

## Reviews

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Rosie Luther, “What Happens to Those Who Exit Jehovah’s Witnesses: An Investigation of the Impact of Shunning.” *Pastoral Psychology* 72 (2023):105–20.

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An article published by Rosie Luther in the journal *Pastoral Psychology* (Luther 2023) promises to reveal “What Happens to Those Who Exit Jehovah’s Witnesses: An Investigation of the Impact of Shunning.” Luther currently describes herself on LinkedIn as “Research assistant on an exploratory project examining emotional learning and transcranial direct stimulation” at Butler Hospital, Brown University, and was when she wrote the article a “part-time Psychology Department Tutor” at Eastern Connecticut State University (Luther 2024).

The problem with this article is that, whatever else it may be, it is not the account of a scientific investigation. Its stated objective was to examine the effect of “shunning” as practiced by the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The latter recommend that current members of the organization limit association or communication with ex-members who have been disfellowshipped or have publicly left the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Cohabiting relatives and those who have simply become inactive without a public announcement that they have left the Jehovah’s Witnesses are not shunned.

Luther’s interest is in familicide, i.e., “the murder of a spouse or at least one child” (Luther 2023, 109). While shunning and familicide have both been studied extensively, the original question Luther asks is whether the doctrines

and practices of the Jehovah's Witnesses, including (but not limited to) shunning, create a special danger that ex-members may commit familicide.

She starts with a sensational account of the tragic case of a woman called Lauren Stuart (1973–2018), who in 2018 killed her husband, her two children (although Luther mentions “three children”: Luther 2023, 105), and herself in Keego Harbor, Michigan. We are told that after “leaving Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) to enroll her sons in college, she was shunned by family and friends alike” (Luther 2023, 105). The only references to the Stuart tragedy in the article come from tabloids. The reader is left with the impression that Stuart was disfellowshipped and shunned for having “enrolled her sons in college.” Other statements in Luther's article reinforce this impression.

However, sending children to college is certainly not ground for disfellowshipping among the Jehovah's Witnesses. Although they do have certain reservations about modern university education, the Jehovah's Witnesses also report that “today, many of Jehovah's Witnesses have received advanced secular education” (“How Do Jehovah's Witnesses View Education?” 2024). In my personal experience of several decades of study of the Jehovah's Witnesses, I have met among them skilled professionals with college and university degrees.

This is true in different countries of the world. A 2023 study from Kazakhstan found that 23.9% of the Jehovah's Witnesses went to college and 19.1% obtained a degree there (Auyezbek and Beisembayev 2023, 8). A much older French study by the research company SOFRES dates back to 1998. At that time, the level of BAC+5 (meaning five years of post-secondary instruction after the high school's final exam) was 7% for Jehovah's Witnesses in their mid-30s. This was considerably lower than Kazakhstan in 2023 but consider that in 1998 the percentage of French citizens in the same age cohort with a BAC+5 education level was only 12% (SOFRES 1998, 4). Both investigations were conducted among Jehovah's Witnesses in good standing only and confirm that in the organization there was and is no prohibition against going to college.

After mentioning the Stuart case, Luther states that this “is not the only case of former JW members committing familicide” (Luther 2023, 105). Three other cases are mentioned but again one of the two references is to a tabloid, where the other is to a *Los Angeles Times* article that prudently presented the cases as “defying explanation” (Frazier 2003).

There would be of course one easy way to prove that having been a Jehovah's Witness results in an especially high risk of committing familicide. This would be a statistical study showing that the percentage of perpetrators of familicide among the former Jehovah's Witnesses is higher than among the population in general or the members or former members of other religions. Luther is no sociologist, but the possibility of such a study is not even hinted at. In fact, she found such a low number of anecdotal cases of familicides committed by ex-Jehovah's-Witnesses to suggest the possibility that the crime may be in fact *less* prevalent among those who have joined this particular religious organization than among others.

Luther offers two arguments in support of her theory that shunned ex-Jehovah's-Witness are at higher risk of committing familicide. One is a reconstruction of the beliefs of the Jehovah's Witnesses that omits to quote mainline scholarly research on the organization by, for example, George Chryssides or Zoe Knox, but does include professional anti-cultists such as Steven Hassan. This explains the caricatural description of the Jehovah's Witnesses as a group of "fundamentalist" (Luther 2023, 106) believers—but to which definition of "fundamentalism" Luther refers is not explained—who live in the panic terror of the "genocide" (Luther 2023, 106) that God himself will commit at Armageddon, i.e., at the end of the world as we know it.

No serious scholar would recognize the Jehovah's Witnesses in this description, and Luther's reconstruction of shunning is not more acceptable. She claims that

Members who choose to leave the religion due to moral or doctrinal objections are shunned by the community. Members who sin in the eyes of their congregation are shunned as well (Luther 2023, 106).

She even pretends that "the idea that people are guilty of murder if they do not follow doctrinal rules is another aspect of JW culture" (Luther 2023, 116), a truly bizarre statement not supported by any reference.

Although possibly unknown to Luther, there is a large literature on shunning by academic scholars (summarized and quoted in Introvigne 2024). She would have easily learned from it that not all members who leave the religion are shunned, only those who leave publicly (or join an organization whose membership is incompatible with being one of Jehovah's Witnesses), thus proclaiming their disagreement with and criticism of the organization. These are the minority of ex-members that sociologists call "apostates" (Bromley 1998;

Introvigne 2022). She would also have learned that not all sinners are disfellowshipped and shunned, but only those who are found guilty of serious offenses after a careful investigation and do not repent. An organization that would expel all “members who sin” would soon have no members at all.

Having liberally read anti-cult literature, Luther falls in almost each paragraph of her article into its most common fallacy. She presents as unique to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and dangerous, beliefs that are commons to hundreds of other religious organizations. This is not surprising, as she considers even the Latter-day Saints and the Seventh-day Adventists, organizations many would regard as mainline, as “high control groups with doomsday prophecies” to be investigated (Luther 2023, 116–17).

Typical examples of the fallacy are Luther’s comments that the Jehovah’s Witnesses “view the Bible as the inspired word of God” (Luther 2023, 106: so do all Christians) and have a hierarchy where “men occupy all positions of power” (Luther 2023, 107: so do Roman Catholics, Orthodox Jews, Muslims, and many other religions). Jehovah’s Witnesses are also singled out for believing that the world outside of the community of believers is “Satan’s world” (Luther 2023, 107). In fact, there was a religious leader who stated that “the whole world is under the control of the Evil One,” but he was not one of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. He was the author of the First Letter of John (5:19, New International Version), a text all Christians accept as part of the Bible.

Luther finally comes to what is promised in the title of the article, her “investigation on the impact of shunning.” The “investigation” consists of interviews with ten former Jehovah’s Witnesses, each of which lasted for a time of sixty to ninety minutes (Luther 2023, 116). The sample is minimal even for a qualitative study, but there is worse. Luther’s sample was selected after “a request for participants was posted on the Ex-JW subreddit as well as on several Facebook-based support forums” (Luther 2023, 109). It is clarified that these “support forums” are intended for “former JW members” (Luther 2023, 116: in fact, for “apostates”). Whoever has encountered the Ex-JW subreddit is aware that some of the most radical apostates post their anti-Jehovah’s-Witnesses tirades there. It is thus not surprising that Luther’s ten interviewees all reported very negative experiences with Jehovah’s Witnesses and shunning, and even humored her with statements that, albeit vaguely, might have implied that ex-members are indeed at risk of committing familicide.

In this mess, which has mysteriously survived the peer review of a journal published by a reputable publisher (but where biased articles against Jehovah's Witnesses have already appeared: see Introvigne and Richardson 2023), there is one sentence that goes to Luther's credit. She writes that,

The current study also has several limitations. Participants were recruited from online social media forums for former JW members. The selection process was not random and relied on voluntary self-identification. Participants in such forums may be more reactive and polarized than the general population of former JW members (Luther 2023, 116).

She even admits that, because of such problems, "this report contains some retrospective accounts that may not be as accurate as descriptions of current experiences" (Luther 2023, 116).

These are honest statements but should have led Luther to the conclusion that no valuable information, much less generalizations about the whole world population of the Jehovah's Witnesses, can be derived from her ten interviews and from a hasty reading of anti-cult literature. Unfortunately, having admitted the serious limitations of her material, Luther nonetheless decided to draw general conclusions from it. The result is something that may be valuable for somebody interested in studying the anti-Jehovah's-Witnesses feelings of a tiny group of apostate ex-members and perhaps of Luther herself but is of no value or interest for the study of current or former Jehovah's Witnesses.

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