

WEBVTT

Kind: captions Language: en They sat across the table from us in a palpably heavy silence. For a while the pair of them looked intensely each other as if willing the answer to spring magically from the other one's mouth.

Then they appeared to catch themselves. Their expressions softened and they turned to us with an apologetic simper. It was a familiar pattern. After more silence they would assure us that it was good that we were challenging them to think.

Then more silence. More potent stares. Eventually, they'd tell us they'd have to get back to us on that one after consulting their spiritual elders. And we'd start a new subject. It was a handful of years after my brother and I came as atheists that, one summer, we invited the Jehovah's Witnesses in for what turned out to be several weeks of discussions. Pairs of JWs had often rang our doorbell proffering issues of their organization's publication: Watchtower. Selling strategies varied. Some came straight out with it asking if we were interested in a magazine.

Others acted like insurance sales folks cryptically enquiring if we were interested in making an important investment in our future. One pair opened with a baffling rant about not conforming to what they called 'the system'. It was unclear what this system was.

No mention of politics. No mention of religion. No mention of anything much. It was only the glimpse of a Watchtower in a handbag that eventually contextualised this mystifying spectacle.

At which point the door was closed with a polite 'Not interested thanks'. But one year, as the frequency of JW visitations appears to be escalating, my brother and I began to think, Well, if they want a discussion why not have one? These were the first civil approaches we'd had to talk about religion ever since we left the church. The christians in our personal lives had been so snotty and belligerent in their approaches that we'd become accustomed to shutting religious discussions down.

We decided to engage the very next pair who turned up on the doorstep. And when Penny and Marcia rang a bell we invited them in for what turned out to be several weeks of discourse spanning a range of subjects,

including hours of biblical assessment. Progress was clunky and riddled with unexpected points of contention. For instance, their extreme literalism combined with their rejection of evolution produced a bizarre moment where we watch them wrestle with the reality of flightless birds.

Marcia just asserted that her god Jehovah made fish to swim and birds to fly. to which I'd casually responded, 'Well, obviously not all birds.' Uncontroversial enough, I thought. But apparently not. 'Yes!' she affirmed, 'All birds!'

Bemused, I said, 'What about penguins?' They were both completely stumped The six weeks were littered with these brick wall moments. The JW's consultations with their elders didn't always produce answers.

Where they did, the answers would prove just as problematic and often downright strange. Regarding penguins, Penny and Marcia came back with the response

that if you looked at penguins from under the water, they would appear to be flying over you. It was a truly grown-worthy contortion. We put it to them: if flying meant swimming and simming flying why differentiate between birds and fish at all? After all if you look at fish from under the water they'd appear to be flying over you too

as in fact would any swimming creature — including humans. Were humans made the fly? Cue silence. The Witnesses came to feel like carrier pigeons flying — or maybe swimming — between us and some unseen party ferrying our responses. They were always confident that this unseen party would have an answer. Halfway through their series of visits, another witness — Sheila — was brought in to replace Marcia.

Sheila, we were told, was much more adept at these kinds of discussions. The carrier-pigeon routine persisted. As the weeks had gone by, Penny at least had seemed to become a little more self-critical. She seemed to be processing

some of the reasons for our objections and had even started spotting problems in Marcia and Sheila's assertions. Sometimes, before me or my brother could even respond to one of their assertions, Penny would turn to her fellow JW and awkwardly point out the flaw in what they'd just said.

And it was interesting to see how readily they would concede the point to Penny while never conceding a single point to us. To us, no ground was given. To us, their attitude was that if one of our points couldn't be answered by them

it could always be answered by someone else. With the unresolved problems piling higher and higher one week they left us a book to read for next time which they suggested would help answer our questions. It was a kind of JW FAQ

telling witnesses how to respond to various questions and issues. For instance, if a 'worldly' person — ie a non-Witness — asked why Jehovah allowed suffering the book told JWs to explain that Jehovah wasn't the ruler of the world. Satan was. Reading the book I recognised a lot of the arguments Penny, Marcia and Sheila had already offered us. And suddenly their brick-wall moments were put in a more illuminating perspective. These were often the moments when we'd unwittingly taken them off-script. If giving us this book was an attempt by the JWs

to lighten their load, it backfired. We now had an avalanche of new problems to discuss with them. When they arrived next week, we got straight down to business asking them about this claim that Jehovah had given over his rulership of the world to Satan.

In response, Penny launched clockwork into a rehearsed analogy about a teacher and a rebellious student. A teacher is explaining to his class how to solve a problem in mathematics. But one of his students claims he has a better solution. and persuades some of the other students that they should listen to him.

'What should the teacher do?' Penny asked rhetorically. She said the teacher could eject the rebellious student then and there. But that might make the others think that the teacher was afraid of challenge. So instead the teacher decides to give

his class over to the rebellious student. When it becomes clear that the student's mathematics don't add up the others

will come to see for themselves that the teacher was right. Penny completed her script, announcing that this was what Jehovah had done.

When Adam and Eve had chosen to listen to Satan instead of him Jehovah had handed them and the rest of humankind over to Satan to demonstrate to them that his ways were wrong. In the christian denomination into which I'd been

indoctrinated, Satan had merely been an influence. The JW's elevation of Satan to 'ruler of the world' was a new one on me. It was fascinating to hear their rationalisation for Jehovah's abdication; how they used this to absolve Jehovah of responsibility for allowing human suffering.

But their reasoning was a mess. Allowing the student a little latitude on a maths problem was in no way comparable to watching with arms folded as centuries of human suffering play out. To even up the picture a little, I continued their teacher analogy.

What if the rebellious student started inciting violence among the students? Would it be ok for the teacher to just stand by and watch while students attacked their classmates right in front of him? Penny and Sheila agreed that it wouldn't be ok. I suggested that if it was unacceptable for the teacher to stand by and watch the violent results of the student's incitements then, according to their analogy, it was no less acceptable for Jehovah to stand by and watch the violent results of Satan's incitements.

But the problem went deeper than that. The Bible was o'erbrimming with divine interventions most of which involved Jehovah killing people for disobeying him — including the flood, in which Jehovah drowned all but a handful of humans.

In fact, next to the genocidal Jehovah, the Biblical Satan came across as relatively innocuous. For the JWS' analogy to be accurate, not only would the student have to incite his classmates to violence but the teacher would also have to constantly interject

killing students for disobeying him. To claim the Jehovah had handed over rulership to Satan when the Bible showed Jehovah continuing to impose his own rule through incessant death penalties was nonsense.

After a lengthy silence punctuated by the obligatory assurance that it was good that we were challenging them to think Penny and Sheila told us they'd have to get back to us on that one. They never did.

The JW's analogy was of course flawed in many other respects. Modern teachers would have a hard time recognising the classroom scene it depicted. What kind of teacher considers himself unquestionably correct so that before even hearing them he dismisses his students' alternative ideas as necessarily wrong? Students do sometimes surpass their teachers. If they didn't, our knowledge would never progress. What kind of teacher labels students 'rebellious'

for putting forward unconventional ideas? Any conscientious teacher would encourage students to think creatively. That's how we discover new solutions. And imagine the backlash from parents if it ever emerged that a teacher had ejected a child from a classroom, merely for proposing an alternative solution. But in the JW's analogy, this initial option was

presented as if it was entirely reasonable. The JW's analogy bore no relation to a modern classroom. But it did crystallise the mindset of our visitors

where the word of Jehovah — conveyed of course by humans — was considered unquestionably correct; where thinking was considered an act of rebellion; and where expulsion for thinking was considered a perfectly fair-minded reaction.

In the earthly life, this expulsion meant shunning a member from the flock. In the afterlife, expulsion meant death. In their final week, Sheila said it was clear they weren't going to convert us so they saw no point in continuing.

At that stage it came as no surprise that recruitment — rather than honest discussion — had been their goal. At the door, we bid them a polite farewell. As she left, Sheila turned and gave a reptilian smile, telling me:

'Thinking themselves wise, they became fools.' I recognised this is a Biblical quote from Roman 1:22. It was a rather shabby parting shot. Even Penny, who'd remained respectful throughout the discussions looked distinctly embarrassed

by her ill-mannered colleague. I was tempted to respond with a verse we'd already referenced when discussing the value of scepticism. Proverbs 14:15. 'The simple believe anything, but the prudent given thought to their steps.' But if it hadn't been processed when they were sat down at a table with us there seemed little point in repeating it as they were walking out the door. So I simply told them if that was the note they wanted to end on, so be it — and closed the door.

So was it all a waste of time? Learning about the JW's' beliefs and practices had limited value. Yes, there was some distinctive quirks — there always are. And for many folks it's those quirks

that they feel set them apart as the authentic expression of their umbrella religion. For them, the devil is quite literally in the detail. But having been indoctrinated into a christian denomination myself it was pretty familiar territory.

Nonetheless, it was good to hear it all from the horse's mouth rather than from possibly misinformed sources. But the main value of the summer of discussions lay in other areas. Three come to mind. Firstly, being my first serious discourse

with theists as an atheist, it disabused me of a lingering idealistic fantasy of mine. My own process of deconversion from religious indoctrination had aroused many feelings. Fear. Regret. Anxiety. Paralysis. Pain. Emptiness. It had been a disorientating and exhausting transition. But throughout it all, I'd remained honest. I'd been prepared to ditch any justifications for my faith that were the product of fallacious reasoning. Initially, I assumed others would be prepared to do the same. The reaction from my religious community when I came out as an atheist put a huge question mark over that assumption. Without exception, the former fellow theists in my private life

who approached me about my non-belief had all refused to hear me out, either shouting me down and insulting me or pathologising me. For a long time, I fantasised that if any of them had been prepared to sit down

to a calm, civil discussion, things would have been different.

But our discussions with the JWs really brought it home to me that there was no reason to believe that calmness and civility would necessarily lubricate honesty. Secondly, our discussions prompted a greater appreciation of the formidable denial of which we humans were capable. That was simultaneously depressing and inspiring. Depressing because I realised that folks in the grip of really powerful denial could be rendered effectively unreachable. Like a passenger on the Titanic, who refused to budge no matter what you said because they'd been told categorically by higher authorities than you that it was unsinkable. Inspiring because it pushed me to learn more about the mechanics of denial — not least because I wanted to find ways of recognising and challenging it in myself. the idea that I might ever be one of those intransigent Titanic passengers was chilling. Thirdly, our discussions with

the JW's deepened my sense of some of the tensions that would run through my interactions with theists. The views the JWs had expressed had often been immoral — sometimes downright hateful. But throughout the talks, I found myself holding back from playing hardball.

The JWs possessed a disarming vulnerability. In fact, the adjective that sprang to mind was peculiarly apt: they seemed so .... unworldly. They were like children forced to brandish antisocial banners, expressing vicious messages they

demonstrably didn't understand. When challenged, all they had were the hopelessly simplistic, fallacious scripts drilled into them by their elders; scripts that were easily debunked, beyond which point they had no substantive material of their own to offer. Of course they weren't children. They were adults. And, as such, they were accountable for any message or act of hate in which they participated. I don't subscribe to the pollyannish idea that everyone is fundamentally good. I think some folks have genuinely antisocial motives. But with Marcia, Sheila and particularly Penny, my sense was that these were individuals motivated by kindness and love. Unfortunately, they'd come under the influence of a supremacist ideology that taught them not only to dehumanise swathes of other kind loving humans

but that dehumanising those humans was in itself an act of kindness and love. Separating the pure from the impure; preserving the godly body. These are the tensions I speak of. Experiencing the zealot's hateful act while knowing

the misdirected love that often drives it. Tough to manage those kinds of tensions sometimes. Dehumanising can be infectious. When members of supremacist ideologies dehumanise us it's a natural reflex to dehumanise them right back;

to forget their humanity as they've forgotten ours. But that leaves us all brutalised, incurious and with an impoverished understanding of the complexity of human experience. For me, it's when we allow ourselves to succumb to those kinds of unthinking reflexes