Jehovah's Witnesses and Racial Prejudice

By Werner Cohn

Jehovah's Witnesses, selling literature on street corners and going from house to house with a message of impending Armageddon, have become a familiar sight in recent years. There are perhaps 150,000 of them in this country, and about half are Negro. All are extremely energetic and forceful; many are self-sacrificing and unmoved by the material preoccupations of this world. Their deliberately unconventional views and practices have made trouble for them all over the world; in the United States, by insisting upon their right to free propagation of their opinions, they have unwittingly made notable contributions to the cause of civil rights for us all.

But most of us generally see the Witnesses only from afar: we might read about them in the newspapers. Or have one of them preach to us in a reluctantly-opened doorway. Unfortunately such superficial contact is misleading in regard to the nature and meaning of the group, for the Witnesses are not altogether what they seem to be. I have elsewhere described the general results of my investigations into the organization; here I shall deal briefly with those aspects that concern the relationship of the Witnesses to the Negroes.

The Negro press carries a great deal of material about the organization, especially at times of Witness conventions. Witness doings are important news for these periodicals because the number of Negro Witnesses is comparatively large and their devotion and articulateness is unusually high. Their influence, consequently, far exceeds their numbers. Furthermore, as I shall explain later,

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JANUARY, 1956

Witness doctrines find a particularly fertile soil in the Negro community. For all these reasons there is good and sufficient cause for the large quantity of Witness news in the Negro press.

But the quality—that is to say the reliability—of almost all this material is very unsatisfactory. Invariably the Witnesses are falsely pictured to represent a racially integrated group, eager to practice the Christian ideal of racial equality. The reason why so much wrong information finds its way into the Negro press is twofold: on the one hand, the Witnesses are interested in more and more Negro recruits, and they use professional public relations people to create a favorable impression in the Negro community. On the other hand, editors of Negro periodicals too often accept these publicity handouts freely and uncritically. The result is that the Witnesses are described to the Negro public, to quote some phrases plucked at random from Negro periodicals, as "the religion of racial integration," as "God's army on the march" in which "love is the binding tie that holds the organization together," etc., etc.

**NEGRO'S ROLE**

But what are the facts of the Negro's role in the organization?

While many of the more conventional denominations—notably the Catholic Church—make real efforts at racial integration in their services in Southern states, the Witnesses practice a very rigid racial segregation there. All Southern states, and most border areas as well, have separate Witness companies (local congregations) for Negroes and whites; a town as far north as Asbury Park, N. J., has racial segregation in the Witness organization. All over the South there are separate "circuits" (area-wide organizations) for the two races, and in the Southwest there are actually three separate circuits: Negro, white, and Spanish. Until recent years, Negro Witnesses were not invited to the national conventions of the organization, being furnished, instead, with jim-crow gatherings.

While, as I have mentioned, about one half of the membership of the Witnesses is Negro, the leadership is almost completely white. When I visited the national headquarters in Brooklyn in 1952, I was told that there were only two Negroes in the headquarters staff of over four hundred; one Negro worked in the mailing room, the other was a linotypist. The national organizational work, the editing and writing, the supervision of the various departments—all these functions were the exclusive provinces of the white members.

The Witness report of their 1953 international convention throws further interesting light on the role of the Negro in the organization. All the top Witness leaders appear in pictures in the report; but there is no picture in which an American Negro is identified as a leader. Two foreign Negroes are pictured as delegates from African countries, and what appear to be American Negroes are pictured as "cleaning up the kitchen"; another witness, apparently Negro, is pictured as helping in the immersion exercises. It is difficult indeed to escape the impression that the role which the Negro
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plays in the Witness organization is very similar to that traditionally assigned by the least enlightened sections of white society; he is regarded as best kept separate and not quite equal; often he is merely "cleaning up the kitchen" while his white brother does all the important theologizing.

REAL RACIAL ATTITUDES

Since Witness periodicals are primarily designed for the instruction of members and close sympathizers, they reflect the true racial attitudes of the Witness leadership much more faithfully than do the press releases designed for popular consumption. Awake of April 22, 1953, counsels against inter-marriage between Negroes and whites. The Watchtower, on April 15, 1953, and again on May 1, 1953, describes practices of African Witnesses in which races are kept apart as a matter of course (this is in contrast to the practices of the more enlightened Christian groups there). On October 8, 1953, Awake carried an article defending the apartheid policy of the South African government, declaring that South Africa's whole color policy is conditioned by this fact and this fear: 80 per cent of her population is black; if the color bar is breached, what new dike can stop a black flood from overflowing and destroying the civilization with which white men have displaced the wilderness?

During both world wars, Witnesses maintained a neutral, pacifist, "curse on both your houses" policy; they were not concerned over any possible threats to the countries in which they lived. The sudden Witness concern over South African white civilization, in this context, is an indicator of a racial prejudice that is as violent as one is likely to encounter anywhere.

In fairness to the Witnesses, however, it must be pointed out that the particularly sharp hostility toward Negroes portrayed in this Awake article is not fully representative of the organization. From my discussions with many white Witnesses I concluded that these people make some honest efforts to feel friendly toward Negroes; I did not meet a single Witness who was conscious of a real hostility. But these people are so full of the prejudices all around them that real racial equality is out of the question. They could not possibly consider racial inter-marriage, for instance. This subject was often brought up by them in the discussions, and always with the comment that such a thing does not exist among Witnesses, would bring discredit upon "Jehovah's organization," and is generally altogether impractical.

COMMONPLACE PEOPLE

With all their conspicuous non-conformity, Witnesses are usually commonplace people with commonplace ideas. It takes a considerable moral and intellectual effort, in our world, to free oneself from the popular racial prejudices, and the Witnesses do not have the energy—either morally or intellectually—to defy the deeper-lying mores of their surroundings. Their nonconformity is merely mechanical and is learned by rote from the dictatorial leaders of their organization: it represents
little more than a cantankerous eccentricity on religious and political matters. Culturally, Witnesses are strictly pedestrian. One is reminded of a mediocre writer who in straining for originality has to fall back on some such purely mechanical device as eccentricity in pronunciation or spelling.

The question that remains, however, is why, with an atmosphere so obviously hostile to Negro integration, Negroes nevertheless find themselves attracted in such considerable numbers to the Witness organization.

To understand this paradox we must, for a moment, concern ourselves with the nature and social sources of the sect as such. Jehovah's Witnesses constitute a protest organization of the spiritually disenchanted. People belong to it who have a vague and general feeling that the world is no good; for one reason or another, they think of themselves as having been left out of things. Witness doctrines make a powerful appeal to this feeling of being excluded. And given a world in which Negroes actually are excluded from many of the benefits of society, it is indeed not surprising to find many of them in this kind of protest organization.

PROTEST IRRATIONAL

The protest of the Witnesses, of course, is so extreme and so irrational that not much good can possibly come from it. The Witnesses reject not only the particular order of things in our present world, but they reject the very idea that men can do anything to better this order. They reject, in short, the human world as a whole, putting their whole trust in a future God-made holocaust which they deduce from their dubious interpretations of the book of Revelation. They have no fundamental interest in anything in this world: things as they are are to them simply irrelevant. That is why they preached that it would not make any essential difference whether Hitler or the Allies won; that is why they do not see any important difference between democracy and Communism. And that is why, also, their Negro members cannot get excited about injustice to their people, either in the country as a whole or in their own organization. After Armageddon, presumably, everything will automatically be straightened out, so why worry about any of the arrangements in the here and now, arrangements that according to Witness doctrine can only be temporary?

In effect, the Witnesses have given up all hope in the potentialities of the human race. Their vision of God is one in which man is passive and has no say. For those of us who do not share this vision, there remains the task of making a better world through our own efforts. No results of ours, of course, can ever be as spectacular as the Armageddon of the Witnesses' fantasies; but unspectacular results that happen are ultimately more satisfying than the spectacular ones that don't.