



1986

Terminal Visions: Apocalyptic Thought of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Stelle Group

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Recommended Citation

Gray '86, Daniel (1986) "Terminal Visions: Apocalyptic Thought of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Stelle Group," *Undergraduate Review*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol1/iss1/6>

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**Terminal Visions:
Apocalyptic Thought
of Jehovah's Witnesses
and the Stelle Group**

Daniel Gray

The Second Coming

Turning and turing in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shawdows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

W.B. Yeats

Please don't dominate the wrath Jack
If you got nothing new to say.
If you please, go back up the track
This train's got to run today.

"New Speedway Boogie"
The Grateful Dead

Apocalyptic thought, belief and action have been an integral part of the American experience from Columbus' landing right up to this very moment. Apocalyptic is infused into many facets of American life and culture. In differing degrees it plays some part in the teachings and creeds of almost every church, domination and sect. In many of the "mainline" churches (Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, United Methodist, etc.) apocalyptic tends to receive little attention. More fundamentalist organizations (Assemblies of God, Latter Day Saints,

Gray '86; Terminal Visions: Apocalyptic Thought of Jehovah's Witnesses and Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.) often focus and dwell upon apocalyptic concerns including Armageddon, Doom's Day and the Millenium.

Not to be dominated by religious groups, apocalyptic has played huge roles in American literature, film, television and politics.¹ A two and a half page article in the Fall 1985 issue of *Convergence*, entitled "The Politics of Armageddon," describes statements, public and private, of President Ronald Reagan that "mirror the Armageddon theology of Jerry Falwell and his allies in the New Christian Right."² The author of this article stresses that Reagan was saying similar things during his first term as Governor of California, indicating that Reagan is not making comments of this nature for use as a political tool but that he is "one of millions of Americans who read the Bible as a sourcebook for predictions of global conflict."

Upon reaching the coast of South America, Columbus quoted passages from Revelation and Isaiah which speak of "a new heaven and a new earth," and wrote to the sponsors of his voyage, "I deeply feel within me that there, where I have said, lies the Terrestrial Paradise."³ Millennialism, belief in the second coming and thousand year reign of Christ, was very strong among the Puritans who viewed their Massachusetts settlement as a "city on a hill."⁴ Inherent in American culture from the start, apocalyptic has found expression in popular religious treatments like Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, but also has received a great deal of secular attention in popular entertainment. John Wiley Nelson, author and minister, describes the prominence of apocalyptic and prophetic themes in recent American films and television shows. Analyses of *Star Wars*, *Battlestar Galactica*, the Western in general, *On the Beach*, and *Dr. Strangelove* (to name only a few) leads him to the belief that entertainment of this type is merely an expression of an "onslaught of fear, anxiety, paranoia and technological guilt."⁵ Nelson then identifies three reasons for this "onslaught." 1) Apocalyptic is as American as the hotdog. 2) After the civil rights movement, the burning of the cities, the assassinations, the birth of the drug culture, the Vietnam War and Watergate, who wouldn't feel anxious, paranoid and guilty? 3) A growing sense that only radical, in-breaking action can successfully resolve problems today.

The End of the World is a compilation of essays which treat the use of apocalyptic themes in science fiction. A major characteristic of science fiction apocalyptic is that "the end of the world is seldom the end." The cataclysm is always followed by a new creation.⁶ And in the eyes of science fiction there will always be a cataclysm. "The twentieth century has trained us to expect catastrophes."⁷

Though manifest in many aspects of life and culture, apocalyptic is rooted in the Bible. This paper will identify the source of apocalyptic

and then attempt a description of what apocalyptic is and what its major features are. I will then explore the apocalyptic facets of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Stelle Group. The Jehovah's Witnesses are a widespread, well-known, 115 year old Christian sect with congregations across the country and around the world. The Stelle Group is small, mostly unknown organization with two communities (one in Illinois and one in Texas) which have been started from scratch in the last 23 years. This exploration will involve a brief description and histories of each group, paying particular attention to teachings and prophecies concerning the end of the world.

The words apocalypse and apocalyptic come from the Greek word *apokalupsis*, which means to uncover or to reveal, and are eschatological (of or relating to the end of the world) in nature. Apocalyptic literature is concerned with revealing information relating to the final days of the present age, the Day of Judgment, and the age to follow.⁸ Apocalyptic refers to either a group of writings which possess certain characteristics or to the idea and concepts typical of this kind of literature. There is no consensus among Bible scholars as to what the term apocalyptic means and there is no agreed-upon list of apocalyptic books, making it difficult to define "apocalyptic literature."⁹ The variety of topics usually considered apocalyptic is very wide but the subjects are always those which could not be known of or discovered naturally; revelation from a higher, non-human source is always necessary. Topics addressed include the end of time, the entrance of the Kingdom of God, secrets of heaven, explanation of natural phenomena, history of the creation, the Messiah, and the characters and deeds of both good and bad angels. Normally these are presented as having been a special revelation to "some hero of the faith of past days".¹⁰

The general form of apocalypse developed from the Judaic prophetic tradition during the one hundred years or so preceding Christ. The prophetic ideals of the Hebrews and their political realities (the dominating empires of Persia, Greece and Rome) were not meshing. The establishment of a community based on a special relationship with Yahweh seemed less and less likely. The apocalyptic writers began to supplant the prophets, insisting that there must soon be "a radical change or break history." The present age must end, and only the righteous will survive the revolution of the end times. Prophecy focused on the earthly destinies of men and women and on their specific behavior as they attempt to fulfill their appointed role as God's chosen people. *The prophet perceives the future as arising out of the present.* Apocalyptic emphasizes future events and encourages people to endure their current suffering with the assurance of a blessed future life. *The*

*apocalypticist sees the future breaking into the present, not being constructed out of it.*¹¹

According to G. E. Ladd, apocalyptic literature is the product of three main factors. 1) The emergence of the "Righteous Remnant." Whenever people found themselves in a minority group, faithfully serving God but with little prospect of the whole nation adopting their perspective, there was a tendency to hold that the Righteous Remnant prophecies were fulfilled in them. 2) The problem of evil. 3) The ending of prophecy. Apocalyptic was never prevalent when life was easy and straightforward, it was called forth by the circumstances of the day. With its emphasis on God's final and perfect solution it made life livable under intolerable conditions.¹² "Apocalyptic was a Judea-Christian world-view which located the believer in a minority community and gave his life meaning by relating it to the end, soon to come, which would reverse his present status. The key to the interpretation of apocalyptic has usually been seen in the restlessness with the imperfection of the present and its quest for a new and total solution to the human problem."¹³

A feature of much apocalyptic is the use of a cryptic language and strange symbolism, which makes the message unintelligible to the modern reader, or anyone outside the group for whom the writing was intended.¹⁴ It is very difficult to interpret in detail because it belongs within a sect or party. It is esoteric, its meaning to be kept secret until the last days, which always turn out to be in the apocalypticist's own time.¹⁵ The question to be asked of apocalyptic is not, "What the hell was the writer really trying to say behind and amid all that imagery and symbolism?" It is rather, "What did the readers (the people) hope for that could only be expressed in such outlandish use of images and symbols?"¹⁶

The apocalypticists were concerned by the problem of why the righteous should be called upon to endure very harsh suffering and persecution.¹⁷ They concluded that the goodness of God lies in his bringing a speedy end to the evils of history and the imminent beginning of the Messianic Age. Characteristics of apocalyptic thinking include that:

- 1) history is teleological (exhibiting or relating to design or purpose),
- 2) the teleology of history is moral,
- 3) the evils of history are necessary preludes to the realization of the moral end of history,
- 4) this world will be cataclysmically destroyed before the new world begins,
- 5) we are living at the critical period of historical transformation,

- 6) only the moral person has a place in the new world,
- 7) human choices have no effect on the processes of history *per se*, but they do effect the individual's own situation in the world to come.¹⁸

A glaring theme is apocalyptic is dualistic thinking—present suffering vs. future salvation, evil vs. good, evil spirits vs. good spirits, Satan vs. God, etc.¹⁹ Human history is seen as a dialectic between two opposing forces, both personal and cosmic in character, which vie for control of the world; the evil powers which are currently in dominance will soon be overcome by the direct intervention of God. This dualism of ethical forces implies that history is “radically discontinuous.” After the final cosmic struggle time will cease, “heaven and earth will become one for eternity and the faithful will enter the holy city.”²⁰

Apocalyptic tradition recognizes the existence of history, but only as a limited time in which human change is possible. But God's control of history is not deterministic. “He sets the teleological course of history but needs humans, whose choices he doesn't control, to create the conditions which allow the teleological processes to occur. He promises to reward moral behavior by implementing the Messianic Age, but people must choose whether or not to be moral.”²¹ Though details about when the End would be (though never too far in the future from their own perspective) and how it would come about differ, all the apocalypticists put their emphasis on the next world and on their faith that God would prevail.²² History does not interpret itself. Therefore, apocalyptic is not immediately concerned with “plain history and real politics.” Apocalyptic is a re-telling of events. It takes another step back from immediate involvement and response and becomes “story about story.” Apocalyptic is the cosmic, universal interpretation of the meaning of current political and historical happenings. It points the way through the present suffering and total chaos toward those things that will “devolve from the mighty works of God.”²³

What types of people, or groups, have tended to array behind these kinds of literary expectations of time, history and God? Apocalyptic movements almost always: 1) Have had a charismatic leader (s), 2) Have established clear boundaries between truth and falsehood and see the world as essentially evil territory to be avoided at all costs, 3) Have members which hail from among the sociologically and psychologically unsettled masses. In times of unusual social stress apocalyptic movements create a “lively sense of group identity.” “Urbanization and industrialization furnished a social context for the emergence of such groups as the Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. The same milieu also set the stage for refining other variants of the apocalyptic vision which helped to assure the place of hope for a ‘new

Gray '86: Terminal Visions: Apocalyptic Thought of Jehovah's Witnesses and heaven and a new earth' within mainstream protestantism."²⁴ Converts to the new religions are concerned about their personal, physical and moral survival and because of this are very negatively oriented toward the established society which is "sunk in materialism and headed for disaster."²⁵

This brief summary of the tradition of apocalyptic is drawn from and is descriptive of very old religious traditions, which began to develop during the first century B.C. Two thousand years later the conditions which made this type of movement possible still exist and still find receptive personalities and mindsets willing to embrace and perpetuate even the extremes of the apocalyptic lifestyle. The organization known as the Jehovah's Witnesses provides an excellent contemporary example of the degree to which apocalyptic can thrive in American culture.

In 1869, at the age of seventeen, Charles Taze Russell, heard a sermon by an Advent Christian preacher that restored his faith in the Bible. He did not become a Second Adventist, but gathered a few friends to meet weekly for systematic Bible study. "We came to recognize," wrote Russell, "the difference between our Lord as 'the man who gave himself,' and as the Lord who would come again, a spirit being. We saw that spirit-beings can be present, and yet invisible to men. . . . we felt greatly grieved at the error of the Second Adventists, who were expecting Christ in the flesh . . ."²⁶ To counteract these erroneous teachings Russell wrote and published at his own expense, in 1873, 50,000 copies of "The Object and Manner of the Lord's Return," the first publication of what would later be known as the Jehovah's Witnesses. Throughout the history of the Witnesses there has been a very confusing number of leadership associations made and dissolved, due usually to disagreements in theology, prophecy and prediction. My discussion of the history and organization of Jehovah's Witnesses will therefore be very simple and existent only to the extent necessary to understand some of their teachings.

The motivating factor behind the Jehovah's Witnesses development as a sect (a religious movement alienated from the world, which stresses that it alone possesses the truth) and their insistence on remaining one has been their millenarian eschatology. No major Christian movement has been so insistent on prophesying the end of the world in such definite ways or such specific dates. They have consistently looked to specific dates—1874, 1878, 1881, 1910, 1914, 1918, 1920, 1925, 1975 and others - as having specific eschatological significance.²⁷ Russell originally believed that 1874 would mark the beginning of Christ's "invisible presence," that 1878 and then 1881 would see the "change" of members of the church from fleshly bodies to spiritual bodies, and that 1910 would be the beginning of global troubles leading to the end

of the world. When prophecies failed they had to be re-interpreted, “spiritualized,” or abandoned.

All of this prediction and “prophecy” is based upon in-depth study of scripture and involved, complicated chronologies developed from this study, based upon examples from the past. Specific dates (often to the month and day) are assigned to historic biblical events—creation, the beginning of the existence of Israel, the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar, baptism of Christ, etc. Recent and future dates are also given significance: 1914 as the end of the Gentile Times and the beginning of the end times; 1918 as the fall of Babylon the Great and the birth of the New Nation of Jehovah’s Witnesses; 1975 as the end of 6,000 years of human existence; 2875 as when the restitution of the earth will be completed; 2914 as the date when dominion of the earth will be restored to mankind.²⁸

Jehovah’s Witnesses hold that “all scripture is of God.” They accept the sixty six books of the standard Protestant Old and New Testaments as the only scripture, but maintain that some translations are more truthful than others. They hold that the New World Translation is the only one that is completely error-free. Translation of the New World Bible was conducted by a committee composed of Watchtower Society Bible “scholars.”²⁹ Throughout its history the Society has published a plethora of Bible study aids, commentaries and other materials to explain the Bible to its members. Due to the emphasis placed upon these Watchtower printings there has occurred an inversion of importance of the Bible and the “supplementary teachings.” In 1981 Witnesses were expected to read 3,178 pages of Watchtower literature, but only 197 pages of the Bible. Russell’s teachings quickly attained the status of *tradition* and became the only medium by which the scriptures were to be understood.³⁰

“The Watchtower Society had been extremely doctrinaire whenever it has held to a particular position, whether relating to prophetic speculation or otherwise. Then, later, when it became obvious that the doctrine in question was untenable, it would retreat to the assertion that Watchtower leaders are not infallible and must progress with the light.”³¹ For years “God’s people” had anticipated October 1, 1914, as the end of the Gentile Times, the end of all things and the moment when the faithful would be lifted off the earth heavenward. As October 1914 receded further into the past, members of the society began to identify that date as “the beginning of the end.”³²

In 1975 an attempt was made to get the governing body to set the Witness community on a more open, less dogmatic course. There was hope that the Society’s Gentile Times chronology and the teaching surrounding 1914 would be ditched, or at least re-examined. The

Gray '86: Terminal Visions: Apocalyptic Thought of Jehovah's Witnesses and closest they came to abandoning that teaching was a proposal to shift the date from 1914 to 1957; from the generation that saw World War I to the generation that witnessed Sputnik and the beginning of the Space Age.³³ The latest spectacular date that has come and gone without fireworks is 1975, the end of 6,000 years of human history and the probable beginning of the millenium. The "Stay alive till '75" campaign proved to be a lot of hype, and caused serious chaos within the power structure of the society and the falling away of many who were weak in the faith.³⁴ The preceding examples are enough to give us a taste of the doctrinal integrity that has been practiced throughout the entire history of the Watchtower Society. It would be unfair to assert that the leadership consciously engages in deceptions. The type of person that reaches the upper tiers of leadership in the society is thoroughly steeped in millennial thinking and really believes that God will work in the ways they have distilled from the scriptures-the inspired word of God.

Jehovah's Witnesses have always accepted and believed the traditional Christian concept of the linear progression of history. History began with the fall of Adam and Eve in Eden. Jehovah destroyed the first world of man and wicked angels by flooding them out. He smiled upon Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and gave their descendants a divine law to live by. However, the law only made Israel's innate sinfulness more apparent. Jesus Christ was sent to die in order to ransom Israel and humankind in general from sin and death. At that point God revealed his will for men and the way in which they could be saved. At the same time Christ began to choose a "church class of 144,000 *spiritual* Israelites from among all sorts of men and women." This "little flock", "bride of Christ," etc. eventually will receive a heavenly resurrection to reign and rule with Jesus as king-priests for 1000 years. Except for the people who have been "wilfully wicked" the dead will be resurrected during the 1000-year reign of Christ and given the opportunity to learn God's will and then accept or reject it. Those living during the end times will either pass through Armageddon, into a new earth which will eventually become an Eden-like paradise, or will be completely destroyed by God's wrath. The dead who are resurrected will be raised to that paradise. At the end of the 1000 years Satan and his demon hordes will be released to deceive the nations. Then Satan, his spirit comrades and those men and women that joined him in rebellion will be destroyed by the fire of God's wrath. Those left alive will be declared justified and granted the loving reward of everlasting life.³⁵

This brief outline of the entire history of the world has appeared in Watchtower publications since 1884. We'll now take a glimpse at some

of the details of the end time as apprehended by Witness beliefs. Christ has been resurrected in spirit and is now invisibly present, ruling in the midst of his enemies and preparing for Armageddon, which will be brought about by the sinfulness and folly of mankind, influenced by Satan. Eventually Christ shall cast Satan into the abyss of Revelation 20:3 and destroy all wicked demons and men. He and his church will serve as king-priests over mankind to bring them to perfection on a paradise earth during his 1000-year reign.³⁶

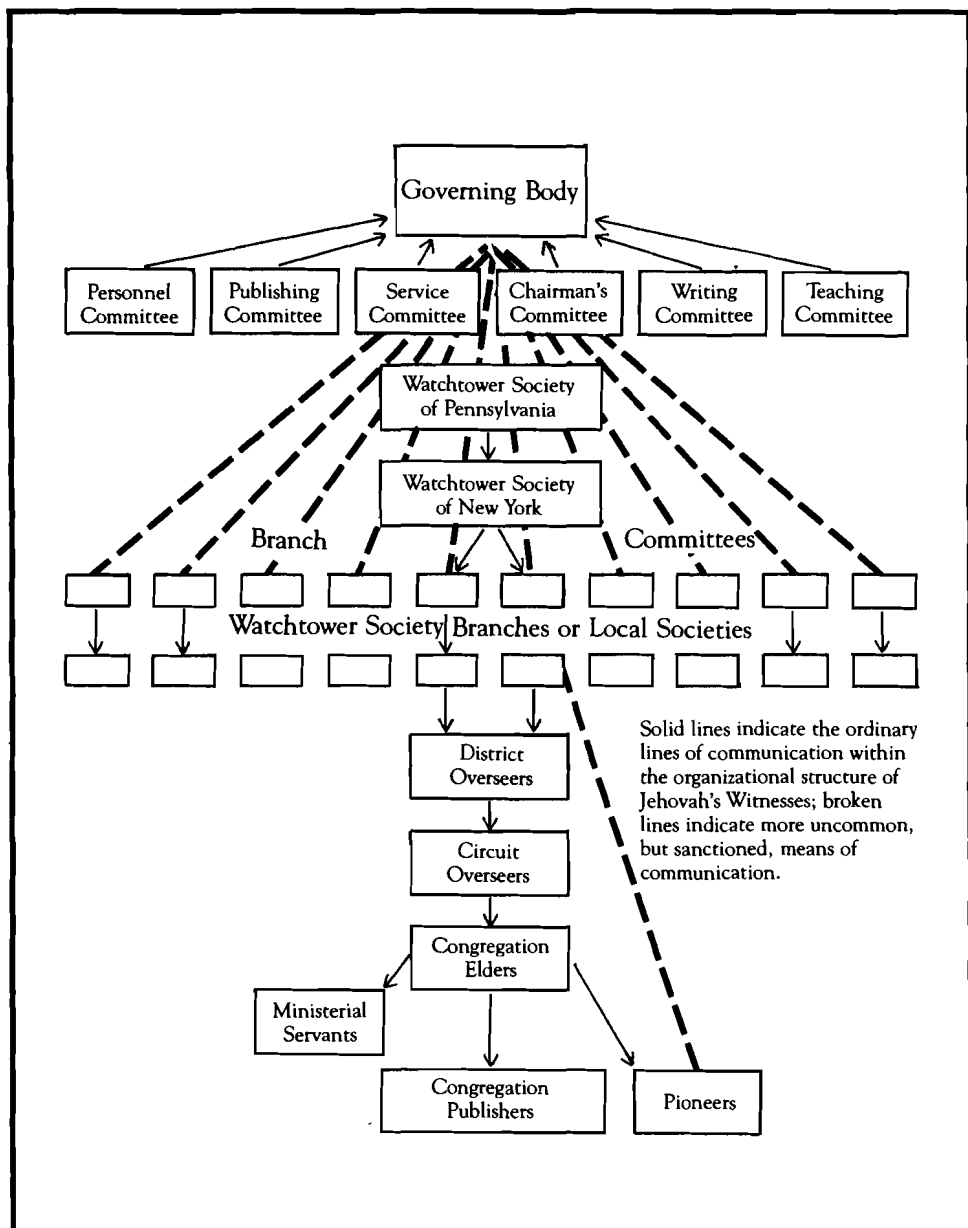
The human soul is the person him/her self. When the person dies it is the human soul that dies. The soul is not eternal. The spirit is the "life force" present in both men and animals, so when people die their spirits are in no sense conscious. Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe in hellfire or purgatory. Hell is simply man's common grave from which individuals can be resurrected to either a heavenly or an earthly life. Gehenna and the lake of fire referred to by Jesus and in Revelation do not indicate eternal torment, but the second death—eternal. Humans die because Adam and Eve's willful sinning caused them to lose perfection, and imperfect beings die.³⁷ Jehovah's Witnesses have been raised up to make God's will known before Armageddon—to give people of the last days another opportunity to know God's will and accept it.³⁸

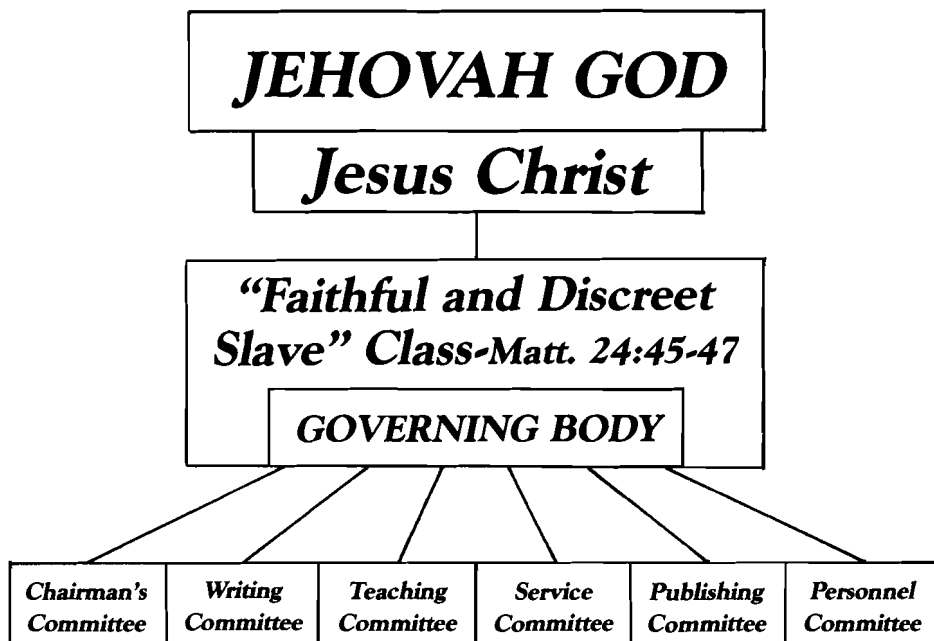
In its formative years the Witness movement was fairly 'liberal' in the sense that it believed that other Christians, particularly some of the Protestants, were part of the church of Christ and could gain salvation. But as time passed Russell and his followers became convinced that he had a special role. He was the special servant referred to in Matthew 24:45-47 who was to provide "meat in due season" for the household of faith. Though he originally associated with, and borrowed from the teachings of, clergymen of various denominations, Russell gradually grew more negative towards, and critical of, other churches, their pastors and priests. In 1919 Judge Rutherford, Russell's successor as president of the Society, began a campaign of condemnation of the world in which business, government and religion "were labelled as the Devil's chief instruments." He claimed that the clergy of all religions had sided with Satan in opposition to the Lord, his Christ and his Christian Witnesses. The Catholic church was seen with the greatest disfavor, with Protestant and Jewish clergy faring little better. They were all depicted as deliberately misleading the children of God. "Religion is a Snare and a Racket."⁴⁰

The formal organizational structure, the theocracy, by which Jehovah's Witnesses are governed is very important. To them it is the government of God on earth. In this case theocratic can be defined as hierarchial. The structure of the Witness government almost exactly mirrors the organization of the Roman Catholic Church (see charts).

Organizational Structure

The Organizational Structure of Jehovah's Witnesses





The *Watchtower's* idealized view of the theocratic government
 of Jehovah's Witnesses
 (from *The Watchtower*, 1 January 1977, 16)

STRUCTURE OF ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Pope of Rome
 The College of Cardinals
 The Papal Curia
 The Vatican
 Archbishops
 Bishops
 Priests
 Deacons
 Regular Orders
 The Catholic laity

STRUCTURE OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESS GOVERNMENT

The President of the Watch Tower Society
 The Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses
 The Committee Structure of the Governing Body
 The Brooklyn Bethel
 District Overseers
 Circuit Overseers
 Elders
 Ministerial Services
 Pioneers
 The Jehovah's Witness community

Gray '86: Terminal Visions: Apocalyptic Thought of Jehovah's Witnesses and Theocracy is a bureaucracy of which the president, until 1971, was a complete spiritual autocrat. After 1971, what is known as the governing body came into existence reducing the role of the president to that of "first among equals."⁴¹ The society exercises great control over the Witness community through 1) the preaching work, and 2) the system of judicial committees. It is difficult for an ordinary Witness to challenge the authority of an elder in his congregation, a circuit overseer or especially any aspect of the national leadership.⁴² "Jehovah's Witnesses are, if anything, twentieth century sectarian Puritans with many of the same taboos and social attitudes as seventeenth century English and New England forbears, along with more than a touch of Victorian pietism."⁴³ For years the society has had a very negative attitude toward *anyone* who has wanted to study the Jehovah's Witnesses in depth. The society has a policy of discouraging individual Witnesses from publishing anything relating to their faith. If something needs to be published, the society will do it. Watchtower officials have an idealized history of the movement, created by suppressing or distorting unflattering historical facts, to which they are dedicated to preserving.⁴⁴ The society has been anti-intellectual since the early days. Russell instructed members not to send children to universities, college or high school. Though Knorr, the third president, raised the educational levels up to the point of stressing the importance of basic education, it has never been believed that higher education was necessary for the training of preachers and evangelists. Circuit overseers and elders have often preached against higher education and made life unpleasant for any Witness students who insisted on attending a university.⁴⁵

There are no prohibitions against any foods (except those containing blood) or any beverages, no peculiar dress styles and no absolute prohibitions against most forms of entertainment for members of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Yet every Witness feels constantly alienated from the world by the many things he *must not* do and the many others that he *should not* do. A Witness may not serve in the military, work for another religious organization, hold an elected public office, produce, sell or consume tobacco, stand for the national anthem, salute the flag, use hallucinogens, celebrate holidays, engage in improper sexual relations, etc.⁴⁶ So why does anyone become a Witness? Some reasons given include:

- 1) Disillusionment with chaotic political, social and economic conditions throughout much of the world.
- 2) Strong feelings of disillusionment with the religious groups with which they were formerly associated in both the Christian and non-Christian worlds.
- 3) Admiration for both Witness moral values and behavior.

4) Appreciation for a religion which claims ultimate answers for mankind's ultimate questions.

5) An equal appreciation for a social and organizational structure in which the life of the individual can become eternally meaningful.

Consequently most Witnesses tend to think of society outside their own community as decadent and corrupt. Every political, economic and military crisis is seen as another sign that the world is fast coming to its end and is beyond repair. This means that they must keep to themselves (except for preaching work); apart from Satan's "doomed system of things."⁴⁷

Since the present evil world is passing away there is little time for any thing except the preaching work. It makes no sense to them to exert time and energy on building schools, hospitals, or any other charitable institutions. "The preaching work of the Jehovah's Witnesses is seen as the 'touchstone' of their lives, central to their very *raison d'être*."⁴⁸ The governing body has placed a great deal of stress on salvation through a work, *through preaching*. The Watchtower society still teaches that both the apocalypse and the dawning of a new age are at hand, therefore to Witnesses in general "life is real; life is earnest; and its goal is not the grave"—it is rather to praise Jehovah and vindicate his name by reading Watchtower literature and placing it at doors.⁴⁹

Since almost the very beginning of the Witness movement, extensive use of the printed word has been made. In 1983 alone they distributed over 53,500,000 Bibles, books and booklets around the world plus over 460,072,000 copies of *Awake!* and *Watchtower* magazines. In spite of much evidence to the contrary, Watch Tower leaders continue to believe that it is an effective means of spreading their message. At any rate, the literature is a major source of income for the society, is considered a most important factor in door-to-door preaching work, and is the basic means of inculcating ideas into the heads and hearts of ordinary Jehovah's Witnesses. The quality of the literature varies. In the view of James Penton, the *Watchtower* has some reasonably well-written articles, especially when dealing with moral or social issues. But it often repeats in tiresome fashion old doctrines or themes which have been printed again and again since World War I. *Awake!* is "a rather low grade version of *Reader's Digest*, is dated, pedestrian and hammers on the themes of social breakdown and moral decay." *Our Kingdom Ministry* is a dull monthly bulletin outlining weekly congregational service meetings and repetitively discusses proselytizing techniques.⁵⁰

There are currently about 2,700,000 Jehovah's Witnesses comprising 34,500 congregations around the world, plus several million more adherents. There has continued to be a growth in numbers, but the

Gray '86: Terminal Visions: Apocalyptic Thought of Jehovah's Witnesses and turnover rate has been very high. Policies of headquarters and the governing body has led to the loss of many intellectuals and the defection of many of the movements formerly most loyal and able members.⁵¹ "In effect, then, while it is always dangerous to predict the future, it is reasonable to believe that while in the short term Jehovah's Witnesses will maintain their 'unworldly' sectarian style, eventually they will be forced to come to terms with the world which today they would like so much to see destroyed. That is, unless mankind as a whole is overtaken by that great apocalypse or battle of Armageddon which not only Jehovah's Witnesses but many others as well see as a real possibility during the last years of the twentieth century."⁵²

For the sake of recognizing the diversity of the American apocalyptic experience, we will also take a brief glance at the Stelle Group whose approach to apocalypse contrasts sharply with the Jehovah's Witnesses, but also parallels some of the basic underlying themes. The purpose of life is "Ultimate advancement to the pinnacle of existence—to be one with God! You cannot become one with God until you are His equal in knowledge of everything. God has provided the means and intermediate steps to do so. It is the very meaning of our presence here. God created us in order to glorify Him in the greatest way imaginable, which is to elevate ourselves to his very level."⁵³

The Stelle Group was founded March 5, 1963, as not-for-profit religious/educational corporation to provide a way for people to consciously work toward the goal mentioned above. In January of 1970 the Stelle Group bought 240 acres of land about 60 miles south of Chicago and began construction of a community, Stelle, Illinois, which it is hoped will eventually mushroom in growth.⁵⁴ Stelle is different from other intentional communities in that it pursues a balanced, holistic upgrading of all aspects of living, which includes the conscious evolution of economics, politics, social structure, art, aesthetics, education, health, technology, spiritual and psychological growth, commerce, construction, agriculture and futuristic undertakings. Its people are practical enough to use anything that has proven workable in improving their lives and the environment of their community. It is an ongoing community of people working to establish a culture that transcends the mediocrity of mass-man.⁵⁵ The Stelle Group provides an organization for persons to achieve the greatness intended of human beings. But there are no recruiting drives or evangelism efforts, it is seen as far more appropriate that the people who are naturally ready for the great work should actively seek a place there by their own volition.

The formation of the Stelle Group and the building and continued existence of the Stelle community were inspired and guided by the

ideals and philosophy expressed in the book *The Ultimate Frontier* by Eklal Kueshana, pen name of Richard Kieninger. This book is an explanation of the organization and the workings of the universe and man's position therein. The book takes the form of an autobiography telling of Richard's contacts with an organization known as the Brotherhoods. Through these contacts Richard was instructed in the nature of man and what is being done to promote mankind's advancement, assuring some amount of preparation for the end of the world as it currently exists. What follows is a very brief summary of some of the main points of this philosophy.

Over a million years ago the current human life-wave was created. Individually each human is called an Ego. The goal of an Ego is, through the course of thousands of incarnations on the physical plane of existence, to gain complete knowledge of the first four planes of existence—the physical, etheric, astral and mental. Upon attaining this goal the Ego is known as a Master and then dedicates all his energy to helping other Egos attain Mastership. After everyone has become a Master, the whole life wave advances to the fifth, or angelic plane of existence. Those beings on the angelic progress to the archangelic, and those on that level progress to the seventh level; the celestial plane where they become one with God.

It should only take one million years for all Egos in a life wave to attain Mastership, but due to a number of factors and evil influences, the Egos on Earth have taken one million ten thousand years so far and only a very small percentage have made good progress. Although, all Egos are supposed to be Masters before progression to the fifth plane, the members of one planet are not allowed to delay indefinitely all the other Egos on other planets in the universe. With this in mind, those Egos that have become Masters, developed a plan several thousand years ago to destroy the earth and remake it, so that the culture and society that develops will be conducive to spiritual and Egoic advancement. In this way, Egos who have been working toward the goal of perfection will have a better chance of attaining Mastership, and thus advance with the rest of the life wave. There are only about 7,000 years before the progression of the life waves, but once an Ego gets on the right track toward Mastership, they can make the grade in just a few lifetimes; but the world today is not conducive to starting on the path."⁵⁶

There are twelve degrees of advancement toward Mastership. The first degree requires spiritual and emotional balance, control over one's body, controlled clairvoyant ability, a cheerful and willing personality, a long record of good works, a high level of skill in at least one trade or profession and a burning desire to be a Brother and work diligently for

Gray '86: Terminal Visions: Apocalyptic Thought of Jehovah's Witnesses and the advancement of mankind. Degrees one through seven indicate the degree of control over oneself and one's environment. Attainment of the seventh degree means that the Ego no longer must function on the physical plane, and is known as an Adept. The twelfth degree is Master and indicates a complete understanding of everything possible on the first four planes of existence; a high proficiency in at least 144 trades, arts, and professions; and that one is perfectly free from hate, fear, envy, lust, and pride.

Those Egos who have already attained Adeptship or Mastership have organized into twelve Brotherhoods dedicated to aiding the rest of mankind in their advancement. Five of the Brotherhoods are composed only of Masters who function strictly on the mental plane. The other seven are composed of Masters, Adepts and other advanced human Egos who have been carefully selected for special attention and instruction so that they may also be elevated to Adeptship. A Brotherhood will never interfere in the affairs of a nation and will not operate in the environment of any individual without expressed invitation to do so, and then only if the person has done his very best to help himself and can go no further without aid. Students of the Brotherhoods have included Moses, Socrates, Jesus, John the Baptist, Buddha, George Washington, and Benjamin Franklin.

The Great Pyramid of Gizah was built under the supervision of the Brotherhoods in order to record in stone the plan for the evolution of a superior society. The dates and events foretold in the pyramid were accurately predicted, usually to the minute, and the Brotherhoods have adhered to this established timetable. However, with the advent of the Aquarian Age in August of 1953, the period of the pyramid's prophecies came to a close. However, Chapter 16 of Revelation foretells the nature of the final years of the twentieth century. In *The Ultimate Frontier* Armageddon and Doom's Day are two distinct occurrences. Armageddon "is a series of wars, or more exactly one war with pauses, which began in 1914 and will grow more destructive and vicious as this century draws to its close. Armageddon's violent culmination will take place about a year before the turn of the century. It is a major instrument of the Judgment."⁵⁷

Doom's Day will be the result of natural geological transformation. The Earth's crust is continually in the process of rising and falling, becoming alternately ocean and continent producing the stratified layers of rock that are easily observed in mountainous areas. The crust is currently out of equilibrium; the continental arches are ripe for buckling, and the ice caps are unbalanced. The trigger for the great seismic re-shifting of the Earth's surface will come from an outside source. On May 5, 2000 A.D., the planets of the solar system will be

arrayed in practically a straight line across space. This will subject earth to enough gravitational distortion to tip the balance.⁵⁸

Armageddon and Doom's Day are the Judgment. Those who are pure in heart will be spared; the careless and thoughtless will be removed. Less than one tenth of the world's population will be alive to see the year 2001. Those who survive these two catastrophes and can retain their convictions and civilization to rebuild the world will comprise the Kingdom of God. After October, 2001 A.D., the kingdom will be formed upon "The Great Isle of the West" which will arise out of the Pacific Ocean. The Brotherhood's plan for maintaining the best of civilization was scheduled around the date of Doom's Day. Richard Kieninger was given the task of establishing the Kingdom of God. The major preliminary step for this was the founding of a community near the Chicago area for the training of perspective candidates for the Kingdom of God. This community is Stelle.⁵⁹

Though given the guidance of the great Brotherhoods and brought together by the highest ideals known to mankind, the Stelle Group has been faced with the same difficulties as any other group—power struggles, schisms, economic uncertainty, and a rockier and much slower growth than expected. Under the direction of Kieninger, the group gathered in Chicago; developed a school for the children, directed by Kieninger's wife; started Stelle Woodworking; bought farm land; constructed a woodworking factory and houses on the site of Stelle. There were a number of schisms over democratic and oligarchic leadership styles, whether or not to permit drug use, etc. Kieninger's wife gained a large amount of power and succeeded in getting her husband exiled from the community. In 1975 he was allowed to return and she voluntarily quit the group. Kieninger then began to concentrate on establishing another community in Texas. The leadership at Stelle was vested in a chairman. Until 1981 it was necessary for a person to be a member of the Stelle Group to reside in Stelle. Now anyone who wishes to may live there.⁶⁰

It is a group of people who have come together to recognize responsibility for their own lives. There is a degree of apocalyptic thought and talk among the members, but the majority are mostly concerned with daily living by the rules of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and "what you sow, so shall you reap." If someone has a complaint, they realize that they are responsible for working to correct the situation. Great emphasis is placed on personal improvement and personal responsibility.⁶¹

There are about 100 people who live in Stelle, another 30 or 40 who reside in surrounding towns, 40 or 50 in the Dallas, Texas, area, and another couple of hundred people across the country who support the

Gray '86: Terminal Visions: Apocalyptic Thought of Jehovah's Witnesses and group. Though minuscule compared to the size of the Jehovah's Witnessess, Stelle provides a good comparison to them in regard to the forms that American apocalyptic expression is currently taking. Though they both fulfill all seven characteristics of apocalyptic thinking noted early in this paper, the differences are quite striking. The Witnesses are a more widespread organization with congregations in many locations. Stelle is a residential community mostly withdrawn from the predominant culture and society, but they tend to be more open-minded and accepting of other people and do not insist on a conformity of thought to be a resident of their project. Jehovah's Witnesses eschatology is more strictly Judeo-Christian in background, contains lots of questionable applications of scripture and numerous unfulfilled prophecies. Stelle's philosophy draws from many traditions but seems to make a great deal more sense than the Jehovah's Witnesses. The dates that have been predicted are yet to come, but preparation for the end requires a refining of one's whole life, but *The Ultimate Frontier* allows for more incarnations in the future to perfect oneself—compared to the Witnesses' one life in which to find the truth.

This paper does not claim to reach any conclusions regarding the validity of apocalyptic, but merely to identify some of its characteristics and current manifestations. Its persuasiveness and influence is quite widespread, and in this day and age of earthquakes, terrorism, and reprisal, and the constant threat of nuclear annihilation, its influence and message need to be taken into consideration.

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⁶¹ Interview with Robert Frothingham, 15 year member of the Stelle Group, April 15, 1986.

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