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# Editorials

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## JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND THE ENIGMA OF MICHAEL JACKSON

Michael Jackson was a real enigma. In the months and years before the popular entertainer died unexpectedly June 26, the news media sarcastically labeled him "Wacko Jacko" due to his strangeness and eccentricity, such as the dangling of his nine-month-old son out of a third-floor hotel balcony in Berlin. However, within minutes of his death, this same media was christening him as one of the world's greatest humanitarians and civil rights leaders. Listening to the news reports, it seemed that Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King Jr. had nothing on Michael Jackson.

During the Jackson memorial on July 7, basketball legend Earvin "Magic" Johnson exulted the late performer calling him "the greatest entertainer ever" and credited Jackson with making him "a better point guard and basketball player." Johnson said, "I want to thank Michael for opening up so many doors for African-Americans to be on daytime shows, late night shows. He allowed Kobe [Bryant] and I to have our jerseys in people's homes across the world because he was already there and he opened all those doors for us." Many thought it was Jackie Robinson who broke the color barrier in sports. Apparently not. Move over No. 42, it sounds as if Jackie needs to surrender his famed status to Jacko.

Yet there was a spiritual enigma about Jackson as well. Many readers may be surprised to learn that in those early years, when Jackson's career was rising to superstar status, he was a Jehovah's Witness. Therein laid a real quandary for the Watchtower.

Jehovah's Witnesses and the Watchtower often chide Christian denominations for a "lack of unity." What they miss is that there is unity on the essentials, and liberty on the non-essentials. And their boast of absolute unity is more correctly identified as uniformity — agree with us 100% or get out. But despite its claim of absolute unity, the Watchtower really does not live up to that which it boasts, or that for which it condemns others. Jackson was an excellent case study of this.

In the early 1980s, Jackson became a Jehovah's Witness. His mother, Katherine, and two sisters, Rebbie and LaToya, had also embraced the faith. In 1984, *USA Today* labeled Jackson as "the USA's most famous Jehovah's Witness" (Aug. 31, 1984, pg. D1). *Rolling Stone* magazine stated, "Religion is a large part of his life, requiring intense Bible study and thrice-weekly meetings at a nearby Kingdom Hall. He has never touched drugs and rarely goes near alcohol" (Feb. 17, 1983, pg. 13). The magazine identified one of Jackson's "few 'safe' zones" as the Kingdom Hall (pg. 14). *The New York Times* reported, "According to his mother, Katherine, Mr. Jackson regularly dons a disguise to proselytize on street corners, distributing copies of *The Watchtower* and *Awake!*" (Aug. 29, 1984, pg. 15). Other newspaper

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44. *Ibid.*, pg. 211.
45. "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment (Part Three: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response)," *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38; *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th edition, Vol. 12, pg. 846, s.v., "Yoga"; and *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, *op. cit.*, pg. 1058, s.v., "Yoga."
46. "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment (Part Three: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response)," *op. cit.*, pg. 37.
47. *Ibid.*, pg. 38, italic in original.
48. Irving Hexham, *Pocket Dictionary of New Religious Movements*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002, pg. 120, s.v., "yogic religions."
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*, pg. 7, s.v., "Abramic religions."
51. *Holy Yoga: Exercise for the Christian Body and Soul*, *op. cit.*, pg. 33.
52. *Ibid.*, italics in original.
53. E-mail correspondence from Brooke Boon on file, dated Sept. 15, 2007.
54. "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment (Part Three: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response)," *op. cit.*, pg. 34.
55. *Ibid.*, pg. 32, italic in original.
56. *Ibid.*, pg. 35.
57. *Ibid.*
58. Concerning its spelling as "Aum," Dr. Winfried Corduan explains, "Sanskrit does not have a separate vowel for o" (*Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998, pg. 345, endnote 12, italic in original).
59. *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, *op. cit.*, pg. 713, s.v., "Om or Aum."
60. *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*, *op. cit.*, pg. 209, italics in original.
61. *Yoga for Dummies*, *op. cit.*, pg. 301, italics in original.
62. *Death of a Guru*, *op. cit.*, pg. 208.
63. "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment (Part Three: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response)," *op. cit.*, pg. 40.
64. *Ibid.*
65. *Ibid.*, pg. 41.
66. *A Guide to New Religious Movements*, *op. cit.*, pg. 43.
67. Pat Zukeran, general editor, *World Religions Through a Christian Worldview: A handbook to analyzing the world's religions from a Christian worldview perspective*. Richardson, Texas: Probe Ministries, 2008, pg. 228.
68. My thanks to my college friend Benjamin Williams for pointing out this verse to me as a biblical refutation of reincarnation.
69. It is true that this vision was symbolic of the inclusion of the Gentiles, whom Jews considered unclean, in the Church. However, in Mark 7:18-19, Jesus had already declared all foods clean. Thus, even the symbolism in Acts 10:9-16 coincides with this truth.
70. "Mohandas K. Gandhi" (1869-1948) was his actual name. "Mahatma" was a title of respect, and means "great soul." The passage that Bright gives here occurs near the end of the Gandhi's brief Preface to his autobiography.
71. Bill Bright, *Ten Basic Steps Toward Christian Maturity: Introduction: The Uniqueness of Jesus*. San Bernardino, Calif.: Campus Crusade for Christ, Inc., 1968, pp. 9-10, italic in original.
72. Adam Hamilton, *Christianity and World Religions: Wrestling With Questions People Ask*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005, pp. 46-47, italics and brackets in original. In quoting this story, I am not necessarily endorsing all that Pastor Hamilton says, either in this book or elsewhere.




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## EDITORIALS

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articles described Jackson in costume going door-to-door in Dallas and Birmingham visiting for the Jehovah's Witnesses.

All of this was concurrent with Jackson releasing songs and music videos such as "Thriller" and "Billie Jean." Picking up on this inconsistency, *The New York Times* observed, "At the same time, perhaps more than anyone else he emplies [sic] the music, videos, fashion and much else that is frowned upon by the hierarchy of his church." With such contradiction, PFO wrote to the Watchtower Society in 1984 and asked them how a Jehovah's Witness should respond when presented with the glaring hypocrisy of Jackson's lifestyle, public persona, and musical art merchandise — specifically his occult-based "Thriller" music video. We wrote, "Certainly, a good Jehovah's Witness would not want to present himself in this kind of light."

The Watchtower responded that, "The Society has been advised that Michael Jackson is a baptized member of the Christian congregation. However, his being one of Jehovah's Witnesses should not be construed by anyone to mean that either the Society or the congregation with which he is associated approves or endorses the music that he sings or plays, or all aspects of his life-style." (Interestingly, to our knowledge, PFO received the only

letter from the Watchtower which specifically identified Michael Jackson by name. When other counter-cult ministries wrote similar letters of inquiry to the Watchtower organization, the Society responded with "an entertainer associated with Jehovah's Witnesses.")

Yet Jehovah's Witnesses knew that evasion would not suffice. The editors of *People* magazine revealed, "A spokesman for Michael Jackson's congregation confirmed that he is a member in good standing and that he attends most of the meetings. However, the elders of his congregation are concerned about Jackson's public image and performances, including his recent forays into rock video" (Jan. 23, 1984, pg. 4).

The negative publicity for the Watchtower was beginning to mount. Some former Jehovah's Witnesses heightened the Watchtower's embarrassment with claims of a cult within the cult. *US* magazine stated, "The Jackson appeal, however, has gone too far in some ways, according to [former Jehovah's Witness Gary] Botting, who says an 'MJ cult' has developed within the Witnesses. The cult believes that Jackson is the Archangel Michael, who is described in the Book of Daniel: 'And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people'" (Oct. 8, 1984, pg. 69). Botting also contended that the Watchtower's "leadership was reluctant to alienate Jackson because the singer has helped bring contributions and credibility to the faith by what many consider his exemplary habits,

including abstinence from sex, liquor and drugs" (ibid.). Given the vast financial resources of the Watchtower, through donations from its millions of members and sale of its publications, Botting's comments appeared to be an overstatement — public image to the Watchtower is much more important than the financial gains brought about by Jackson.

In May 1984, the Watchtower tackled the Michael Jackson issue head on. In its *Awake!* magazine the Society featured an article entitled, "Young People Ask... What About Music Videos?" in which it argued that these "videos often are bizarre." While not identifying Jackson as one of its own, the periodical stated:

"In another popular video, *Thriller*, the performer is seen to transform first into a 'cat person,' then a dancing 'monster.' Evidently not wanting viewers to conclude that it promoted spiritism, the film begins with the disclaimer: 'Due to my strong personal convictions, I wish to stress that this film in no way endorses a belief in the occult. — Michael Jackson.' Nevertheless, it was so realistic that some who saw it admitted that they were horrified at first. What was this short film intended to convey? And how does the performer, Michael Jackson, feel about it in looking back? 'I would never do it again!' says Jackson. 'I just intended to do a good, fun short film, not to purposely bring to the screen something to scare people or to do anything bad. I want to do what's right. I would never do anything like that again.' Why not? 'Because a lot of people were offended by it,' explains Jackson. 'That makes me feel bad. I don't want them to feel that way. I realize now that it wasn't a good idea. I'll never do a video like *that* again!' He continues: 'In fact, I have blocked further distribution of the film over which I have control, including its release in some other countries. There's all kinds of promotional stuff being proposed on *Thriller*. But I tell them, "No, no, no. I don't want to do anything on *Thriller*. No more *Thriller*!"' (May 22, 1984, pp. 19-20, italics in original).

Concerning Jackson's statements in the Watchtower publication, *The New York Times* wrote, "Norman Winter, a press agent for Mr. Jackson in Los Angeles, declined to discuss the singer's religious beliefs or the authenticity of the quote in *Awake!*" (Aug. 29, 1984, pg. 15).

A related matter of Jackson's personal actions which conflicted with strict Watchtower doctrine was found in a brief celebrity report which appeared in the *Fresno Bee* newspaper. For most, the significance would be missed. The article stated: "**Mother's Day** is Sunday and many famous children are offering special advice or are doing something for their mothers. ... And of course, everyone is wondering what **Michael Jackson** is going to give his mother, **Katherine**, Sunday. The rock superstar gave her a red Rolls-Royce with a white ribbon on it for her birthday last week, eliminating that for a present" (May

10, 1984, pg. A2, bold in original). Jehovah's Witnesses condemn as creature worship the celebrating of birthdays and other holidays, including Mother's Day, and denounce those who give gifts for such occasions.

In 1987, without much fanfare, Jackson separated himself from Jehovah's Witnesses. According to a *Los Angeles Times* report, "A representative of the Los Angeles congregation where Jackson belonged said that the entertainer 'disassociated' himself from the congregation and 'no longer wants to be known as a Jehovah's Witness.' ... A form letter from the Witnesses' Brooklyn headquarters, dated May 18, also stated that the organization 'no longer considers Michael Jackson to be one of Jehovah's Witnesses'" (*The Denver Post*, June 7, 1987, pg. 20A).

Jackson's departure from the Watchtower presented yet another enigma — this one for family members. Within weeks of the pop star's retreat from the Watchtower, a federal appeals court in San Francisco upheld the practice of shunning former members by Jehovah's Witnesses. According to an Associated Press report, "The practice was applied recently to singer Michael Jackson. ... When Jackson left the church recently, the members who were ordered to shun him were reported to include his mother" (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 13, 1987, pg. 6D).

Like Jackson, his mother Katherine appeared to also show disregard for Watchtower teaching which restricted her personal freedom. *Star* magazine reported, "'This definitely means more anguish for Katherine,' says a close family friend. But although her religion is the basis of her life, she will not shun Michael. 'She loves her kids and has always defended them. She will, however, go through a long, living hell because of this,' the friend says. Another source close to the family agrees: 'Katherine believes that family ties are stronger than church ties and Michael was her son long before he became a Jehovah's Witness'" (June 23, 1987, pg. 5).

In the two decades that followed, Jackson made no true advancement or reform in his spiritual pilgrimage. Following his brief encounter with the Watchtower, Jackson moved within the circles of Hindu philosopher Deepak Chopra and psychic Uri Geller. More recently, Jackson reportedly became a member of the Nation of Islam. His conversion came amid his arrest and subsequent charges against him of child molestation — of which he was later found not guilty. Jackson's older brother Jermaine hired members of the sect to work in Michael's inner circle in various jobs, including body-guard. Jermaine joined the group in 1989.

It all ended very sadly with Jackson on a bizarre path of self-destruction. Yet the answer to removing the enigma of Michael Jackson's — or any other Jehovah's Witness' — spiritual pursuit was so very easy: "Jesus stood and cried out, saying, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37-38).

The Words of the Lord, recorded through the prophet Jeremiah, continue to ring clear: "For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, And hewn themselves cisterns — broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13).

—MKG

While Coleman will appear on the *Hour of Power* program, "it hasn't been determined how much she will preach," a church spokesman told the Associated Press.

—MKG

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## NEWS UPDATES

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The 58-year-old Coleman had been serving as the director of the church's family ministries. Juan Carlos Ortiz, who stepped in as an interim pastor following the ousting of Robert A. Schuller, will continue his role as a teaching pastor.

Schuller's ministry posted a statement on its Website saying that in the wee hours of one morning God spoke to the 82-year-old Schuller, telling him, "Don't worry. I have called your daughter Sheila, too. She is equipped and she will be your legs."

According to the *Orange County Register*, Coleman said her taking over the reins of the leadership of the church founded by her father was unexpected. She told the newspaper, "Our church didn't even start ordaining women until 1973. I'm proud of my dad for doing this, and I hope I can serve as a role model for younger women who want to get things accomplished in this church."

## LAWSUIT CHARGES DOLLAR CASHES IN

Televangelist Creflo Dollar has been accused of ripping off a spiritual text messaging service created by a former employee. A lawsuit filed in June in California accuses the Atlanta-based pastor, his son, and other ministry staff of "breach of nondisclosure agreement, fraud, unjust enrichment, civil conspiracy, breach of contract and misappropriation of trade secrets," according to the Associated Press.

Devone Lawson of Marina del Rey, Calif., said he spent a year in 2004 with Dollar's World Changers Church International developing a program which sent daily inspirational text messages to the cell phones of church members and subscribers. Lawson said that Dollar and his ministry then stole his idea and established another text messaging service, which was called "Word on the Go."

The AP report said, "Attorneys for Lawson estimate the \$4.99 per month subscription service generates more than \$50 million a year in revenue."

—MKG

### PERSONAL FREEDOM OUTREACH — STATEMENT OF BELIEF

- I. THE BIBLE AS THE DIVINELY INSPIRED, INERRANT WORD OF GOD: IT IS IN ITS ENTIRETY THE SOLE AUTHORITY FOR ALL MATTERS OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF AND PRACTICE.
- II. THE ONE TRUE GOD. IN THE ONE TRUE GOD THERE EXIST THREE PERSONS, BEING: THE FATHER, THE SON JESUS CHRIST, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT.
- III. JESUS CHRIST: HIS DEITY, HUMANITY, VIRGIN BIRTH, SINLESSNESS, DEATH AND BODILY RESURRECTION; WHO WILL PERSONALLY AND VISIBLY RETURN AGAIN TO EARTH.
- IV. THE PERSONALITY AND DEITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.
- V. THE EXISTENCE AND PERSONALITY OF SATAN, HIS TOTAL OPPOSITION TO GOD, AND HIS POWER OVER THE UNREGENERATE.
- VI. THE COMPLETE AND TOTAL DEPRAVITY OF ALL MEN WHICH MAKES THEM HOPELESSLY LOST WITHOUT THE NEW BIRTH OBTAINABLE THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST.
- VII. THE FINAL ESTATE OF MAN: FOR THE SAVED, EVERLASTING LIFE IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD AND FOR THE UNSAVED, EVERLASTING PUNISHMENT BECAUSE OF THEIR UNBELIEF.
- VIII. THE GOSPEL BY WHICH WE ARE SAVED BEING SUMMED IN THE DEATH, BURIAL AND RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST.
- IX. THE CHURCH BEING THE BODY OF CHRIST, UNITED IN THE HOLY SPIRIT, CONSISTING OF THOSE WHO HAVE RECEIVED JESUS CHRIST AS SAVIOR. A LOCAL CHURCH IS AN ORGANIZED ASSEMBLY OF BELIEVERS UNITED FOR THE PURPOSE OF CARRYING OUT THE GREAT COMMISSION OF CHRIST.
- X. THE GREAT COMMISSION OF CHRIST BEING TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO ALL MEN, BAPTIZING AND DISCIPLING THOSE WHO HAVE BELIEVED.