

## Foreword

Jehovah's Witnesses are, paradoxically, one of the most widely known at the same time as being one of the least understood of today's minority religions. Commonly recognized as a result of their resolute determination to offer their understanding of God's Truths to every living person, throughout the world, we can see Witnesses standing in rain or sunshine in public places, offering us samples of their literature (which has been translated into well over 1,000 languages, including sign languages), knocking on our front doors, inviting us to discuss our faith in God and, should we engage in conversation, encouraging us to attend a Bible study session. And, despite the fact that only a small minority of those who do undertake further Bible study will become baptized, the Witnesses' persistence has, over the past 150 years, built up a membership of more than 8.8 million in 239 countries. We may also have heard that in present-day Russia the Witnesses have been "liquidated." This is because they openly claim that their beliefs are the true beliefs (although what religions, one may ask, are not of a similar persuasion?) and because their publications (and thus the Witnesses themselves) are officially defined as extremist. Any serious scholar of religion would dismiss this claim as rubbish, yet ironically there is a very different sense in which Witnesses could be viewed as extremist – certainly not in the sense that either jihadi terrorists (as one "extreme") or isolated hermits (as another "extreme") are extremist. On the contrary, Witnesses refuse to take up arms in any circumstances, and, far from living cloistered lives, most live in nuclear families, send their children to "ordinary" schools and have "ordinary" jobs, though these tend to be such as not to interfere with their responsibilities for spreading their truth to the four corners of the world.

In short, it is the seriousness with which Witnesses take their religion that is extreme. They are prepared to go to prison or even die rather than break the sixth commandment, *Thou shalt not kill*. And, although they are in many ways exemplary citizens of whatever state they inhabit, they will obey the law – Caesar's law – only insofar as it does not offend against what they deem to be God's law. Thousands were incarcerated, with about 1,750 dying in Nazi concentration camps during World War II, although, unlike Jews, Roma and homosexuals, whose fate was sealed, Witnesses could have escaped the horrors of Auschwitz simply by complying with the requirement to pledge allegiance to the regime. One reason why Witnesses can exhibit such extreme steadfastness to their principles could well be the belief that after death they will live in a restored Paradise on earth as subjects of God's Kingdom.

While their beliefs and practices clearly form a coherent whole for the Witnesses, some of their actions might seem somewhat surprising to non-believers. Although Witnesses will not vote or lobby for political ends, they have, through numerous legal battles, succeeded in changing or at least clarifying international and national law on a number of issues, mostly related to religious freedoms and human rights. Although Witnesses tend not to encourage higher education for the majority of their members, they have been responsible for supporting those with little access to any education. They have taught more than 152,000 Mexicans to read and write since 1946.

Although Witnesses will not accept blood transfusions, they have contributed to medical progress by facilitating the development of what are sometimes safer alternatives. Although Witnesses understand the Scriptures to be inspired by God and, as such, inerrant, this does not mean that everything in them is taken literally. Although Witnesses who are deemed to have committed serious sins may be “disfellowshipped,” a practice that can be experienced as resulting in considerable emotional distress, they can be welcomed back into the community if it is accepted that they have truly repented of their wrongdoing. Although they form a close-knit community (referring to each other as brother or sister) and are anxious to protect their members, especially their children, from the influences of the secular world, we are told that nearly half the Witnesses surveyed in Kazakhstan were in an interfaith marriage.

There are a few excellent publications about Jehovah’s Witnesses written by social scientists and historians (most of which are referenced in this volume), but almost all those written by individuals who have themselves experienced life in the movement have tended to be exposés by apostates – J. Gordon Melton has identified 138 autobiographical memoirs written by former Witnesses since 2000 (private communication).

Jolene Chu and Ollimatti Peltonen are, however, both fully committed Jehovah’s Witnesses who hold academic degrees, and I find it hard to believe that an outsider could have bettered this comprehensive and lucid introduction to an emic understanding of Watch Tower history, beliefs, and practices. Although not all those who read these pages will be tempted to accept the Witnesses’ beliefs and lifestyle, we are given a rare opportunity to comprehend more clearly why some of our fellow human beings do accept them – and this cannot but be a good thing.

Eileen Barker

## Introduction

Not so long ago, a manuscript of this kind would have had little chance of seeing the light of day. The prevailing opinion of “insider research” in times past was well captured by intellectual historian David Hollinger, who quipped that “religion is too important to be left in the hands of people who believe in it” (qtd. in Lofton 2020: 1). Unease over inside researcher bias is of course a legitimate concern, in this case, that the authors, both raised in Witness households, would allow their personal sympathies to govern their editorial choices about the content of this work. In full awareness of the challenges of our positionality, we hope to make a meaningful contribution to the small but growing field of scholarship on Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Witnesses trace their modern origins to the 1870s and currently number more than 8.8 million in 239 countries and territories. The community’s size and its 150-year history raise the question of its inclusion in a series on New Religious Movements (NRMs). Witnesses themselves would reject the NRM label, maintaining that their religion is not new but rather a restoration of early Christian belief and practice. Among scholars, NRM remains a “contested concept” (Chryssides & Whitehead 2023). Some would say Witnesses qualify because they are relatively new; others would say they *were* but no longer are an NRM. Still others classify the religion as an NRM because of its marginal status vis-à-vis the religious establishment. Definitional nuances aside, Witnesses are often buffeted by the same cultural and political headwinds as relatively newer minority religions, which partly explains why academic discourse about Witnesses continues within NRM circles.

Scholarly literature on the Witnesses commonly follows two basic tracks: (1) comparative approaches that highlight, for instance, how the belief system differs from mainstream religion or how the Witnesses navigate their minoritarian positions within wider society; and (2) analyses of controversies and conflicts that trace the roots of debates and examine responses and impacts thereto. These approaches have made important contributions, the majority of which assume a largely etic perspective. Even works that cover the lives of individual Witnesses tend to focus on narrow contexts, such as episodes of religious persecution or other crisis situations. Few works explore the quotidian experiences of ordinary Witnesses, and even fewer studies delve into the cultural and epistemological backdrops of their beliefs and practices. This Element seeks to fill a gap in the literature by offering an emic, or inside, perspective of the worldview of Jehovah’s Witnesses on both a collective and an individual level. High-profile controversies and lesser-known accomplishments are discussed briefly; however, the greater proportion of text is devoted to

outlining the broader picture of how Jehovah's Witnesses see themselves and take their place in the world.

The history section describes the origin and trajectory of the Witness community up to the mid-twentieth century. The doctrine section outlines the tenets and principles of their belief system, noting major differences with mainstream Christian religions, while avoiding digression into doctrinal disputation. The identity section describes the processes of becoming and belonging, as well as modes of exit and reentry. The section on organization continues from the mid-twentieth century onward with local and global developments that involve virtually all Witnesses in some way. The interaction section covers the Witnesses' relationship with society regarding government, legal and medical issues, and other areas. Finally, the conclusion suggests directions for future research.

Most academic works about Witnesses are geographically bounded. This Element, by contrast, highlights the community's worldwide scope. Statistical data, including recent quantitative research and previously unpublished material, convey the breadth of the community's diversity and collective activities. Witnesses' individual, communal, and organizational perspectives are included – voices largely absent from scholarly discourse to date.

Inclusion of all these essential aspects of Jehovah's Witnesses may leave some readers unsatisfied with sparse treatment of subjects of their particular interest. However, we hope that discussing the interrelationship of major features of the belief system from an emic perspective adds a fruitful vantage point for exploration. We also suggest a number of understudied topics that could be particularly enriched by including insider views as part of comprehensive scholarly analysis.

### Literature Review

In 1997, sociologist of religion Rodney Stark and economics professor Laurence Iannaccone co-authored the article “Why Jehovah's Witnesses Grow *so* Rapidly,” describing the group as “one of the most significant religious movements of modern times” (Stark & Iannaccone 1997: 133, italics in original title). Yet, they noted a paradox: “Almost every reader of this essay will have been visited by Jehovah's Witnesses during the past several years. However, if the Witnesses frequently appear on our doorsteps, they are conspicuously absent from our journals” (133). The authors mentioned the “almost complete omission” of the topic from scholarly literature, including the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, where theirs was the first article on Jehovah's Witnesses in the journal's history. In the quarter century since their article, significant works in sociology, medicine, history, and law have narrowed the gap. But scholarship from the perspective of lived experience is still rare,

though recent ethnographies have begun to fill this vacuum. Cross-cultural studies are virtually nonexistent.

The lacunae may be due to several factors. Historians and social scientists have typically approached their work from a strictly secular viewpoint (Lofton 2020; Pohran 2022). Scholars of religion have mainly examined the Witnesses' perceived minority and marginal status. Academic studies lean toward issues unrepresentative of the experience of most Witnesses. Histories often focus on periods of tension with political authority, such as during wartime or under dictatorships. Doctrinal analysis favors those concepts that stoke controversy, with discussion revolving more around disputes and consequences than a given core belief itself – its intellectual origin, its place within the belief system, and perceptions and experiences of believers.

Among other impediments facing scholars, attempts to access the Witness community have sometimes been met with suspicion by potential study subjects who, like other marginal communities, have felt misrepresented by journalists or demeaned by academics (cf. Bromley 2007). Other scholars studying Witnesses up close have recoiled when finding themselves subjected to evangelizing efforts (Holden 2002). Categorization poses another challenge. Though they consider theirs an expression of authentic Christianity, Witnesses are generally classified as neither Catholic nor Protestant – and not even Christian – according to creedal orthodoxy. Statistical data on Witnesses in censuses and surveys often disappear into aggregates with other minorities; or, when reported separately, sample sizes are usually too small for meaningful analysis.

Some scholars analyze Witness beliefs from a broad perspective, framing contested concepts as variations on practices and beliefs common to many religions, such as religious observances, sexual and reproductive issues, medical ethics, ecclesiastical discipline, and family relations (Rigal-Cellard 2020; Introvigne 2024; cf. Hammer & Swartz-Hammer 2024). International tribunals and high courts have similarly ruled that Witnesses are entitled to the same rights as other religions (e.g., *Taganrog LRO and Others v. Russia*).<sup>1</sup> Experts on religious freedom examine the foundational role Witnesses have played in defining, establishing, and expanding the broader collective rights not only of religious minorities but all manner of social groups (Richardson 2017; Knox 2018).

With literature reviews available elsewhere, such as those by Chryssides (2016) and Knox (2017), we instead provide an approximate chronological

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<sup>1</sup> The 2022 decision by the European Court of Human Rights in *Taganrog LRO and Others v. Russia* (Application no. 32401/10 and 19 others, June 7, 2022 [Final July 9, 2022]) followed this line of reasoning, noting that contested features of the Witness faith can be found in most religions. The Court stated that those who leveled charges of “extremism” provided no concrete evidence of harm. <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-217535>.

periodization of various genres of literature on Jehovah's Witnesses, including works that do not specifically mention Witnesses, but have influenced academic approaches to the subject.

During the 1870s to early 1900s, the nascent community was virtually synonymous with the readership of publications produced by Charles Taze Russell, leading thinker, writer, and founder of Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society<sup>2</sup> and the International Bible Students Association. The group attracted no scholarly attention. The earliest outside writings came from two sources: (1) denominational critiques branding Russell's views as heretical; and (2) former associates of Russell who publicly leveled accusations of doctrinal error, business fraud, and scandalous conduct.

Disputes escalated during the 1910s to 1930s. The widely distributed series *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*<sup>3</sup> carried William G. Moorehead's article "Millennial Dawn: A Counterfeit of Christianity" (1910). Denominational criticism increased thereafter, some casting Bible Students as uneducated and gullible victims of a charismatic charlatan (e.g., Haldeman 1915). After Russell's death in October 1916, a succession crisis produced several schismatic groups and a new round of polemical literature. Some theologians combined doctrinal and political lines of attack reflective of wartime conditions (Case 1918). Much vitriol targeted the Watch Tower Society's new president, Joseph F. Rutherford, whose criticisms of mainstream churches sharpened from 1919 onward.<sup>4</sup> During the interwar period, caustic interreligious rhetoric intensified, each castigating the other for having abandoned genuine Christianity.

Two influential works by theologians – Ernst Troeltsch's *The Social Teaching of the Churches* (1931, English translation) and H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929) – utilized sociological concepts to analyze religion in the social terms of class and power relations. According to "deprivation theory," so-called sects appeal primarily to unlettered masses seeking compensation for life's privations. This assertion, mapped onto prevailing negative portrayals of Bible Student leadership, provided a ready explanation for the group's appeal for those described in an early study as "earnest, harmless folk" who were "tactless and ignorant" (Czatt 1933: 22).<sup>5</sup> The concept of social deprivation has a certain explanatory value and aligns with biblical portraits of those drawn to

<sup>2</sup> Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society (founded 1881) was incorporated by the state of Pennsylvania, USA, in 1884. Similar entities have been established, where required, to support the religious activities of Jehovah's Witnesses.

<sup>3</sup> Regarded as the theological basis for the modern form of fundamentalist Christianity.

<sup>4</sup> By then renamed Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society.

<sup>5</sup> Czatt sent out about 500 questionnaires to Bible Students, surveying the leadership of "ministers and laymen." Questionnaire response rates are unstated, but his "fragmentary information"

early Christianity (cf. Tokmantcev 2023; Matthew 5:3–6; 11:28–30). However, positioning deprivation as the primary explanation for the religion's appeal may have contributed to the conspicuous dearth of scholarly accounting for the agency of individual believers (cf. Hickman & Webster, in press).

Sociological research during the 1940s through the 1960s examined the organization's growth and structure. Studies often referenced deprivation theory in describing economic, social, and intellectual deficits or psychological propensities of adherents, and isolated the Witness doctrine of the impending Millennium as the proverbial carrot that attracts the disinherited. Werner Cohn (1955) labeled Jehovah's Witnesses as a "proletarian movement," proposing certain parallels with totalitarian and radical ideologies, including Nazism and Communism. The labels of "authoritarian" and "totalitarian" still appear in scholarly works about Witnesses (e.g., Holden 2002).

Religion/state relations received considerable attention with scholars examining Witnesses' nonviolent stance in Allied and Axis countries, most notably, Nazi Germany. American civil rights experts wrote of Witnesses' court victories that upheld fundamental freedoms of speech and religion (Chaffee 1941). The period of decolonization generated studies such as Norman Long's 1968 sociological analysis that challenged the applicability of deprivation theory to upwardly mobile Zambian Witnesses.

In the 1970s to 1980s, further sociological research probed the affiliation process. Bryan Wilson's studies in Belgium, Japan, and Kenya assessed individual motivations for adopting the Witness faith (Wilson 1973, 1977; Dobbelaere & Wilson 1980). By tracking kinship ties and growth patterns, Wilson argued that the Witnesses do not fit the typology of "cults," which are generally assumed to be single-generation phenomena. Wilson also disputed Cohn's characterization of Witnesses as a "proletarian movement" (Wilson 1973: 145). James Beckford's landmark *Trumpet of Prophecy* (1975) about Witnesses in Britain dismissed the usefulness of deprivation theory and church-sect typologies in analyzing the faith. Self-reports of conversion emphasized rational, cognitive change over narratives of sudden transformation, leading Beckford and others to reject reductionist explanations of Witnesses' religious orientation (e.g., Aguirre & Alston 1980). Although scholars welcomed Beckford's work, Roy Wallis, a student of Bryan Wilson's, wrote: "I get little sense of these members *as people*" (Wallis 1976: 523; italics in original).

Wallis' oft-cited *The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life* (1984) classified churches, sects, and cults as world-affirming, world-accommodating,

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indicated that Bible Student ranks contained few college-educated or "professional men." Of fifty letters sent, he received eleven replies, which "contained little except further testimony to their meagre [e]conomic and educational outlook" (20–1).



or world-rejecting. Wallis did not mention Witnesses, but later scholars, drawing on his three-part typology, commonly describe the faith as “world-rejecting.” This label has had an outsized influence on stereotypes of the religion as secretive, closed, and antisocial (Di Marzio 2020; Chryssides 2022: 75).

The growing use of donor blood in the 1970s gave rise to a substantial body of medico-legal research on Jehovah's Witnesses who refused transfusions based on their belief in the sanctity of blood. Since then, advancements in patient blood management protocols, development of the bioethical concept of patient autonomy, and growing understanding of risks associated with allogeneic (donor) blood use have reduced but not eliminated controversies regarding Witnesses' abstention from certain blood-based treatments (Beaman 2008; Leahy et al. 2017; Balafas et al. 2023; Olejarczyk & Young 2024).

Although Jehovah's Witnesses were not initially targeted during the “cult wars,” later on in the 1990s, they became the subject of official inquiries into “sects” and “cults” in France and Germany (Siewert 2004).<sup>6</sup> George Chryssides, Raffaella Di Marzio, Holly Folk, Massimo Introvigne, Sergey Ivanenko, and James Richardson are among NRM scholars who have written about past and recently resurgent anticult criticisms of Witnesses. NRM scholarship and studies in the field of law and religion often situate the Witnesses in the wider struggle for personal and corporate freedoms, including pivotal rulings by the European Court of Human Rights (Côté & Richardson 2001; Richardson 2020).

Historical monographs on Jehovah's Witnesses in North America and Europe include those by Shawn Francis Peters (2000), Hans Hesse (2001), Detlef Garbe (2008), Gerhard Besier and Katarzyna Stokłosa (2016a, 2016b, 2018, 2021), and Zoe Knox (2018), and works covering the Soviet period by Emily Baran (2014) and Artur Artemyev (2021). Anthropologists and sociologists of religion have begun filling an important gap in understanding the intersection of belief and individual action in what has been called “millenarian moral world-building” (Hickman & Webster, in press).

Recent articles by and about disaffiliated Witnesses assert that the Witnesses' religion includes practices considered coercive and harmful to the mental health of those who exit the community (e.g., Luther 2022). Of this genre, it has been observed that “single case studies of impaired members or ex-members and clinical studies are used to negatively generalize about the groups in questions. Specific beliefs and practices are seldom considered” (Namini & Murken 2009: 562). This literature finds a home in the field of psychology, with its historically ambivalent view of religion in general and its tendency to characterize

<sup>6</sup> The German Bundestag's Enquete Commission on Sects and Psychogroups concluded: “New religious and ideological communities and psychogroups do not pose a danger to government or society” (Siewert 2004: 95).



conversion to NRMs as pathological (Saliba 2007; Pargament & Lomax 2013).<sup>7</sup> Former Witnesses with academic backgrounds, such as historian James A. Penton, have published works critical of Witness doctrine and organization.

Finally, practitioners of the faith have occasionally produced reflexive (insider) scholarship (e.g., How & Brumley 1999; Chu 2015; Perkins 2016; Hu & Murata 2024). Increased openness toward reflexive research and collaborative insider/outsider studies may foster further research of this kind.

In this Element, we aim to navigate the roles of scholars and believers by adhering to academic standards while incorporating insights gained during our personal association with the Witness community. While acknowledging controversies, we mainly present the religion on its own terms, describing the faith as understood by its adherents, their sense of religious identity, and their view of their roles inside and outside the community. We take two basic approaches. First, we discuss doctrines and organizational practices in the context of real-world application. For this reason, certain topics are covered in multiple sections of the text. Second, we describe cultural nuances that may help reduce caricatures and foster further study of individual Witnesses as agents of their own religious lives (cf. Richardson 1985). These explanations are not claims of complete uniformity among congregants, but statements that await further examination by scholars who are not content to rely solely on outside analysis, but are also willing to probe and observe within the faith and among its adherents.

### Notes on Terminology

“Jehovah’s Witnesses” refers to the collective community, individuals therein, or their organizational belief and practices beginning in 1931 when the name was adopted. From 1910 until 1931, the community used the official designation “International Bible Students’ Association.” However, because associated individuals commonly used the term even before 1910, the capitalized designation “Bible Students” is used herein to refer to the faith community from the late nineteenth century until 1931.

“Faith community” refers both to the early Bible Students and Jehovah’s Witnesses, depending on the context. Witnesses previously used the term “Society” (or “Watch Tower Society”) for organizational matters, whereas the current term is “organization.” Regardless of time period, we use the term “organization” for consistency.

Opinions vary on when Jehovah’s Witnesses could be called a “denomination.” As will be discussed, the legal entity, basic organizational objectives, and core beliefs were already established during the 1880s, and the faith community

<sup>7</sup> For views of NRM scholars on ex-member testimony, see Bromley (1998).