

Why Opposition? An Exploration of Hostility Towards Jehovah's Witnesses

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ABSTRACT: Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced opposition since the Watch Tower Society's inception, and the history of opposition is traced here. Initially, grounds for disapproval were doctrinal, but spanned out to controversies about "miracle wheat" and founder-leader Charles Taze Russell's marital breakdown. Under second leader Joseph Franklin Rutherford, controversy surrounded patriotism and military service. The Witnesses' refusal to celebrate popular festivals attracted subsequent disapprobation, as did allegations of failed prophecy. The Society's stance on blood, disfellowshipping, and shunning have given rise to further unpopularity, and its *New World Translation* of the Bible has attracted hostility from Christian counter-cult critics. Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced political opposition, and particular attention is given to Russia and South Korea. Most recently, accusations of sexual abuse have gained publicity, and official investigations in Australia and the Netherlands. Finally, the advent of the Internet has enabled critics to organize opposition online. The author does not evaluate these criticisms or examine the Society's rejoinders, but notes that Jehovah's Witnesses continue with faith maintenance, regarding opposition as fulfilment of biblical prophecy.

KEYWORDS: Jehovah's Witnesses, Religious Minorities, Counter-Cult Movement, Religious Minorities in Russia, Religious Minorities in South Korea, Charles Taze Russell, Joseph Franklin Rutherford.

Introduction

Jesus said, "And you will be hated by all people on account of my name. But the one who has endured to the end will be saved" (*Mark* 13,13). Having enemies can be an expectation by those who vigorously proclaim a religious message, and this article aims to identify the theological, political, and societal objections that have been made against the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society since its

inception. Not only Jehovah's Witnesses believe that fierce opposition is one of the signs that we are living in the end times, but Jesus' words provide a measure of the veracity and impact of one's message. Vehement opposition demonstrates that the proclaimers have hit a raw nerve, and should redouble their efforts. This article aims to explore the various grounds on which Jehovah's Witnesses (originally known as Bible Students) have experienced opposition, from the inception of Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society (now the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society) to the present day.

From its very inception, the Bible students encountered opposition. Initially, opponents were mainstream Christian leaders who objected to founder-leader Charles Taze Russell's (1852–1916) teachings on theological grounds. William C. Irvine (1871–1946) commented that “any believer who has been induced to buy his literature ought to burn it” (Irvine 1917, 151); and William G. Moorehead (1836–1914) stated that, “perhaps among all the books of the English-speaking world there is not another which contains as many errors as ‘Millennial Dawn’” (cited in Gray 1909, 70; *Millennial Dawn* was the original series title of Russell's six books, later named *Studies in the Scriptures*).

Moorehead's objections were mainly directed at Russell's Christology (Moorehead 1910, 107–08). Russell presented Christ as the firstborn of God's creation, thus denying his full deity, in contrast to the traditional creeds, which stated that Christ is “eternally begotten of the Father, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.” According to Watch Tower teaching, Jesus Christ pre-existed as the Archangel Michael, and was born as a fully human being, who acquired his messianic status, not at birth, but at his baptism. This concept of the person of Christ had important repercussions for Russell's doctrine of Atonement: while he viewed the doctrine of Christ's “ransom sacrifice” as central to his theology, the ransom was that of a perfect human being, not of one who was fully God and fully human.

The emphasis on Christ's human nature presented further implications for his resurrection and ascension, since a physical being could not be taken up into Heaven. Russell therefore declared that Jesus rose from the dead with a “spiritual body,” not a physical one, and that his physical body was miraculously removed from the tomb. It was in this spiritual body that Jesus ascended back into Heaven, from whence he cast Satan down in 1874 (later revised to 1914), attaining his

“second presence” with his followers; he is not expected to return on the clouds of Heaven, as many mainline Evangelicals hold.

Russell’s teaching that humanity is living in the end times was no doubt not so objectionable, and even the calculation of end-time prophetic dates was done by many Adventists, and indeed had its origins with mainstream clergy like Edward Bishop Elliott (1793–1875) (Elliott 1844). However, his teachings on life after death were less acceptable. He rejected the immortality of the soul, which numerous clergy were teaching, and he held that there was no Hell for the wicked, only oblivion: not all the dead would be raised at the resurrection, but only those worthy of “probation after death,” which meant a subsequent opportunity to accept the Christian faith.

What added to the mainstream clergy’s resentment was who Russell was. He was a haberdasher, without formal theological training, who had mingled with a number of Adventist teachers who also lacked qualifications and, notwithstanding this lack of credentials, he had the temerity to criticize and correct the rest of Christendom, urging his supporters to “come out of her.” James Martin Gray (1851–1935) commented, “How great effrontery, therefore, that this modern religious teaching ... by one man, should challenge the interpretation of all the churches, in all the centuries!” (Gray 1910, 20).

Not content simply to criticize all of Christendom, Russell and his supporters were enthusiastically propagating this message. Russell offered his sermons to newspaper syndicates, and they often appeared in as many as 2,000 different publications. Russell travelled worldwide, reaching countries as far afield as Japan, the Middle East, and Europe, setting up new branches of the Society, and his supporters travelled widely in the US, Canada, and Europe, distributing his literature, and promoting his distinctive brand of Christianity. Clergy were losing members to the Bible Students organization; it is impossible to determine the scale of the defections, but it was certainly a matter of concern to them.

Criticism of Russell, however, was not confined to his theology. Opponents continue to cite the “miracle wheat” controversy, over a century later, as an example of the allegedly fraudulent nature of the Watch Tower organization. In 1908, an edition of *Zion’s Watch Tower* offered wheat for sale that was produced by a Virginian farmer, which had a remarkably high yield, the proceeds from which would go to the Society’s funds (*Zion’s Watch Tower* 1908). The wheat had already aroused the interest of the US government, and Russell believed it

fulfilled Ezekiel's prophecy that "the earth shall yield her increase" (*Ezekiel* 34,27). When the seed failed to meet expectations, the Society offered refunds to purchasers (*The Watch Tower* 1910), but this did not prevent the Brooklyn newspaper *The Eagle* accusing Russell of profiteering. Russell decided to sue for libel, but lost the case, thus damaging the Society's prestige further.

A further controversy involved Russell's domestic life: his wife Maria (1850–1938) filed for divorce, amidst accusations of sexual impropriety with their foster child. The dispute was given prominence by Russell himself, who wrote about it at some length in *Zion's Watch Tower* (*Zion's Watch Tower* 1906a). A further high-profile libel suit involved John Jacob Ross (1871–1935), a Baptist minister who wrote a pamphlet in 1912, which, among other things, described Russell as "a religious fakir of the worst type, who goes about like the Magus of Samaria enriching himself at the expense of the ignorant" (Ross 1912, 4), and brought up the subjects of the miracle wheat and Russell's divorce once more. Russell sued and lost, and the court proceedings served to damage Russell further by raising questions about his competence in Greek.

The Rutherford Era

When Russell died in 1916, the Great War was at its height, and the US entered into it in the following year. During Russell's period of office, some readers of *The Watch Tower* had enquired about whether they should engage in combat. Russell's response was that enlisting in the army was acceptable, but not killing, and he recommended alternatives to armed military service, such as joining the ambulance corps, which involved saving rather than taking life.

When his successor Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1869–1942) took over the leadership, however, the Society's stance hardened. The catalyst for state opposition to the Society was the publication of *The Finished Mystery* in 1917: the book was inappropriately attributed to Russell as a posthumous publication, being substantially the work of Clayton J. Woodworth (1870–1951) and George H. Fisher (1870–1926), probably assisted by Gertrude Seibert (1864–1928). The book accused the clergy of being responsible for the war in Europe, denounced patriotism as being a narrow-minded "hatred of other peoples" (Woodworth and Fisher 1917, 247), and described the war as "butchery" (Woodworth and Fisher 1917, 272). The book was banned in Canada, and was

only allowed to be circulated in the US once certain pages had been excised. Rutherford and seven other Watch Tower leaders were arrested, and made to serve prison sentences. Rutherford alleged that the arrests were instigated by the clergy, intensifying opposition between the Watch Tower organization and mainstream denominations.

The government finally withdrew its case, and the Watch Tower leaders were released from prison in 1919, after the Great War had ended, but their punishment increased rather than diminished their zeal. At a Watch Tower Convention at Cedar Point, Ohio, in 1922, signs were displayed throughout the auditorium with the letters “ADV.” It became a practice to tantalize convention attendees by displaying enigmatic letters, whose meaning was eventually divulged, when Rutherford gave a rousing speech, concluding “Advertise, advertise, advertise the king and his kingdom!”

One of Rutherford’s innovations was to encourage—indeed require—his supporters to advertise the Society’s teachings by their house-to-house evangelism, for which they continue to be known. However, the encouragement to commence this work was at a time when the Society’s popularity was extremely low. The promotion of the Society’s teachings was not only by house-to-house visiting: its preachers would give talks using loudspeakers in public places, and go around the streets with “sound cars” (vans with loudspeakers). Sometimes this was without the requisite permission, since they believed that their right to proclaim Jehovah’s message did not require permission from any human authority. If the police attempted to make arrests, Witnesses would summon other cars to converge on the area, so as to ensure that there was insufficient room in the jail cells to accommodate them (Chryssides 2019, 47).

Jehovah’s Witnesses were not content simply to practice their own faith privately, and their evangelizing tactics were designed to draw attention to their organization. One method of publicity was the “information march,” which began in Glasgow in 1936, when Witnesses put on sandwich boards advertising public events, such as conventions. Rutherford devised the slogan “Religion is a snare and a racket,” which was frequently displayed on these boards, “religion” denoting mainstream Christendom.

In 1938, an information march heralded a lecture to be given by Rutherford in the Royal Albert Hall in London, entitled “Face the Facts.” If the publicity was provocative, Rutherford’s lecture was even more so. Rutherford claimed to

identify two “incontrovertible” facts. The first was uncontentious enough, namely that God wanted to establish his kingdom over the earth, and that Jesus Christ had come to the world to establish that kingdom. The second “incontrovertible fact,” however, was not so incontrovertible: he declared that a “hideous monstrosity” had ensured that no righteous government existed on earth, since Satan had been cast out from Heaven to earth, to establish his own governments there. Satan’s new threat was totalitarian government, which, he argued, began in Russia in 1917 with the Bolshevik government’s rise to power, and continued with the regimes in Italy and in Germany, under Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) and Adolf Hitler (1889–1945). Further, Christendom, he claimed, had colluded with these governments, and Britain had begun to forge an alliance with Roman Catholicism. Only Jehovah’s Witnesses had maintained their allegiance to Jehovah by opposing these governments. Regarding the Pope and the current political leaders, Rutherford went on:

Today you stand before the judgment seat of Christ, the great Judge of the world. According to the undisputed facts you are convicted out of your own mouth, and the Lord’s final judgment has been entered against you and you are going to die. You have willingly yielded to Satan, abandoned God and his King, and have permitted the Devil to gather you to Armageddon, that battle of the great day of God Almighty, as Jesus foretold (*Revelation* 16,13–6). The final showdown has come. Your high-sounding titles, your garments, your exalted positions, your money, and your boasted power, shall now completely fail you. Christ Jesus, the antitypical David, has called your bluff. Jehovah’s witnesses do not fear you, but they do fear and serve God and Christ. ... At the battle of Armageddon Christ Jesus, leading his invincible army, will slay you and give your dead carcasses to the fowls of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, and all creation shall know that Jehovah is the Almighty God, that Christ Jesus is the rightful Ruler of the world and the Vindicator of God’s word and name, and that Jehovah can put men on earth who will remain true to him (Rutherford 1938, 23–4).

Rutherford’s lecture was relayed on a transatlantic radio link, and could be heard by around 150,000 listeners in the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. His strident tone proved too much for three of the stations, who cut the broadcast midway.

Holidays

A further way in which Jehovah’s Witnesses have marked themselves out as different from others is their stance on holidays. The non-celebration of Easter

was a feature of the Society from its inception, and appears to have been the norm in various Adventist groups that influenced Russell. Christmas celebrations were part of the Society's tradition initially, and Russell would typically wish all the residents a happy Christmas when he entered the dining room on Christmas morning. Rutherford, however, came to the view that 25 December was unlikely to be the authentic date for Jesus birth and, perhaps more importantly, the date was associated with "pagan" festivals, particularly the Roman Saturnalia, which were celebrated around that date. Accordingly, the last Christmas celebration at the Brooklyn Bethel was in 1926, and ever since then the festival has gone unmarked.

The avoidance of birthday celebrations did not come until some time later. The exact date of their abandonment is unclear, but appears to have been around 1950, and certainly after Rutherford's death. The biblical reasoning behind the avoidance is that the Bible only twice mentions birthdays—once that of the Egyptian pharaoh in the time of Joseph, and much later by King Herod (before 20 BCE–after 39 CE). Both birthdays were of "pagan" rulers, and both had unfortunate consequences: the pharaoh's baker was condemned to death, and Herod's birthday resulted in the execution of John the Baptist at the request of Herodias' (15 BCE–after 39 CE) daughter.

Jehovah's Witnesses also believe that birthdays involve superstitious practices such as making a wish when blowing out candles; they are also selfish events, involving adulation of the individual whose birthday is celebrated, and that they are unduly commercialized. Other more minor popular celebrations such as Valentine's Day and Halloween are associated with an apostate church's calendar. Jehovah's Witnesses do not acknowledge Christian saints, and Halloween involves occult practices, such as portrayals of witches and an inappropriate fascination for the dead.

While it is not particularly onerous for adults to avoid such celebrations, the Society's stance on these events impacts much more seriously on schoolchildren, at least in countries where Christianity is the dominant religion, since school activities frequently focus on such celebrations, for example designing Valentine cards or Halloween decorations. Socially, on returning from their Christmas vacation, children's conversation will frequently turn to the presents they have received, causing Jehovah's Witness children to explain that their families do not celebrate the festival.

There can be other issues for children at school: care is needed to avoid any overtly religious activity, for example at a morning assembly, and activities such as pledging allegiance to the state mark Witness children out as different. Religious education can present problems, although Jehovah's Witnesses normally have little objection to children being taught about religions in an objective and non-confessional way.

Sex education in schools can also create difficulties: although schools teach the biology of sex, Witnesses believe that this is inappropriate without promoting the moral standards that should accompany it. Some schools have been known to make contraceptives available, advise on how to avoid pregnancy, and have condoned practices such as masturbation, and most recently homosexuality and gender transitioning, all of which have attracted Jehovah's Witnesses' disapprobation.

"Failed Prophecies"

A further common criticism relates to prophetic failure. Although failed prophets are not as inconvenient to society as other aspects of Jehovah's Witnesses, members are frequently criticized for apparently setting dates for "the end of the world," which invariably fail to materialize. I have argued elsewhere that their prophetic statements and "adjustments in view," or "clarifications of doctrine," as they call them, are frequently misunderstood (Chryssides 2010). Nonetheless, the year 1925 provided a clear example of a prediction that did not materialize. In his highly publicized *Millions Now Living Will Never Die* (Rutherford 1920), Rutherford's end-time calculations gave rise to a firm prediction that in the year 1925 the "faithful ones of old"—the patriarchs, prophets, and other worthy individuals of ancient Hebrew times—would rise from their tombs and come back to life with the expectation of inheriting a renewed earth as their everlasting entitlement.

This prediction left no room for adjustment, and Rutherford was forced to admit that he had simply been wrong. At a convention the following year, he was asked, "Have the ancient worthies returned?" leaving Rutherford with this somewhat lame rejoinder,

Certainly they have not returned. No one has seen them, and it would be foolish to make such an announcement. It was stated in the “Millions” book that we might reasonably expect them to return shortly after 1925, but this was merely an expressed opinion (*Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses* 1980, 62).

The year 1975 was not explicitly defined in Watch Tower literature, but there was an expectation that, since the year was reckoned to be 6,000 years after Adam’s creation (reckoned as 4026 BCE), it would mark the beginning of the millennium, and hence the commencement of Armageddon. Frederick Franz (1893–1992), who was then vice-president of the Society, was particularly vocal in raising expectations. Some members sold up property in order to fund the increased witnessing that took place in the run-up to the year; and others postponed marriage or having children. When 1975 came and went, some attempt was made to resolve the cognitive dissonance that resulted: the fact that the Jewish New Year began in October rather than January provided some leeway, as did the observation that Eve was created after Adam, which allowed a slight extension to the length of the sixth creative day. However, when 1976 had passed, disillusionment set in, and the Society experienced a decline of membership over the ensuing two years. Jehovah’s Witnesses learned after the failed 1975 date not to set further dates for the end-times, but the reputation for failed prophecy lingers on, and critics continue to pour ridicule on the organization, claiming that “they keep changing the dates.”

The Flag Salute Controversy

Jehovah’s Witnesses’ political neutrality has caused them to incur consequences that have gone beyond verbal criticism. They do not support any earthly government, holding that patriotism involves paying homage to the state rather than to Jehovah. This belief gave rise to major controversy about saluting the national flag. At a convention in 1935 in Washington DC, Rutherford urged his supporters to refuse to salute the flag, since this was placing loyalty to the nation over allegiance to Jehovah.

In 1931, Rutherford had authored a booklet entitled *The Kingdom, the Hope of the World*, which cited the story in the book of Daniel of three Jewish men—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—who refused to comply with King Nebuchadnezzar’s (ca. 634–562 BCE) decree that all citizens should bow down

and worship a 90-foot tall gold statue in Babylon, or else face the prospect of immolation in a blazing furnace (*Daniel* 3,1–30). At the 1935 convention, Rutherford urged followers of Jehovah to follow their example by refusing to comply with expressions of allegiance to the state, such as saluting the national flag or reciting the pledge of allegiance (Rutherford 1931).

Soon afterwards, a number of schoolchildren heeded his instruction, and were excluded from school. This led to numerous famous court cases: Jehovah's Witnesses were finally victorious in 1943, on the grounds that religious freedom, as granted by the First Amendment, should prevail over schools' requirements concerning declarations of national allegiance. Although the Watch Tower Society was jubilant at the final outcome, its members' non-compliance in expressions of patriotism did not enhance public perception of the organization.

Blood

Jehovah's Witnesses are probably best known for the stance they take on blood. There is no other religious group known to the author that rejects blood transfusion, and the uniqueness of the Jehovah's Witnesses' position therefore makes them stand out. Jehovah's Witnesses' stated opposition to blood transfusion is biblical (Pattillo 1931; *The Watchtower* 1944, 1945, 1952a). After the great flood, God gives Noah new dietary laws, stating, "Every moving animal that is alive may serve as food for you. Just as I gave you the green vegetation, I give them all to you. Only flesh with its life—its blood—you must not eat" (*Genesis* 9,3–4). A similar prohibition is found in the *Book of Leviticus*: "You must not eat the blood of any sort of flesh because the life of every sort of flesh is its blood. Anyone eating it will be cut off" (*Leviticus* 17,13–4). The continuing application of this law is seen as confirmed by the First Jerusalem Council in 49 CE, at which the early Christian leaders agreed to "abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from what is strangled, and from blood" (*Acts* 15,20). The *Book of Leviticus* prescribes the penalty for contravening the law relating to blood: the offender should be "cut off"—in other words, removed from the rest of the people.

In 1961, it was announced that voluntarily accepting a blood transfusion constituted grounds for being disfellowshipped; today the act of knowingly

receiving a transfusion and being unrepentant is a signal that the member has disassociated from Jehovah's organization.

Jehovah's Witnesses have never attempted to conceal or play down their attitude to blood transfusion; indeed, if anything, they have been proud of what they regard as faithfulness to Jehovah. In 1994 the front cover of *Awake!* magazine displayed the heading "Youths Who Put God First," depicting three of five young people who were featured inside. They were between 12 and 17 years of age, and had refused blood transfusions rather than betray their religious beliefs. Three of them died of blood cancer. The article commended their courage (*Awake!* 1994), and two subsequent letters to the editor also endorsed their bravery, but opponents continue to draw attention to the article.

Disfellowshipping

The practice of disfellowshipping was mentioned above: congregations ensure that strict integrity is maintained among their members, in accordance with Jesus' preaching, as recorded by Matthew:

Moreover, if your brother commits a sin, go and reveal his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take along with you one or two more, so that on the testimony of two or three witnesses every matter may be established. If he does not listen to them, speak to the congregation. If he does not listen even to the congregation, let him be to you just as a man of the nations and as a tax collector (*Matthew* 18,15–7).

The first step in maintaining discipline, therefore, is for a member who is aware of another baptized member's wrongdoing to talk to that person and point out their error, thus giving him or her an opportunity to repent and change their behavior. If this proves ineffective, the other members should be brought in to speak to that person. If the erring member continues, then the matter should be raised at congregational level by involving the elders, who will investigate the report and determine how it should be dealt with, and whether they should form a judicial committee.

When a serious offence has been alleged, such as sexual impropriety, drunkenness, fraud, or apostasy, a judicial committee of three elders is appointed and meets with the accused. In accordance with biblical principles, two or more witnesses are needed before he or she can be found guilty and disciplined.

Depending on the severity of the offence, the committee may issue a judicial reproof, which may either be private or public, or they may decide to disfellowship the offending member. A public reproof or a decision to disfellowship will be announced to the congregation at its weekday meeting; the precise reasons are not announced, but it is merely stated that “[N] is no longer one of Jehovah’s Witnesses.” Disfellowshipping often involves being barred from association with fellow members; the disfellowshipped member may attend congregational meetings, but without social exchange with others, not even a simple greeting.

Shunning

The practice of shunning dissociated and disfellowshipped members has frequently attracted criticism, and there is no doubt that ostracism of such people has caused considerable suffering. In the Society’s early years, Charles Taze Russell expressed the view that Christians in general—not merely Bible Students—should avoid becoming “unclean,” and should separate themselves from God’s enemies. By this, he meant that the Christians should avoid associating with people of reprehensible character, which did not include those whose opinions differed from the rest of the congregation. In his later work *The New Creation*, in which Russell set out the regulations governing congregational practice, he allowed that a congregation might discuss a member’s misdemeanors and, if appropriate, disfellowship that person (Russell 1904).

However, disfellowshipping did not entail shunning, but merely that the rest of the congregation should “withdraw special brotherly fellowship” and that the offender should be treated “as a heathen man and a publican.” The word “publican” means a tax collector in the King James Version of the Bible: tax collectors were unpopular among first century Jews, and were typically avoided.

Nonetheless, an early *Zion’s Watch Tower* article (1906b, 3801) recommended that such people should be treated courteously, not snubbed, and even Joseph Franklin Rutherford, who wished to exert greater control over the Society’s members, expressed opposition to “bondage to creeds,” which he believed to be characteristic of the Roman Catholic Church (*The Watch Tower* 1930, 283). It was Nathan Homer Knorr (1905–1977), the third president, who argued that there was no biblical warrant for congregational voting, and

introduced the institution of judicial committees in 1944. Offences which merited judicial investigation and possible disfellowshipping now included “disturbing the unity of the congregation” and not merely moral lapses, and recourse was made to Paul’s advice to the Corinthians:

But now I am writing you to stop keeping company with anyone called a brother who is sexually immoral or a greedy person or an idolater or a reviler or a drunkard or an extortioner, not even eating with such a man.... Remove the wicked person from among yourselves (*1 Corinthians* 5,11–3).

In 1952, it was made a requirement for congregations to disfellowship those who were guilty of serious offences and unrepentant, and in 1955, a *Watchtower* article went further, stating that even associating with a disfellowshipped person could itself be grounds for disfellowshipping (*The Watchtower* 1952b, 1955).

As the Watch Tower Society’s stance on blood, disfellowshipping, and shunning intensified, it inevitably came to public attention, was publicized in the media, and became the subject of films, television programs, and documentaries. Jehovah’s Witness parents refusing blood transfusion for their child made for exciting film and television drama; some plots, such as Ian McEwan’s *The Children Act*, were based on real-life cases, although the fact that they were not always well researched no doubt helped fuel public antagonism towards the Society.

The New World Translation

The Watch Tower Society’s own translation of the Bible, *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (1961/2013), which commenced in 1950 and was completed in 1961, enabled new opposition to the Society’s teachings. Up to that time, the Society used mainstream versions of the Bible, mainly the King James Version and the American Standard Version. The Society wanted a version that was “not colored by the creeds and traditions of Christendom” (*Jehovah’s Witnesses: Proclaimers of God’s Kingdom* 1993, 609). In addition, the translators wanted to reintroduce the name “Jehovah” as a rendering of the tetragrammaton YHWH in the Hebrew scriptures and its presumed equivalent *kurios* in Greek. They also wanted to clarify the translation of *parousia*, which they have insisted, right from the time of Russell, means “presence” rather than

“coming,” and refers to Christ’s invisible kingly presence which they believe began in 1914.

The New World Translation inevitably provoked much mainstream criticism, and a number of prominent mainline scholars expressed their evaluation. William Barclay (1907–1978) described it as “a shining example of how the Bible ought not to be translated” (Barclay 1953, 31–2), although his short article in *The Expository Times* did not identify any specific deficiencies. Bruce Metzger (1914–2007) provided a much more detailed critique, mainly focusing on how the translation addresses Christological issues (Metzger 1953). Like many subsequent critics, he takes issue with the rendering of *John* 1,1 as “the Word was a god,” and takes exception to the translation of *Colossians* 1,15: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, because by means of him all other things were created in the Heavens and upon the earth.” As he points out, the word “other” does not appear in the Greek text, and the anonymous Watch Tower translators inserted it to support their view that Jesus Christ is the first created being, rather than “eternally begotten.” Again, in common with many other critics, Metzger questioned the use of the name Jehovah, either as a rendering of Yahweh, or as a legitimate translation of *kurios*.

One postscript concerning *The New World Translation* is worth mentioning. Critics have alighted on the use that the Society allegedly made of Johannes Greber’s (1874–1944) translation of the Bible, which appeared in 1937 (Greber 1937). Greber was a Roman Catholic priest who joined a Spiritualist group, and his translation supposedly involved the help of the spirit world. The Watch Tower Society referred to him in a small number of articles in the 1950s and 1960s, expressing approval of his translation of *John* 1,1, and *Matthew* 27,51–3, which I have discussed elsewhere (Chryssides 2016, 169–70). Greber’s translation of *John* 1,1–3 was quoted in full in a booklet entitled “*The Word*”—*Who is He? According to John* (1962). The Society later ceased quoting Greber, recognizing his occultist connections with disapproval, but this detail of the Society’s history continues to haunt it: its critics contend that not only are Jehovah’s Witnesses really occultist at heart, but hypocritical as well!

Of the countercult literature that targets Jehovah’s Witnesses, books by Robert H. Countess (1937–2005), David A. Reed, Ron Rhodes, and Robert M. Bowman, specifically address the Society’s translation and interpretation of the Bible (Countess 1982; Reed 1986; Rhodes 1993; Bowman 1991). Particularly

influential is the writing of Walter R. Martin (1928–1989), whose *The Kingdom of the Cults* was first published in 1965, and sold over half a million copies by 1986 (Martin 1965). His chapter on Jehovah’s Witnesses started life as a short booklet, co-authored with Norman H. Klann (1919–1971), entitled *Jehovah of the Watchtower* (Martin and Klann 1953). Also well-known is Anthony A. Hoekema’s (1913–1988) somewhat more measured *The Four Major Cults* (1963), one of which is inevitably Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other more recent critics have included Bob Larson’s *Larson’s Book of Cults* (1982).

In addition to mainstream Christian literature, there are many writings by ex-members, the best-known being William J. Schnell (1905–1973), Raymond V. Franz (1922–2010), Marvin James Penton, and Edmund C. Gruss (1933–2018). A large number of ex-members have now produced novels, of which there are now over 50—a topic that merits further research—some of which are autobiographical, and others works of fiction, which show strong evidence of being based on the authors’ own experience of the Watch Tower organization.

Political Opposition: Nazi Germany

Much more serious than countercult critique is political opposition. Undoubtedly, the most serious persecution was during the Third Reich in the 1930s and 1940s, when Jehovah’s Witnesses—or *Bibelforscher* (Bible Students) as they were called in Germany—declined to participate in national festivals, to salute the national flag, or to give the greeting “Heil Hitler,” and refused to undertake military service. They continued with their house-to-house work and their literature distribution, despite government banning of their activities. As a consequence, they were barred from government employment, denied state benefits, had their businesses boycotted, and children were separated from their families. They were subjected to arrests and beatings, and some 13,400 *Bibelforscher* were sent to prisons or camps.

Unlike the Jews, however, the *Bibelforscher* were given the option of release, on condition that they “swore off” by signing a document certifying that they had left the Watch Tower organization and would no longer participate in any of its activities, transferring their allegiance to the State. Very few Witnesses availed themselves of this option, and around 2,000 did not survive, 270 of whom were

executed. The Nazi authorities were less inclined to sentence *Bibelforscher* to death, since they judged the Witnesses to be “ideologically” rather than biologically unfit, and renouncing their faith was viewed as a greater victory than execution.

South Korea

While Jehovah's Witnesses are now free to proclaim their message in Germany, opposition continues elsewhere. Military service remains a highly contentious issue: while there are many countries that offer alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors, some offer no alternatives, and some require longer periods of alternative service than the equivalent time required in the military. Jehovah's Witnesses are amenable to alternative service, so long as it is not under military control.

In recent times the greatest difficulties have occurred in South Korea and in Russia. In South Korea, the 1948 Military Service Act required military service for all men of 18 years and over, with no option of alternative service, and objectors were criminalized. From 1953, some 19,000 Jehovah's Witnesses have served prison sentences, totaling 36,000 years in all. When Park Chung-Hee (1917–1979) became president, his aim was to have a 100% compliance with the 1949 Conscription Law, and in 1971 he declared a state of emergency, thus making freedom of conscience subordinate to national security. Soldiers were ordered to seek out congregations to arrest conscientious objectors, and use was made of military courts rather than civilian ones, which entailed that Witnesses received not only a less sympathetic hearing, but longer prison sentences for non-compliance—typically, three years' imprisonment rather than two. Prison conditions were harsh, contacts with family were denied, and Witnesses were often tortured, as a result of which five young men died.

Matters changed for the better in 2001, when cases were moved to civilian courts and, following some 500 complaints to the United Nations' Human Rights Committee, assisted by the legal department of the Watch Tower Headquarters, the right of conscience became protected in 2018, and South Korea was required to offer alternative service. However, South Korea's alternative service extends to three years, as compared with the period of military service, which is only 18

months, making it the world's longest period of alternative service. However, all Jehovah's Witnesses there have now been released.

Russia

In Russia, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 resulted in new opposition. Although Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov Lenin (1870–1924) had proclaimed the freedom of religion, the atheist Social Democratic Party soon regarded religion as the “opium of the people,” and made religious instruction illegal. Opposition intensified, as Witnesses continued to ensure the availability of their literature by smuggling it into the country, operating clandestine printeries, and continuing with street witnessing. When Germany attacked Russia in 1941, Jehovah's Witnesses maintained neutrality, and refused to enlist in military service or to vote in elections. In 1951, the KGB persuaded Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin (1878–1953) to exile the “Jehovists” to Irkutsk and Tomsk, where they continued with informal witnessing. In 1961, a budget of 5,000,000 rubles was designated to deal with Jehovah's Witnesses, such was the perceived threat.

Under *perestroika*, which was announced in 1985, the situation began to change, and in 1990 the Chairman of the Committee for Religious Affairs received a delegation of 15 Jehovah's Witnesses, as a result of which the Society was allowed to register in 1991. The religious freedom of Jehovah's Witnesses was short lived, however. The situation for Jehovah's Witnesses was largely prompted by the attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church: Eastern Orthodoxy has tended to be intolerant of other forms of religion, and it is opposed to proselytizing, which of course Jehovah's Witnesses insist on undertaking.

In 1993 Alexander Dvorkin, a Russian Orthodox scholar and activist, decided to set up the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Information and Advisory Center, Russia's first anticult organization, with the approval of the Patriarch of Moscow. At first, the Center targeted small sectarian Russian groups, but with the passage of time better-known new religious groups, such as Scientology, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and numerous others were targeted, including Jehovah's Witnesses.

In 2002, the Russian federal authorities passed a law “On Combatting Extremist Activity,” defined as “propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or

inferiority of a person on the basis of their religious affiliation or attitude towards religion.” In 2006, modifications were made to the legislation, resulting in Jehovah’s Witnesses being accused of incitements to “religious discord” and assertion of superiority and exclusivity, and the following year the Prosecutor General’s Office began an investigation of the Watch Tower organization in the country, commissioning a number of “expert studies.” Although it was concluded that Jehovah’s Witnesses did not actively incite hostility, some 95 of their publications were defined as extremist, and put on the Federal List of Extremist Materials.

Meeting together as congregations came to be regarded as extremist, and 16 Jehovah’s Witnesses were found guilty by the Taganrog City Court on November 13, 2015. This was followed by police raids, and in 2017 the Supreme Court required the liquidation of all the Society’s assets, making it impossible for the premises to be used for meetings. As of October 9, 2020, 388 Witnesses in Russia and Crimea are under criminal investigation, 45 are in prison (10 convicted; 35 awaiting trial); over 190 have served time in pre-trial detention; 26 are under house arrest; and 1,146 homes have been raided since the Supreme Court ruling in 2017.

Sexual Abuse

As the public became increasingly aware of sexual abuse scandals, Jehovah’s Witnesses came under scrutiny. In the year 2000, William H. Bowen, who had been an elder in a Kentucky congregation, and at one time a Brooklyn Bethelite, decided to publish an Internet post, inviting victims to contact him, and he set up the website Silentlambs.org, which became an incorporated organization in 2001. The website’s material is not confined to the Watch Tower Society, but it describes Jehovah’s Witness organization as a “pedophile paradise.”

In reality, there are few, if any, opportunities for pedophile activity at Kingdom Hall meetings or at conventions, since there are well attended, with no special activities for children, who remain with their parents throughout. Sexual abuse has tended to occur within families, or with a congregational member—sometimes an elder or ministerial servant—who has befriended vulnerable fellow members and received hospitality in their homes. What has attracted particular attention, however, appears to be the way in which Jehovah’s Witnesses have

dealt with the problem. Jehovah's Witnesses have now been the subject of two government reports—one in Australia (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse 2015), and the other in the Netherlands (van den Bos et al. 2019). The Australian Royal Commission's investigations were not confined to Jehovah's Witnesses but had a much wider scope, including health care and educational establishments, as well as a number of religious denominations, such as Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and the Salvation Army. By contrast, the Netherlands Report exclusively targeted Jehovah's Witnesses.

Online Opposition

Mention should also be made about the opportunities for opposition afforded by the Internet. There are many websites that have been created in opposition to the Watch Tower Society: many of these are amateurish, but there are a number of quite professionally produced web pages, such as avoidjw.org, jwfacts.com, jwsurvey.org. Particularly vocal in his online criticism is Lloyd Evans (who also writes under the pseudonym John Cedars), author of *The Reluctant Apostate* (Evans 2017), who has authored various books and web pages, and features numerous videos.

These online critiques of Jehovah's Witnesses address numerous perceived doctrinal and social issues, particularly blood, disfellowshipping, and shunning, and highlight atrocity tales, as well as alleged changes in doctrine, offering advice on what to say to Jehovah's Witnesses at the door and on literature carts, and how to leave. These pages also make available archival material, as well as restricted literature normally only available to elders.

Perhaps most important for ex-members is the role of social media. One major problem for ex-members is that they miss former friends, families, and community. Groups such as the Facebook (2020) Ex-Jehovah's Witnesses Support provide an alternative community: at the time of writing, it is followed by 9,140 members, with 8,695 "likes." The forum is international, and because social media groups are themed, it can readily bring together those who would have found difficulty in the past pre-Internet years finding others in like situations. Although such groups operate in cyberspace, the online contact frequently leads to physical meetings, and thus can create new communities of conventional friendships.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion has not attempted to evaluate these criticisms or to consider how the Watch Tower Society has responded, but merely to enumerate the kinds of criticism that have been made of the organization since its inception. A thorough assessment would be a more major task. More detailed discussion of sexual abuse allegations can be found in the Jehovah's Witnesses' response to the Dutch Government and an expert report by Holly Folk, Massimo Introvigne, and J. Gordon Melton (van Ling 2020; Folk, Introvigne, and Melton 2020). Further analysis must await my forthcoming *Jehovah's Witnesses: An Introduction* (Chryssides 2021). In the meantime, it is worth mentioning briefly that many of the critics only tell part of the story. For example, the Miracle Wheat incident ended with the Watch Tower Society offering a full refund to all purchasers—an offer of which no one took advantage.

Allegations against Russell and the foster child Rose Ball (1869–1950) were never substantiated, and indeed seem unlikely if, as is often reported, his marriage with Maria was a celibate one (*The Watchtower* 1953). Critics of the Society's policy on blood often fail to mention the medical alternatives that Jehovah's Witnesses find acceptable, their Hospital Liaison Committees, or the fact that blood transfusion has sometimes caused illness rather than cure. While their stance on war may seem unpatriotic, Jehovah's Witnesses will typically point out that, if all countries adopted the same attitude to armed conflict, the world would be a much more peaceful and prosperous place. I have discussed the Jehovah's Witnesses' position on prophecy elsewhere and, without endorsing their views on inter-time chronology, I have argued that it has been seriously misunderstood (Chryssides 2010).

Mainstream Christians will of course continue to challenge Watch Tower teachings; that is certainly their right, but criticism of course should be based on accurate understanding rather than caricature or scant and careless reading of the Society's literature. Few critics in the free world would endorse the persecution that Witnesses have undergone, but Jehovah's Witnesses remain undeterred, continuing with their worship and their evangelism, believing that the truth should not be compromised by secular ideologies or vociferous critics, and that opposition is to be expected as confirmatory evidence that Armageddon is near.

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