

Continuous Reinforcement

(Ritual paper)

Last week I visited a Jehovah's Witnesses meeting for the first time in my life. The meeting was open to the public, like all their meetings. It helped me make more comfortable that I went with a friend who was a member of this congregation. The most important tenet of this faith is the belief in the divine origin of the Bible, from which they derive the Bible principles they try to base their lives upon. One of the most influential of these principles is the responsibility to make sure that every human being has a chance to get familiar with the truths they believe the Bible contains. This is why they do "ministry" work, proselytizing strangers. I attended the regular weekly meeting of the "Theocratic Ministry School", which is created to help members in this work. I believe this type of meeting served well the explicit intentions of the institutional church and the members' needs, which in this case coincide: reinforcing the faith, enforcing sense of community and learning to be more efficient in the ministry work.

The meeting was in a plain, one-storey building. Approximately one third of the 90 or so chairs were filled this weekday evening. There were no decorations in the well-lit room, no crosses or other religious symbols, only a Bible quote on the front wall in English and Spanish. There were 6-7 children present, a few elderly and the majority was people in their 20s-40s. Beside 1-2 African-Americans, a couple of Asian-Americans, and a bit more Hispanics most people were Caucasians. The overall racial proportions reflected the general Santa Cruz proportions. Everybody was dressed up nicely, men wearing suits and ties, women wearing nice, but not ostentatious dresses. Paying attention to their outlook showed that the meeting is important for them and that it is a special place and time in their lives.

The almost two hours I spent there was filled with speeches, Bible study, announcements, and demonstrations. All of these utilized Bible quotes heavily. The opening prayer, said aloud by a leader, was asking for God's (more precisely Jehovah's) help to reduce anxiety in us. The calming voice, the ritualized setting and the accompanying song did work and put even me, an outsider, at ease. The two following speeches, one on reducing anxiety when speaking in public and the other one on decision making, combined the "how" (techniques known to me from secular books) with the "why" (to live according Bible principles.) I found this combination interesting, because I believe the two questions are separate in most people minds. I.e. I try to live my life in a decent way (the "how") but when inquiring into the "why" I should be decent I do not necessarily look for divine justification.

The following Bible study outlined 5 chapters from the New Testament (or the Greek Scriptures as the Witnesses call it.) Next the congregation was asked: What did they found in this week's chapters useful for their ministry work and what strengthened their faith and appreciation of Jehovah from this section. The direction of these standard questions, asked after every study session, and the enthusiastic answers provided another feedback loop intended the build their faith stronger.

Next a young man read a chapter from the Bible. It was probably one of the first times he read aloud, because when he was done the leader analyzed shortly his delivery, mentioning only positive aspects. This and the events after this belonged to the more explicit part of the teaching/learning part of the school. We witnessed (pun intended) two scenarios reenacted by congregation members of real life situations (having lunch in a cafeteria, meeting someone in a park) turned into opportunities to talk about issues (carnal warfare and what happens to the soul after death) based on their understanding of the Bible. After a few

announcements about upcoming events of nearby communities there was a demonstration on how to conduct a phone call to a stranger as part of the ministry work. All of these were designed to help people in their proselytizing work.

Then we heard a summary of how this congregation did in the previous year in terms of numbers. Goals were set for higher results in the future. Before the closing song an article from the central newsletter were studied in a mnemonic way. Each paragraph of the 3 page article was summarized by a different congregation member based on the guided questions of the session leader. I was surprised how repetitive and slow the process was, but was told by my friend later that this part of the meeting was for people with lower level of literacy.

Most of the meeting didn't feel like a "ritual", more like a professional conference. We defined rituals as "formal, repetitive, stylized notion, performed at special times in special places" and added that religious rituals have mythology associated with them. The meeting fulfilled all of these requirements. However based on the religious services I attended in the past, I thought of rituals as something more exotic, where either more special action is taken, movements performed or more special prayers and songs are verbalized. From this point of view my expectations were not fulfilled. This gathering was business like in several aspects: it followed a very precise time-schedule; the transitions from one activity to the next were smooth, introduced and explained by a leader; beside one opening and closing song and prayer there were no other activities that I associate with religious services; the speakers made sure that everyone heard and understood the whole meeting clearly; everything was said in the vernacular, no Latin, Greek, Hebrew or other language of the scriptures were used; microphones and amplifiers were used throughout.

I had a pleasant evening. The Witnesses I met made a good impression on me. Their intentions and actions seemed benevolent. It was clear that the meeting was designed with specific goals in mind: reinforcing the believers' faith and providing tools to spread it. On one hand I find this attitude natural for a religion that believes they have the unique truth and this truth includes Armageddon coming soon, from which the only escape is to follow this religions path to Paradise. On the other hand I would need to inquire more about the institution, hierarchy, history and organization of this church to provide a balanced account whether less explicit motivations are also at work behind the continuous reinforcement cycle I noticed.

Things that I learned and ready to share in class:

- ? I have more empathy for the Witnesses now. They have a reputation of being aggressive. When I saw them amongst themselves I noticed no signs of aggression.
- ? They strongly encourage learning via asking questions. That is a positive characteristic for me as opposed to dictatorial indoctrination.

Notes

Where, room

Timing business meeting vs worship

Welcoming me

Writign on the wall: I Jas 4:8

(Spanish/English)

Who and how

Focus on numbers

Song I corinth 6:20

Praying for reducing anxiety, claimng,
refreshing

Agenda announcement

Speech on anxiety

? What

? Speaking qualities

? Hannel energy

? Prepare thoughts

? Practcit timein

? Jeremiah 1:5-6

Talker introduced switches –

Decision making

? good ones are hard

? Long lasting

? Recognizing limitations

? Look for God (Bible) for hellp has
more experience

? No right to expect Jehovah's
intervention

? Is: 30:21

? Nature help you to reaons not tell what
to do

? We printed it it cannot eb wrong

? Several choices can be right

Bible study

? 2 Cor 8-13

? New speaker (3rd)

? Outline: focus

? Asking audience what they found in
this wek's chapters useful for their
minmistry work

? Testimonias: entusiastic humility

? What strengtend your fath and
appreication of Jehovah

? Reading aloud 2 Cor 8:1-21 -4th,
younger male

? Feedback on reading, praising what
was good in it

Talk #3

Witnessing in the park: Ssisters what
happens to the soul after Death (Gen 2:7,
Ecc 9:5-10

Talk #4

2 women in cafateria; carnal warfare,
nephew from army, Isaiah 2:2-3; 4

Mathew 26; get lunch

Service meeting

Service announcements

letters to read aloud,

volunteer help

Circuit assembly

To regular pioneers, Los Gaot

Fairfield building, no pioneer credit

Demosntration: phone witnessing

Conversation of acoupl

How did we do last year

12.5 hours of ministry

Proverbs 27:17

How to go past results for the futre

Pioneers: newly baptized, young or old

Pioneer service school: 6 months program

US Bethel

God news has to be delieverd to every
man

Questions – paragraph by pararaph

Page 39 God's warriors

song

I Timothy 6:12

Pray – appreicate

Summary head down