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# We-Religion

Collective Intentionality, Media, and Commitment  
among Jehovah's Witnesses

## Abstract

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, academic research on religion in Western societies has mainly focused on individualized forms of religiosity. Consequently, theoretical reflection on religious collectivity has remained underdeveloped. To redress this imbalance, this study draws on the philosophical debate surrounding collective intentionality to put forth a framework that will allow scholars to conceptualize the actions, beliefs, emotions, and aesthetic experiences of collective religious agents without reducing them to the sum of their members' personal attitudes. To demonstrate the fruitfulness of the proposed approach, this study presents a detailed analysis of collective intentions and commitments among Jehovah's Witnesses, with a particular attention to the roles print and electronic media play in structuring the communicative processes that are conducive to such collective intentions and commitments. This analysis draws on extensive fieldwork carried out in Switzerland and Germany and discusses both qualitative and quantitative data.

After a general introduction (**Chapter 1**), this study is structured into two parts. **Chapter 2** opens the first part by introducing speech act theory, which can be regarded as a historical predecessor of the approach developed throughout this study. The subsequent chapters (**3 to 6**) introduce the ideas of four major authors in the field of collective intentionality: John Searle, Raimo Tuomela, Michael Bratman, and Margaret Gilbert. **Chapter 7** concludes the first part by providing a systematic overview of some of its central topics with a particular emphasis on their relevance for social scientists.

The second part presents four empirical applications of this philosophical framework. **Chapter 8** transitions into the empirical analysis by offering a short history of Jehovah's Witnesses and presenting the data used in the research. The following four chapters (**9 to 12**) address, in turn, the topics of collective action, collective belief, collective emotion, and collective aesthetic. Furthermore, each of these chapters discusses a competing theoretical approach that entails a particular understanding of the nature of religious collectivities.

**Chapter 9** approaches the topic of collective action by discussing the famous door-to-door ministry of Jehovah's Witnesses. This chapter also compares the idea of rationality put forward by rational choice theories with a different idea of rationality that emerges from speech act theory and from the framework of collective intentionality. **Chapter 10** tackles the subject of collective belief through an analysis of the domestic use of various media by Jehovah's Witnesses in light of some of the teachings of the Watch Tower Society. From a theoretical point of view, this chapter reviews Heidi Campbell's idea of the religious-social shaping of technology and suggests some amendments to this idea. **Chapter 11** departs from the smaller settings of the congregation and the home to invite the reader into the larger venues in which several thousands of Jehovah's Witnesses gather for their regional conventions. Against this backdrop, this chapter explores the issue of collective emotion and engages with the neo-Durkheimian theories developed by Anne Rawls and Randal Collins. Finally, **Chapter 12** focuses on the ongoing transition toward electronic media that is occurring among Jehovah's Witnesses. Commencing with a critical reading of Birgit Meyer's concepts of sensational forms and aesthetic formations, this chapter discusses the collective aesthetic connected to the use of digital supports to read the Bible.

The conclusion of this study (**Chapter 13**) calls attention to the limits of so-called summative concepts of religious collectivity and also outlines a number of avenues for future research on both a theoretical level and an empirical level.

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