

THE PLAIN TRUTH ABOUT THE ARMSTRONGS AND THE WORLD TOMORROW

Get in on a good
thing at the
Last Judgment
by
William C. Martin

IN 1930, HERBERT W. ARMSTRONG was a business failure in Oregon. Today, vital and energetic at age eighty-two, he is preparing to rule the world from his and God's headquarters in Pasadena, California, P.O. Box 111. The shift in Mr. Armstrong's fortunes began in 1931, when he was called and ordained to be the "leading minister, to direct this entire era of God's work on earth." Though a sizable portion of the world has carelessly neglected to acknowledge his apostolic authority and power, Armstrong has managed, by dint of imagination, zeal, and organizational genius, to ensconce himself firmly atop one of the most remarkable tumors ever to develop on the Body of Christ.

Shortly after Mr. Armstrong received his call, he initiated *The World Tomorrow*, which is said to be the most widely broadcast religious program in existence. At one time or another, almost everyone has heard Armstrong or his better known son, Garner Ted, denounce the sad state of human affairs and offer *The Plain Truth* magazine and a spate of books and pamphlets that promise to unlock the secrets of a wide range of hitherto unfathomable mysteries, most of which can be fully understood only in the light of Biblical prophecy. Garner Ted never asks for money in his broadcasts, and all publications are available free, a fact that creates an aura of respectability uncommon among radio evangelists.

Even those who put no stock in the application of Biblical prophecy to current events are inclined to admit that Garner Ted is a remarkably articulate and intelligent man who seems genuinely to care about the state of the world, unlike so many of the God hucksters who proclaim their version of the Gospel from the Great Church of the Airwaves. He may be smug, but he is not crooked and certainly not dangerous. A casual listener might reason that if men must preach on the radio, better to have them concerned about pollution and crime and quoting scientists and philosophers than shouting hell-fire and damnation and urging us to send for a vial of healing oil squeezed out of olives from the Garden of Gethsemane.

What is heard and seen, however, even most of what is read by those who write away for the free literature, is the tip of an iceberg. And what

is beneath the surface is not just another peculiar religious sect but an astoundingly well-coordinated religious empire with an estimated annual income of over \$50 million and a hold on the lives of its members that is tyrannical in nature and pernicious in its effects.

THE MOST VISIBLE INSTITUTIONAL component of the Armstrong empire is Ambassador College, with units in Pasadena; Big Sandy, Texas; and Bricket Wood, England. The original campus in Pasadena is a utopian jewel box, an opulent but tasteful blend of luxurious modern buildings and beautifully renovated older mansions set on elaborately landscaped grounds complete with fountains, tree-lined paths, and a recirculating rippling brook. The other two campuses are slightly less grand, but quite lovely. These colleges, with a combined enrollment of 1,600, are the ostensible sponsors of *The World Tomorrow* broadcasts, and all printed materials bear the imprint of the Ambassador College Press. The radio and television facilities at the Pasadena campus are superior to many commercial stations, and the Press covers an entire city block. Another building houses the Letter Answering Department, where 180 men read and answer as many as 250,000 letters a month from Garner Ted's listeners.

But all of these—colleges, broadcasts, the Press, and the Letter Answering Department—are but front and support organizations for an unpublicized and little known sect called the Worldwide Church of God. Few outsiders had ever heard of the 80,000-member church until the national media focused minor attention on it after Garner Ted suddenly and mysteriously disappeared from the broadcasts in October 1971.

THE RELATIVE OBSCURITY of the Worldwide Church of God is not accidental. Garner Ted has rarely mentioned the church on his broadcasts, and that only since his return from exile in June 1972. Local congregations meet in unmarked rented halls, do not advertise, are not listed in the telephone book, and turn away visitors who have not been cleared by the mir-

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ister or other leaders. The only disciples they seek are those who give abundant testimony, in word and deed, that they are and will remain true believers.

To assure the level of commitment they want, the Armstrongs till only the most fertile of the soil on which their widely broadcast seed falls. Before receiving a visit from a minister of the WCG, the typical seeker goes through several stages, all self-initiated. From the broadcasts he learns of and requests *The Plain Truth* and perhaps several of the other publications offered. If he likes what he reads, he enrolls in the free Bible correspondence course, which leads him step by step through the Gospel according to the Armstrongs. In various unobtrusive ways, these materials inform him there is a church that embodies these teachings, but he receives no pressure to join. If he wants to learn more, he must write to Ambassador College and request a visit from a representative of the church.

After this initial self-screening has narrowed the field to the genuinely interested, the church starts its own winnowing process. Prospective members may be rejected after only one interview if the visiting minister feels they would not meet the church's rigorous moral, financial, and doctrinal standards. Additional visits are made to the more promising prospects until the minister is satisfied their personal lives are in good order and they thoroughly understand and accept the tenets of the Armstrongs. Only then are they permitted to enter into the full fellowship of the church. New members enroll in clubs and training classes to receive detailed instruction in every aspect of the church's doctrine and practice. These are supplemented by publications available only to members and by a steady stream of letters and memos from the Messrs. Armstrong and others at the top of the church's elaborate hierarchy. This intensive indoctrination is complemented and aided by systematic isolation. Social fellowship with nonmembers is forbidden. Children may not participate in interschool athletics. Most important, members are commanded not to entertain any religious thoughts that might prove unsettling. They are ordered to read no religious materials other than those provided by the church, to listen to no other interpretations of the Bible, and to answer no questions about the church unless they are sure the questioner wants to join.

The chosen people

THE BEDROCK OF THE ARMSTRONGS' dogma, spelled out in Herbert Armstrong's book, *The United States and British Commonwealth in Prophecy*, is the belief that the True Israelites are not the Jews but the Anglo-Saxons, who are descended from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel

and are therefore the rightful heirs to the land and riches God originally promised to the offspring of Abraham. They, and not the Jews, are the chosen people. As good Anglo-Israelites should, the Armstrongs and their followers regard much of the Law of Moses as binding on them. They follow kosher food regulations strictly, observe Passover and other major Jewish holidays, and keep the Sabbath as their day of rest, while forbidding observance of such "pagan" holidays as Christmas, Easter, and birthdays.

Armstrong calls his teaching the "Master Key" that unlocks the many Biblical prophecies intended for the present age. These prophecies are, in the main, discouraging; for thirty-five years the Armstrongs have pounded out a litany of unrelenting despair and doom. The world as they see it is mentally, morally, and spiritually sick, filled with heartache, frustration, broken homes, dope, crime, insanity, perversion, racial hatred, poverty, filth, pollution, disease, and traffic jams. Against these and other sorrows and evils, modern science, technology, and education are helpless. But things will get worse—much worse—before they get better. According to the Armstrongs' inside information, we may soon expect Great Britain and America to be hit by drought, pestilence, and famine that will claim one-third of their populations. This catastrophe will signal the beginning of World War



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III, which will end with the utter defeat of Britain-America at the hands of a Holy Roman Empire revived through the good offices of the Vatican and led (probably) by Germany. The war will be fought with the hydrogen bomb and will result in the death or enslavement of the remaining two-thirds of the British-American population. Communist hordes will then fight and defeat the Holy Roman Empire, at which point Jesus Christ will return to set up God's government on the earth. Faithful members of the Worldwide Church of God will then be admitted to God-status and will reign over the renewed planet. Under this new administration in the Wonderful World Tomorrow, survivors (including millions who will be given a chance to accept Truth once they discover the Armstrongs have been right all along) will experience "compulsory joy"—apparently whether they like it or not.

Herbert Armstrong's original scenario called for a cataclysm in the 1930s; after it failed to occur, he reread the signs and singled out January 1972 as the date most likely to usher in the apocalypse. The Armstrongs now deny ever having set dates and have expunged all allusions to 1972 in a new edition of *The United States and British Commonwealth in Prophecy*, but their writings make it abundantly clear that 1972's record as merely bad and not catastrophic was a severe disappointment.

IF MENTAL ASSENT TO BIZARRE theological propositions were all that membership in the Worldwide Church of God entailed, one could scarcely find serious fault with the group, except as an exercise in intellectual snobbery. But the Armstrongs want more than assent. They seek, in fact will not settle for less than, complete control of the lives of their adherents and unquestioning acceptance of demands more oppressive than those prescribed by any other significant religious group in America.

The most obvious stripes laid on new converts are financial. Every member is required to contribute one-tenth of his gross income to the church. A second tithe is set aside to cover expenses incurred while attending the holy day festivals at church-owned sites. Every three or four years, still a third tithe is exacted, ostensibly for the upkeep of widows and orphans, although skeptical ex-members claim much of this money is siphoned into an expensive private jet in which church leaders travel the world in high style.

In addition to these fixed obligations, which may take as much as 40 to 50 percent of a family's net income after taxes, members are constantly badgered into sending additional contributions and loans to the church. Further, because the expected imminent end of the age

makes long-term financial planning superfluous, Armstrong instructs members to buy only short-term life insurance and to avoid paying Social Security whenever they have an option. These measures bring in an estimated 70 percent of the Armstrong empire's million-dollar-a-week income; the rest comes from "co-workers" (regularly contributing nonmembers) and other persons who simply like what they hear or read and send occasional gifts in response. Many families are placed in such severe financial straits that nonmember spouses and other relatives sometimes write pathetic letters begging for release from the heavy burden.

WCG members can perhaps afford these tithes better than many in similar financial brackets, since they run little risk of incurring the medical expenses that often strain others. The Armstrongs urge their followers to pursue a diet-exercise-sleep regimen designed to produce radiant health. Physical disease is seen as the result of personal physical sins. Since only God can remove sin, only God can heal physical disease. Herbert Armstrong has written: "There isn't a cure in a car-load—or a train-load—of medicine." An article in *The Good News* (a magazine available to members only) states that to accept medical science is to spit on the sacrifice Christ made. Drugs are denounced as poison, vaccines described as compounded from pus and filth. The only medical measures allowed are those in the "repair" category, such as stitching wounds and setting broken bones, but even these are to be performed without benefit of anesthetics.

The church practices faith healing but has never made claims for spectacular results. Letters to ministers and members commend those who have had the courage to resist medical attention pressed on them, but they also report their failures, acknowledging that some die despite their prayers that God would heal them. Christian Scientists and other groups, of course, hold similar views of illness but make their beliefs a matter of public record. The Armstrongs delay introducing any teachings that might create resistance until prospective members are well hooked into their overall system.

Some apparent casuistry is practiced. When Director of Ministers Roderick Meredith suffered a detached retina, Herbert Armstrong granted him permission to obtain "repair surgery," but ministers were cautioned not to announce that Meredith had "had an operation" lest members get the wrong impression. Mr. Armstrong, however, can hardly be accused of ordering one thing for rank-and-file members and another for key leaders. His son Richard might have escaped death following an auto accident had Armstrong not refused to allow transfusions and other medical measures deemed necessary.

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From personal letters and conversations, accounts of reliable witnesses, and various Armstrong publications, I have gathered a depressing collection of stories of children suffering from untreated rheumatic fever, epilepsy, spinal meningitis, blackouts and convulsions, asthma, infections, and iron deficiency; of ministers confronting a member in a hospital corridor in an attempt to talk him out of a cancer operation for his son, and of adults who suffer broken health or who are dying of diseases that might have been arrested or cured with proper treatment. Early in my research I asked a former Armstrong disciple what members do when they become seriously ill, expecting to hear that allowances are made for critical cases. Her answer was succinct: "They die."

Armstrong thought is not body-affirming even when that body is a sin-free, healthy one. Articles in *The Good News* encourage members to look at themselves from "a God's-eye view" so that they are able to see themselves as God sees them—"a self-centered, hostile, shriveled-up, rotten, vile, filthy, sinning hulk of rotting human flesh" and can learn to say, "I'm carnal, I'm selfish, I hate myself," and "really mean it." Despite the enormity of the challenge, the church is willing to help members manage their carnality. In the booklets *Modern Dating* and *God Speaks Out on the New Morality*, the Armstrongs warn teenagers that necking is sensu-

ally arousing, creates lust, and causes increased daydreaming. With this much one can hardly quarrel; but the Armstrongs go on to assert that necking is "A CAPITAL SIN" of the same magnitude as lying, stealing, and murder.

Masturbation, not surprisingly, is condemned as that than which there is "no greater plague." Parents are urged to be "vigilant, ever watchful imperceptibly," and to take "proper means to protect their children from this CURSE!" Within marriage, members are relatively free to enjoy "the ecstasy of occasional coitus," as long as they "restrain caressing and lovemaking in between the times of full intercourse" and stick to "the two most natural and commonly used positions."

Dating is allowed, but since dating leads to mating, and "wrong-mating" can lead to unhappiness, murder, suicide, homosexuality, dementia praecox, economic disaster, night sweats, and fits, one should be careful in choosing a date. Garner Ted recommends that serious dating should not be undertaken without checking for compatibility of blood types and that young lovers should inquire about the condition of their companion's physical health, defects of eye or ear, and the genuineness of teeth and hair. He also warns darkly that although the "fellow who arrives on time, dresses neatly, looks 'cool,' and asks you where you want to go may be a TERRIFIC partner . . . [he] may also



be a potential wife-beater or child molester, or habitual drunk. OR QUEER."

These elaborate precautions take on a certain pragmatic logic when one considers them in the light of the church's teaching on divorce and remarriage, a doctrine so central that ministerial letters often refer to it simply as "D and R." Basically, the Armstrongs maintain that if a first marriage is a valid marriage, in which no fraud or misrepresentation was involved, the couple can never obtain a "scriptural divorce." Any subsequent marriages after a valid union terminated by civil divorce are regarded as adulterous. Persons who join the WCG while part of a second, "adulterous" marriage must separate from their spouses and are urged to move at least one state away from each other to minimize temptation to reunite and to hamper efforts of nonmember spouses to visit the children when the member has been given custody. Herbert Armstrong concedes there are practical problems inherent in the application of this teaching but he insists that "separation only SEEMS wrong," that "GOD'S WAYS AND THE LAWS ARE ALWAYS RIGHT," and that we will be far more unhappy if we do not obey them.

The sacred canopy

IN VIEW OF WHAT MUST BE CONSIDERED formidable obstacles to recruitment, how do the Armstrongs attract and hold a following?

To begin with, they know how to package and sell religion to persons troubled by ambiguity and anxious for certainty. They lace broadcasts and publications with provocative questions: "Have you ever wondered what present world conditions *really* mean? What will be the outcome of the crisis in the Middle East? *Why* global pollution and the population explosion? *Why* so much crime, chaos, confusion—even *anarchy*? What does the *future* hold?" Then, in a manner remarkably free of self-doubt, they provide answers that bespeak a firm and confident hold on truth. These answers and the charismatic authority of the men who provide them enable true believers to find order in the midst of chaos, to erect what sociologist Peter Berger has called a "sacred canopy," a symbolic superstructure that makes sense of all that comes under it—the grand sweep of history, current events, and one's own biography. Under this canopy, confusion and doubt disappear. All is explained, and a detailed blueprint for living is provided. The escape from autonomy and its awful demands is complete.

The Armstrongs protect their sacred canopy with fanatical determination. Because the church's teachings on medicine and divorce are potential sources of damaging litigation and negative publicity that might result in loss of

contributions, the original versions of the booklets *Does God Heal Today?* and *Divorce and Remarriage* have been withdrawn. Ministers have been instructed to continue preaching the doctrine these booklets contained but to be extremely careful in any situation that might cause trouble for the church. In a special instruction letter to ministers dated July 18, 1969, Roderick Meredith stated that if a couple is told to separate, the decision must always be delivered "*verbally, in person.*" "Do not," Meredith warned, "under ANY circumstance, put the decision in writing! It could be used against us in court . . ."

Ministers in the Akron, Ohio, area received a similar set of detailed instructions on how to avoid legal problems that might arise when failure to seek medical aid resulted in death. This six-page document offers the following recommendations:

Don't say anything! *Avoid telling anyone that you knew the person was seriously ill. . . . If you are a witness, there is no better way out than the old time-worn cliché, "Look, I just don't want to get involved." . . . Deny any knowledge that the ailment was serious . . . If the question of a doctor should arise, it might be met with, "If I had any idea that she was that sick and that a doctor could have healed her, I certainly would have called him immediately."*

Not all serious threats, of course, come from outside. The Armstrongs realize this and have learned to maintain order within their empire by using techniques long favored by rulers of closed societies: fear, radical invasion of privacy, and absolute intolerance of dissent.

Fear is basic to the Armstrong approach. Publications with optimistic titles like *The Wonderful World Tomorrow* are filled with photographs and vivid descriptions of war, crime, pollution, famine, and assorted examples of human depravity. Ex-members assert that terror is also a common element in many sermons preached by local ministers and claim to have seen young people faint or vomit in response to such sermons.

The fear that a single misstep may bring the wrath of God crashing down on one's head is probably sufficient to keep most disciples on the narrow path, but the Armstrongs take no chances. Teams of ministers and other church leaders frequently visit members to question them about their private lives, including their sexual activity. A ministerial letter dated July 18, 1969, offers counsel on how to obtain such information:

Let them know that you have gone into intimate details of dozens of cases and that you are not going to be shocked at all. Tell them . . . you are bound as God's minister not to

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divulge any of it to anyone, and that, in fact, you forget most details anyway as you go through more and more cases.

Another letter, dated July 8, 1969, cites a member's complaint that a visiting team had searched her closets and dresser drawers and recommends that ministers exercise greater tact and discretion in their visits. This practice has aroused such resentment among members that *The Good News* has run articles defending the visits, including one entitled, "The Visiting Program or Gestapo—Which?" One such article complains that visiting teams have encountered people who fidgeted, who were secretive, or who hid and would not answer the door. Another asks, in an accusatory tone, "Has the minister ever had to *extract* the *whole* truth from you—or have you always freely told him everything, starting with your most obnoxious sin?" The information gathered on these visits, along with records of contributions and attendance, is forwarded to the Pasadena headquarters, where, according to ex-members, it becomes part of a computerized file begun when a prospective member first requests a visit from a WCG minister. Herbert Armstrong apparently has no second thoughts about using computers to store personal data. He has written: "Although the designers of the new third-generation computer, IBM 360, don't know they designed this fantastic tool for God's work, they did! God inspired its conception." THINK about *that*, Tom Watson.

Scare tactics and gestapo techniques fit well into the Armstrong policy of demanding absolute and unquestioning obedience from their followers. No sin is regarded as more serious than questioning the teachings or actions of the Armstrongs or any other ministers of the church. Members are sternly informed they have no right to disobey any command a minister gives them and are warned: "If any member comes to you to point out where the church is wrong DO NOT LISTEN! Rather, tell him to take it to the CHURCH! And then report him to Headquarters." Those who violate this policy are summarily "disfellowshipped," and other members are ordered to have no communication with them, on pain of a similar fate. Mrs. Irene Peterson of Seattle, who left the WCG after it broke up her second marriage of twenty-five years (she and her husband have since reunited), recalls that she often heard those who had been disfellowshipped accused of adultery, incest, sodomy, or demon possession. "As a result," she says, "none of the members would ever dare contact these people again. . . . It was a spiritual concentration camp." Mrs. Peterson's account is corroborated by others, including one West Coast man who obtained retraction of a false accusation of homosexuality only after threatening the Armstrongs with a slander suit.

There is reason to believe a version of this gambit may have been used to hide a rift between Herbert and Garner Ted Armstrong. In a letter to members dated September 26, 1971, the elder Armstrong announced that his son would soon be taking a well-deserved rest. On October 14, Mr. Armstrong reported that ill health, frayed nerves, and the high tension of Ted's "heavy and crushing responsibility" had forced an immediate leave of absence and that all suspicions and questions about his sudden departure from the broadcasts should cease forthwith. As curiosity mounted despite this injunction, Mr. Armstrong gave broad hints that his handsome son had succumbed to one of the more popular sins of the flesh. When Garner Ted reappeared months later, he also alluded to having sinned against "the wife God gave me in my youth." On other occasions, however, Mr. Armstrong had characterized his son's transgression as "spiritual, not moral," and most Armstrong-watchers agree that the implication of sexual impropriety was probably a smoke screen to obscure the far more serious sin of disagreeing with God's Number One Minister over issues of doctrine or organizational policy.

THE COMBINATION OF SELECTIVE screening, continued indoctrination, isolation, fear, swift reprisal for doubt or dissent, and—let it be admitted—sincere belief has enabled the Armstrongs to boast a low rate of apostasy. Most who seek refuge within their fold are apparently quite content to trade the present for the future, to wait like sheep in the expectation they will become as lions. But a widespread network of expelled and escaped refugees, together with others angry over what the church has done to their families, has begun to oppose the Armstrongs by initiating lawsuits, collecting materials to document their charges, and informing the media of the darker side of WCG beliefs. Some of them believe Herbert W. Armstrong is a fraud. The more pessimistic, like George Schwartz of Perrine, Florida, fear that he is maniacally sincere. Angry that his ex-wife is rearing their seven-year-old daughter in the WCG, Schwartz charges Armstrong with having "wrapped the Bible in barbed wire" and says, "If that old man could get to the button, he'd blow up the world in a minute, just to see his prophecies come true."

Whatever the motives of Herbert and Garner Ted Armstrong, the religion they espouse has the capacity to destroy community, to harm the body, to twist the soul, and to shrivel the spirit. It is a kind of religion that has always appealed to some, and no doubt its appeal will continue. But it does not seem exactly what Jesus had in mind. And there is not much about it that can authentically be called good news. □