

## Correspondence

*Letters for publication in the Correspondence columns should be addressed to:*

**The Editor, British Journal of Psychiatry, 17 Belgrave Square, London, W1M 9LE**

### PSYCHIATRY AND SECTARIANS

DEAR SIR,

The article by John Spencer on 'The mental health of Jehovah's Witnesses' which was published in this *Journal* (June 1975, 126, 556) may appear to have made a useful contribution to the scientific understanding of phenomena which have remained largely unexplored. While the article is welcome as a pioneering attempt to introduce some conceptual rigour and some apparently objective facts into a peculiarly ill-informed area of psychology, it contains some serious errors of fact and method. My object in correcting them is to lay the foundations for a more clear-sighted and methodologically sound approach to the study of mental health among religious sectarians. The topic is important enough and sufficiently unexplored to warrant closer scrutiny.

The factual errors are threefold. Firstly, Spencer is wrong in saying that there have been 'remarkably few studies correlating choice of religious belief with personality or mental disorder'. The literature in the psychology and sociology of religion is replete with references to studies of this kind. Secondly, Spencer misrepresents the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses about the availability of eternal salvation. They do not deny that some non-Witnesses will attain this state; they merely affirm that only the Witnesses will pass *unscathed* into the allegedly impending 1,000 year reign of peace and perfection on earth. Thirdly, my own research on Jehovah's Witnesses in Britain has shown that it is mistaken to believe, as Spencer explicitly states, that the organizational structure of the Watch Tower movement has no relevance to an understanding of the Witnesses' mental health. Indeed, my findings showed that the complex structure of their social relations was an important determinant of their ways of thinking, feeling and acting. To follow Spencer's procedure of isolating personality characteristics from their social context is to preclude the possibility that the aetiology of Jehovah's Witnesses' alleged mental ill health could ever be properly understood.

More serious, however, are two methodological shortcomings of Spencer's study. On the one hand he never questions the reliability of the process whereby

the hospital staff who admitted his subjects also attributed to them full membership in the Watch Tower movement. But given that the admissions took place over a period of 36 months and that the staff concerned had not been specially alerted to the importance of correctly categorizing religious affiliations, there are good grounds for being highly suspicious of the statistics. Moreover, it is commonly found that anomalies and ambiguities cannot be tolerated by officials whose tasks include repetitive form-filling. The attribution of Watch Tower membership is probably a more accurate reflection of the concern of admission staff to maintain tidy records than a true account of patients' religious affiliation.

On the other hand we cannot know whether the patients were being truthful about membership of the sect or whether they were lying, fantasizing or indulging in wishful thinking. If they really were suffering from psychiatric disorders, than even their self-reported religious affiliations must be suspect. At least, their claims to membership should have been checked by an independent researcher. The reason for insisting on this point is that for a variety of reasons I find it unlikely that Spencer's schizophrenics and paranoid schizophrenics would have been allowed to remain in full fellowship with Jehovah's Witnesses.

These criticisms are offered in a positive spirit, for Spencer's article has at least served to highlight the difficulties inherent in any study of sectarians. But one of the pre-conditions for improved knowledge in this area must be the correction of published errors. My hope is that with a more sophisticated methodology the psychiatric study of sectarians can make significant advances.

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DEAR SIR,

In 'The mental health of Jehovah's Witnesses', John Spencer (*Journal*, June 1975, 126, 556) suggests that Jehovah's Witnesses are 'more likely to be