

**Submission
No 258**

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECRUITMENT METHODS AND IMPACTS OF
CULTS AND ORGANISED FRINGE GROUPS**

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Date Received: 31 July 2025

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withheld

Introduction & Background

My name is [REDACTED], I am 31 years old and I realised that I had been raised in a cult about 18 months ago. I have written this during the time in which I have gone from being “physically in, mentally out” (PIMO) to “physically out, mentally out” (POMO). I have only let my family know about my decision to leave the religion 6 weeks ago and so whilst I would love to be a part of this in any way that I can up to and including the opportunity to appear before the committee in person, I would need to assess each step at the time as to what is involved and as to its potential impact on my life and familial relationships. This reality speaks volumes about the situation. I have been brought up in a Jehovah’s Witness family. My parents were very loving and a great example to myself & my siblings in modelling a healthy family dynamic and relationship. My childhood was a happy one filled with lots of exposure to different places and experiences and I harbour no bitterness towards my family or anyone from my faith community. However, upon realising that some of the fundamental claims of the religion are untrue, I then had a second ominous realisation: I couldn’t simply leave. Mike Rinder, an ex-Scientologist said “the difference between a religion and a cult is what happens when you try to leave.” This had never occurred to me at any point during my 30 years as a witness - if you’re a part of the one true religion and your eternal life hinges on remaining as such; why would you ever want to leave? But suddenly it became apparent to me that certain policies and behaviours within the group’s culture are there *specifically* to leverage relationships as emotional blackmail. These are the two key elements that need to be understood in relation to Jehovah’s Witnesses: the doctrine & the culture. The latter is naturally more nebulous and the Watchtower organisation knows this. There are many examples of Watchtower lawyers and representatives obfuscating issues in formal settings such as courts or press releases and one key way in which they do this is by utilizing the group’s culture to enforce things which they can then deny in writing. For example, dog whistles may be used to let the members know what is really being said or to let them know that what is being said is “not being directed to them” and so no changes are made in practicality. I will elaborate on this further below and with specific citations to documented examples so as to make this murky topic somewhat clearer. Firstly, to lay the groundwork, I would like to explain some terms and highlight some fundamental doctrinal points which are relevant to understanding Jehovah’s Witnesses, their recruitment methods, how they relate to the world around them and the harm that this group can cause to individuals.

Terms Explained

Throughout this submission I will make reference to the following terms which could be considered jargon or that could have multiple different meanings in different contexts. Often cults will have different meanings for words than what is understood by the general public such as within the list the words “congregation” or “worldly” and so in some cases the words in this list are defined from that perspective. Here are the definitions of terms as I will here use them:

Apostate - Someone who was previously a baptized Jehovah’s Witness who now actively speaks against the organisation. More broadly, this may refer to anyone speaking negatively about the organisation.

Bad Association - Verses like Proverbs 13:20 & 1 Corinthians 15:33 (from which the phrase “bad association” is taken) are used to teach that Jehovah’s Witnesses should only have close relationships with other Jehovah’s Witnesses. Bad association is therefore anyone outside of the congregation and can also refer to ones within the congregation who may be considered “spiritually weak.”

Committee of Elders - Formerly called a Judicial Committee (until the recent litigation in Norway relating to shunning, especially of minors, caused Watchtower to make a change in terms in 2024) this is a group of 3 elders assigned to evaluate whether a member of the congregation who has committed a serious sin (at this point, the sin has already been established as “having occurred” at least in the minds of the Body of Elders.) The elders seek to determine if the individual is repentant. Extensive guidelines can be found on this subject in the Elders’ manual “Shepherd the Flock of God.” If the elders determine that the individual is repentant, the outcome may be anything from no consequences or the removal of privileges within the congregation all the way through to a public reproof in which an announcement is made to the congregation that “Brother Smith has been publicly reproofed.” The congregation is not overtly told what the issue was regarding. If the individual is deemed to be unrepentant, then they will most likely be “removed” from the congregation. This is announced to the congregation as “Brother Smith is no longer one of Jehovah’s Witnesses” and then everyone understands that they are to shun that person and have nothing to do with them.

Congregation - This can refer to an individual local congregation (typically of around 50-120 members, sometimes smaller or larger) but can also refer to the entire membership of Jehovah’s Witnesses worldwide. Someone being “in the congregation” means that they are an active member whereas someone being “out of the congregation” may mean that they have left or been removed.

Cult - An abusive, high control, high demand group which exerts undue influence on its members and matches up with the BITE model. It is important to note that Watchtower denies that they are a cult and that members are generally unaware that they are in a cult (or even what others perceive to be a cult) due to the information control exerted by the organisation.

Elder/Body of Elders - An elder is a position held by a man in the congregation who has demonstrated his loyalty to the organization over a period of years. Elders have the highest level of authority at the lowest level of the organisation (the local congregation level). A body of elders is the group of elders of one individual congregation. Collectively, a body of elders handles all of the administrative work within a congregation and is responsible for all congregation activities including their preaching work. Members view the elders as an authority and take seriously the things that they say especially “from the platform” during a congregation meeting. Members will also frequently seek out the advice of the elders when it comes to personal decisions such as career choices, dating and medical choices especially when the issue of blood transfusions may be involved (since Jehovah’s Witnesses do not accept blood transfusions).

Governing Body - The Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses are the leaders of the "earthly part of Jehovah's organisation." They claim to be directed by Jesus by means of the holy spirit, but they do not claim that they are "inspired" which therefore means that they can make mistakes. There are currently 11 members of the Governing Body, however this is not a fixed number. They determine when new members are to be appointed and who those new members will be. There are no checks and balances, their authority is more or less absolute and unquestioned within the sphere of Jehovah's Witnesses.

False Religion - Any religion, spirituality or belief system other than Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses link the harlot of Revelation 17 & 18 also known as "Babylon the Great" with the "world empire of false religion." It is noteworthy that whilst Jehovah's Witnesses consider themselves to be Christian, they do not consider anyone else to be Christian, regardless of how that person behaves or self identifies.

Jehovah - The rendering of the divine name into English. This is God. From the Hebrew tetragrammaton (יהוה) equivalent to the English letters YHWH.

Jehovah's Witnesses - The one true religion, the re-established Christianity of the first century (before it was corrupted by Christendom.) As used here, it will mainly refer to individual rank and file members of the group as opposed to the formal structure of the organisation or its leadership.

Jesus - Jehovah's Witnesses view Jesus as the son of God, not as God or part of a trinity or Godhead. Jesus is the head of the congregation (collective sense) and the Governing Body is technically directed by Jesus, though they will at times refer to their direction as coming from Jehovah (who in turn is Jesus head - 1 Corinthians 11:3)

Ministerial Servant - Similar to the role of a deacon in other churches, a ministerial servant is a tier below an elder. Only men can hold this position and it is largely a support role to elders and is considered to be an "elder in training" since serving as a ministerial servant is a prerequisite to being appointed as an elder.

Ministry/Preaching - Jehovah's Witnesses are well known for their door to door preaching. This is only one aspect of what a Jehovah's Witness will consider their ministry to be though. They will preach in informal settings such as at school or work, they will write letters, make phone calls, do "street work" which involves literature carts or in inner cities larger table set ups, "business territory" which is similar to door to door but for commercial premises and various other less common settings such as in prisons or at shipping docks. It is important to understand that in the Jehovah's Witness psyche, you are "always on duty" and that preaching is a matter of life & death. Notably absent from the Jehovah's Witness conception of "ministry" is charitable works. Whilst they do engage in some disaster relief work, this is largely confined to supporting their own members and repairing their own buildings. They have no community based programs such as soup kitchens, homeless shelters etc.

Spiritual Routine - This refers to the regular activity that an individual engages in; their spiritual routine. Inside the group, this is referenced as a crucial measure of one's "spiritual health" and a way to grow spiritually is to improve your spiritual routine. Amongst ex-members this is often referred to as a "hamster wheel" of endless activity which keeps you too busy to think or question matters of doctrine. Typical elements of a spiritual routine include attending 2 weekly meetings, preparing in advance for those meetings, prayer, Bible reading, personal study (within the Watchtower's publications), family worship (a weekly arrangement at the family level for their own structured study (within the Watchtower's publications) & regular preaching. For a Jehovah's Witness to do all of the above properly requires a minimum of 12 hours per week. Many do less, many do more - but crucially it is evident roughly how much an individual is doing and therefore their merit as a member and as a Christian can be evaluated by others within the congregation based on their level of activity. Jehovah's Witness theology is very much "saved by works" as opposed to "saved by grace" which contributes to its culture as a high-demand religion.

Spiritually Weak - This is a term to describe someone who may not have a strong "spiritual routine" or who has doubts. It is a loaded term which is generally framed through the lens of "we should help brother Smith, he's not doing too well spiritually" but which also is practically a pejorative against a person's character. One who is viewed as spiritually weak is a person who needs help to be corrected. They do not have anything to offer; they are the one who needs to be helped. Their opinions lack weight and their motives for a lack of activity will be called into question. Their value as a person is lessened and this discredits anything which may be critical of the organisation. It is important to understand that from a Jehovah's Witness perspective, there is no valid reason to leave the group. Practically this means that for someone to do so, their character will be attacked.

Theocratic Direction - Because of the Governing Body's claim to be "the earthly representatives of Jehovah's heavenly organisation" the organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses is viewed as a theocracy and therefore any directions received from it (even about mundane matters such as maintenance procedures for the local kingdom hall) are viewed as theocratic direction if they have come from "above" the local congregation elders. Obeying such direction is one way in which a person's spirituality is measured in the view of those around him, especially the elders.

Watchtower - I am here using Watchtower to refer to the legal organization of Jehovah's Witnesses. In reality, there are hundreds if not thousands of legal entities used by Watchtower around the world. But in the context of this document, it is sufficient to differentiate what is a part of "the organization" as viewed internally vs what is the case from a legal/formal standpoint as Watchtower presents itself to the world outside of its own membership.

The Organization - The organization of Jehovah's Witnesses is viewed as being only the "earthly part of Jehovah's organization." So internally, Jehovah's Witnesses will use this term to describe how things are organized (such as the preaching work) and how they can support it or follow the direction given. This is, unconsciously to most, really referring to the legal/formal

structures that are in place. Again, “The Organization” is an internal term and “Watchtower” in this context is an external term, both more or less describing the same thing. The significance of how individual Jehovah’s Witnesses view themselves in relation to “The Organization” is such that it requires a separate term herein to accurately portray the reality of the situation.

The Truth - This refers to the current body of teaching espoused by the Governing Body of Jehovah’s Witnesses. It also simultaneously refers to what it means to “be a Jehovah’s Witness.” One is “in the truth” since this is “God’s one true organisation.” This term really obscures what “truth” is since someone can have been “in the truth” for 70 years and yet during that time there have been countless doctrinal changes to what “the truth” actually is.

The World/Worldly - This is a term that is essentially used as a pejorative. Someone being “worldly” is someone who involves themselves in things which are not allowed by the organization or things that “reflect the spirit of the world” without necessarily being outright banned. This could include certain hairstyles, fashion choices or music. This term can be used to label people within the congregation who may then be seen as “spiritually weak” or “not exemplary.” Jehovah’s Witnesses have a very “us vs them” worldview and believe that they must remain separate and distinct from the world. Worldly is a loaded term used to foster isolation into the group.

Satan - Jehovah’s Witnesses teach that Satan is a rebel angel who became Jehovah’s arch-enemy. Satan is the current ruler of the world and is behind much of the wickedness and suffering that we see in the world. His influence on the world and on individuals is a highly nebulous concept and can more or less mean whatever is needed for it to mean in a specific context. Satan is often attributed to influencing people’s thinking or behaviour.

Doctrine

“Bad association” - as per the term explained above, anyone outside of the group is to be kept at arm’s length, developing close relationships outside of the group is strongly discouraged and will result in a person being considered as bad association themselves. Dating & marriage is only “in the lord” (1 Corinthians 7:39) which means only other Jehovah’s Witnesses. Again, deviation from this would leave someone regarded as spiritually weak and bad association for others. The impact of this doctrinal point is twofold and self reinforcing. Firstly, it contributes to the insular nature of the group. Secondly, it amplifies other doctrines about the dangers of the “outside world” since, without close friendships with people outside the religion, Jehovah’s Witnesses don’t get to know them well. It is much easier for the group to then perpetuate their “othering” narratives since members cannot form close relationships with non-witnesses without risking social ostracism from their friends & family on the inside.

“The whole world is lying in the power of the wicked one.” (1 John 5:19) - Jehovah’s Witnesses teach that, in order to settle the “issue of universal sovereignty” (God’s right to rule), Jehovah has allowed Satan to rule the world from the time since Adam & Eve sinned until now. Soon (at

Armageddon) Jehovah will reclaim control of earth and all governments will be destroyed and replaced by God's Kingdom, which is itself a heavenly government.

"We're living in the final part of the Last Days. Undoubtedly, the final part of the final part of the Last Days, shortly before the last day of the Last Days." - Stephen Lett (Governing Body Member) March 2020 JW Broadcasting program. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that "the last days" (Matthew 24:3; 2 Timothy 3:1) began in the year 1914 and that as such, Armageddon is "just around the corner." This adds urgency to everything that they do, not just in terms of the "live saving preaching work" but also in regards to life decisions. Sometimes this can have the opposite effect of delaying life plans until "the new world." For example, in the lead up to the much anticipated prediction of the world's end in 1975, many Jehovah's Witnesses sold their homes and even took on loans that they couldn't afford to pay back because they wanted to spend the last days of "this system of things" having "a full share in the preaching work." Conversely, many witnesses may put off plans of all kinds for their future life. I know this first hand as I have done it myself. I relegated the learning of musical instruments as a "new world" project. I have made life altering decisions through the lens that this world is soon going to end. I spent 3 years preaching in Malaysia, self funded. Each year I would return home, work for 2-3 months and then live off the money saved for the remaining 9-10 months. I moved back to Australia when my wife & I got married and our intent was to set ourselves up to go overseas again to "serve where the need is greater." We built up our cleaning business with the specific intent of being able to be away from it geographically for long periods of time with enough money to live on. I have personally (and have seen this in others) not taken optimal care of my health and other aspects of life due to the belief that soon "all of mankind's problems will be solved. This promotes an attitude of complacency and abdicated responsibility which I have only come to see and appreciate since waking up from my indoctrination.

All earthly governments will soon turn on religion to destroy it. (Revelation 17:15-18) - Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the 7 headed 10 horned wild beast depicted in Revelation represents all of the governments of the earth and that it will destroy the harlot/prostitute who represents all false religions. After all false religions have been destroyed, a final attack of these governments will be made specifically on Jehovah's Witnesses and this will trigger a response from Jehovah's heavenly armies, resulting in Armageddon. Whilst Jehovah's Witnesses will generally respect government officials, laws and police in line with Romans 13:1, they also harbour an understandable (through the lens of this worldview) distrust of all such institutions and authorities. Ultimately, they respect these as "being permitted by God" to exist and exert authority at this time, but they fundamentally view them as "a part of Satan's system."

Spiritual warfare - individual Jehovah's Witnesses are "witnesses" in the sense of a universal court case. Their daily actions either speak in support of Jehovah God or align themselves with Satan's side of the "issue of universal sovereignty" or "God's right to rule." Since they view governments and officials as "a part of Satan's world," whenever there is a conflict between "the organisation" and the authorities they will circle the wagons around the organisation. Such a conflict may not be seen as such from the outside. For example, the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was not set up in an

“adversarial” manner. However, the Watchtower representatives involved definitely took it as such and were defensive and uncooperative from the start. This is a case in which we can also see the use of “theocratic warfare” which is a term that appears in several Watchtower articles in the 1950s & 1960s. Since then, the term has been phased out, but the underlying teaching is still currently reinforced, just with different language. Here is a quote to explain the term:

"From time to time letters are received asking whether a certain circumstance would justify making an exception to the Christian's obligation to tell the truth. In reply to these the following is given: God's Word commands: "Speak truth each of you with his neighbor." ...

There is one exception, however, that the Christian must ever bear in mind. As a soldier of Christ he is in theocratic warfare and he must exercise added caution when dealing with God's foes. Thus the Scriptures show that for the purpose of protecting the interests of God's cause, it is proper to hide the truth from God's enemies. A Scriptural example of this is that of Rahab the harlot. She hid the Israelite spies because of her faith in their God Jehovah. This she did both by her actions and by her lips. That she had Jehovah's approval in doing so is seen from James' commendation of her faith." Watchtower 1960 Jun 1 pp.351,352 Questions From Readers

So since Jehovah's Witnesses view all authorities as ultimately being a part of Satan's system and therefore they are not to be trusted, when they feel threatened, they will lie to protect the organisation. They will even lie under oath in a courtroom setting. Governing Body member [REDACTED] lied under oath¹ at the Australian Royal Commission as did a representative of the Australasia Branch, [REDACTED].² Because of their doomsday worldview and belief that Jehovah's Witnesses will be uniquely persecuted for their faith in line with Jesus' words and their interpretation of various biblical prophecies, Jehovah's Witnesses have a persecution complex. They will perceive themselves to be being persecuted if anything at all negative is being said about the organisation (the larger the perceived platform of the one saying it, the more persecution will be sensed - for example, if it is from a newspaper, that is one thing, but a government is an order of magnitude worse) or anything happening to them individually which makes their worship more difficult. For example, if an employer refuses to give a witness time off to attend their annual convention, this will be perceived as a test of faith and the witness is expected to be willing to quit their job in order to attend. Such persecution, whilst uncomfortable, serves to reinforce their indoctrination as they view it as evidence that they are being "persecuted for righteousness' sake." (Matthew 5:10) This also somewhat inoculates them against former members who may point out problems with the organisation or doctrinal inconsistencies. Not only can they ignore them because they are "apostates" but also, the very fact that they were challenged by them is interpreted as evidence that they are doing the right thing. The thought process would be along the lines of "Satan wouldn't be expending effort to test me if I were not faithfully serving Jehovah."

This warped view of Jehovah's Witnesses in relation to the rest of the world cannot be overstated as it impacts their worldview of everything. Personally, I first heard about the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse from another Jehovah's Witness who told me that he had found it "faith strengthening" to see the brothers

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defending the Bible in that formal setting. He was especially impressed with Governing Body member [REDACTED]. I watched some of the hearings at the time on his recommendation and, whilst I wouldn't have agreed with his sentiment that it was "faith strengthening" I also was not overly troubled by it. Looking back at it now, I cannot understand his position nor my own. [REDACTED] and the other representatives of Watchtower misrepresented the stance of Jehovah's Witnesses on many points, they lied and they were utterly disinterested in the harm caused. None of them took the time to listen to the victim statements (most likely because the individuals involved were being shunned and it would have been perceived as inappropriate to listen to disfellowshipped ones (as the term was at the time) speaking out against the organisation. Essentially, they viewed the lived experience of child sexual abuse survivors as apostasy.) Personally, at the time, I was of a similar mentality. Essentially my thoughts on the matter were "yes, there may be some issues within the organisation. A few bad apples in the bunch. However, this is the one true religion, and those speaking out against it are making it harder for other people to become Jehovah's Witnesses and be saved." I didn't give any thought to how hard it must have been for them to be shunned and cut off from their social support in the wake of their sexual abuse. I just didn't think about the other side of the story. I also assumed that serious matters of both sin and crime like child sexual abuse would be handled very thoroughly. I never suspected any cover up thereof and didn't think to question it. My experience within the organisation doesn't lend itself towards that conclusion. However the facts of the matter (from that royal commission as well as various other court cases and inquiries around the world) clearly show that there is a major systemic problem within the organisation when it comes to not protecting children.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that they offer the only true way to salvation & everlasting life, therefore the preaching work/ministry is a matter of life & death. This adds to the "high demand" nature of the religion. The stakes are high. This worldview and subsequent pressure even extends to children who are told that their school is "their own personal territory." In the Jehovah's Witness vernacular, "territory" is how the preaching work is divided and organised. For example, with the door to door ministry, small maps are produced which will typically have about 4-8 blocks on them. Jehovah's Witnesses go out in the ministry to "work that territory." Naturally, schools cannot be preached to in the same manner, so children of Jehovah's Witnesses are essentially told that they have a special opportunity and responsibility to preach where their parents and others cannot. This is a huge weight to put on the shoulders of a child. Not only are they extremely likely to be socially ostracised and bullied for their strange beliefs and socially isolating stances (listed in detail below) but they are encouraged to preach to their classmates and teachers. Through the two weekly meetings and the publications of the Watchtower that they would regularly study as a family and potentially on their own, this idea will gain strength and moral weight and the child is likely to feel that the lives of their peers and teachers are in the balance and that perhaps, by something they did or did not do, something they said or did not say; that they will become responsible for their death. Blood guilty. I felt this as a child. I was torn between making friends, having fun, being liked (all of which seemed so selfish and trivial by comparison) and preaching & "giving a good witness." That expression essentially means representing Jehovah & his organisation well in whatever you are doing. For example, I remember once swearing at school and feeling extreme guilt because I had "given a

bad witness” - I hoped that no one had heard; the word had just slipped out in surprise. On another occasion, a teacher wanted to ask me some questions about my beliefs after a class project that I wasn’t allowed to participate in. I answered his questions and left with the feeling of “having given a good witness.” In both instances I was about 8-10 years old.

Here is a list of the socially isolating stances that Jehovah’s Witnesses (and particularly important to the subject at hand, their children) are expected to take:

- Not singing the national anthem (When I was in primary school, we sang the national anthem each Monday at our assembly. Each Monday I stood silently. Another young witness child would mouth the words. I viewed him as giving a “bad witness” since others would not know that he wasn’t singing. Conversely, some more strict parents may instruct their children to not even stand for the anthem and/or flag salute depending on what was common in their area.)
- Not celebrating birthdays including not singing “Happy Birthday” (This was always slightly harder than the national anthem as it was directed at a person, so not participating can seem rude to that individual. Normally the teachers would be aware of the situation in advance and I would be removed from the class ahead of the song/cake. Sometimes they missed this. Either way was extremely embarrassing. Also, if other kids would give me an invite to their birthday party, I felt like I had to firmly reject it. It seemed like a test of faith. I didn’t even want to politely take the invitation. I remember once that I was given an invitation by one kid who was acting as a courier for another. I sent him back with the invitation telling him that I had an invitation for the kid who’s birthday it was. It doesn’t make any sense to me now, but perhaps in my 7 year old brain it did.)
- Not celebrating Christmas (This meant that the last 3-4 weeks of term 4 in primary school were almost a total write off. Nearly every assignment or activity became Christmas themed and so I would have a constant string of alternative activities. It was impossible to avoid being noticed.)
- Not celebrating valentine’s day
- Not celebrating Easter (similar to Christmas, in primary school this involved a lot of “activity swaps” and it was a rare teacher who was good enough to think that perhaps I might enjoy a chocolate frog since I couldn’t have a chocolate egg.)
- Not running for or voting in SRC or similar school structures (I remember being nominated for the SRC one year and feeling instant dread at having to explain why I couldn’t participate. For what it’s worth, the reason is essentially that Jehovah’s Witnesses don’t engage in anything political and this is viewed as a precursor or training for such involvement.)
- Not commemorating Remembrance Day or Anzac day
- Not celebrating halloween
- Not participating in projects related to Mothers’ Day or Fathers’ Day
- Not participating in Religious Education
- Not getting involved in extracurricular activities
- Not joining sports teams (Because this would involve spending too much additional time with “worldly associates” and would take away time such as Saturday mornings that were set aside for preaching or other aspects of one’s “spiritual routine.”)

- Not participating in anything “magic themed” such as if the class was going to watch Harry Potter
- Not getting involved in any “social or political issues”
- Not participating in any LGBTQ+ or Pride events or activities
- Not mimicking the “styles of the world” - therefore potentially having hairstyles or clothing choices that stand out as different from their peers
- Not accepting blood transfusions (My mother wrote on every permission slip for every school excursion that I ever went on. It had a line about “administering medical treatment if necessary” and I remember that she wrote “with the exception of blood transfusions. Non-blood volume expanders can be used if needed.” Fortunately I have never needed blood, however, it was just another way in which a normal school activity became “different for me.”)
- Not participating in school camps (I think that some Jehovah’s Witness parents would send their kids, but most that I know do not and neither myself nor any of my siblings ever went on a school camp. Again, this often meant weeks of adjusted curriculum. My parents are amazing and they often made up for this in other ways, we would go on a family trip instead sometimes which in my opinion was better. Nonetheless, in writing this list out, it is clear to see that being a Jehovah’s Witness child at school can be exhausting even if you are never bullied which I was and which most are. This contributes to a persecution complex and the sunken cost fallacy as well as generally just making members (especially children) constantly reaffirming their “buy in.” By constantly needing to “take a stand” for something, witnesses dig their heels into their identity further and further and continuously view the world as “different” from them; us vs them mentality.)

Removal (formerly disfellowshipping) - the shunning of “removed” members or “disassociated” members is extreme and includes all familial relationships except for “necessary family business” or if a “removed” minor is still living under the roof of their parents. One of my brothers was disfellowshipped when I was about 14 years old. He is 9 years older than me. We cut him off almost completely. He has had substance abuse issues, severe depression and has been through some very volatile relationships and situations without the support network of his previous friends and family. Only because his issues became so severe (he had a stint in prison, he went missing for a while and we didn’t know if he was dead or alive, he has attempted suicide etc) did we as a family make exceptions to the shunning and deem it “necessary family business” to seek him out and offer minor support. Aside from that, we would only see him at funerals. I invited him to my wedding, but only to the ceremony at the Kingdom Hall. The elders even specifically asked me (just to make sure) that I had not invited him to the reception. A person can also “disassociate” which means that they take the action to remove themselves from the congregation as opposed to the other way around. Typically this is done by writing a letter to the body of elders to let them know that you no longer want to be one of Jehovah’s Witnesses. The announcement made to the congregation in either case is *exactly* the same. “Brother Smith is no longer one of Jehovah’s Witnesses.” This means that no one ever knows if you were removed or if you chose to leave. No one ever knows if you committed adultery, robbed a bank or simply decided that you could not conscientiously remain a part of this

organisation. There is no dignified way to leave. Disassociation is viewed as “falling on your own sword” - essentially an admission of guilt by someone who didn’t want to meet with the committee of elders to discuss the wrong that they were obviously guilty of. The shunning is severe. Many have committed suicide as a result of it. In 2024, changes to the policy were made. These changes were framed as “the Governing Body has considered Jehovah’s mercy...” In reality the adjustments were in response to the litigation in Norway. The changes were cosmetic in nature. “Disfellowshipped” was rebranded to “removed” and “judicial committee” was rebranded to “committee of elders.” Members could now contact “removed” members to invite them to a meeting (not for social contact or any other purpose) and if a “removed” person attends a meeting, members can now give them a short welcome (but would not linger in conversation.) The only other change was that in the process of removing someone, the elders may take more time, more meetings with that individual, before reaching a decision. In the case that that baptized individual is a minor, then the elders try to let the parents handle it more than getting involved. They didn’t commit to never removing minors and thus having them shunned, but it was enough to have their appeal to the court in Norway successfully overturn the lower court’s ruling. Similar legal pressure during the 1970s and early 1980s lead to Watchtower making a policy change that introduced the concept of “disassociation.” Watchtower saw the legal liabilities that they may be open to for “taking action” against individuals around particular issues; especially relating to blood transfusions. Notable was the R v Blaue case (UK, 1975), the Tracy Annette Haworth Case (USA, 1980) & other legal trends being set in various countries around that period relating to scrutinizing religious practices that may conflict with individual freedoms. After these cases and amidst that legal climate, The Watchtower of September 15 1981 included the article “Disfellowshipping—How to View It” and it was this article which first introduced “disassociation.” The main reason that I am providing this background and context is to say that Watchtower has shown themselves willing (as recently as 2024) to make policy changes to protect their legal status and especially where government funding is concerned (as was the case in Norway.) Whilst they may attempt to only make window dressing changes, if the institutions involved understand the doctrine, culture and background surrounding Watchtower’s track record, they may be able to effect more substantial changes to some of their harmful practices. This will require very precise wording within any legislation made as Watchtower will only change if they are absolutely forced to; if there are any loopholes, their well staffed legal departments will find and use them.

The Governing body is viewed as appointed to their position by Christ Jesus and whilst they claim that they “are not infallible and may err in doctrinal matters,” questioning of the “current truth” or disobeying “theocratic direction” is, at best a major red flag and at worst will result in your removal from the congregation and the subsequent shunning that that brings. Since the leadership is “God’s channel of communication” it is believed that no one can properly understand the scriptures without their help in interpreting them. Therefore, all outside study is discouraged and anything “against” the Watchtower or their doctrines is viewed as ranging from worthless to deadly poison. This doctrinal point along with its enforcement applies strong coercion towards members in the realm of “information control” as per the BITE model.

Culture

Listening is equated with obeying and humility is equated with submission. Therefore, anyone not obeying or submitting is seen as “spiritually weak”, “arrogant” & “proud” which is essentially a cultural ad hominem attack that discredits their character and by extension any possible reason that they may have had for “not obeying.” This can make Jehovah’s Witnesses seem very unreasonable on subjects that make them uncomfortable. Once they become defensive, their indoctrination “kicks in” and the information being presented to them is bypassed through a filter. Essentially, even if presented with a specific and verifiable fact, they will often compare that data point against their overall worldview and determine that it is out of harmony with “The Truth” and therefore it must be “untrue.” I have personally experienced this from both sides. When I was indoctrinated, I would “square the circle” with conflicting information and unconsciously disregard the cognitive dissonance that it created. I would choose to focus on information which supported my worldview and I would satisfy myself with strawman arguments of points that conflicted with that worldview. Upon waking up and trying to wake others up, I have become keenly aware of just how powerful and pervasive this mental conditioning is. Things can be considered “true” in the face of all evidence to the contrary. In having discussions with my family in an effort to wake them up, I selected the organisations’ 1919 doctrine as a subject for my “doubts” and questions. None of my family could make sense of or explain the doctrine and all of them could see the conflicting points that it presented when I highlighted these to them. However, none of them conceded that this must mean that the doctrine is itself untrue. As I write this now, it remains to be seen whether my family will ultimately shun me for disagreeing with them about something that they themselves can neither explain nor understand. That is a very real possibility and the emotional strain and mental load to carry has become extremely difficult. I am finding myself highly stressed, sometimes snapping at my children with a shortened fuse. I am struggling with maintaining normal day to day functions as is my wife in the midst of all of this. Our bandwidth to handle our busy life running two businesses and raising three young children is exceptionally low. Our house is not as clean as it would typically be, we are not eating as well as we would typically and we are living day to day as planning beyond that feels overwhelming. This is a brief insight into the impact that is being had on our life right now specifically from the structures, doctrines and culture set in place by the Watchtower organisation. Because of these structures, doctrines and the culture fostered, we cannot simply leave.

Self doubt is encouraged; relying on yourself is seen as foolish and as a demonstration of weak faith. This is particularly exploited when it comes to gaslighting and revisionist history such as when Watchtower falsely predicted that the world would end in 1975 and then essentially blamed “some” of the rank and file members for reading too much into what they had written. Objectively it is difficult to comprehend how they could “get away” with such a thing when their material emphasizing the importance of 1975 was still in print and well circulated. Yet, as with the above, “The Truth” seems to win out against any apparent conflicting “truths” and so the latter are dismissed.

The word “critical” is only ever used negatively in the Watchtower’s publications and therefore, by and large, the same is true within congregations and by individual Jehovah’s Witnesses. The demonization of this word is very beneficial to Watchtower. For one thing, critical thinking is framed in the sense of being negative as opposed to in the sense of evaluation. So it can safely be discouraged without raising eyebrows from indoctrinated members. Secondly, “critical reports” about Jehovah’s witnesses are equated with “false reports.” The same is true for “negative” reports or statements being made to mean “false” reports or statements. So Watchtower can label anything that it doesn’t like as negative or critical and Jehovah’s Witnesses understand that they are not to concern themselves with such lies; they don’t need to read it for themselves. This then also acts as a natural self-censoring mechanism so that if a Jehovah’s Witness were to see a negative fact about their religion, they would chalk it up to being a twisted half-truth from Satan, ignore it and move on with their day. This mental conditioning is clearly an example of various elements of the BITE model.

Peer policing and self reporting. All Jehovah’s Witnesses understand that they have a moral duty and obligation to “keep the congregation clean.” So if there is a breach of conduct, it needs to be reported to the congregation elders. Ideally a person would report themselves to the elders, confess their sin and then have that dealt with by the elders in line with the Shepherd the Flock of God manual. However, if a person doesn’t self report and someone else becomes aware of the situation, the one who has become aware of the situation is to ask that individual to go and speak to the elders about it within a reasonable amount of time (perhaps a week or two) and then, if they have not confessed to the elders within that time, then the person who has become aware of the situation will themselves go and report it to the elders. This represents a high degree of coercion and control. Self reporting is very common and Jehovah’s Witnesses will put themselves in very uncomfortable positions due to their belief and respect for this arrangement. For example, young women who come forward to the elders with confessions of a sexual nature will likely need to recount the details multiple times in front of 3 older men. Notoriously these committees tend to dwell on very specific details relating to sexual acts. In the case of peer policing, Raymond Franz (a former Governing Body member who left and spoke out against the organization) documented in his book *Crisis of Conscience* an incident in which a young woman who worked at a medical practice breached patient confidentiality and informed the elders of another sister’s “sinful conduct” which she only became aware of from paperwork at the medical practice. This example, whilst not “common” would certainly typify the thinking of a Jehovah’s Witness; matters of the congregation carry more weight and require more adherence than matters of law.

“Negative” reports or statements about Jehovah’s Witnesses are equated with “false” reports or statements about Jehovah’s Witnesses. This contributes to their culture of distrust towards institutions and the media.

They refer to their religion as “The Truth” which completely replaces the concept and meaning of actual truth. For example, when doctrinal revisions are made, you need to keep up with the newly revealed truth, yet most never stop to question that since this new truth conflicts with an old truth, how was that “The Truth” and still now this is “The Truth?”

Doubts are demonized - there is a pre-determined correct conclusion that a JW must reach on many topics (and often that conclusion is that "this is The Truth and the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses are God's chosen one true channel of communication on earth at this time.") No one needs to "show their workings" for how they arrived at that conclusion. Whether you can or not is irrelevant. Doubts which can be corrected are acceptable. But doubts that cannot be corrected are a definite sign of "spiritual weakness," self-reliance and twisted thinking probably influenced by Satan and/or apostates. Similarly with "obeying", this becomes a cultural ad hominem attack which discredits a person's character and by extension any possible reason that they may have had for "not believing." There is not only "no good reason to leave" but also "no good reason to disobey" and "no good reason to doubt too much, too long or too loud."

Thought-Stopping Clichés: Phrases like "Wait on Jehovah," "Stay in Jehovah's Organization," or "Don't run ahead" halt critical thinking. These phrases are like a Swiss army knife and can apply to just about any doubt, behaviour or dissent. "Wait on Jehovah" is most troublingly used as "leave that to Jehovah to sort out" in cases of serious wrongs, even crimes such as child sexual abuse within the congregation. It can also be used to strike the balance between the "ever present urgency of Armageddon" and the fact that "the end" has not yet come. In this way, it acts as a timing belt for the hamster wheel of "spiritual routine."

Constant Repetition: Meetings and literature repeat the same themes (obedience, end times, loyalty) to reinforce indoctrination. Regularly repeated subjects will be discussed among members as being pertinent to current needs/threats as they view their meetings and literature as "food at the proper time" - so regular reinforcement of themes which align with the BITE Model help the organisation to maintain control. Then, if anyone does start doubting or questioning, the constant repetition of these warnings is reinforced as evidence that that spiritual food was indeed timely.

This life isn't "the real life," therefore attainment in "this system" is worthless and a dangerous distraction. Education (especially higher education beyond highschool), career advancement and any pursuit which occupies too much time are warned against. These can be demonized as idolatry (putting anything in your life "above" Jehovah (Jehovah, it is often noted amongst ex-members, is really synonymous with the Governing Body.) Pursuits outside of "the organisation" can also be cast as selfishness, greed, materialism or "not making time for the more important things" (Phil 1:10) Since anything that a person can do could be time spent doing something for the organisation, this results in an extremely self-effacing culture. The proper course is to "make sacrifices" of the things that you want to do in favour of the things that you ought to do.

Goals are set for members, especially those born in, from a young age. This is constantly reinforced through meetings, literature, videos, conventions & assemblies (larger meeting programs held once & twice per year respectively. These programs are longer and due to their scale, more weight is given to the things that are featured therein. Weekly meetings are "spiritual food" but these are considered to be a "spiritual banquet.") Parents are encouraged to

set “spiritual goals” for their children so that they can progress within the organisation. In a devout family, this will result in practically constant messaging for a child to follow a specific path and that messaging comes from everyone that they love, know & trust. Additionally, any counter-messaging would be an automatic red flag of “bad association” and so whilst many witness children “make the decision” to get baptized at a young age; they really are unaware of the implications of that decision and they have so much social expectation towards that decision that it really is not fully their own. This is hugely relevant to the subject of this enquiry since only “baptized” members of the congregation can be “removed” (formerly disfellowshipped) from the congregation incurring all of the consequences that go along with that. I was personally baptised at 14. I remember thinking that I wasn’t necessarily sure that I was “ready” but I knew that I would be ready eventually and I might as well do it now. There was no conception in my mind that I would ever “not get baptized.” It is viewed as similar to marriage, specifically that marriage is the second most important decision that you will make in your life and baptism is the first. The major difference is that if someone, as was the case with myself, doesn’t feel 100% ready to get baptized or isn’t totally sure, they also recognise that that uncertainty is solely one-sided. You are not weighing up whether to get baptised to this god or that god; whether to be baptised in this religion or that religion. So there is only one acceptable choice, the rest is just a matter of “when.”

Group identity supersedes individual identity. Jehovah’s Witnesses are a very ethnically and culturally diverse religion. However, the culture of the organisation shines through here in that whilst you might have a Spaniard, a Korean, a Malaysian and an American all dressed in their own cultural attire whilst worshipping, they have no real diversity of thought. Any such real diversity of thought would be a threat to “the unity of the congregation” and would either be stamped out or the individual would leave. Over time this and other “self selection” processes (such as who will leave when a doctrine changes) results in an increasingly loyal base. This also makes it harder and harder over time (and with the advent of the internet and social media) for people from outside the group to assimilate into the group. However, for those born in, it makes the opposite more and more difficult since what is familiar to them from birth is so strange to the outside world that they become increasingly isolated if they remain within the religion. Since waking up, I have been shocked to learn how much of myself I had suppressed in order to fit within that group identity. I didn’t feel the constant pressure of needing to conform, but conform I did and only upon realising that I did not have to do that anymore did I give myself permission to acknowledge those other parts of myself. My wife has always thought that she would like to be a nurse, but only as of last week has she actually started to entertain the idea that that is something that she could actually do. (Since it would require “higher education” she had understood from a young age that it simply wasn’t going to happen.)

“Independant thinking” is labeled rebellious and is strictly condemned in JW literature. Satan is pointed to as the prime example of thinking independently. For me, and I think my experience would be typical, I never saw this as a red flag or thought much of it, but I allowed that language and the repetition of this kind of idea to impact my own thinking. It acted as a part of my own “immune defence structure” against information that conflicted with my worldview. If someone would raise a valid point about an issue with our beliefs or the organisation, this was amongst

the mental barriers that would immediately appear alongside thought-stopping clichés and ad hominem attacks questioning the source and intent of the speaker.

Fear of Armageddon: The imminent destruction of all non-JWs creates fear and urgency to obey. Many former witnesses report feeling an ever present dread or even extreme terror triggered by events such as thunderstorms. Another common thread is feeling traumatised by the imagery directed at children such as from the book “My Book of Bible Stories” or similar publications produced by Watchtower. I personally have not felt this, however, I did feel the ever present question of “am I doing enough?” and “if Armageddon came tomorrow, would I make it?”

Hamster wheel (high demand) - you can never do enough, are always left feeling guilty and questioning if you can do more. This is directly promoted by Watchtower and it is a very “works based” religion as opposed to “faith/grace based” as with many other Christian religions. Jehovah’s Witnesses need to work as hard as they can for the organisation to have their chance of eternal salvation. In many this leads to chronic anxiety, burnout, mental health issues (or exacerbations thereof) and even higher rates of disease.³

Many former members lament that their relationships, even with their parents, siblings or children, were all based on “conditional love.” I personally do not think that this is the best way to describe the problem. I see it as a part of the indoctrination of members that they are to love Jehovah above all else and a key part of that is obeying him even when that seems difficult. Since the rules of the Governing Body are seen as coming from “Jehovah’s mouthpiece,” members view it as a choice between showing love & loyalty to Jehovah God the supreme ruler of all the universe who is the embodiment of love and who has given them everything, or their family member who has “turned their back” on Jehovah. So whilst familial love may be conditional on continuing within the religion, I think that this is not without parallel in “normal” society. For example, if a man were to commit heinous crimes, it would be viewed as “understandable” if his own family cut him off completely and even treated him as though he were dead. The difference within Jehovah’s Witness indoctrination is that that kind of response is triggered at a much lower threshold and specifically by the judgement of the local elders. If a committee of elders determines that an individual is to be removed from the congregation, that person is viewed as an unrepentant wrongdoer who ought to be shunned and practically treated as though they were dead as part of “Jehovah’s loving discipline.”

Unlike many other religious groups, Jehovah’s Witnesses have an extremely corporate structure. The impact of this on the culture of the group is that “ladder climbing” is encouraged and the path forward is fairly clear. There is a great sense of attachment to titles and standing with the congregation. People are viewed and treated differently by their titles and the “privileges” of service that they have. Attachment to these titles goes beyond the norm of the corporate world since within this religious context, members tend to view their titles as being tethered to their standing before God. Therefore, the threat of removal of a title is a way in which the organisation (whether at the local congregation level or higher) can exert influence over

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members. I have personally set aside my own reasoning in order to keep a title that I held. This was after we had returned to in-person meetings post COVID. The direction from the branch (the organizational structure in charge of a specific region of the world, in this case the Australasia Branch based in [REDACTED]) had been that “the wearing of masks was strongly encouraged.” I had decided that not only did I hate wearing a mask, but also that there was no point in my doing so since we had two young children who were not wearing masks. I explained to my local elders when I was questioned about this that my reasoning was “if I wear a mask, it is merely a facade. If someone else bases their decision of whether to attend in-person or not on the fact that “everyone is wearing a mask” then I am doing them a disservice. I am, for all intents and purposes, not wearing a mask since my children whom I spend all of my time with are also not masked.” It was explained to me in no uncertain terms that the only reason that the direction stated “strongly encouraged” instead of “mandated” was for legal reasons and that I, as a Ministerial Servant, would be expected to set the example by wearing a mask or I would no longer qualify to serve in that position. This is a trivial little matter, however I have no doubt that similar instances have occurred with much more serious consequences. This exemplifies how the organisation can use dog-whistles to ensure that they are able to say the right thing so as to avoid legal issues whilst conveying the desired meaning to be enforced at the local congregation level. I believe that this is why carefully worded legislation needs to be enforced in relation to any areas in which changes are sought; be that in relation to the freedom of members to choose whether or not to accept a blood transfusion or the obligation of elders to report allegations of child sexual abuse.

Isolated relationships. Since all approved relationships are essentially conditional on “being an active member of the congregation” the thought of leaving is overwhelming. Couple this with the fear of “the world” outside of the religion and it leaves Jehovah’s Witnesses with a sense of “nowhere else to go.” This can act as its own part of the immune defence against information or thoughts that may challenge the beliefs held. As fast as a Jehovah’s Witness can contemplate that they may be wrong about something they are met with the implications of what it would mean for them if that were the case. Therefore, many Jehovah’s Witnesses are unwilling to explore or research their own doubts for the fear of what they may find.

Recruitment Methods

Love bombing. I had never heard this term before “waking up” but I instantly recognised it as what we were trained to do as a congregation. When someone new attends a meeting or begins a bible study, they will be showered with hopeful attention. The fact that love bombing is often associated with abusive relationships is a neat parallel which many have drawn between “abusive relationships” and “abusive groups.” This love bombing plays on deep human emotions and needs. If someone whose needs are not being adequately met in these areas is exposed to such love bombing, it can overpower their judgement and they may ignore their intuitions that would have otherwise alerted them that something was not quite right.

Ambulance chasing. Jehovah's Witnesses are specifically trained to capitalize on the misfortunes of others. Sometimes this can be very overt, such as sending letters to people with the same last name as someone listed in the obituaries. That is, thankfully, not a common approach. However, the culture behind that action is very active. In their weekly midweek meeting which, in part, focuses on training for preaching, they are frequently given examples of how to preach to someone who has lost a loved one in death or who has a serious illness. Jehovah's Witnesses in general have good intentions and most genuinely believe that they have a hope of eternity in perfect health to share with others. As such, misfortunes in someone's life are to a witness like blood in the water is to a shark. I have personally done this on many occasions. Two stand out in my mind. One was a lady that I met in the door to door ministry. She was polite and definite as she told us to please leave as she was very sick that day and battling cancer. I "politely" said that we understood and that I would try to come back at a better time. I was determined to share the good news with this poor woman. I returned several times, mostly not finding anyone at home, once finding her son. I left hand written letters riddled with bible verses for her along with our literature. I genuinely thought that this was the most loving thing that I could do for her. The second example that comes to mind was that of a client that I cleaned windows for. Her husband was very fit, looked after himself and in fact was off to the gym when suddenly at 40 years old he had a heart attack and died leaving her with their two young children. I went and hand delivered her some flowers along with a hand written letter about our hope for the future and a tract. These stories sicken me now and I can hardly imagine how this "crossing of a line" must have been perceived from the other side. But these stories are commonplace and are illustrative of the thinking and behaviour of a "good Jehovah's Witness." Ambulance chasing as a recruitment method is baked into Jehovah's Witness culture.

Vulnerable members of the community. In Australia, with a culture that is increasingly progressive & secular and easy access to the internet and all of the necessary information that it contains to debunk Jehovah's Witnesses, recruitment of outsiders into the group is rare. Most of their new baptisms come from the children of witness parents. However, preaching from door to door or on the street can be very problematic for vulnerable members of the community whether they convert or not. Vulnerable members of the community I would define as being anyone who:

- Has a mental or cognitive condition
- Is socially isolated
- Is at a very low point in their life such as after a divorce

Again, Jehovah's Witnesses in general have good intentions. However, they are trained to view a "positive response" as "interest to be followed up on." Also, if they see that someone is struggling, most genuinely believe that they hold the best possible solutions and hope for that person. So if someone fits one or more of the above conditions and is polite to Jehovah's Witnesses when they call, they will most likely get another visit soon. This can lead to both of the above aspects at once: love bombing and ambulance chasing. If the person converts, they will likely now have a full and rich social life with plenty to keep their schedule full in the form of their new "spiritual routine." However, if they leave, this will all go away. If they do not convert, it may be troubling or upsetting for them to have repeated visits from well meaning strangers. Vulnerable members of the community are typically more likely to have difficulty asserting their boundaries or knowing how to politely decline further visits. Organizationally, Jehovah's

Witnesses have no specific training regarding mental health and often lag behind (due to the culture of the organisation) the general understanding of mental health in the broader community.

Family influence. Internal recruiting is the main way in which Jehovah's Witnesses "grow." Some studies report that roughly two thirds of children raised in the faith end up leaving. However, neither path set before them is without undue influence and harm. If they stay, it is largely due to sheltered indoctrination from a young age. There is only one "correct" path laid before them, so from a young age, witness children understand that in order to please their parents and enjoy relationships with their extended family and social circle, they need to get baptised and then remain in the religion. If they leave, as outlined above, there are serious repercussions. Even in the best case scenario, relationships with believing family members will be largely unrecognisable from what they were when that individual was still in the religion.

Doomsday messaging. Jehovah's Witnesses live a life waiting for armageddon to break out at any moment. Whenever a major event happens (natural disasters, wars, COVID, political unrest etc.) this is viewed with anticipation; "perhaps this will be the event that triggers the beginning of the end." This kind of rhetoric coupled with the power of social pressure can lead to a sense of urgency amongst those associated with a congregation. Again, those most susceptible would be either the children of witness parents or individuals who are prone to anxiety. Fear based messaging is prevalent in print, images and videos.

Harm

No voting. Jehovah's Witnesses are strictly politically neutral to the point that even "political opinions" are viewed as a failing that a person needs to work on in order to root out. This removes members from the voting population and contributes more broadly to a sense of disconnect. Many former members have said that they never felt like they were a part of the community at all until they realised that these issues which affected them were open to them to think about and express opinions on. I share this sentiment.

Social isolation. This is broadly across two categories, both already covered. Firstly the isolation of being "removed" from the congregation due to some perceived wrongdoing or due to deciding to no longer be a part of the religion. Secondly the isolation of living a life within the group (especially if born into the religion) due to the extreme "us vs them" mentality. This is both cultural and rule based. For example, an elder in the congregation would likely lose that position if his minor child was seen to be spending too much time with "worldly" friends; especially if this was in a formal extra curricular setting such as a sports team.

Refusal of blood transfusions and some related treatments. The organisation's stance on this issue is not only completely unreasonable but also unbiblical. Regardless, the fact is that legal forms and advice are provided to congregation members, typically annually, to ensure that individuals make declarations and often appoint a medical power of attorney to have their wishes regarding the refusal of blood adhered to. This is a difficult subject as the line between respecting a patient's wishes and medical best practice is complex. However, the most

egregious part of the harm that this causes is that information disseminated to Jehovah's Witnesses by the organisation is curated in an extremely biased way. I think that it is a clear violation of the right to informed consent. Outside research is discouraged as per the "I" in BITE model. Examples of the bias of the information presented to Jehovah's Witnesses on this subject would be that it is extremely rare for an experience to be related in which someone died because of having refused blood. Even when that is the case, often overtly or subtly by means of the culture, the narrative is formed that "we don't know that taking blood would have saved their life anyway." Additionally, medical information is limited and skewed. A great reference for this (though it is a very long and detailed exchange) is the Jensen letters which are a series of correspondence from a congregation elder to the world headquarters branch in the U.S.A. In essence, he was preaching to some work contacts who were medical professionals and as a result he found himself with a long list of inexplicable questions to which he received no useful answers from the organization.

Discouragement of individual flourishing. Jehovah's Witnesses hinder individual flourishing by demanding strict conformity to organizational norms that suppress personal growth, creativity, and self-determination. From early childhood, members are taught that their value lies in obedience to the Governing Body and service to the organization, rather than in the development of their unique talents, interests, or aspirations. Personal goals — whether artistic, entrepreneurial, or exploratory — are often labeled as selfish distractions from "spiritual priorities." Independent pursuits are subtly or overtly discouraged unless they directly benefit the group's religious objectives. Even permissible hobbies are framed with caution, and time spent on personal development is often viewed as time taken from ministry or congregation activities. This environment of conditional acceptance creates a ceiling on personal ambition and fosters a sense of guilt or futility when individuals feel drawn toward paths not explicitly sanctioned by the organization. Over time, many members report a blunted sense of self, difficulty making autonomous choices, and a pervasive fear of stepping outside predefined roles — even long after leaving the group. The effect is overall extremely self-effacing.

Educational & economic suppression. Jehovah's Witnesses actively discourage higher education and career advancement, framing them as spiritually dangerous pursuits that can lead to pride, independence, or exposure to "worldly thinking." Youths are routinely warned that university education is a distraction from serving God and may lead them away from the organization. Instead, they are encouraged to pursue part-time or low-skilled work that allows more time for preaching activities. This institutional bias against education limits members' access to professional development, financial stability, and social mobility. It also disproportionately impacts women, who are often steered toward domestic roles or part-time employment, reinforcing dependence on male headship. Members who choose to pursue further education may be socially pressured, subtly marginalized, or viewed as spiritually weak. As a result, many lifelong Jehovah's Witnesses enter adulthood with restricted options and a lack of transferable skills, leaving them economically vulnerable — particularly if they later leave the faith and must rebuild their lives with limited qualifications or career experience. A common refrain (and which has been directly stated by the leadership) is that "we will not need lawyers and doctors and accountants in the new world, but we will need carpenters and gardeners and

tradespeople.” This, coupled with the ever present expectation that “this system will end before you could...” “enter school”, “finish school”, “complete your degree”, “retire” or “die” results in a culture of poorly equipped people with minimal future planning and no incentive nor freedom to pursue anything more. The degree to which this is deliberately fostered specifically in light of the next point is up for discussion.

Exploitation of labour. Jehovah’s Witnesses view “theocratic construction” (the building of Kingdom Halls, Assembly Halls & other organizationally owned properties) as well as other forms of free labour as being a form of worship. By volunteering their time and labour (especially skilled labour) they are able to “give a good witness” and “further kingdom interests.” This willing labour is exploitative by nature for at least the following reasons:

- There is a massive imbalance of power within the relationship that a Jehovah’s Witness has to the organisation. Essentially “saying no” to the organization, especially repeatedly, is akin to “saying no” to Jehovah. So if the organisation requests the time and labour of an individual, it is to that individual as though God himself were asking them to do it. Additionally, maintaining a good reputation within the congregation is critical to an individual’s relationships. Being seen as spiritually weak may result in soft-shunning, so there is added human pressure to the situation as well. A larger imbalance of power would be hard to imagine.
- Volunteers working on Kingdom Hall builds, Bethel (branch office) assignments, or disaster relief projects often perform skilled labour without pay, insurance, or worker’s rights.
- Sacrificial mindset is normalized: Sacrificing career or income for volunteer labour is praised in publications and at conventions, reinforcing a culture where burnout is spiritualized.

Additionally, it seems likely that this labour is exploitative in view of the economic gain that the organization benefits from. The organisation wields free labour in various contexts (publishing, translation, cleaning, shipping and more) but especially with construction, they save on the biggest (or one of the biggest) costs in a project and end up with a new or renovated facility for their real estate portfolio. They also enjoy a charitable status for tax purposes in most countries including Australia (despite performing little to no actual charity) and since the introduction of the Local Design & Construction arrangement (LDC) in 2013, it *seems* as though deliberate planning is going into the “flipping” of properties built or renovated with volunteer labour.

Suppression of critical thinking. Jehovah’s Witnesses discourage critical thinking by equating intellectual independence with spiritual rebellion. Members are taught to accept the teachings of the Governing Body as divinely guided and beyond question. Dissenting views, personal interpretation of scripture, or even asking probing questions about doctrine are labeled as signs of “pride,” “doubt,” or being influenced by Satan. The term “independent thinking” is explicitly condemned in Watchtower literature, fostering an environment where blind loyalty is praised, and analytical reasoning is treated with suspicion. This culture trains individuals to filter all thoughts through organizational approval, stunting intellectual development and problem-solving capacity. It also leads to a deep internal conflict for those who notice inconsistencies or ethical concerns, as voicing these doubts can result in social punishment or expulsion. Over time, this

erodes confidence in one's ability to reason, make decisions, or trust personal conscience. This pattern often persists long after individuals leave the group, requiring extensive unlearning and psychological recovery.

Inadequate handling of child abuse. Jehovah's Witnesses have repeatedly failed to protect children from sexual abuse due to internal policies that prioritize the reputation of the organization over the safety of victims. A key barrier is the application of the "two-witness rule," which requires two eyewitnesses to an incident of wrongdoing before action is taken — a standard that is almost impossible to meet in cases of CSA. As a result, credible allegations are often dismissed internally, and known abusers may remain in good standing within the congregation. Elders are instructed and/or tacitly encouraged to report abuse only to the organization's legal department, not to authorities, unless mandated by law. This creates inconsistent reporting practices and enables cover-ups to the degree that reporting is not required or to the degree in which loopholes and concessions may be found within reporting laws. Victims and their families are culturally discouraged from going to police, and are instead urged to remain silent or to forgive the perpetrator in the interest of "not tarnishing Jehovah's name." This has shifted slightly since the Australian Royal Commission, however, even if instructions change, the culture persists. Notably, the "two-witness rule" is not universally applied to "serious sins" even those which are not also a crime. For example, strong circumstantial evidence can be enough for congregation elders to conclude that fornication has occurred. This may be with two consenting adults, and yet a committee of elders can be formed and action may be taken to remove the offender(s) from the congregation. Yet when the sin (and also crucially, the crime) of CSA is alleged, such circumstantial evidence is generally not considered and examples of precedent for such consideration have not been published by the organisation.

Mental health impact. The teachings and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses have a significant and often damaging impact on members' mental health. The religion imposes a black-and-white worldview where doubt, struggle, or deviation from group norms is interpreted as spiritual failure, creating chronic guilt, anxiety, and internal conflict. Members live under constant pressure to meet demanding religious obligations, including frequent meetings, public preaching, and moral perfection with the looming fear of divine judgment metered out by the congregation elders now (removal) or by God at Armageddon if they fall short. Emotional suppression is normalized; feelings like depression, fear, or even curiosity are often framed as signs of weak faith or even demonic influence (this is less common now, but again, the culture is there and this sort of thing takes time to dissipate), discouraging individuals from seeking help. Professional mental health care is mistrusted or treated with suspicion, especially if it contradicts organizational teachings, and members are encouraged to rely instead on prayer, scripture, and elders for support — even in cases of serious trauma. Again, this has improved somewhat in recent years, but nonetheless these patterns are still present. The threat of shunning, both for formal "removal" or informal social distancing/soft-shunning, adds another layer of psychological distress, particularly for those grappling with questions, identity, or crisis. Former members frequently report symptoms of complex trauma, religious OCD (scrupulosity), depression, and suicidality

both during their time within the religion and after exiting. This is often worsened by a lifetime of conditional love and fear-based control masked as spiritual care.

Gender inequality. Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a rigid, patriarchal structure in which men are given all formal authority, while women are expected to remain submissive and supportive. Only baptized men may hold leadership roles such as elders, ministerial servants, or teachers within the congregation, while women are excluded from decision-making positions regardless of experience, education, or capability. Even in informal settings, women must defer to male headship and are often discouraged from expressing opinions that contradict male leadership. In public worship, women are not permitted to pray aloud in the presence of baptized men or to teach men under any circumstance. When women do teach, for example, in training younger women or conducting Bible studies, they must wear a head covering if there is a baptised male present (for example, a woman conducting a bible study whilst her husband is at home.) In marriage, husbands are positioned as the spiritual heads, with wives expected to submit regardless of whether the husband is kind, competent, or even actively practicing. Women experiencing abuse may be counseled to remain in the marriage unless there is adultery, and emotional harm is rarely taken seriously as grounds for separation. The only grounds for a "scriptural divorce" is adultery, so if a woman separates from her husband, even if for her own physical safety, she may get legally divorced but is not "scripturally free" to remarry unless her ex-husband dies or admits to committing adultery. A spiteful ex-husband may refuse to make such an admission and leave his ex-wife in a very difficult situation in which she either commits to a life of celibacy or risks being removed from the congregation for adultery. This systemic inequality undermines women's autonomy, voice, and spiritual agency, often leading to feelings of invisibility, disempowerment, and internalized unworthiness; outcomes that are framed as virtues rather than symptoms of gender-based control. My wife has really struggled to even "have an opinion" upon our exit (she is still behind me on the deconstruction process.)

Mishandling of sensitive subjects. In line with the above, matters of sin can become very awkward and even traumatising especially with a male/female dynamic. For example, if a young girl commits a sexual sin (such as masturbation, fornication, "uncleanness" which, in reality, is a very misunderstood term by the rank & file and for a young girl she would likely not understand the rules by which she was to be judged (e.g is kissing a sin? Is touching certain body parts above or under clothing a sin? The rules are very detailed, but the rule book is reserved for the elders' eyes only.) She is expected to confess her sin to the elders (all men) and if they determine that a "committee of elders" (formerly a "judicial committee") is to be formed, then she will meet with 3 men who will ask very detailed and probing questions of her. Regardless of any extenuating factors, this is already enough to be traumatic, but this is even worse in cases of statutory rape. In the view of the congregation, she would not really be an "innocent victim" since she may have been a willing participant. In attempting to find where the line is between "victim" and "participant" elders have infamously been very graphic in their questions and these "hearings" can last for hours.

My Personal Experience

I have interspersed some of my personal experience above, but in addition to that I would like to add that I have deferred living my life for the sake of a future life that I thought was coming. I relegated the learning of musical instruments as a “new world” project. I have made life altering decisions through the lens that “this world is soon going to end.” I spent 3 years preaching in Malaysia, self funded. Each year I would return home, work for 2-3 months and then live off the money saved for the remaining 9-10 months. I moved back to Australia when my wife & I got married and our intent was to set ourselves up to go overseas again to “serve where the need is greater.” We built up our cleaning business with the specific intent of being able to be away from it geographically for long periods of time with enough money to live on. I have personally (and have seen this in others) not taken optimal care of my health and other aspects of life due to the belief that soon “all of mankind’s problems will be solved.” This promotes an attitude of complacency and abdicated responsibility which I have only come to see and appreciate since waking up from my indoctrination. I have struggled and am continuing to struggle to find my own sense of identity. I am 31, but I have missed some developmental milestones in terms of learning to set appropriate boundaries, learning how to express myself and how to even determine what I want. I am having to reconstruct frameworks of meaning and to learn how to measure myself outside of the lens of the organisation which was always all too happy to provide a metric or point of comparison. I don’t really know how to make friends in “the world” as it is something that I have practiced not doing my whole life. I need to build up myself, my identity and find a social place to fit into. All the while, my wife (who is still mostly “in” the congregation) & I are trying to navigate how to work through all of this with our 3 kids aged 5 & under. We want them to enjoy relationships with their grandparents, aunts, uncles & cousins. But what does that look like? What is the price of that? One consideration that we have is birthdays: if we celebrate our birthdays, it will widen (perhaps irreparably) the gap between us and our Jehovah’s Witness family. However, if we don’t celebrate birthdays, then we deprive our children of a normal social connection point and inhibit their ability to make friends outside of their beloved cousins. The way that this is seen through the eyes of my witness family members is and always will be that I am “the aggressor” and so therefore, any negative consequences, anything that is awkward, whatever problems or complications there are: it is all automatically my fault. It is outside of their realm of conception to think that perhaps I could celebrate my child’s birthday on a Saturday and go around to have dinner with my parents on Sunday. In that scenario, I would be the one who ruined the relationship, cancelled the dinner plans; even shunning, it would be “me choosing to shun them” by taking actions that I know would lead to that outcome. Almost as though they had nothing at all to do with it. And I love them. They are my family. In many ways, they don’t have all that much to do with it as I well understand. I was them. I thought these thoughts. I am lucky to have a beautiful wife and kids, a stable financial situation and hopefully the majority of my life ahead of me. I have been lucky in many other ways with my circumstances surrounding my exit and it all could have been a lot worse. Yet even as it is, it is by far the hardest thing that I have ever gone through and it would be extremely easy to end up in a very dark place without some of the things that I am privileged to have; chiefly my wife.

Suggestions

I think that the Watchtower organization should be scrutinised for its charitable status and the possibility that they are deliberately exploiting free labour for the benefit of their real estate portfolio. Following the money will, I am confident, uncover some skeletons in the closet. Should they maintain their tax-exempt status? Do they demonstrate that they are a public benefit and do not cause demonstrable harm?

Additional audits should be conducted regarding their CSA policies and the changes made since the Australian Royal Commission. I don't think that this should be exclusive to Jehovah's Witnesses, I think that across the board following up on improvements made with a view to protecting children is hugely important. The "two witness rule" discrepancy though should be something that they are held accountable for and I think that some pressure and media attention on this would foster a change even within the culture. Spotlighting the difference between handling "a sin" vs "a sin that is also a crime" would also aid in shifting both policy and culture. As with everything, the Watchtower organisation shows themselves to be unwilling to budge unless forced. These kinds of changes should be forced upon them. I am not an expert on what the mandatory reporting laws are across Australia but I think that mandatory reporting of CSA by all religious leaders with no room for exemptions would be a good start.

In regards to accountability surrounding "high control high demand religions," "cults," or "abusive groups" I think that possibly the best starting point would be public education. The term "cult" is not very helpful as it conjures almost a cartoonish image of dark villainy. It is not within the psyche of the general public to think of cult members as "people who walk among us." Instead, they are thought of as "people living off in a compound somewhere." The term "abusive group" is very useful instead since it draws a helpful parallel between an "abusive relationship" (which is fairly well understood within the common psyche) and the behaviours of a coercive group. For example, the question of "why don't you just leave?" highlights the difference in how this is understood between an abusive relationship vs a cult. With the former, most people understand that "it is not as simple as that." By educating the public about the latter through the lens of "abusive groups" people will be helped to see why it can be complicated and thereby with that awareness, it will become less and less likely that people will subject themselves to this kind of control.

Additionally to the above, I think some specific legal accountability could be set up in that vein. It would be difficult to do, but with a clear understanding of the groups involved (not just Jehovah's Witnesses) the wording of any such legislation could be sharpened to the required level to ensure that it applies specifically in the way that it is intended. I think some areas to look into for this in regards to Jehovah's Witnesses would be:

- The baptizing of minors. Baptism as a Jehovah's Witness is essentially a legal contract witnessed by thousands of people binding an individual to an organisation (the organisation is specifically mentioned in the baptism) for life. The consequences of leaving are severe. This is true to some degree whether a child raised in the religion gets baptised or not, however, they cannot be "removed" from the congregation if they were never baptised into it. Therefore, the strictest form of mandated shunning would not

apply to them. We do not allow minors to drink, drive on their own, get a tattoo without parental consent or sign a long-term contract such as a loan. Baptism as a Jehovah's Witness carries more weight with it than some other things that minors are not permitted to do.

- Legal protections against institutional/mandated shunning. Noting that the impact of someone breaching their mandated shunning could have negative consequences for them, this is a clear example of coercive control and even if the laws instituted were difficult to enforce, bringing this conversation into the public square would raise awareness and apply a lot of pressure to Watchtower; they may make adjustments to save face.
- Improved privacy & anti-defamation laws. This would allow exiting members to request and require the deletion of any and all records that the organisation holds about them. Specific anti-defamation laws could make it "too risky" for the congregations to announce that someone has been "removed" or "disassociated" from the congregation. This would reduce the power wielded by the organisation over members who would like to leave and it would also lessen the impacts of mandated shunning.
- Providing access to therapy via medicare, perhaps upon referral from a GP. Even 5-10 sessions covered or discounted would be a massive help as many who leave are also (not by coincidence) not in a very good financial situation to afford the kind of help that they need. Also, educational programs to ensure that therapists are aware of things like Religious Trauma Syndrome or the impacts & scope of cults. That way, those who do not specialise in it can contact other therapists who do. I have heard from many former members that they felt like they had to spend their entire therapy sessions explaining the religion rather than being given support to deal with it.
- Norway has taken the approach of legislating against "Psychological Abuse" - I think that that could be an effective angle through which to deal with some of the issues presented by Watchtower, however I fear that if definitions are left too broad it could be used to apply to just about anyone or anything and perhaps if the definitions are too broad it may lack the specificity to hold organisations like Watchtower accountable.

With regards to any dealings with Jehovah's Witnesses, ensuring that they feel "minimally attacked" is the best way to reach individual members. Any of the above suggestions or similar actions should be clearly communicated to the public as seeking to improve things for the future, not seeking to prosecute and blame (unless that is the specific intention of a particular intervention.) With this in mind, messaging may be tailored in a way that is more likely to "wake" individuals up and allow them to leave from their abusive group.