
ECUMENICAL WITH THE TRUTH? JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND DIALOGUE

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In the year 2000 the Watch Tower Society produced a booklet entitled *What Jehovah's Witnesses Believe*. The publication set out 40 tenets of the Jehovah's Witnesses, one of which reads, 'A Christian ought to have no part in interfaith movements.' My aim is to examine the organization's reasons for rejecting dialogue, and to trace the history of how this came about.

In its early years the Bible Students (as they called themselves then) were not a completely exclusivist organization. They emerged from the Adventist tradition, and they did not teach that they were Jehovah's sole vehicle of salvation: even the 144,000 anointed class might be drawn from a variety of Christian groups, and there are records of other denominations, for example Baptists, occasionally helping them with their early work. The main enemy, however, from the Bible Students' point of view, was the Roman Catholic Church. Founder-leader Charles Taze Russell's anti-Catholic polemic can be found in the second volume of his *Studies in the Scriptures*, entitled *The Time is at Hand* (1889). There Catholicism is described as 'the abomination of desolation', of which the prophet Daniel speaks (Daniel 12:11). Russell's objections are very much in line with those of the earlier Protestant Reformation: the pope is the Antichrist, and the Roman Catholic Church's teachings are unbiblical human creations. They depart from the simplicity of the early Church, having woven a complex tapestry of canon laws, theological systems, and elaborate ceremonies. Russell objects to the Mass, which is regarded as a sacrifice and celebrated at an altar. It venerates saints and relics, uses images, and pays tribute to a woman in the form of the Virgin Mary. The Roman Church is collectively the 'man of sin' to whom Paul refers (2 Thessalonians 2:3), and also to be identified with Babylon the Great.

The Evangelical Alliance had been set up in 1846, shortly before the founding of Zion's Watch Tower Society. While many Christians viewed this as a welcome initiative in inter-denominational relationships, the Bible Students viewed it as a Protestant attempt to rival the size and power of the Roman Church. Thus the Alliance was said to be 'the image of the beast' (Revelation 13:14; 16:13). The Book of Revelation also mentions a two-horned beast (Revelation 13:15): this is the Church of England (Russell, 1886: ix). Although not part of this Alliance, the Church of England nonetheless sent its greetings, thus arousing the suspicion that its doctrine of apostolic succession might become widespread within Protestantism more widely. One edition of *Zion's Watch Tower* interpreted 'the number of the Beast' (the enigmatic 666) as referring to phrases consisting of 18 letters (18 being the sum of 6 + 6 + 6). Examples of such phrases were 'Roman Catholic Power', 'Romanic Catholic Beast', and 'Roman Catholic Women': women are specifically mentioned here, since the Book of Revelation mentions a woman and a prostitute. Anglicanism was also perceived in similar vein, since 'English State Church', 'The Episcopal Church', 'Episcopalian Church' and 'The Church of England' are composed of 18 characters (Watch Tower 1882: 323). (It should be noted that Jehovah's Witnesses today do not endorse this piece of exegesis, however.)

Under Russell's leadership, the organization occasionally engaged in debates with mainstream clergy, although of course a debate is different from a dialogue, and three quite famous ones took place in 1903, 1908 and 1915. The first — between Russell and the Rev. Dr E. L. Eaton (Methodist Episcopal) — was in Allegheny, where the Bible Students originated, and the second — with the Rev L. S. White (Church of Christ) — in Cincinnati, Ohio, and then in Dallas, where J. F. Rutherford — destined to become the Society's second president — debated with the Rev. John H. Troy, a prominent Baptist minister (Allegheny Gazette 1903; Rowe 1908; Los Angeles Express 1915). A debate, of course, is not a dialogue, but at least the respective parties were prepared to talk to each other. Unlike ecumenical and interfaith dialogues, these debates tended to focus on points of divergence, rather than points in common, and typically spanned the issues of life after death, eternal punishment, 'probation after death', and Christ's second coming. After the Rutherford-Troy debate, the Society took the view that debates gave undue prominence to teachings that the Bible Students rejected, and that it was preferable to propagate its own distinctive teachings (Watch Tower, 1915: 5685).

The extending of the concept of Babylon beyond Roman Catholicism, to span the totality of religion outside the Watch Tower Society was prompted by a little-known book entitled *The Two Babylons* by Alexander Hislop, bearing the intriguing subtitle ‘or The Papal Worship Proved to be the Worship of Nimrod and his Wife’. This book was originally written in 1858, but continued to be reprinted until 1969 at least, and the full text of it can be found on the Internet. Hislop appears to have been a Scottish Free Church clergyman, but his criticisms seem to take him beyond a critique of Catholicism and target certain key ideas of mainstream Christianity more widely, such as the doctrine of the Trinity and mainstream Christian festivals. Russell never mentions either Hislop or Nimrod in his writings: we first read these ideas in the highly controversial Watch Tower Society publication *The Finished Mystery* (1917). Jehovah’s Witnesses typically regard this book as a posthumous work by Russell, but this claim is highly problematical, not least because it introduces a whole new range of ideas that are foreign to Russell, including the Nimrod theory.

Hislop’s two Babylons, needless to say, are ancient Babylon and Roman Catholicism, which, he argues, share similar features, and are open to similar theological critiques. In order to understand Babylon the Great, we need to understand its origins and history, as recounted in scripture. The first reference to it is in the Book of Genesis and relates to Nimrod. Nimrod was Noah’s great-grandson, and it will be remembered that Noah is famous for having survived the great flood by obeying God’s instructions to build the ark. The flood is significant in the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ account of history, since Jehovah sent the flood to wipe out false religion, which had resulted from Adam and Eve’s rebellion against Jehovah in the Garden of Eden by obeying the serpent — Satan — rather than Jehovah. Noah, however, preached righteousness, and when his family reached dry land after the flood, true religion became re-established on earth.

Noah, however, had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth. These represent three branches of the human race that supposedly developed through history. Ham was the father of Canaan, the home of the fertility cults that rejected the true God and rivalled the faith of the Israelites, while Shem was the follower of Jehovah. The name ‘Shem’ is reckoned to be etymologically related to the word ‘semitic’.

Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.

Blessed be Jehovah, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. (Genesis 9:20-27, AS).

It is with Nimrod, however, that the utter apostasy begins. Nimrod is the key figure in Hislop's thesis (Genesis 10:8-10). He is described as a warrior and 'a mighty hunter before the Lord' in most translations, but the Watch Tower Society holds that the preposition should be translated 'in opposition to'. Thus, Nimrod was 'in opposition to Jehovah' (Gen. 10:9), and the author perceives him as being responsible for the totality of false religion. The Book of Genesis recounts that his first kingdom was centred on Babylon, from where he travelled to various surrounding countries including Assyria. Nimrod is the first person in scripture (and, Witnesses say, in human history) who is described as a king, thus replacing theocratic rule with civil government. Babel — the name of the place whose inhabitants built the famous tower — is taken to be synonymous with Babylon. The tower that they attempted to build was more than a status symbol: it was one of the first ziggurats — towers that were used for religious purposes in ancient Babylonian religion (Chryssides 2008: 101). Jehovah thwarted their plans, however, causing them to speak in diverse and mutually incomprehensible languages, and dispersing them throughout the world. Since these people had now embraced false religion, false religion travelled with them, thus deceiving the whole earth.

In order to examine the impact of Nimrod on religion worldwide, Witnesses' literature has to draw on a variety of sources extraneous to the Bible. Nimrod is described as the husband of the Babylonian goddess Semiramis, who gives birth to the god Tammuz. Thus we have a triad of deities, which had an impact on the development of the later Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The mother-and-son image of Semiramis and Tammuz also bears affinities to Christianity's virgin and child, which Hislop believes 'Popery' copied. Semiramis is also depicted in the context of a serpent, apparently fulfilling the biblical prophecy that the woman's offspring would crush the serpent's head and bruise its heel (Genesis 3:15). However, the teaching that a Babylonian deity would destroy the serpent (i.e. Satan) is itself the teaching of false religion and therefore should be rejected.

Babylonian religion exhibits many of the features that are found in Christendom, from which the Witnesses stand apart. First, it should be noted that Babylonian religion was itself a civil religion. The king was also the high priest, who assumed the role of the supreme

Babylonian god Marduk at the New Year festival, thus combining state and religion. In similar vein, the Roman Catholic Church has been a state religion: the Holy Roman Empire was once a religio-political system spanning much of the globe. Protestantism too, as the image of the beast, combined religious and political systems, for example in Calvin's Geneva.

Second, Babylonian religion is Satanic, involving the worship of Satan. Hislop maintains that Nimrod was deified as the high god, and the triadic configurations of deity feature in various middle-eastern and Indian forms of worship. This, he believes, is evidence of the widespread influence of Nimrod worship, and if, as he argues, Nimrod is Satan, then it follows that these forms of religion involve Satan worship. Hislop has no objection to Christian trinitarian doctrine, but he objects to false triads employed within Roman Catholicism, for example, instructions to pray to Jesus, Joseph and Mary, at which he is affronted. By appropriating these false triadic features from Babylonian religion, Roman Catholicism becomes a form of devil worship, in reality venerating Nimrod and his wife Semiramis, the latter being transformed in Catholicism into the Virgin Mary. Further, Nimrod's birthday falls on 25 December, and hence customs such as Christmas trees and yule logs are associated with Nimrod and false religion. Hislop writes:

Now the Yule Log is the dead stock of Nimrod, deified as the sun-god, but cut down by his enemies; the Christmas-tree is Nimrod redivivus—the slain god come to life again. (Hislop: 97-98).

As is well-known, the Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate Christmas or Easter because of their 'pagan' associations. The refusal to celebrate Christmas was not a Watch Tower policy in the Society's early years; indeed one old edition of the Watch Tower goes as far as to suggest that Russell's *Studies in the Scriptures*, *Heavenly Manna*, copies of *The Watch Tower* or *The Diaglott* (an interlinear Greek-English New Testament, favoured by the Society) would make excellent Christmas presents (Watch Tower 1910: 4727). Under Rutherford's leadership, and influenced by these new considerations, the festival was discontinued.

Third, Babylonian religion teaches unbiblical doctrines. Hislop contends that Nimrod was deified after his death and resurrection, and the idea of his rising in supernatural form connotes a soul-body dualism, which he — and the Watch Tower Society — believe is alien

to the Christian faith. Babylonian religion teaches the immortality of the soul, instead of the resurrection of the body, which the Bible affirms.

There is a fourth and final consideration about Babylonian religion: God's personal name. This is not in Hislop, but the idea has been of key importance in Watch Tower teachings. As the Society points out, Babylonian religion does not employ God's personal name. It uses generic names such as Bel, Belu and Baal (meaning 'Lord'). In his contest with the Baal priests, Elijah wins the contest of lighting the fire on the top of Mount Carmel by calling on Jehovah by his personal name, while the Baal priests use generic titles. As the Witnesses contend, the Jews themselves lost the practice of using God's personal name, avoiding pronouncing the tetragrammaton (Yahweh, or Jehovah), and substituting the word 'Adonai'. (Watch Tower 2010: 27).

This discussion of Babylonian religion might suggest that the Jewish people kept themselves free of such taint. However, the Bible records that God's chosen people, the nation of Israel, came continually into contact with the Canaanite fertility cults, and compromised with them. The prophets directed them back to Jehovah, but repentance was invariably followed by further apostasy. Jesus came as the messiah who atoned for sin by offering himself as the 'ransom sacrifice', and the community he established engaged in true worship of God. After the age of the apostles, however, the early Church became apostate through contacts with Graeco-Roman religion, coming to accept ideas like the immortality of the soul, becoming over-involved with civil affairs, introducing a separate class of clergy, and adopting pagan practices such as the celebration of festivals such as Christmas and Easter.

The Watch Tower Society holds that wherever Nimrod's influence has gone there is false religion, and because all religions — Christian and non-Christian — are tainted with false doctrines and practices, any form of religion outside the Society is part of Babylon the Great. In the later years of his leadership, the second president J. F. Rutherford organized 'information marches', in which supporters carried placards with the slogan, 'Religion is a snare and a racket.' By equating the term 'religion' with 'false religion' the slogan was initially construed as a complete rejection of spirituality, and some members of the public concluded that the demonstrators must be atheistic communists. To clarify matters, Rutherford instructed that alternate banners should carry the slogan, 'Serve God and Christ the King'.

The Watch Tower Society, on principle, does not support either interfaith or Christian ecumenical activity, since it has set itself outside the boundary of 'religion' in general. It has

no interest in Christian ecumenical affairs, because the three issues discussed within the ecumenical movement are baptism, eucharist and ministry, none of which are of interest to Jehovah's Witnesses, and are certainly not matters for negotiation. New converts must undergo baptism at a Jehovah's Witnesses' assembly or convention, even if they have already been baptized in a mainstream Christian denomination. In place of the eucharist they celebrate their annual Memorial, which they believe follows Jesus' practice and instructions at the Last Supper. It is not presided over by ordained clergy, because there are none in the Watch Tower organization; hence questions about the validity of anyone's ordination is not a live question for Jehovah's Witnesses.

The identification of false religion with Babylon is generally not fully appreciated by those outside the organization. Babylon is the whore, the body who has abandoned Jehovah and gone after false gods. Mainstream Christians have sometimes tried to bargain with Jehovah's Witnesses with invitations like, 'I'll come to your church if you'll come to mine.' Since other religions are Babylon, such a proposition is rather like a prostitute from a local brothel inviting the Christian, 'I'll come to your place if you'll come to mine.' Since religion outside the Society is the whore of Babylon, the proposal is unacceptable.

The Jehovah's Witnesses' position on dialogue is therefore a straightforward and logical one. If one holds the truth, then it is to be proclaimed, rather than discussed as if it were on an equal footing with other denominations and other faiths.

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