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# An Inside View of Jehovah's Witnesses: A Interview With Director Gregorio Smith

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I recently had the opportunity to view a new documentary about the experiences of contemporary Jehovah's Witnesses and was so intrigued by what I saw that I wanted to know more and thought my readers would as well. So what follows is an interview with director Gregorio Smith, whose film *Truth Be Told* will currently become available to the general public on December 19th.

*This film takes a fairly critical look at the institution behind the Jehovah's Witnesses. What led you to make it?*

I had just completed my film *Birds* and was eager to start a new project when my production partner, who was raised Catholic, suggested we do a documentary about "the Jehovah's." This is what they were called in his neighborhood while growing up, as in, "Quick! Get away from the window! The Jehovah's are coming!" At the time there were few films about the Jehovah's Witnesses organization and/or experience. Two of the more recent productions included a well-received fictional drama from Denmark, and a documentary that aired on PBS here in the States that's widely considered a patently uncritical puff piece of the Watchtower Society.

I watched dozens of ex-Jehovah's Witness testimonials on YouTube and found revisiting my own Jehovah's Witness upbringing more distressing than anticipated. I left the religion decades ago, but there I was feeling an instant kinship with complete strangers sharing their stories of various emotional, social and psychological traumas.

These testimonials, albeit powerful, have a limited reach since they contain language that would only be understood by other ex-Jehovah's Witnesses -- The Truth, field service, apostates, disfellowshipping (shunning), worldly, the society, demonized -- an entire lexicon of obscure Jehovah's Witness jargon. Furthermore, these testimonials were mostly created in people's homes with consumer-grade technology and lacked key formalistic elements like picture quality, shot composition, lighting, editing and sound design.

Production value and approachability matter. And after giving the project much thought, we felt that we were in a good position to produce a documentary that offered an immersive historical understanding of the Jehovah's Witness experience, one that harmonizes the intensity of individual Jehovah's Witness stories with professional-grade aesthetics and technical elements.

And while *Truth Be Told* is of natural interest to former, fading and active Jehovah's Witnesses, we believe it is a valuable tool that will appeal to the non-Jehovah's Witness world and can educate millions about the lesser-known side of Watchtower Society culture: the suspension of critical thinking, the discouragement of higher education, the non-observance of birthdays, Christmas and other societal holidays and customs, the prohibitions on sexual conduct, their zero-tolerance homosexuality policy and their excessive devotion to a central tenet that the destruction of the world is imminent.

*Do you think there's such a thing as a happy Jehovah's Witness? Or if I phrase it differently, do you think the religion is flawed or do you think the way people practice it makes it flawed?*

I think Jehovah's Witnesses believe they are happy, at least in the Jehovah's Witness version of happiness. Problem is, this happiness resides outside of themselves in a facade, a pious Potemkin Village where members are simply aping the smiling happy people and fellowship depicted in Jehovah's Witness literature designed to elicit emotional versus rational responses. In short, their happiness is informed by their own propaganda.

I am not a theologian, so I cannot say whether or not the Jehovah's Witness religion as a system of belief is flawed. I can say, however, that my Jehovah's Witness upbringing was a life of strict obedience to "theocratic order" in an atmosphere of high expectations with little to no reward. And a dogmatic culture fraught with fear, guilt, paranoia, legalism, isolation, and asceticism does not leave much room for happiness.

It's worth mentioning that a show of hands at *Truth Be Told* screenings across the country revealed that more than half of the former Jehovah's Witnesses in attendance have either been in or sought out mental health counseling/therapy, and half of those admitted to contemplating or attempting suicide.

*What kind of reforms would you like to see the Jehovah's Witness -- formally called the Watchtower Society -- make for the religion to be healthier? Are such changes possible?*

The Watchtower Society can benefit from a healthy dose of humility. This perception that they alone possess "The Truth" cultivates an air of spiritual elitism and bigotry, since members regard other faiths and beliefs as "false" or otherwise inferior. It also fosters a dangerous climate of absolutes where the rules, regulations and doctrine as set forth by its leadership (called "Governing Body") are considered unimpeachable and any challenge to their administrations is tantamount to religious persecution, heresy or apostasy.

Ironically, this tendency towards legalism could signal the demise of the Watchtower Society, as their entrenchment in response to upticks in departures and increasingly dangerous questions from members will ultimately approach a point of hyper-legalism whereby the entire Jehovah's Witness infrastructure chokes on its excess of rules and regulations.

No one has a monopoly on the truth and a healthy discussion about religion needs vagueness -- room to contemplate the wonderment and mystery of the unknowable. A God understood is no God. This kind of perceptual shift, however, challenges over a century of increasingly insular and absolutist Watchtower Society doctrine, so I don't believe reforms will ever happen in earnest.

*What do you hope viewers will take from the film?*

*Truth Be Told* is an examination of the clear and present dangers of undue influence in the hands of fanatical religions and other high-control groups. And it is important for our viewers to understand that the indoctrination, spiritual intimidation, ostracism and other human rights abuses discussed in the film did not just occur in the past. They are happening right now to millions of Jehovah's Witnesses families and their worldwide.

*Truth Be Told* is also an effective educational tool that will allow the non-Jehovah's Witness world to see this religion in an entirely new light. Academics, medical and mental health professionals, and legal experts regard have expressed surprise and fascination upon viewing *Truth Be Told* and regard the film as a "valuable contribution" for its historical and immersive insider's view into Jehovah's Witness culture.

Our outreach will have its challenges since the people that the film could help the most are the least likely to view it. As one ex-Jehovah's Witness tweeted:

"I'd share this with my JW family but am afraid of being called an apostate and losing contact. They are ruled by fear."

*More information on the film is available at [this website](#). Worldwide online screenings will be held on Christmas Day, accompanied by social media-facilitated discussions (#hereliesthetruth).*

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