

UNADFI – National Union of Associations for the Defense of Families and the Individual  
victim of cults

# Jehovah's Witnesses

**Excommunication, a violation of Human Rights**

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## **Jehovah's Witnesses**

### **Excommunication, a violation of Human Rights**

- p.3 Who are the Jehovah's Witnesses?**
- p.4 Doctrines and practices**
- p.6 A religious discipline: excommunication.**
- p.7 Clearly expressed guidelines ...**
- p. 9 ... and sanctions in case of non compliance**
- p.10 Justification and double talk**
- p.11 Violation of individual rights**

*"The principle of freedom of conscience imposes a positive obligation on the State, as the European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly affirmed. And if the State has to respect freedom of conscience, the neutrality of the State with regard to the different personal beliefs cannot be interpreted in terms of passive indifference: the State instead should work to guaranty effective freedom of conscience for everyone and must oppose those who use the freedom of expression, religion and association to undermine the very foundation of these freedoms."*

*Serge Blisko  
President of MIVILUDES*

**The public is usually unaware of this, but those who leave the Jehovah's Witnesses Organization are generally separated from their family against their will, and the attitude of rejection which follows an excommunication (shunning) is even more extreme as it is presented by the leaders as a "sacred" duty.**

The psychological, emotional and social distress which relatives endure resulting from shunning can be terrible. Not only many family events take place in the absence of a loved one such as a father, mother, child, grandchild, grandparent, brother, sister; but above all, the relatives are forced to consider those who have left as dead and once and for all mourn their relationship with them.

Parents, grandparents, children live through terrible heartbreaking and extremely deep moral suffering, desperate loneliness, severe depressions. Shunning can lead to similar consequences as physical violence, loss of health and death. Some commit suicide, seeing no solution to the moral and emotional conflict they are living. When they have the courage, the victims seek help and support on forums, with associations or with official bodies (i.e. MIVILUDES) when they exist.

Today, the numbers of former members and relatives of Jehovah's Witness families are growing in all countries who denounce these violations of their fundamental rights, "institutionalized" by the movement under cover of freedom of worship.

*This file was drawn up with the help of a former Jehovah's Witness who receives a large number of testimonies and calls for help, it is intended to inform the general public, policy makers, professionals (judges, lawyers, social workers, etc.) about the system of shunning in the Jehovah's Witnesses organization and the great harm this causes to individuals and families. Based on the organization's internal documents this decoding of the Jehovah 's*

*Witnesses "excommunication" process raises questions about how to consider associations which do not respect the freedom of conscience of their own members...*

## **Who are the Jehovah's Witnesses?**

Founded by Charles Taze Russell in 1870 in the United States and originally known as a **Bible Student movement the Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses is known today as the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society.**

If Russell gave it its millenarian and apocalyptic doctrinal basis, the second president, Joseph Franklin Rutherford, created the pyramidal authoritarian hierarchy structure, which insured the stability and unity of the movement and allowed close monitoring at all levels. In 1931 to distinguish it from other religions, he chose to call it Jehovah's Witnesses.

The global activities of Jehovah's Witnesses are directed by the Governing Body consisting of seven men at the moment. Settled in the Brooklyn Bethel (New York) , this college is responsible for all operations, teachings, and appoints the leaders: everything emanates from it which, alone on earth, is empowered to proclaim "Jehovah 's will " that is the official doctrine of the Watch Tower.

By declaring itself as the only spokesman of God on earth in all Jehovah publications, it demands unconditional obedience from all followers :

*"At that time, the life-saving direction that we receive from Jehovah's organization may not appear practical from a human standpoint. All of us **must be ready to obey any instructions we may receive, whether these appear sound from a strategic or human standpoint or not** <sup>1</sup>."*

(WT 15/11/2013 p 20 § 17)

*"Jehovah uses his organization to guide us, his people, through "the wilderness" during these last days of Satan's wicked world."*

(WT 15/4/201 p.5)

Local officials and *branch offices* manage the activities and local situations following strictly the instructions propagated by publications, letters, meetings or special courses of the *Governing Body*. The *Branches* must be informed of all specific problems so as to react with the appropriate instructions (risk procedure, press, sexual abuse of minors).

The local basic unit is the *congregation*, which covers a defined geographical area and meets in the Kingdom Hall. It is headed by a body of elders (minimum of three: coordinator, secretary and service supervisor), appointed by the hierarchy on recommendation by the elders in service. It is from the members of this body that "judicial committees" are constituted. The different services of the congregation are provided by "ministerial servants" occupying intermediate positions before access to the rank of elders.

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<sup>1</sup> The emphasis are put in by us, as in all the citations that follow.

## Doctrines and practices

The Jehovah's Witnesses particular interpretation of the Bible has led them, since the 1870s , to announce the imminent intervention of God in human affairs at the Battle of Armageddon (War between God and the world at the end of time), the result of this battle will bring about the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth (the earthly paradise) which is only destined for Jehovah's faithful. Those who do not obey God will be destroyed.

Deadlines for this event have been announced many times and have marked the history of the movement, maintaining a vigilant concern among followers, and making any other investment than those in the Service of Jehovah seem unimportant:

**From the beginning, the movement** announced the possibility of the Bible Students' ascent to heaven in 1878. As this prediction was not confirmed, the date was postponed to 1881 and then to 1914.

**1914** - As the previous prediction failed to be realized, however, Russell interpreted the outbreak of the First World War as the beginning of the fulfillment of the earlier predictions. Jesus now reigned in heaven and his kingdom would soon extend to earth after having thrown out Satan and his demons. Armageddon was then announced for 1918.

**1917** - A book "The Finished Mystery" was published which predicted that patriotism and militarism were condemned and doomed. The destruction of other religions was announced for 1918, followed by a period of anarchy until 1920 .

**1920** - The booklet "*Millions of people now living will never die*" highlights, as was done in 1917, the resurrection in heaven of prophets like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the beginning of the millennium (Direct government by God) for 1925.

**1928** - Many practices were forbidden i.e. Christmas celebrations, birthdays, Mother's Day, the salute to the flag, vaccinations (later cancelled), and any involvement in civic and political life.

**1966** - The Organization once more took the risk of recalculating and "suggested" that Armageddon could happen in 1975.

**1986** - The movement found a link between the UN declaration on the "International Year of Peace" with the biblical text from 1 Thessalonians 5: 2, 3 predicting "sudden destruction of those who would speak of "peace and security", that is all the nations ... with the exception of the Watch Tower (which was nevertheless secretly affiliated in 1992 as an NGO to the UN ... until in 2001, when this was made public by the U.K. newspaper "The Guardian", resulting in the immediate disaffiliation by the Jehovah's Witnesses) .

**2006** - At district assemblies "*Deliverance is near!*" Resolutions were adopted unanimously by all Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide reaffirming their submission to Jehovah , the immediate end of the world , and their willingness to keep out "this system of things" that will soon disappear. This text insistently repeats that Jehovah's Witnesses are not part of the world.

*"In all these ways, we are determined to show that we are not part of the world, and we show it in all aspects of our lives and in our relationships with others. "*

## Doctrines and practices

(continued)

Since 1914 , the world is living the "end times" or "last days", terms that denote a difficult period characterized according to the Jehovah's Witnesses, by a set of intensely unprecedented unfortunate events: wars, famines, earthquakes, violence, moral crisis, from which only the believers of Jehovah will be saved.

**So, for the followers , it is urgent to convert, to preach to the maximum of people in order to save them. Thus, "you will please Jehovah" and be spared.**

"To please Jehovah" means comply in all points with the instructions of the Organization, taught in many books and commented during multiple weekly meetings. The guidelines may cover all aspects of individual and collective lives of Witnesses. In particular, it is frowned upon to be friends with people who are not Jehovah's Witnesses.

*" What about having close association with those who may be morally clean but who lack faith in the true God? The Scriptures tell us: "The whole world is lying in the power of the wicked one." (1 John 5:19) We come to discern that bad associations are not limited to permissive or morally debased people. Hence, we are wise to cultivate close friendships only with those who love Jehovah."*

(WT 15/3/2006 p 23 §9)

*"Throughout the ages, all who have truly loved Jehovah have felt like strangers, or aliens, in this system of things."*

(WT 15/3/2013 p 19 §1)

Thus, the **Jehovah's Witnesses community has a monopoly over social relationships, emotions and friends that are important to the follower.** Professional relations remain superficial and are just tolerated. **This relational isolation from the outside world makes it difficult to leave the movement because he who leaves the Organization finds himself completely severed from friends and family and unable to build new relationships.**

## **A religious discipline: excommunication.**

Although in 1947 the Jehovah's Witnesses believed that excommunication was of 'pagan inspiration', the desire to preserve the "purity" of the congregations was particularly highlighted by the Organization as from the 1950s, a time which codified the rules of excommunication.

This is the most radical measure applied to a follower who commits what is considered (in the internal rules) as a "serious sin", and does not repent. The denunciation of the culprits is clearly required, even if it means violating professional secrecy. If necessary, elders can make "pastoral visits" to the homes of the members to make sure that each member lives in accordance with the doctrine. The excommunication of a follower usually comes after a decision taken by an internal court, the "judicial committee" composed of 3 or 4 elders.

**He who leaves the movement of his own free will is also considered excommunicated.** Some acts are considered to lead to a voluntary disassociation, **like unrepentant acceptance of a blood transfusion or challenging a doctrine (apostate)**. **Whilst this measure should only be considered as the breaking a spiritual link, it also leads to shunning (ostracism) and rejection by the immediate interruption of social and family ties with the excommunicated person and all the faithful of the congregation, including friends and own family.**

The Watch Tower, the official organ of the movement, orders its members "not to keep up relationships" with those people leaving the organization (excommunicated, or voluntary disassociation), even with their own relatives: parents, children, brothers, sisters. Therefore, those who leave Jehovah's Witnesses are excluded not only from the Organization but also from their own family which has remained in the movement. An active member who does not shun a former member will be punished by the Jehovah's Witness organization through sanctions, which may lead to disfellowshipping.

These instructions, mean that for the rest of his life<sup>2</sup> the former ex-Jehovah Witness will be cut off from emotional relationships with his closest family and lifelong friendships. The aim is to exert pressure to prevent the departure of followers and compel those which have left the movement to return. This is what might be called emotional blackmail.

To summarize, the displayed biblical discourse, full of love and kindness, making it easy to enter the movement **hides the terrible and frightening reality of moral and emotional imprisonment making it impossible to exit without damage.**

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<sup>2</sup> Unless he reintegrates the movement

## Clearly expressed guidelines ...

The Watch Tower regularly calls attention to the instructions on shunning (ostracism) in its publications and during the 3.30 p.m. weekly meetings.

## Kingdom Ministry (KM) , non-public monthly publication , to the faithful:

### KM August 2002

“What about speaking with a disfellowshipped person? While the Bible does not cover every possible situation, 2 John 10 helps us to get Jehovah’s view of matters: “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, never receive him into your homes or say a greeting to him.” Commenting on this, The Watchtower of September 15, 1981, page 25, says: “A simple ‘Hello’ to someone can be the first step that develops into a conversation and maybe even a friendship. Would we want to take that first step with a disfellowshipped person?”

Benefits of Being Loyal to Jehovah: Cooperating with the Scriptural arrangement to disfellowship and shun unrepentant wrongdoers is beneficial. It preserves the cleanness of the congregation and distinguishes us as upholders of the Bible’s high moral standards. (1 Pet. 1:14-16) It protects us from corrupting influences. (Gal. 5:7-9).”

## Watch Tower, bimonthly publication

### WT 15/11/2014

"Are you personally proving yourself holy with regard **to not associating with family members or others** who have been disfellowshipped?"(study edition, p 14 § 5)

"Are you proving yourself holy **by not associating with family members or others** who are disfellowshipped?." (simplified edition , p.16 §5)

### WT 15/6/2013, p.28 §17

Disfellowshipping is another type of discipline from Jehovah. It protects the congregation from a bad influence and can play a role in the sinner’s recovery. (1 Cor. 5:6, 7, 11). Robert was disfellowshipped for nearly 16 years, during which time his parents and siblings firmly and loyally applied the direction in God’s Word to **quit mixing in company with wrongdoers, not even greeting such ones**. Robert has been reinstated for some years now and is progressing well spiritually. When asked what moved him to return to Jehovah and His people after such a long time, he replied that the stand that his family took affected him. **“Had my family associated with me even a little, say to check up on me, that small dose of association would have satisfied me and likely not allowed my desire for association to be a motivating factor to return to God.”**

**WT 15/1/2013, p.16§19**

“Really, what your beloved family member needs to see is your resolute stance to put Jehovah above everything else, **including the family bond**. [...] Do not look for excuses to associate with a disfellowshipped family member, for example, through e-mail.”

**WT 15/5/2012, p.26§13**

“**Let us therefore have nothing to do with apostates** or anyone who claims to be a brother but who is dishonoring God. This should be the case even if he is a family member. (1 Cor. 5:11) We are not benefited by trying to refute the arguments of apostates or those who are critical of Jehovah’s organization. In fact, it is spiritually dangerous and improper to peruse their information, whether it appears in written form or it is found on the Internet. - Read Isaiah 5:20; Matthew 7:6.”<sup>3</sup>

**WT 15/7/2011, p. 32§17 and 18**

“**Today, Jehovah does not immediately execute those who violate his laws**. He lovingly gives them an opportunity to repent from their unrighteous works. How would Jehovah feel, though, if the parents **of an unrepentant wrongdoer kept putting Him to the test by having unnecessary association with their disfellowshipped son or daughter?** **Many who were once disfellowshipped now freely admit that the firm stand taken by their friends and family members helped them come to their senses.**”

**WT 15/7/1985 p. 31§7**

"So John may deliberately have used "*Khai'ro*" in 2 John 10,11 rather than *aspa'zomai* (verse 13). If so, John was not urging Christians to avoid merely *warmly greeting* (with an embrace, kiss, and conversation) a person who taught falsehood or who renounced the congregation (apostatized). **Rather, John was saying that they ought not even greet such an individual with "*Khai'ro*, a common good day.**

To a regular and insistent repetition of these instructions are added the penalties for non-compliance, sanctions ranging from quarantine to exclusion. Contrary to what the Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses may declare in court, they are not simple "reflections"...

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 7: 6: " Do not give what is holy to dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine , lest they do trample with their feet and turning round, they tear you . "  
Apostates and those who criticize the organization are treated here as "dogs and pigs " belittled and rejected violently.

**... And sanctions in case of non compliance.**

Voluntary or imposed, departures from the Organization all lead to the same consequences: the breakup of all relationships with the followers, not only for religious activities (worship, meetings, rallies, etc.) but also social and family relations.

If the person excommunicated is not part of the family, friendly contacts also lead to risks of excommunication.

*"Willful, continued, unnecessary association with disfellowshipped nonrelatives despite repeated counsel" is a considered part of "offenses that may require review by a judicial committee"*

*("Shepherd the Flock of God"<sup>4</sup> p. 58 to 60)*

If the excommunicated person is a family member, those who are "unnecessarily" friendly with them need to understand that the example they thus give is bad with regard to the "purity of the congregation".

*"[If it is clear that a Christian is violating the spirit of the disfellowshipping decree in this regard and does not respond to counsel,] it may be that he would not qualify for congregation privileges, which require one to be exemplary. He would not be dealt with judicially unless there is persistent spiritual association or he openly criticizes the disfellowshipping decision."*

*(Shepherd the Flock of God, p.116)*

The part in [ ] is not in the French text.

The very fact that a "judicial committee" would not be constituted indicates that this purely family matter cannot lead to excommunication. However, the person who finds himself in this situation is 'degraded', set aside; considered as a bad example, he loses all his functions and responsibilities. Certain activities are also denied him. But only if there are contacts, discussions at religious level with the excluded family member will excommunication (and its consequences) be considered.

Sanctions for those who continue to communicate with an excommunicated member of his family are mentioned for the first time in the manual reserved for the elders' use, published in 2010.

Previously, the instructions were very disparate and oral only given to the elders. **The average Witness knew nothing about such sanctions .**

Besides the sanctions officially provided for above, discrimination by all members of the congregation is encouraged against active members who do not respect these instructions:

*"Likewise, Jehovah's people today, striving to live clean lives, should avoid intimacy with individuals in the congregation who persistently disregard Jehovah's principles. "*

(WT 15/7/2014, p 16 §16))

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<sup>4</sup> "Shepherd the Flock of God" (ks 2010) manual only accessible to the elders, which include the directives from the Central body

## Justification and double talk

The Organization asserts that this provision is accepted by every Witness at the time of his "baptism" and cannot be disputed. But is it fair to talk about a real free and informed acceptance? The future follower will only consider the subject of excommunication in the second study book (page 35) after having been conditioned by many hours of discussion and study of more than a thousand scriptures (the first study book alone includes over 1,000 biblical passages). Membership in the organization is the result of a programmed path whose successive and growing engagements are revealed only step by step as the influence, called "progress", of the future follower takes hold. One cannot speak of a free and conscious acceptance regarding family, social, and emotional consequences of these options.

The ambiguity of the terms of the baptism engagement maintains a confusion between the commitment to Jehovah and commitment to the Organization. The candidate is baptized by immersion at a meeting of constituency or district, having said yes, before all the congregation to two questions:

- 1) *On the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, have you repented of your sins and dedicated yourself to Jehovah to do his will?*
- 2) *Do you understand that your dedication and baptism identify you as one of Jehovah's Witnesses **in association with God's spirit-directed organization ?***

The vows or commitment are made to Jehovah (affirmative answer to the first question). With the Watch Tower ("God's spirit-directed organization"), the member enters into an "association" (affirmative answer to the second question), the definition and limits of this association in terms of rights and obligations are nowhere specified ... particularly the dramatic consequences of a possible excommunication. Jehovah's Witnesses also claim that this practice related to their interpretation of the Bible, is according to them, their freedom of worship.

*"...including that of freely organizing the internal functioning of the community. Since the exclusion measure, with its practical consequences, is part of the faith and religion of Jehovah's Witnesses, this practice is covered by freedom of worship."*

This is used as an argument in the case Lejeune/Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium ... but, as the Court noted, the internal rules of the movement violate individual freedoms, particularly those regarding the freedom to change one's religion:

*"It is obviously out of question to challenge the principle of freedom of worship and religion. However this freedom may have limitations, within the framework of its internal application, when the organization **imposes specific obligations to the followers that are not consistent with the respect of other basic democratic principles.**"*

(Belgium, Liège Court of Appeal, 6/2/2006, Lejeune/Jéhovah's Witnesses)

**Double Talk or voluntary omission**

Aware of the illegality of the ostracism imposed on those who are excommunicated, the Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses displays a misleading and false presentation of its position with regard to those who leave the movement.

First, it explicitly develops this doctrine in books for its followers, where the general public has little chance of discovering and fully grasp its meaning. This is the *Elders Manual* (KS 2010) and other publications studied internally at private meetings.

On the other hand, publications available to the public emphasize the fundamental right for everyone to change his religion. The message for people likely to join the movement, does not allow the future Witness even to imagine what would happen to him if he decided later to leave the organization:

*"God leaves everyone free to decide what to do (of the divine teachings ) ... **No one should be forced to choose between his family and his beliefs"***

(Awake July 2009 p. 29)

*"Do Jehovah's Witnesses Shun Former Members of Their Religion?"*

*"What of a man who is disfellowshipped but whose wife and children are still Jehovah's Witnesses? The religious ties he had with his family change, but blood ties remain. The marriage relationship and normal family affections and dealings continue."*

<http://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/shunning/>

The official website of the movement is careful not to address the most frequent cases of family members living outside the home. It addresses only the case of a married man who has children living under his roof, and suggesting that the excommunication has no effect on family or social ties ...

To make people believe that the texts are only suggestions free of all constraint, the Watch Tower asks people to follow the instructions with regard to excommunication, most of the time there are no clear instructions, only unverifiable stories of people, who having strictly followed these instructions, saw a family member who had left return to the Organization. Guilt provoked by comments at meetings by the most radical members of the congregation and individual sanctions taken by the elders leave no visible trace.

Although the Watch Tower hides its position with regard to those who leave the movement to the public and to the authorities, the signals it gives are clear, as noted by the Liège Court of Appeal, which cannot be considered as " simple reflections " .

## **Violation of individual rights**

**The practice of excommunication** as institutionalized in the movement of Jehovah's Witnesses **violates the individual liberty of the followers:**

- by requiring that the excluded member break family or social contacts with members still in the movement,
- and by preventing the followers with threats of exclusion to keep family or social contacts with those who have left the movement,
- by exerting pressure, threatening exclusion and its consequences on those who wish to leave the Organization,
- by preventing under threat of exclusion followers from deciding in full consciousness to accept a vital blood transfusion<sup>5</sup>
- forcing to return to the Organization those excluded who can no longer bear isolation from family or the social breakdown.

## **Founding principles, (non exhaustive):**

### **Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen 1789**

**Article X** - No one may be disturbed for his opinions, even religious ones, provided **that their manifestation does not trouble the public order established by the law.**

### **Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948**

**Art 18:** Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

**Art 12:** No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

### **European Convention of Human Rights**

**Article 9** – Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.
2. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

**Article 14** of the European Convention on Human Rights provides:

The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this European Convention on Human Rights shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour,

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<sup>5</sup> See Bulles n°118, 2nd trim. 2013, "Can a Jehovah's Witness use his personal conscience in the choice of blood products?"

language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status.

**French Law of 9/12/1905**

**Art 31:** Are punished with the penalty of fine provided for contraventions of the 5th class from six days to two months imprisonment or one of these penalties only those which, either by assault, violence or threats against an individual or making him fear job loss or expose to damage his person, his family or his fortune, have the determined to exercise or refrain from practicing a religion, to belong or cease to belong a religious association , to contribute or refrain from contributing to the costs of a cult .

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