruling political party.

The Internet broke the Witnesses' isolation from truth. On April 20, 1998, the obscure Bulgarian agreement was discovered lurking on the website of the European Commission and was reported by a poster on H2O. This seems to have been the first news that the Watchtower world (including almost everyone at Watchtower headquarters) had received of it. The news aroused both hope and suspicion. Was this apostate trickery, or a symptom of Watchtower reform? Electronic research confirmed that the news was authentic: the Society had compromised its stance on blood. In the Witness community, this was one of the biggest events imaginable. "As a witness of 40 years standing," one H2O poster observed, "I never thought I would see it."

But what did it mean? Was the Society hesitantly adapting itself to a new, more open world? Had it conveniently discovered some new truth about blood? Would it admit that its old idea of truth was false? Would it have to admit this, now that everybody who had a computer could see what was happening? Intelligence from Europe and America suggested that the Society was dithering, unprepared to react to the challenge of quick and uncontrolled publicity. But with the Internet watching, even the slowest, heaviest authority can't take long to dither.

When the Society acted, its objective was not to speak the truth but to quell disorder on the net. On April 27, 1998, it dispatched a press release to a friendly site, NoBlood.com. Its announcement was a masterpiece of obscurantism. It said nothing about the Society's moral compromise; it merely applauded a victory for "religious freedom."

This was a desperate gamble. The Society had decided to engage with the Internet's demand for public dialogue, but only by playing its own private game with words. The strategy was boldly postmodern. It was meant to free the Society from any binding relationship between language and reality, any expectation that it would satisfy the correspondence theory of truth. Of course, that kind of freedom could be achieved only by identifying truth with institutional authority. But this is an ironic reflection on postmodern theories about authority and truth, not on the Society, which has always simply identified the two.

Understanding that principle, operators of loyal websites quickly purged people who came up with annoying questions about the Society's announcement. Loyalists posting on enemy sites went so far as to argue that the blood ban had never existed in the first place, that individual consciences had always been invited to decide things for themselves — even though, admittedly, a wrong decision might have certain unpleasant institutional consequences. This, indeed, was the Society's new line: having a blood transfusion is completely up to you — just don't do it, if you know what's good for you.

The immediate effect was to inspire the Watchtower's opponents. Dissenters, especially the people at H2O, spoke of final judgments and miraculous conversions:

"This has to be the beginning of the end for the WBTS [Watchtower Bible and Tract Society] as we know it. No way in hell will this slip quietly into obscurity."

"They compromised their faith in Jehovah and failed the test."

"I'm so [expletive deleted] at myself for being a SUCKER! for so many years. Thanks to the Internet I was able to wake up from my STUPIDITY!!!"

By fall, 1999, the Society realized that it was in serious trouble. It began taking action to soften its image, while hardening its authority. It yielded to one of the most vociferous demands of its Internet opponents: it made four appointments of relatively young men to the Governing Body, one of them the GB's first African American member. At the same time, it aimed a harsh blow at its Internet intelligentsia. An extraordinarily long and emphatic article in *Our Kingdom Ministry*, the Watchtower house organ, denounced the Internet, coming down hard on even such seemingly "innocent" phenomena as the electronic sharing of edifying news and chat. *Kingdom Ministry* made a special target of loyalist sites that had been dispensing increasingly sophisticated defenses of the Society's doctrines. It insisted on the Society's exclusive right to market its own teachings, using its own books and its own website.

Websites all over the world went blank — but only temporarily. Even the Watchtower Society could not tell private individuals to unplug their machines. The lasting effect was simply to make the loyalists who remained in action, or who returned to the Web, endure the ridicule of Internet opponents who wondered how they could keep defending the Society's authority after the Society

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had authoritatively decreed that they must not take it upon themselves to do so.

While the blood battle continued on the Internet, another problem cropped up — less important, but with its own nasty squint toward the problem of truth: Y2K. The Society had never associated any of its millennial prophecies with the advent of the actual millennium. Nevertheless, a long time had passed since 1914, which was supposed to mark the beginning of this world's end. Apocalyptic hopes were endemic in local congregations; they attached themselves to the year 2000; they were encouraged and spread by the Internet; and they were frustrated, as all preceding hopes had been.

The millennium dawned very dismally over the Watchtower Society. Since 1999 it had been spending much of its time (in some issues of its publications, all of its time) exhorting Witnesses to patience and endurance over the long haul. The exhortations were a concession to reality, the new reality that the Internet helped to create. In most countries of the industrialized world, as well as many countries of the third world, membership was slumping badly. Despite gargantuan efforts at proselytization, the number of Jehovah's Witnesses in 17 heavily Internetted countries, including the United States, actually shrank in 1999. Growth in the world as a whole was a very suboptimal 2%. The pattern continued in 2000, with zero growth or losses in 74 out of 235 countries or territories reporting statistics, declining placements of literature, and an 11% decrease in baptisms. Growth in the United States reached only about one half of one percent.

2002 saw a modest turnaround: the worldwide number of active Witnesses increased by 2.84%. Witness watchers attributed the change, which was especially evident in certain Western nations (e.g., the United States, where the increase was 3%), to anxieties prompted by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The number of baptisms, however, still floated near a 14-year low, while the number of hours that Witnesses spent preaching remained steady. In 1988, almost 3,300 hours of witnessing were required to produce one convert. That was a lot of hours. But by 2002, over 4,500 hours were required (up from about 3,500 in 1999 and about 4,000 in 2000). That means that the average Witness, who logs about 200 hours of preaching a year, will work more than two decades before achieving any quantifiable result.

The problem looks even worse when you consider that many baptisms are those of family members, who are a great deal easier to convert than randomly contacted "householders." For generations, Watchtower

publications have excoriated "Christendom" for its laziness and smugness, but now it appears that the Witnesses' own zeal is much less effective than that of many evangelical and mainline Christians. No wonder: the Witnesses are stuck in the door-to-door-salesman routines of a pre-electronic world, with no electronic outreach except watchtower.org, which no one will ever find unless he goes to look for it.

Where Are They Going?

In the last year or so, the Watchtower Society has encountered additional threats, and it has tried some new responses, most of them feckless. One of the biggest threats was an infection from the Witnesses' ancient enemy, the Roman Catholic Church. Russell, like most Protestants of his time, was fervently anti-Catholic, and Rutherford insisted that the Catholic Church was the real leader of the Axis powers. As late as 1960, the Society was inspired by the Kennedy presidential campaign to publish a special issue of its magazine *Awake* attacking "The Catholic Church in the Twentieth Century". The Society had always rejoiced in the Church's embarrassments. Yet the Church's current sex scandals showed how easy it is to pursue a scandal in any religious group, given the ability of the Internet to organize the forces of disaffection. Watchtower dissidents learned the lesson, organized, and began attracting significant media coverage to their stories of sex abuse and cover-ups among Jehovah's Witnesses.

Fearful of legal interference in any form, the Society tried various means of appearing to decentralize itself, protectively isolating religious functions in certain corporate bodies and business functions in others. When former Watchtower President Milton Henschel died in March 2003, the Society's news release said only that he had "filled various administrative capacities." It was a far cry from the leader-worship of Rutherford's day, or the corporation-worship of Knorr's. It was as if the presidency had never existed, or as if Henschel had been an interchangeable part of some electronic device. Once again, the Society was acquiring the characteristics of its surroundings. It was succumbing, at least in style, to the age of the Internet — not, to be sure, to the Internet's wild, demotic individualism, but to its other characteristic, its capacity for remoteness and anonymity. The digitized world was now inhabited by a digitized Society, with the Governing Body its shadowy webmaster. Dodging attempts at refutation, Witness literature grew grayer and blander, as if its content were computer-generated from some remote source.

The Internet broke

Meanwhile, the Society's foes continued building their

**the Witnesses'
isolation from truth.**

own institutions. H2O remains, and it has been joined by other well-mounted message boards, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses Discussion Forum (jehovahs-witness.com). The conflict between the Internet and the Society is decidedly unequal. The Society's task is, first, to convince people that it has a comprehensive and fully consistent explanation of reality; then, to organize these people into a force that can support a vast profusion of things: printing plants, assembly halls, local churches, mortgages, investments, legal offices. The task of the Internet dissidents is simply to show that the Society's ideas aren't true, and to organize such inexpensive virtual institutions as may be useful in spreading that message. The dissidents have a considerable economic advantage.

Can the Society, or anything like it, have a future in an Internetted world?

Perhaps. There are several options available to it. The most obvious is to do what Raymond Franz tried to get it to do, a quarter-century ago: admit it was wrong. But this, of course, is the least likely option to be taken. Only one modern American institution has ever admitted that it was fundamentally in error — the Worldwide Church of God, an Adventist church that, influenced by the Witnesses, once referred to its members as "in the Truth," and to everyone else as out of it. During the 1990s, the WCG leadership surveyed its distinctive teachings and announced that they could not be squared with the Bible. The reward for its courage was the loss of 50–60% of its membership. This is an example that the Watchtower Society will be very reluctant to follow.

It is much more likely to choose one of two other options, roughly the same two that confront all other truth-challenged institutions in the modern world.

The first option is for the Society to keep trying to isolate its own version of truth from the checkable truth of the Internet. If it does that, the Watchtower movement will become a living fossil, a fellowship confined to people who, like the Amish, are content to remain in a world that predates the net.

The second option is for the Society to adapt its version of truth, bit by bit, to the fact-gathering capability of the Internet and the free society that the Internet exemplifies.

This second option is almost certainly the one that will be taken. Like other earthly authorities, the Society has a will to live at almost any cost. It will try to live even if

the cost is a quiet coming to terms with its own mistakes. The real question is whether the speed of the Internet will give it time for an orderly evolution. We have seen, in Eastern Europe, how quickly glasnost can be followed by oblivion. The crucial factor may be the morale of the leadership, its ability to live with the same truth that normal people live with, while simultaneously acting as if it were still in possession of its higher truth.

Raymond Franz told me the following episode from the life of his uncle, Frederick Franz, the fourth president of the Watchtower Society. In old age, Frederick Franz was taken to an eye doctor, who found that he couldn't read even the first line on the eye chart. The doctor pronounced him almost totally blind, with no possibility of improvement. "Well," Franz said, slapping his knees, "as long as I'm here, I might as well get my eyeglass prescription brought up to date!"

That's morale for you. Does the Society still have enough of it, at a time when morale has so few ways of evading the embarrassments of truth? We'll find out — because the Internet will tell us.

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