

The Witnesses also do not see the Holy Spirit as sharing the divine nature. For them he is not a personal being at all but merely the power of God: this again reflects the reliance of the Witnesses on Old Testament thinking. But in the NT the Spirit is never an impersonal force but personal. The Spirit is the advocate promised by Christ and in any reference to the work of the Spirit the personal pronoun in Greek meaning “He”, not “it”, is used throughout the NT.

If the Spirit is personal and acts as the continued presence of Christ in the world it is illogical to deny him divinity. Christ’s command is to baptise in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit ( Mt 28:19) Numerous references mention Father, Son and Spirit in the same breath.

Jehovah’s Witnesses contend that the Trinity is unscriptural and illogical and that it takes its origin from pagan religions. The first claim can be refuted by stating that the NT (like the OT) insists that God is one and nevertheless uses terms like Father and Son that imply plurality within God. We are dealing with a mystery beyond human experience: of how two beings can be one in essence and still have different personalities. We can only say that our experience is limited to the finite and we are not in a position to say what is possible in the realm of the divine.

### **Blood transfusions**

The prohibition of blood transfusions by Jehovah’s Witnesses flies in the face of common sense, even in the era of AIDS where much blood is contaminated. It is without foundation in Scripture, which does indeed prohibit the drinking of blood in the OT (Gen 9:3, Lev 17:4). However extending an OT prohibition on consuming blood to forbidding the use of donated blood to save human life is nonsensical. This calls to mind Christ’s warning that it was foolish to prohibit healing on the Sabbath (Mt 12:9-13). If it was wrong to prohibit healing on the Sabbath how much more ridiculous is it to stop lives being saved through donated blood!

### **Birthdays and Christmas**

Jehovah’s Witnesses do not celebrate Christmas on the grounds that it was a pagan feast taken over by Christians. On the other hand the very calendar we use is filled with names of pagan gods: yet the witnesses have never objected to that! The Jews were commanded to circumcise males: yet this was and still is a pagan custom; even baptism was a Hellenistic rite before Jews and then Christians adopted it!

Another belief of the Witnesses is that it is wrong to celebrate birthdays because they claim in Scripture that only pagans celebrated birthdays (eg Herod in Mk 6:21-29). Scripture does not at any stage object to birthdays being celebrated: rather the sacred writers sometimes condemned excesses that took place in feasts.

### **Did Christ die on a “stake”?**

Witnesses also deny that Christ died on a cross. They hold rather he died on a stake citing 1 Cor 10:14. The language used was KOINE Greek in which the word used meant an upright with crossbeam. The expression “hung on a tree” in Acts 5:31 is merely to show that it is a fulfilment of Deut 21:23. The historical truth however is that Romans executed criminals on a high pole with a crossbeam. Many scripture texts use the term “cross” for the instrument used to put Jesus to death (see Gal 3:13; 1 Cor 1:17-18). The cross is thus a fitting symbol for recording Christ’s redemptive work.

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### **Pamphlet 065**

## **Jehovah’s Witnesses Beliefs and Characteristics, A Catholic Response**

Most Catholics are familiar with Jehovah’s Witnesses distributing magazines and tracts on the street and knocking on doors. They probably have the most highly organized and effective evangelical outreach of any faith. What Catholics are not aware of is that many Catholics have left the Catholic Church and joined Jehovah’s Witnesses. It is therefore important for Catholics to understand their own faith and defend it against Jehovah’s Witnesses. **The Witnesses are known for being close-minded, extremely persistent and rather wily propagandists, adept at avoiding difficult issues when challenged. Effectively they see themselves as the only true believers and the only ones guaranteed salvation.** They claim to base their teachings on Scripture, but their ruling body sets their interpretation of Scripture. They have their own translation of the Bible with many additions to and omissions from standard translations. In addition their translations and interpretations of Scripture are always engineered to support their beliefs.

The Witnesses were founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the USA and now count some 13,000,000 adherents in more than 100 countries. They originated as a break away group from the Adventist movement (churches that believe in the early return- advent – of Christ). It was founded by Charles Taize Russell and given its present structure and beliefs by J F Rutherford. **The Witnesses have the same fervour for evangelisation in view of the Second Coming of Christ as the Adventists. However the founders of the Witnesses came to deny basic Christian doctrines such the Trinity and the divinity of Christ and this has been passed on to Witnesses to this day. Their teachings bear an uncanny resemblance to early heresies in the Church, such as the Arians and Ebionites.** Like the early Christian judaizers they continue to observe Old Testament prohibitions. For them Christ is not God,

but an incarnation of the Archangel Michael, and the first of creatures. Like some early Christian thinkers (and many modern liberal Christians) they maintain that the unrepentant will not suffer eternal damnation and instead, their souls will be annihilated. In some ways too the Jehovah's Witnesses have resemblances to the Catholic Church: they have a strong highly centralized organization. There is no room for dissent in the Witness organizations: members are thoroughly propagandised in the organization's beliefs and face expulsion if they voice dissenting opinions.

Like some groups in the early Church they have continued to observe some prohibitions found in the Old Testament. Their unorthodox doctrines on death and judgement also hark back to controversies in the early Church that were settled by the fourth century. Essentially they are a heterodox Christian group emphasising works with a strong central authority. **Their success is due to ceaseless well-organized proselytising and the thorough indoctrination in their beliefs that they give newcomers. Undoubtedly the Catholic church could learn something from their methods.**

Of late, Witnesses are becoming less aggressive in their evangelising. They have found that this is often counter-productive in attracting converts, and they are now less likely to condemn other faiths and those adhering to them. They do not emphasise those beliefs that they do not share with orthodox Christians. In particular the belief of Christ's imminent return is no longer stressed as much. Their literature focuses on current issues and they take a strong stand on matters involving public morals.

### **Witnessing to "Jehovah"**

Jehovah's witnesses claim that their mandate is to proclaim God's name, which they maintain is Jehovah. Yet this word never appears at all in the NT, and is a misspelling of the name YHWH as commanded by God to be used by the Hebrews when naming him (Ex 3:13-15). The spelling YHWH follows the Hebrew practice of omitting vowels from

the name of God, and scripture scholars are unanimous in asserting that the name Jehovah does not accurately spell this Hebrew word. Jesus commands his followers to call God "Father" (Jn 17:6) and does not use the Hebrew YAHWEH: our mission, like Jesus, is rather to proclaim God as Father, and not the OT YHWH.

### **Approaching Jehovah's Witnesses**

Debating with Witnesses in a convincing manner requires preparation and a thorough knowledge of scriptures that support Catholic beliefs. If you are not ready to dialogue at least be courteous and friendly (without opening up to lengthy discussions) and try to find some points of agreement. In talking to them it is often best to start with everyday subjects they will feel comfortable to discuss with you: once you have won their confidence you can talk to them more freely but in an objective non-judgemental manner.

Unlike fundamentalists, the Catholic Church is happy to acknowledge and rejoice in truth and goodness wherever it exists. It is the duty of Catholics to treat those with a deficient faith with courtesy and love and win them over to the fuller faith they have. In addition, one should prepare carefully and pray for inspiration before witnessing to the Catholic faith: remember too that while the Catholic faith contains the fullness of Christian belief we have the duty to live it out in convincing fashion if we want to attract others.

Following are a few guidelines on how orthodox Christian doctrine can be established from Scripture:

### **The divinity of Christ**

**Explicitly the divinity of Christ appears in the prologue of St John's gospel where we read "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God. And the Word was God" It also appears in the confession of Thomas the doubter (Jn 20: 28: "My Lord and my God"), which was not interpreted by Jesus as blasphemy but won**

**him commendation.** Jesus is condemned by the Sanhedrin for blasphemy for claiming to be God's Son: the High Priest rightly understood that by doing so he had claimed equality with God. In Col 1:15-17 we read that Christ created everything and that all things were made through and for Christ. In Scripture creation is exclusively an action of God: the notion of creation through any being not God is repugnant and reflects pagan religion and philosophy. Peter, in his profession of faith at Caesarea Philippi explicitly declares: "Thou art the Christ, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD".

Jesus' claim to share in the deity is implicit in his claim to be God's only Son, repeated in nearly all New Testament writing: if God is his Father, he must also share the nature of God, because any being must share the same nature as the being that begets it. It is also implicit in statements like "the Father and I are one" (Jn 10:22-39) and "Whoever sees me has seen the Father". In Jn 5:1-15 and 36-37, he forgives sin and performs miracles as his Father does.

However, certain texts that Christians use to prove the divinity of Christ are mistranslated by the Witnesses: for example the text in John 1 is translated as the Word was a "god", and that he was created in time. What one can say is that this is totally baseless because Scripture (especially the NT) never refers to anything or anyone as a god: God is alone in both NT and OT teaching. Watchtower objections to the divinity, based on Scriptures, such as Jesus advancing in knowledge and wisdom (Lk 2:52) or his being sent by the Father (Jn 17:3) are spurious. The first passage simply means that in his human nature he progressed in maturity.

### **The Trinity**