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## BOOK REVIEW

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Chryssides, George D. 2022. *Jehovah's Witnesses: A New Introduction*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. viii + 197 pp. ISBN: 978-1-350-19089-4 (pbk). £65.00.

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While I describe myself as a scholar of religious sectarian rhetoric and a current conservative Protestant, I am also the grandchild of three “Bible Students”—those pre-Rutherford Jehovah's Witnesses or “Russellites” who left their Catholicism behind in Poland when they immigrated to the United States. I heard all the family stories about their rejection of “pagan” holidays, their argumentative reputations in the neighbourhood, and their disgust over the “moneychangers in the temple” upon visiting Father Coughlin's National Shrine of the Little Flower. There was an inscrutable religious practice to me, and so I picked up George Chryssides' book hoping to understand them better and to imagine my own scholarly interrogations of sectarian religion. Chryssides does not disappoint, offering a nuanced but detailed bridge for understanding this “old-new” religion as well as an exemplar for empathetic scholarship. Chryssides tackles all the necessary foundational ideas of any outside-the-mainstream religion. He aptly explains the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society's founding but warns that most rank-and-file members are unfamiliar with those details. The Witnesses are a practical group eschewing esoteric explanations and preferring plain, direct interpretations of the Bible. Their prolific publishing connects Witnesses around the world, and their lay-clergy reinforce the Bible's inerrancy over historic creeds. Their gathering places are modest and their worship practices distinct from other denominations which they regard as “pagan.” They renounce “the world” by avoiding higher education for the more practical trades, and they resist long-term planning since Jehovah's Kingdom is at hand. They meet regularly for “Bible study” and discussion and annually for the Memorial of Christ's death. Chryssides covers all these issues in chapters on belonging, teaching, congregational life, lifestyle, and festivals.

Chryssides skilfully compares and contrasts Witnesses' doctrine and practices with mainstream religion. The public generally knows about the Witnesses' rejection of blood transfusions and military service, but this text goes deeper than that. I especially appreciated Chryssides' explanation of the Witnesses' Christology as not-quite-Arian (whom they consider too Trinitarian) and their view of God as not-quite-omnipresent (since Jehovah resides in Heaven). Chryssides clarifies the distinct Witness nomenclature. There are not hymns, but “songs”. God is not YHWH, but “Jehovah”. Rather than “original sin”, Witnesses

reference “the original sin” or “Adamic sin”. While Christians reference the third person of the Trinity as the “Holy Spirit”, Witnesses use the lower-case “holy spirit” to reference Jehovah’s power. All of these nuances are important for any scholar interpreting Watch Tower Society discourse.

I knew first-hand that my Russellite grandparents would not eat blood sausage and did not celebrate birthdays and Christmas. This introduction explains those practices in a detailed way that my family would clearly recognize and affirm. Chryssides even explicates the idea of “soul sleep” that I often heard in my elders’ conversations. The chapter on expectations describes the Witnesses’ intricate eschatology—a set of ideas that are familiar to me, perhaps because I grew up in dispensationalism with the same elaborate end-times charts as Charles Taze Russell created. Understanding that the Witnesses believe that the world’s destruction is inevitable and imminent explains their resistance to political action and academic pursuits.

Within his empathetic scholarship, Chryssides does not shy away from the Witnesses’ controversies. He documents the “failed prophecies” for the years 1914, 1918, 1925, 1975, and 1984. Additionally, the book substantiates the purple triangles Nazis forced Witnesses to wear as well as their continued persecution around the globe. Ex-members’ criticisms and insider reform attempts get their due, and even—as is happening with many religious groups through #ChurchToo—sexual abuse investigations.

My grandmother thought her first-born son was a member of the “anointed class” or the 144,000 and her second-born son (my father) was part of the “great crowd” or among those who will live forever on earth after Armageddon. I did not understand these distinctions until I read Chryssides’ detailed but accessible text. I especially appreciate his glossary and biblical chronology table which puts mainstream dates and terminology alongside the Watch Tower conclusions. I am happy to have this book in my library not only for its nuanced explanation of Witnesses’ religious life, but also for its fine example of how to conduct ethnographic religious study. I will use Chryssides’ first chapter specifically for my undergraduates to show them how to conduct research on groups outside their own experiences.