

## **In the Shadow of Russia: Jehovah's Witnesses and Religious Freedom in Central Asia. Some Introductory Considerations**

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**ABSTRACT:** This issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* contains the proceedings of an Internet Seminar that was held on 2 December 2022, entitled *In the Shadow of Russia: Jehovah's Witnesses and Religious Freedom in Central Asia*. The papers by Šorytė, Introvigne, and Richardson present a general overview of the situation of religious liberty in the five countries of Central Asia, all marked by Russian influence. Willy Fautré surveys Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The papers by Central Asian scholars Beissebayev, Sinyakov, and Aslanova, discuss specific issues in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The papers demonstrate that the situation for the Jehovah's Witnesses in the area is not good, and it is worse in some Central Asian countries than in others. But it is better than in some neighboring countries, and there are signs that it is improving.

**KEYWORDS:** Jehovah's Witnesses, Jehovah's Witnesses in Central Asia, Religious Liberty in Central Asia, Anti-Cult Movement in Russia, Brainwashing.

It is probable that some kind of legal structure is necessary to ensure human rights such as the freedom to manifest one's religion, but these structures are rarely if ever sufficient. Those in positions of power, and indeed those with apparently little power, can usually manage to prevent members of unpopular religions from enjoying those rights that, at first sight, we might assume the law guarantees. Nearly all the Declarations, Conventions, Constitutions, and ordinary laws that pronounce the rights of all peoples to practice their religion freely have a clause that can be used to restrict such rights.

For example, Article 2.1. of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* (1992) affirms that persons belonging to religious minorities:

have the right to profess and practice their own religion in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination.

Article 4.2. then adds the proviso:

States shall take measures to create favorable conditions to enable persons belonging to minorities to express their characteristics and to develop their [...] religion [...] except where specific practices are in violation of national law and contrary to international standards.

Article 9 of *The European Convention of Human Rights* affirms in clause (1) that:

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

Then, in clause (2), it adds that:

Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

And this is understandable. The right of members of a religion to sacrifice virgins on an altar is not an acceptable right in contemporary societies. Clearly, the rights of others also need to be considered.

But where does one draw the line? What, we might ask, happens when members of a religion take seriously the commandment found in both the Torah and the New Testament (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17; Matthew 5:21; Matthew 19:18; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20): “Thou shalt not kill”? What *has* happened is that thousands of believers have been imprisoned, tortured and killed for doing that very thing—refusing to take up arms against fellow human beings (King 1982; Knox 2018; Liebster 2003; Wontor-Cichy 2006).

I am, of course, referring to the Jehovah's Witnesses, one of the more controversial religions of modern times, but just as controversial are the social reactions to which they have given rise in the numerous countries throughout the globe in which they are to be found. Rarely are they greeted with open arms by governments—at best, they are tolerated and left to their own devices; but even then, they are unlikely to be welcomed by the general population. A recent YouGov poll of a random sample of a thousand United States adults indicated that, out of 35 religious groups, organizations, and belief systems, only Satanism

and the Church of Scientology had a higher percentage than the Jehovah's Witnesses having an unfavorable attitude towards them (YouGov 2022).

Nonetheless, the Witnesses are persistent in their proselytizing efforts, and are able to attract new members wherever they go, in even the most restrictive of countries, and in the full knowledge that they are risking their freedom and possibly their lives by so doing.

This issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* contains the proceedings of an Internet Seminar that was held on 2 December 2022, entitled *In the Shadow of Russia: Jehovah's Witnesses and Religious Freedom in Central Asia*. With the collapse of the USSR, all five countries of Central Asia became independent states, each adopting a Constitution in the 1990s that clearly proclaimed freedom of religion for all its citizens, the vast majority of whom are Sunni Muslims. Yet, within these pages we can find a wide range of examples of ways in which these new states have managed to circumvent the freedom of religion clauses that they had embodied in their Constitutions.

It is rare for the countries of Central Asia to hit the headlines of Western media; and it is unlikely that a majority of either Europeans or Americans could name the five countries that comprise it, let alone point them out on a map. Luckily, the contributors do not take prior knowledge for granted. The paper by the internationally renowned human rights advocate, Massimo Introvigne, provides a remarkably wide-ranging overview, briefly introducing us to the geography, demography, economy, politics, religion, legislation, and history of the region in general and the five countries in particular, paying particular attention to the changing relationships that have existed between them and their near neighbors, Turkey, China, and Russia.

As the title of the issue suggests, it is the role that Russia has played in the region which underlies the content of the papers, demonstrating ways in which it has had, and continues to have, significant consequences for the lives of the Jehovah's Witnesses, who have been active in the region for over the past hundred years. While the first three papers contain references to the whole region, the next four are more focused on specific countries.

Unfortunately, for health reasons, Artur Artemyev was unable to join the Seminar. This was a disappointment as Professor Artemyev is an internationally respected scholar from Kazakhstan who, among his many scholarly projects, has

carried out an extensive study of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan. His impressive book on the subject can, however, be freely downloaded in both Russian and English (Artemyev 2021).

The first paper, by Rosita Šorytė (who has a diplomatic background and, as a native of Lithuania, has experienced life under Soviet rule), sets the scene by recounting how a Kazakh couple left the Jehovah's Witnesses after twenty years' membership and managed to register, with unprecedented speed, an "anti-cult" movement directed against their former religion. Again, with unprecedented speed, they were in a court of law, claiming damages for the mental ill-health they maintained they were suffering from as a result of their years with the Witnesses. It took three "expert witnesses" only few days after being presented with sixteen publications of the Jehovah's Witnesses for analysis to produce a detailed report declaring that the couple had been "brainwashed" by the Witnesses and that their literature contains subliminal messages that had the effect of manipulating the minds of any who read it. As a result, the Witnesses were ordered to pay the equivalent of two years' salary.

Šorytė goes on to explain how it was discovered that the "expert report" was the exact same report as that which had been used in another case, and that *that* report had itself relied on publications of the Russian anticult movement, some of which were lifted from Western anti-cult literature. Furthermore, Šorytė tells how she had encountered a similar example of expert testimony being a copy of a copy in a case in Kyrgyzstan, reminding her of the Russian Matryoshka dolls, nesting into one another.

Jehovah's Witnesses, like other individuals and organizations, can be faced with an assortment of legal jurisdictions. These can be at the international (United Nations) level, the continental (European) level, the governmental level, and/or the regional and local level. Normally the more extensive level of law trumps a lower level of law, but this is by no means always the case. The Jehovah's Witnesses have been discriminated against at the local, regional level in a number of cases that are not necessarily sanctioned at the state level.

The paper by James Richardson, who has expertise as both a lawyer and a sociologist of religion, describes how the Witnesses have had considerable success in the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in cases they have taken against the Russian Federation. Faced with decisions instructing it to release prisoners and compensate for property seized, Russia has simply ignored

the Court's orders and has now removed itself from the jurisdiction of the Court. Not being members of the Council of Europe, the countries of Central Asia have no recourse to the ECtHR; the Court's rulings on the Russian treatment of Witnesses can, nonetheless, send a signal about what is not considered acceptable in Europe. They are, however, members of the United Nations, and Jehovah's Witnesses have successfully turned to the UN Human Rights Committee (HRC); and Richardson cites some cases that can give them hope that discriminatory government rulings can be overturned.

Willy Fautré is the founder and Executive Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers International, an organization that documents information about violations of religious freedom throughout the world. His paper provides examples of how Jehovah's Witnesses have had their religious freedoms violated in Tajikistan (where, as in Russia, they are banned), Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (where they have been imprisoned and their ability to practice their religion has been severely curtailed). His paper illustrates how, in a country which guarantees freedom to manifest one's religion, the government might add the rider that this is only so long as the religion is officially registered, then make it impossible to register unless there is a large number of members in any particular association, and/or find various spurious reasons why it should not register the religion. One reason offered in Central Asia is that Russia has declared that the literature provided by the Jehovah's Witnesses is extremist; this means that the Witnesses, as readers of such literature, are themselves extremist, and therefore dangerous, and should not be allowed to operate in the country.

It is true that Jehovah's Witnesses are extremist in some ways. They are extremely non-violent; and they are extremely meticulous in following the law of the land, unless it goes against God's law as they understand it, as in the case of obeying the Ten Commandments. They are not, however, violent—quite the opposite in fact. Yet they can find themselves being imprisoned, having their property confiscated, and, sometimes, being tortured, without there being a shred of evidence that they have harmed a single soul.

The next two papers are written by scholars from Kazakhstan. Serik Beissembayev's paper presents the preliminary findings of an online survey he has conducted with over 1,500 Kazakh Jehovah's Witnesses respondents. Among the many interesting findings, is that just over half of his respondents identified themselves as Russian, with only 28 per cent identifying as Kazakhs.

Furthermore, over three quarters said they spoke only Russian in their homes, with 11.5 per cent speaking both Russian and Kazakh. Over two thirds had received some kind of further education, around three quarters considered their life had improved considerably since they had become a Jehovah's Witness, and most of the respondents indicated that they were happy or confident about the future. Not surprisingly, practically all of them placed primary importance on the role of God in their life. It will be interesting to see what further findings can be revealed by the survey, and it is to be hoped that further surveys, asking yet further questions, with, perhaps, a control group of non-Witnesses, may be undertaken in the future.

Oleg Sinyakov's paper presents a qualitative analysis of the situation in contemporary Kazakhstan, where, we learn, 3,834 religious associations within 18 confessions are registered. Nearly two thirds of the associations are Islamic, but there is a fair number of Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic associations as well as a number of minority religions including the Hare Krishnas, the Bahá'í, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Unification Church (Family Federation), and, with 60 registered associations and 57 Kingdom Halls, the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Sinyakov then gives us a brief account of the history of the Witnesses in Kazakhstan, which began in 1892 when a Witness was exiled from Russia to Kazakhstan because of his commitment to his religion. During World War II, Witnesses imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps converted hundreds of fellow prisoners to their faith, and after the war many found themselves in Soviet camps where again, under conditions of severe hardship, they continued their successful proselytizing. Further trials awaited them, but following the collapse of the Soviet Union, life for the Witnesses and other religions was considerably easier in Kazakhstan than in most neighboring post-Soviet countries, including Russia. Nonetheless, there were still quite a few challenges that faced the registration of associations in several of the Kazakh regions.

However, since 2013 all the Jehovah's Witnesses' associations have been reregistered, and Kazakhstan's authorities have officially stated that despite the ban on Witnesses in Russia they did not consider the believers to be extremists and they would not ban them. Sinyakov includes the results of some of the research he has been conducting into the conversion of Jehovah's Witnesses and ends his paper with a rejection of accusations made about them, pointing out that,

in opposition to what the media and anti-cultists claim, the Witnesses are perfectly rational and, although not everyone will agree with their beliefs, their actions pose no threat to fellow citizens.

The final paper is by Indira Aslanova, a scholar at the Kyrgyz Russian Slavic University in Bishkek. Concentrating on Kyrgyzstan, Aslanova returns to the subject initially raised by Šorytè: the role of forensic experts in the repression of both Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities, such as the Church of Scientology, when, she tells us, "expert" assessment is based on the assumption that (real) religions are monotheistic, have a Holy Scripture, and the institution of the church and clergy. She cites a case in which the Ahmadiyya community of Kyrgyzstan was denied reregistration after expert witnesses representing the "traditional" Muslim clergy declared the organization to be a "destructive cult."

It is not only in Central Asia that religions are judged according to the beliefs and practices of a region's predominant faith. Today, for example, the majority of Christian churches, including the Russian Orthodox Church, accept the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and, like many in the UK and elsewhere, consider non-Trinitarians are not "real Christians" but heretics. Yet the doctrine is not explicitly stated in the New Testament and only came to be widely accepted after several church councils had debated the nature of God throughout the first few centuries of Christianity. An expert witness in a secular court can explain what the doctrine is, which religions accept it, and which do not, but s/he cannot claim any expertise in deciding whether or not the doctrine is true.

To take another example of a common accusation, the concept of brainwashing is, of course, a metaphor. No one is suggesting that Jehovah's Witnesses actually wash the brains of their members with soap and water. The concept of mind control is slightly more plausible, but there are now numerous studies demonstrating that, although members of a religion may certainly influence those with whom they communicate (anyone living in a society is constantly being influenced by others to a greater or lesser extent), proselytizing religions are rarely as effective as they might like to be in persuading others to accept their beliefs.

Those who use a concept such as brainwashing are frequently judging the outcome rather than the process by which the outcome is reached. They are really arguing that it is difficult to accept that anyone could reach that outcome of their own free will. However, most people who are approached by enthusiastic

proselytizers do not convert, and nearly all religions have a significant turnover, with those who had joined later leaving of their own free will. This is as true of the Jehovah's Witnesses as it is of many other religions that have been accused of employing "brainwashing" techniques. Indeed, the Kazakh couple who left the Witnesses to set up an anti-cult movement managed to leave after twenty years of so-called indoctrination.

A rough estimate of turnover can be made by adding the number of baptisms in year  $X$  to the peak number of publishers (Jehovah's Witnesses: see [jw.org](http://jw.org) 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021), then subtract the projected deaths (1% per annum: The World Bank 2022); the result can be compared to actual peak publishers for the following year ( $X+1$ ), which will indicate whether there have been members leaving over the period. Data about both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—and the worldwide Jehovah's Witnesses community as a whole—show that members do leave on a more or less regular basis. However, it is true that we cannot tell from these figures whether such people have left, have been disfellowshipped or, in the cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, emigrated to another country.

Aslanova concludes her paper by saying that Kyrgyzstan (and, we could add, the rest of Central Asia) "located in the infosphere of Russia, very organically absorbed the anticult rhetoric." It is time, she says, for investigators and judges to rely on factual evidence of illegal acts rather than fabricated and/or irrelevant information.

In conclusion, the opportunity for Jehovah's Witnesses (and some other religions) to enjoy religious freedom in Central Asia is not good, and it is worse in some Central Asian countries than in others. But it is better than in some neighboring countries, and there are signs that it is improving. There is clearly a growing number of Central Asians who are aware of the problems and are trying to rectify them by rejecting the more negative influences of Russia and its anti-cult movement, and by recognizing the value of social science in combatting both ignorance and misinformation through educating governmental bodies, the media, the courts, and the general public.

It is clear that external influences can also contribute to the reduction of prejudice and discrimination through passing judgements in international organizations such as the United Nations, the US State Department, and the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), and by providing expert witnesses to give evidence alongside local experts in the courts. Seminars



and publication of papers such as those in this issue can also play a role in highlighting some of the obstacles to, and potential solutions for, the realization of religious freedoms in an ever-changing and increasingly pluralistic world.

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