

Raphael Narbaez, Jr., Jehovah's Witness Minister, USA (part 1 of 2)

Description: A pioneer minister and comedian disenchanted with his faith.

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Published on 16 Jan 2006 - Last modified on 06 Mar 2006

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A forty-two-year-old Latino, Raphael, is a Los Angeles-based comic and lecturer. He was born in Texas where he attended his first Jehovah's Witness meeting at age six. He gave his first Bible sermon [soon after the age of thirteen], tended his own congregation at twenty, and was headed for a position of leadership among the 904,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in the United States. But he traded in his Bible for a Quran after having braved a visit to a local mosque.

On November 1, 1991, he embraced Islam, bringing to the Muslim community the organizational and speaking skills he developed among Jehovah's Witnesses. He speaks with the urgency of a new convert, but one who can make immigrant Muslims laugh at themselves.

He told his story mimicking a cast of characters.

I remember vividly being in a discussion where we were all sitting in my parents' living room and there were some other Jehovah's Witnesses there. They were talking about : "It's Armageddon! The time of the end! And Christ is coming! And you know the hailstones are going to be out here as big as cars! God is going to use all kinds of things to destroy this wicked system and remove the governments! And the Bible talks about the earth opening up! It's going to swallow whole city blocks!"

I'm scared to death! And then my mother turned around: "See what's going to happen to you if you don't get baptized, and if you don't do God's will? The earth is going to swallow you up, or one of these huge hailstones is going to hit you on the head [klonk], knock you out, and you will not exist ever again. I'll have to make another child."

I wasn't going to take a chance of being hit by one of those big hailstones. So I got baptized. And of course Jehovah's Witnesses don't believe in the sprinkling of the water. They submerge you completely, hold you there for a second, and then bring you back up.

I did that at the age of thirteen, September 7, 1963, in Pasadena, California, at the Rose Bowl. It was a big international assembly. We had 100,000 people. We drove all the way from Lubbock, Texas.

Eventually I started giving bigger talks - ten minutes in front of the congregation. A circuit servant recommended me to give the hour lectures that are done on Sunday when they invite the general public. They usually reserved those [sermons] for the elders of the congregation.

[In an authoritarian voice:] "Sure he's young. But he can handle it. He's a good Christian boy. He has no vices, and he's obedient to his parents and seems to have pretty good Bible knowledge."

So at the age of sixteen I started giving hour lectures in front of whole congregations. I was assigned first to a group in Sweetwater, Texas, and then, eventually, in Brownfield, Texas, I got my first congregation. At age twenty, I had become what they call a pioneer minister.

Jehovah's Witnesses have a very sophisticated training program, and they also have kind of a quota system. You have to devote ten to twelve hours a month to door-to-door preaching. It's like sales management. IBM has nothing on these guys.

So when I became a pioneer minister, I devoted most of my full time to doing the door-to-door ministry. I had to do like 100 hours a month, and I had to have seven Bible studies. I started lecturing other congregations. I began to get a lot of responsibility, and I was accepted at a school in Brooklyn, New York, a very elite school that Jehovah's Witnesses have for the *crème de la crème*, the top one percent. But I didn't go.

A few things no longer made sense to me. For example, the quota system. It seemed like every time I wanted to turn a corner and get into another position of responsibility, I had to do these secular material things to prove my godliness. It's like if you meet your quotas this month, God loves you. If you don't meet your quotas next month, God doesn't love you. That didn't make very much sense. One month God loves me and one month He doesn't?

We criticized the Catholic Church because they had a man, a priest, to whom they had to confess. And we'd say, "You shouldn't have to go to a man to confess your sins! Your sin is against God!" And yet we went to a Body of Elders. You confessed your sins to them, and they put you on hold, and said [Elder as telephone operator:] "Hold on just a minute . . . What do you think, Lord? No? . . . Okay, I'm sorry, we tried our best but you're not repentant enough. Your sin is too big, so you either lose your fellowship in the church or you're going to be on probation."

If the sin is against God, shouldn't I directly go to God and beg for mercy?

Probably the nail that hit the coffin was that I noticed that they started reading their Bible less. Jehovah's Witnesses have books for everything that is put out by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. The only people on the entire planet who know how to interpret Bible Scripture correctly are that group of men, that committee in Brooklyn, who tell Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide how to dress, how to talk, what to say, what not to say, how to apply Scripture and what the future is going to be like. God told them, so they can tell us. I appreciated the books. But if the Bible is the book of knowledge, and if it's God's instructions, well, shouldn't we get our answers out of the Bible? Paul himself said to find out for yourself what is a true and acceptable word of God. Don't let men tickle your ears.

I started saying, "Don't worry so much about what the Watchtower says - read the

Bible for yourself." Ears started to prick up.

[Old Southerner's drawl:] "I think we got us an apostate here, Judge. Yup. I think this old boy's one taco short of something."

Even my father said, "You better watch it, young man, that's the demons talking right there. That's the demons trying to get in and cause division."

I said, "Dad, it's not the demons. People don't need to read so much of these other publications. They can find their answers with prayer and in the Bible."

Spiritually I no longer felt at ease. So in 1979, knowing that I could not make headway, I left, disgruntled and with a bad taste in my mouth, because all my life I had put my soul, my heart, my mind into the church. That was the problem. I didn't put it in God. I put it in a man-made organization.

I can't go to other religions. As a Jehovah's Witness, I had been trained, through the Scriptures, to show that they are all wrong. That idolatry is bad. The Trinity doesn't exist.

I'm like a man without a religion. I was not a man without a God. But where could I go?

In 1985, I decided to come to Los Angeles and get on the Johnny Carson show and make my mark as a great comedian and actor. I have always felt like I was born for something. I didn't know whether it was going to be finding the cure to cancer or becoming an actor. I kept praying and it got frustrating after a while.

So I just went to the Catholic Church close to my house, and I tried it. I remember on Ash Wednesday, I had that ash cross on my forehead. I was trying anything I could. I went for about two or three months, and I just couldn't do it anymore, man. It was:

Stand up. Sit down.

Stand up. Sit down.

Okay, stick your tongue out.

You got a lot of exercise. I think I lost about five pounds. But that's about it. So now I'm more lost than ever.

But it never passed through my mind that there is not a Creator. I have His phone number, but the line's always busy. I'm doing my little movie shots. A film called Deadly Intent. A telephone commercial in Chicago. An Exxon commercial. A couple of bank commercials. In the meantime I'm doing construction work on the side.

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