

*Director Daniel Kokotajlo's drama **Apostasy** gives audiences a revealing and very uncomfortable insight into the lives of Jehovah's Witnesses*



From left: Siobhan Finneran (mother Ivanna), Sacha Parkinson (Luisa) and Molly Wright (Alex) are part of a close-knit community of Jehovah's Witnesses

# Dreary Sect

by Gerard Condon

**T**HE WORD *apostasy* comes from a Greek word meaning rebellion or defection. In religion the term is used to describe a person who has turned against their faith, or is deemed to have done so by the faithful. This movie, however, is not so much about an individual leaving their faith, as the failures of the religion itself. Writer and director Daniel Kokotajlo has drawn on his own experience as a Jehovah's Witness to deliver a quietly devastating critique of the pseudo-Christian sect.

### Failed predictions

Many Roman Catholics admire, even envy, Jehovah Witnesses for their temperate lifestyle and door-to-door preaching. Their knowledge of the Bible is impressive. According to the Witnesses own statistics, the organization has almost 9 million 'publishers' (members actively engaged in preaching) worldwide, in some 120,000 congregations. The origins of the sect can be traced back to 1879 when Charles T. Russell, an American evangelical protestant, began publishing the *Watch Tower* magazine. Russell said that Armageddon, the violent end-times predicted in the Bible, would oc-

cur by 1914. At that time, only those following the teachings of Jehovah would be part of a new paradise on earth. Since then other dates for the end of the world have been offered, including 1925 and 1975. All have failed to deliver the promised apocalypse.

Catholic theology rejects the teachings of Jehovah Witnesses on many points. Witnesses deny that the nature of Christ is consubstantial with God. Their notion of the afterlife does not include purgatory. Scripture scholars criticize the group's fundamentalist reading of the Bible, which takes individual verses out of context. For example, Witnesses read chapter 15, verse 29 of the *Acts of the Apostles* as a prohibition of blood transfusions. The Catholic tradition, by contrast, sees advances in medical science as signs of God's wisdom, insofar as they coincide with the underlying pro-life principles of the Bible. Even the name 'Jehovah' is based on an inaccurate translation of the personal name for God in Hebrew. But it is the sect's repressive institutional structure and stifling of free will that gives the greatest cause for concern.

### Three women

*Apostasy* tells the tale of a family in Greater Manchester, UK (where

the film was also shot). Alex (Molly Wright), her older sister Luisa (Sacha Parkinson) and their mother, Ivanna (Siobhan Finneran) are part of a close-knit community of Witnesses. Ivanna has a routine office job. Alex, who has just turned eighteen, works part-time at a garden centre. Luisa has recently begun to attend college. Ivanna is worried about the liberalizing influences she might encounter there, including "airy fairy Catholics." Of the three, Ivanna is most in tune with the black and white thinking that we associate with Jehovah Witnesses.

The family's sense of discipline makes for a dreary lifestyle. Witnesses do not observe birthdays or Christmas, and do not permit television. Their place of worship, the Kingdom Hall, is also drab, its barren interior a signal of the sect's rejection of religious images as guides to prayer. The movie also conveys the sense of fellowship and mutual support to be found in "God's organization" – as long as you are a loyal member.

This Kingdom Hall is located beside a busy motorway, a metaphor, perhaps, for the Witnesses' desire to find a solid reference point amid the chaos of modern living. *Apostasy* highlights the contrast between secular Britain, with its trite consumerism,

and the vivid way Witnesses' talk of demons, Satan and the "New System" that God will bring about soon. The sect's strong proselytizing ethic is also evident. Alex and Luisa learn Urdu, so that they can communicate more convincingly with the large Pakistani community in their area.

Alex is devout, timid and suffers from anemia. She hero-worships the "boys and girls who died for Jehovah" whether by persecution or by refusing to take a blood transfusion. It is through her eyes that much of the movie is narrated. She speaks of her shame at having received a blood transfusion at birth.

Luisa, on the other hand, is more independent minded and "likes to voice her opinions too much." She has begun dating someone who is not a Witness. Her mother is determined that Alex will not go down the same route and introduces her to "nice" and "suitable" Steven (Robert Emms), a newly arrived Elder. He begins to court her, but there is no real chemistry between them.

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### Family crisis

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The family's personal Armageddon begins to unfold when Luisa announces that she is pregnant. Her

**Ivanna (Siobhan Finneran) and Alex (Molly Wright) offer a pamphlet to commuters in Greater Manchester, UK**



**Writer and director Daniel Kokotajlo has drawn on his own experience as a Jehovah's Witness**

mother's first reaction is that the baby's father must convert. When Luisa says this will not happen, her mother promptly reports the matter to the Elders. They decide to have Luisa "disfellowshipped" for not repenting of her sin in the proper manner. Elder Brian (James Quinn), whose cruelty is masked by an avuncular manner, advises Ivanna and Alex not to offer Luisa any support, and "avoid socializing or eating with the wrongdoer," otherwise they risk committing a "disfellowshipping offence" themselves.

Life takes an even darker turn for the family when Alex collapses at a party. What happens next is so shocking that it does not form part of the movie, but may be inferred from subsequent scenes. Ivanna and Luisa express their grief in two very different ways: one denies the reality of death, the other is fully human. Meanwhile the elders continue to make unreasonable demands. At a memorial service for Alex, Elder Brian announces that his spectacles are fogged up not because he is crying, but because the Kingdom Hall is so comfortably warm. Eventually it's all too much for Luisa, who (in the movie's most poignant scenes) leaves the Witnesses for good.

Later, at a sermon on Luke 12:51,



Elder Steven points out that the Truth (another title used by Witnesses) sometimes causes family divisions. Ivanna momentarily loses her composure and rushes from the service into the restroom. But there is no escape. The preacher's voice is even piped into the toilets, saying that we must respect Jehovah, even if His demands are unreasonable, "If God was to say this book is green, when it's really red, then maybe it is green - what do I really know. Such is His guidance."

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### Restrained intensity

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*Apostasy* was premiered at the 2017 San Sebastian film festival, and was on general release in art-house theatres last summer. Ex-Jehovah Witnesses have praised its accurate portrayal of life inside the Kingdom Hall. This 95-minute film has almost no supporting soundtrack; the acting is restrained and naturalistic. The use of lingering close-ups adds to its emotional intensity and reflects the stifling nature of being a Witness. The director does not parade his criticism, but allows the potentially damaging effects of the sect to speak for themselves. Of the actors, most convincing of all is Siobhan Finneran, as Ivanna. Her character remains stony-faced right to the end, yet she manages to win the viewer's compassion.

On the downside, the movie raises more questions than it answers. There is little by way of resolution, let alone the happy ending that we expect from cinema. In this respect, too, *Apostasy* has the ring of authenticity. ♦