

# Jehovah’s Witnesses

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## Introduction

Jehovah's Witnesses are the followers of a Christian-based religion perhaps best known for their 'door-to-door' evangelising activities. It is a millennialist religion, with followers believing that we are living in the last days and that Armageddon is fast

approaching. Jehovah's Witnesses are also known for their refusal of blood transfusions; for not voting or bearing arms; and for not celebrating Christmas, Easter or their own birthdays. In 2017, there were just over 8.4 million Jehovah's Witnesses in 240 'lands and territories' worldwide.

Jehovah's Witnesses have two main legally incorporated institutions in the USA: The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, and The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. Other affiliated institutions include International Bible Students Association in Britain, Association les Témoins de Jéhovah in France, and Jehovas Zeugen in Deutschland in Germany. The names Jehovah's Witnesses and Watchtower Society are sometimes used interchangeably but in this profile the term Jehovah's Witnesses will be used.

We are indebted to Professor Eileen Barker, Founder and Director of INFORM (the Information Network on Religious Movements) and her team of researchers, for providing this new material in response to requests from RE teachers and pupils. INFORM can be contacted via [www.inform.ac](http://www.inform.ac)

The resources contained in the list of subjects are a basic introduction to the facts and beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses.

## Beliefs, Teachings, Wisdom and Authority

### Basic Beliefs

Jehovah's Witnesses are a millennial, restorationist and nontrinitarian Christian movement with roots in 19th century America. They believe in God, whom they refer to as Jehovah, and the complete Bible (the Old and New Testaments which they call the 'Hebrew-Aramaic Scriptures' and the 'Christian Greek Scriptures') as his 'inspired message'. Jesus is believed to be the Son of God and the saviour but not part of a Trinity. The name, Jehovah's Witnesses, adopted in 1931, is said to identify both their God and their mission – in Isaiah 43:10-12 God says 'you are my witnesses.'

Religious scholars have tended to see the Jehovah's Witnesses as a millennial religious organisation with roots in the Adventist movement. The Adventist movement developed from the teachings of an American Baptist minister, William Miller, who claimed that Jesus Christ would return to Earth in 1843. When this event failed to materialise, his followers revised the date to October 1844. When this date also passed (in what has been termed the 'Great Disappointment'), different groups emerged under various leaders who explained the failed prophecy in different ways. The Seventh-day Adventists, perhaps the best known of the Adventist groups, grew out of the teachings of one such leader, Ellen G. White. White claimed that rather than returning to Earth on the expected date in 1844, Jesus had, instead, moved into the heavenly sanctuary in order to prepare for his return.

Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916) led a Bible study group in the Adventist tradition, although he claimed never to have been an Adventist (Chrystides 2016: 47), and was not a part of Ellen G. White's tradition. The Jehovah's Witnesses developed as a distinct movement in the 1870s when Russell began to publish the magazine, Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence. He argued that Christ had invisibly returned to Earth in 1874 and that his visible return was imminent. 1878 was one date given for his return, and then 1914. This latter date was reinterpreted as marking the moment when Jesus began to rule the Kingdom of God in Heaven. Members alive in 1914 expected to be the generation that would witness Armageddon and the end of the present system that is ruled by Satan.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that we are currently in the 'end times' or 'last days' and that the battle of Armageddon is imminent. Present world conditions are taken as signs of the end. During Armageddon, it is believed, Christ will lead an army of angels to defeat the earth's rulers. Satan will be imprisoned for 1,000 years, which will be a time of paradise on earth, led by Christ as ruler in heaven, with all suffering finally eradicated.

A 'great crowd' of people from all nations will survive the 'great tribulation' at Armageddon. A chosen 144,000 will be co-rulers with Christ in heaven, forming a theocratic government to replace human-made ones. The majority of the 144,000 are already believed to be in heaven. The Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the 144,000 began to be chosen in the time of Jesus and they began to take their places in 1918/1919. In contrast to traditional Christian teaching, Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe in Hell. Instead they believe that those judged adversely by Christ will be destroyed.

Jehovah's Witnesses are non-Trinitarian Christians. They believe that God – whom they call Jehovah – is the 'Most High'. Jehovah is an 'invisible spirit' without a body of flesh and blood, but he is also an individual with thoughts and feelings, as well as infinite wisdom and power. Jesus Christ is recognised as God's son and one can only be saved from sin through faith in Jesus Christ. God provided his son as a 'ransom sacrifice' as a gift to humankind: the death of Jesus paid the 'ransom' for human sin. Jehovah forgives those who have faith in the ransom sacrifice, are repentant and seek to imitate Jesus in their lives.

Jehovah's Witnesses have also been described as a Restorationist movement, indicating their belief in the necessity of returning to first-century Christianity as lived and taught by Jesus and the Apostles. The holy spirit is seen as God's active force for accomplishing his will. The holy spirit is hence another aspect of the universal God and not a separate entity.

Jehovah's Witnesses opposition to blood transfusions is based on Biblical warnings against the ingestion of blood. (For more information see Values and Commitments section). They also believe that a Christian should keep separate from the world and should not be involved in interfaith movements.

## Scriptures

Jehovah's Witnesses accept the entire Bible as the inspired Word of Jehovah. They see it as an historical record, a blueprint for living, reliable prophecy and containing many scientific facts. However, they do not take a literalist interpretation, recognising that some parts of it were written figuratively. They have a particular interest in Biblical prophecy and its fulfilment, which has included an interest in symbolic meanings of numbers in the Bible.

Jehovah's Witnesses have their own translation of the Bible called the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures or NWT. The first edition of the translation was completed in 1961, whilst Nathan Homer Knorr (1905-1977) was the Jehovah's Witnesses' third president. It is an original translation of ancient Hebrew and Greek texts. It is distributed worldwide in more than 150 languages without charge and is also available online. Jehovah's Witnesses also publish online Bible study guides and offer free Bible study classes as a primary means of evangelization.

In addition, Jehovah's Witnesses publish a number of magazines through their own publishing company and printing presses located in a number of countries. The UK printing press is located at the group's UK headquarters in North London (although there are plans to relocate it to Germany). From here, more than 200 million magazines (11–12% of the Jehovah's Witnesses magazines) are printed and distributed each year. The best known of these are *The Watchtower* and *Awake!*, which are, in early 2018, quarterly publications for public distribution, with a 'study edition' of *The Watchtower* produced monthly for meeting attenders.

The Jehovah's Witnesses place importance on people being able to read Scripture in their native language and they have a huge translation programme. They also try to ensure that people have access to meetings in their own language as well as offering services and apps in sign language.

## Founder and Successors

Originally known as Bible Students, Jehovah's Witnesses originated in America in the latter half of the 19th century with the teachings of Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916) and his associates. Russell was something of a religious seeker, establishing friendships with teachers in the Adventist movement including Jonas Wendell, George Stetson and Nelson Barbour. Like these individuals, he engaged in studying the Bible and he sold the cloth merchant and haberdashery business he had inherited in order to finance his preaching and publishing activities. In the early 1870s, he established a Bible study movement – the International Bible Students Association – in his hometown of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 1879, Russell published the magazine, *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*, which would become the Jehovah's Witnesses' main publication, *The Watchtower*. This magazine, as the title suggests, had an apocalyptic theme and discussed the imminence of Armageddon. In the early 1880s, Russell established the Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society. In 1908, he moved the headquarters of the organisation from Pittsburgh to Brooklyn, New York, where it remained until it moved to Warwick, New York in 2017. (However there are two incorporated societies in America – The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania and The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York).

Russell was succeeded by a lawyer, Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1852–1942), who became the second president of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society and who coined the name Jehovah's Witnesses in 1931. Rutherford also introduced some of the

distinctive Jehovah's Witnesses' practices, such as not participating in politics and military service, not celebrating Christmas and the acceleration of house-to-house evangelism. It was under Rutherford's leadership that the Jehovah's Witnesses became a large and stable organisation. During this time the organisation changed from being democratic to theocratic and hierarchical; directors of local congregations were no longer elected by local assemblies but appointed by the Governing Body in New York.

Rutherford was succeeded by Nathan Homer Knorr (1905–1977) in 1942, who began a public relations programme which won the movement more converts. As mentioned above, Knorr oversaw the 1961 publication of the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, a modern English Bible translated from original language texts – the version of the Bible that Jehovah's Witnesses use today, primarily in its 2013 revision.

The fourth president was Frederick W. Franz (1893–1992) and the fifth was Milton Henschel (1920–2003). Henschel stepped down from the presidency in 2000 (all four previous presidents had remained in post until they died). Subsequent presidents have not been members of the Governing Body, and are believed to be part of the 'great crowd' rather than the 144,000. Henschel was succeeded by two presidents: Don A. Adams (1926–) became president of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, and Max H. Larson (1915–2011) became president of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York. They were succeeded by Leon Weaver Jr (the Society's first black president) and by Robert Ciranko, respectively.

## Structure and Authority

The overall direction of the Jehovah's Witnesses is in the hands of the Governing Body, which is based at the headquarters in New York. There are two incorporated societies in America: The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania and The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York which oversees printing operations. The Governing Body currently, in early 2018, has eight members, all of whom are believed to be of the 144,000 'anointed class'.

Individual congregations are led by elders, comparable in some ways to clergy in other denominations, but without special titles, and without being paid for their work. Elders are assisted by ministerial servants who fulfil such practical tasks as welcoming attendees to services and handing out literature, in order that elders can focus on teaching and shepherding duties. In some ways, the Jehovah's Witnesses can be considered an egalitarian movement – any man can become an elder or ministerial servant and the lack of clergy titles and remuneration creates a sense of equality. However, women cannot become elders or ministerial servants. (See also the Values and Commitments section for information on the practice of disfellowshipping and the authority which elders can hold over parts of their congregation).

Governing Body representatives visit the 240 lands where Jehovah's Witnesses are present to meet with branch representatives. Each branch is divided into circuits and each circuit has about 20 congregations (based at a Kingdom Hall, which several congregations might share) ranging in size from a few to 200 people. A circuit overseer visits each congregation in his circuit twice a year. Each congregation is mapped out into territories and individual Witnesses endeavour to visit every home in the territory.

As in the USA, there are two main Jehovah's Witnesses organisations in the UK, both of which are registered charities: The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Britain and The International Bible Students Association (IBSA) (individual congregations are also registered charities). These manage the printing, literature distribution, translation work and related administrative functions of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Around 300 staff live 'on-site' at the IBSA headquarters located in North London. This complex, spread along and around a residential road in an affluent, suburban area, includes a printing press; offices; purpose-built residential complexes with communal living areas, including a cafeteria where members eat communally; large houses which have been purchased for additional accommodation; and a Kingdom Hall. The building in which the offices and printing press are located is open to the public, who can walk in for guided tours and talks. It is also open to schools and there are interactive displays for children. There are similar complexes around the world which are called 'Bethels' (Hebrew for House of God).

However, in 2019, the Jehovah's Witnesses UK headquarters will be relocated to Chelmsford in Essex, to a purpose-built complex at a property formerly called Temple Farm. Jehovah's Witnesses report that this is because they have out-grown the London site in Mill Hill, but it also parallels a move in New York to move from the city centre to an out-of-town location for financial reasons.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not use the terminology of membership. A distinction is made between those who are baptised and those who are not yet baptised. (Children are not usually baptised until between the ages of 13-16.) Baptised Jehovah's Witnesses are known as 'publishers' – those who go door to door spreading the word and distributing and materials. Publishers are engaged in 'witnessing' for Jehovah and they are asked to report their preaching activity to their local congregation each month (it is in this way that the number of Witnesses in each congregation is determined). Some share in the publishing work prior to their baptism (if they are on the path to converting, for instance) and are known as 'unbaptised publishers'. A wider number of people attend services, including the annual Memorial Service.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not practice tithing (donating a regular amount of money to the Church, often 10% of earnings, which is common in some Christian traditions). However, they are encouraged to make modest donations to the Church and to leave legacies. The Church also has some income from investments.

## Membership Figures

In 2017, there were just over 8.4 million Jehovah's Witnesses in 240 lands worldwide.

In the 2011 Census, 63,073 individuals in England and Wales, 8,543 in Scotland and 1,728 in Northern Ireland identified as Jehovah's Witnesses by writing in their religious affiliation.

Growth is largely through conversion rather than 'internal growth', with the fastest growing membership populations currently in Latin America, Asia and Africa.

# Ways of Living

## Guidance for Life

It is important for Jehovah's Witnesses to live in the service of God. The Bible serves as a 'moral code' for members, who also apply their 'Biblically-trained conscience' to ethical issues they face. Members are also expected to accept all doctrines established by the Governing Body. As a result, the Jehovah's Witnesses lifestyle is one that could be considered socially conservative: great importance is placed on married life, marital fidelity and family values; keeping the right company or avoiding 'harmful associations' is stressed; as is living a modest lifestyle, with the values of hard work but for the benefit of cooperation, rather than competitiveness; employment is usually trade-based and must not be contrary to the faith, such as working in a betting shop, politics, or trades which involve arms. Alcohol is permitted in moderation but not tobacco or recreational drugs. Dress should also be modest, tattoos are disapproved of, as are beards in the UK context. Jehovah's Witnesses see themselves as 'in but not of the world', and therefore to a degree separate themselves from wider society.

## Religious/Ritual Practice

For Jehovah's Witnesses, congregational life is of the utmost importance. Members meet together in purpose-built buildings called Kingdom Halls. All meetings which take place in Kingdom Halls are open to the public. Families stay together for worship and meetings – although families with very small children may make use of a 'mother and baby room', which typically has glass panels and a sound system so they can follow the service. Children do not attend 'Sunday school' type meetings in a separate room as in some other Christian groups.

The number of meetings which Jehovah's Witnesses are expected to attend has decreased over time. Scholar George Chrystides notes that for much of their history, Jehovah's Witnesses met for five hour-long meetings a week. In recent years, meetings have been shortened and combined in recognition of the pressures of modern living. In 2018, members attend a weekend meeting and a meeting on one weekday evening. The weekend meeting includes the public service followed by the Watchtower study. The public service includes song (the preferred term over hymn), spontaneous prayer and a Bible talk, whilst the Watchtower study involves the study of a passage outlined in the study edition of *The Watchtower* magazine. In this standardised format, all Jehovah's Witnesses congregations around the world study the same passage in the weekend meeting. The weekday meeting is termed the 'Our Christian Life and Ministry Meeting' and includes sections titled 'Treasures from God's Word', which considers the entire Bible a few chapters per week; 'Apply Yourself to the Field Ministry', which gives instruction in door-to-door evangelising and teaching interested persons; and 'Living as Christians'. As there is a preference for Bible study in native languages, and for not too large a congregation, the same Kingdom Hall might be used every week night for different

congregations. For example, one Kingdom Hall in London has three English congregations, one Spanish, and one Serbian and Croatian congregation meeting on different week nights. Alternatively, different language congregations might meet simultaneously in different rooms of the same Hall. Jehovah's Witnesses are also proactive in offering services using sign language and have a 'Jehovah's Witness Library Sign Language' app which offers sign language videos of the Bible and other publications in various national sign languages.

Throughout the year, Jehovah's Witnesses also gather in larger numbers. Circuits meet periodically in Assemblies, held in Assembly Halls or in hired facilities; and regions meet in Conventions, for which stadiums or conference centres are hired. Conventions can attract thousands of members and are often focused on a particular Biblical theme.

In addition, all Jehovah's Witnesses spend time in voluntary evangelistic activities, as the cornerstone of their faith – being a witness for Jehovah. They are most well-known for their door-to-door ministry with the aim that "each congregation tries to reach all people in its neighbourhood with a brief Bible message at least once a year." In recent years, Jehovah's Witnesses have added another evangelism approach, with publishers operating literature stands in public places, such as train stations and shopping centres. They claim that this has a Biblical basis since the Apostle Paul is recorded as having preached in the market place (Acts 17:17). In this approach, publishers take a generally quietist position and wait to be approached for information or discussion rather than engaging the public actively – although of course this varies from individual to individual. If a member of the public expresses interest, Jehovah's Witnesses will attempt to establish regular home visits for free Bible study courses. The practice of witnessing can be problematic in countries which do not allow proselytising or the distribution of religious literature (see Religious Freedom and Persecution section for more).

Jehovah's Witnesses practise baptism by immersion of adults and older children (typically aged 13-16). Baptism of adults is preceded by regular attendance at meetings, engaging in public ministry, and then a meeting with elders who evaluate, through asking around 120 questions, whether the person has the knowledge of the Bible and is living the appropriate lifestyle (that is, in line with Biblical standards) that is needed in order to be committed.

Baptisms generally do not take place in Kingdom Halls but in the larger Assembly Halls, which typically have a built-in baptismal pool, or in a hired stadium. A baptism is a public event which marks one as a member of the faith. Through baptism, an individual demonstrates repentance from sin, and is forgiven and cleansed through Christ's 'ransom sacrifice' and is able to start a new life in the Church. Individuals joining Jehovah's Witnesses from a different Christian denomination are re-baptised in the belief that only Jehovah's Witnesses are the 'true' organisation which can offer salvation (Chryssides 2016: 211-214).

Jehovah's Witnesses also engage in personal study at home, including reading the Bible. Much emphasis is placed on raising children within the movement and most members observe a weekly family worship evening in the home (see other sections for more on children). Jehovah's Witnesses usually say grace before meals.

## **The Journey of Life (life cycle)**

Jehovah's Witnesses mark a number of important life cycle events, including marriage and death, but not the birth of a baby. Neither are babies or infants baptised in the faith. Children can be baptised, once they have understood and demonstrated their commitment to the faith (see Religious Practices section above). Unlike other Christian denominations, baptism and other life cycle rituals are not considered sacraments, and Jehovah's Witnesses do not use this term.

Jehovah's Witnesses recognise marriage as a sacred union between one man and one woman for the purpose of companionship and procreation. Homosexual partnerships are prohibited and are a cause for disfellowshipping (see Rules and Ethical Guidelines section). In some countries, Kingdom Halls are recognised as legal places of marriage: in other countries, Jehovah's Witnesses have a civil registration and then may have the marriage blessed in a Kingdom Hall, though this is not regarded as essential. The marriage service includes a talk by an elder, singing, prayer and the exchange of vows. Divorce is only permitted in cases of adultery.

Jehovah's Witnesses also hold funeral services at Kingdom Halls. "Funerals are kept short and simple, and are used as opportunities for reminding the congregation of life's purpose and what lies beyond the grave" (Chryssides 2016: 217). Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe in Hell or in eternal souls who are distinct from bodies. The 144,000 will have 'spiritual bodies' in Heaven, whilst the 'great crowd' will have restored physical bodies. Death is compared to being 'asleep', free from pain and suffering but not a conscious state. And like sleep, death is a temporary state, for Jesus will resurrect the dead. The

Jehovah's Witness website states "Those whom Jesus resurrects during his thousand-year reign will have the prospect of living forever—as long as they truly put faith in him."<sup>1</sup> For this reason, funerals tend not to focus on excessive grief but on the prospect of the family being reunited in the future. The deceased may be buried or cremated according to the family's preference: there is no prescription on this. The service generally includes singing, prayer and a Bible talk by an elder.

## Holy Days and Celebrations

The Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate religious festivals which are usually marked by other Christian traditions, such as Christmas or Easter, because of their pagan undertones. Nor do members mark their own birthdays. This lack of religious or secular festivals leaves them without the liturgical calendar with which so many people, religious or not, mark their lives.

Instead, the Jehovah's Witnesses have one annual festival which is of the utmost importance to them, although it is not considered a sacrament. It is the Memorial of Christ's Death or the Lord's Evening Meal, and is the commemoration of Jesus' death and ransom sacrifice on behalf of humankind. It is comparable to the Eucharist or Holy Communion in other denominations, in which (unleavened) bread and (red) wine are shared in remembrance of Jesus' last meal with his disciples. The bread and wine are called 'emblems' by Jehovah's Witnesses to signify their symbolism. This is different from Roman Catholic belief in transubstantiation (where they are called 'elements'), in which it is believed that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. Nor are they consumed by the vast majority of the congregation but are rather passed around. This is because consumption of them is believed to be reserved for the chosen 144,000 who will reside with Jesus in heaven after the last days. The service also includes singing, prayer and a Bible talk.

The service takes place after sunset on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the Hebrew month of Nisan, which usually corresponds to the Jewish celebration of Passover. Nisan is in March or April on the first full moon after the spring equinox. The service is held in all Kingdom Halls (though, when many congregations share a Kingdom Hall, additional facilities may be hired), and is open to the public. Members who cannot attend often have the opportunity for a live link either through a telephone or computer. Members are encouraged to bring guests and attendance at the service is higher than for other Witness services. In 2017, there were over 20 million attendees worldwide.

# Ways of Expressing Meaning

## Stories of Faith

The Bible is the basis of Jehovah's Witness life and as such all narratives within it are of the utmost importance. Emphasis is placed on teaching Bible stories to children, with numerous online services geared towards this, including illustrated stories, associated activities and cartoons. The stories are taught as important lessons in cultivating the appropriate morals, values and ethics to live a good Christian life. Unlike in some other religious movements, Jehovah's Witnesses do not tell stories about their founders or leaders. The Bible is always the focus.

## Symbols of Faith

Since the 1930s, Jehovah's Witnesses do not venerate the cross or any other religious symbols as this is considered to be pagan idolatrous practice (prior to this, they did use the symbol of a cross in a crown, until it was judged to be a pagan symbol). Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus did not die on a cross but rather on a single stake or tree. They suggest that Roman Emperor Constantine introduced the cross as a Christian symbol in the fourth century, and that the cross has its origins as a symbol of "nature worship and pagan sex rites."<sup>2</sup>

The Watchtower symbol (which appears on the magazine of the same name), as well as an image of an open Bible, are popular imagery within the religion, but they are not accorded any sacred significance and are not venerated. The same could be said of the jw.org website which is now advertised on a plaque in every Kingdom Hall and on the organisation's vehicles.

## Places of Worship and Architecture

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/wp20140101/resurrection-hope-for-the-dead/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/bible-teach/origin-cross-symbol-pagan/>

Whilst the Jehovah's Witnesses have purchased a few former churches in the UK, the huge majority of Jehovah's Witnesses around the world worship in distinctive, purpose-built, buildings called Kingdom Halls. Chrissydes notes that the term 'Kingdom Hall' came into use in the mid-1930s and refers to "the Society's central message, which is the coming kingdom of God." He writes, "the redesigning of the buildings was to encourage simplicity in worship, distancing Jehovah's Witnesses from what they regarded as the over-elaborate buildings that are often found in Christendom." (2016: 204).

These rather bland and functional-looking buildings have been designed as the most cost-effective means of establishing buildings quickly and easily as needed. A number of different designs of Kingdom Halls exist and these can be selected 'off the shelf' from the local design and construction department, adapted slightly for any necessary planning regulations, and then may be constructed by the congregation over the course of a week or two, in a practice known as 'quickly built'. In 2018, this means of building is less common than it has been in the past. As the majority of Jehovah's Witnesses enter trade jobs, rather than professions, most aspects of construction can be covered by the congregation and other local or regional volunteers. The finances necessary for the construction of UK Kingdom Halls is distributed as a grant from the umbrella body in the UK, to which all surplus funds are donated. The Hall is not considered a sacred building, though it is only used for worship and related activities, and it is not consecrated although there may be a dedication service.

Inside the Kingdom Hall, the emphasis is also on functionality and comfort. There are no religious symbols (see Symbols of Faith above) and no pulpit or pews. Instead, rows of chairs face a raised platform, much as in a classroom. There is often a computer and projector or other means of screening videos during the teaching sessions, as much emphasis is placed on online and audio-visual learning materials.

In addition, Jehovah's Witnesses have Assembly Halls, which are larger buildings for the purpose of the meetings of 'circuits' (which are themselves around 20 local congregations). These may be purpose-built but are often bought for the purpose and Chrissydes notes that former cinemas are favoured as they already have the necessary tiered seats facing centre (2016: 207). Baptisms usually take place in the Assembly Hall.

## Prayer

Prayer is a key practice within Jehovah's Witnesses' worship; however, it differs from the recitation of prayer in some other Christian traditions. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that prayer should be directed towards Jehovah (not Jesus), should take the form of a respectful conversation to a revered friend and should be spontaneous. In this way, the repetition of standard prayers, such as The Lord's Prayer, or any prepared prayers or prayers written by others, is not encouraged. Jehovah's Witnesses also meditate, or think upon, the Bible passages which they read in public services and private worship.

## Pilgrimage

There is no practice of pilgrimage by Jehovah's Witnesses; no sacred site which members visit. However, there are a number of tour companies owned by individual Jehovah's Witnesses, through which travel can be booked for whole congregations to visit the headquarters in either the USA or Britain. Tours of the Holy Land can also be booked, although these are not considered pilgrimages. Tours can also be booked for national museums, such as the British Museum in London, where a Jehovah's Witness guide explains the significance of archaeological discoveries, in accordance with Watch Tower teachings. Members also attend the annual conventions in various different locations.

## Expression and Worship

Meeting together for worship is central to Jehovah's Witnesses' religious practice. Much worship is focused on Bible study and weekend services include a Bible talk and *Watchtower* study. Worship does include songs (the preferred term over hymns). In the UK, the musical accompaniment is usually pre-recorded and played on a CD player or computer, rather than live music. This differs by country however, and in Germany, for instance, live music is more common in Kingdom Halls (Chrissydes 2016: 206).

The Jehovah's Witnesses website lists the following activities as worship:

- Praying to God
- Reading and studying the Bible



- Meditating on what we learn from the Bible
- Meeting together to pray, study the Bible and sing
- Preaching the “good news of the Kingdom”
- Helping those in need
- Constructing and maintaining Kingdom Halls
- Sharing in disaster relief

## Art, Music, Drama and Creativity

Whilst song is an integral aspect of Jehovah’s Witnesses’ worship, in general, art, music and drama activities are not organised by the congregation but rather take place in individual homes. Most members’ observation of their weekly family worship evening includes fun activities related to faith, such as performing plays or making pictures or crafts based on Biblical passages. There are a great number of suggested activities on the Jehovah’s Witnesses website in the Bible Teachings for Children section. These encourage parents to engage their children in fun activities which will teach them important moral and ethical lessons from Biblical stories.

Having said this, there is a distinctive style of art work and photography in the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ magazines, often depicting aspects of family life or missionary work. Illustrated Bible stories can be found on the Bible Teachings for Children section of the website, as can an animated cartoon series for children, ‘Become Jehovah’s Friend’.

# Identity, Diversity and Belonging

## Religious Identity

Jehovah’s Witnesses derive a strong sense of religious identity from belonging to the organisation. Whilst Witnesses might not be easily distinguishable in terms of dress codes or physical markings, they are from their distinctive beliefs and practices, including not accepting blood transfusions, not celebrating birthdays, and proselytising through knocking on doors in their neighbourhood. It is baptism which makes one a Witness – a Witness is baptised by full immersion as an adult (or typically between ages 13–16 if they have been raised in the movement), even if they have been previously baptised in a different Christian denomination. This is because Jehovah’s Witnesses consider themselves the one ‘true’ church – which again contributes to a strong sense of identity amongst believers.

Jehovah’s Witnesses, who can be found in all countries and across all ethnic groups, seek to have a global identity through being united in their beliefs. Their website states that they “work hard” to have “no social, ethnic, racial, or class divisions.”<sup>3</sup> They place great emphasis on all being equal in the eyes of God, as well as on reaching everyone in their own language. The Jehovah’s Witnesses publish material in over 900 languages and establish specific language-based congregations when there is the need.

Jehovah’s Witnesses are famously apolitical, refusing to vote or bear arms. Neither will they support any movement motivated by racial or ethnic hatred. This commitment to peace and equality has meant that members have lost their lives through conscientious objection and through refusing to denounce their faith in the most appalling circumstances, including the concentration camps of the Second World War and modern-day prison camps. As of January 2018, Jehovah’s Witnesses are imprisoned in Eritrea, Singapore, South Korea and Tajikistan for conscientious objection, and in Eritrea, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan for ‘religious activity’.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/jehovah-witness-beliefs/>

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.jw.org/en/news/legal/by-region/world/jehovahs-witnesses-in-prison-2/> for a list of the number of prisoners by country.

Jehovah's Witnesses' conscientious objection and imprisonment in concentration camps during the Second World War is not as well-known as the imprisonment and murder of other groups such as Jewish people, Roma, homosexuals, communists and trade unionists. During the Second World War, the Nazi regime considered the Witnesses 'ideologically unfit' as they would not salute the flag, say 'Heil Hitler', or take part in any military service. The Jehovah's Witnesses were the only Christian denomination to be assigned their own distinctive badge in the concentration camps – a purple triangle (Jews wore the Star of David and all other Christian dissenters a red triangle). Jehovah's Witnesses were also the only faith group to be given the option of release if they renounced their faith – the huge majority did not do so. Around 13,400 Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned in the camps. Around 2000 did not survive (which is a relatively small proportion compared to the Jewish population imprisoned). 270 Witnesses were executed – not through the gas chambers but by being shot or decapitated so as to be made an example of and to encourage others to renounce the faith. Chryssides writes that the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses at various times and in various countries has, from their perspective, "served to confirm the belief in the truth of the Society's teachings (as) Jesus predicted that persecution would be one of the marks of the end-times." (2016: 123).

## Family and Community

Jehovah's Witnesses place great emphasis on family life and on raising children within the faith. They believe that marriage is a sacred and permanent bond and that by following Biblical principles, one can have a happy and long-lasting marriage. These Biblical principles include adherence to the authority of the husband in a patriarchal family dynamic: "A husband is head of his wife" (Ephesians 5:23), but must treat her as Christ treats the congregation and to love her "as his own body" (Ephesians 5:25, 28–9); "Wives, be in subjection to your own husbands" (1 Peter 3:1).<sup>5</sup> A happy marriage depends on accepting these God-given roles, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses. Nevertheless, Witnesses view this not as gender inequality but as gender complementarity. They believe that God created Eve not merely as a helper for Adam, but as a "complement of him" (Genesis 2:18). Together, the couple are made complete and can satisfy each other's emotional and sexual needs. Together, they can fulfil the divine commission to have children and populate the earth.

The Jehovah's Witnesses produce a great deal of literature on the topic of keeping a happy marriage, with advice and guidance from managing money, managing relatives, when children are born, how to cope with tragedies, and more. There is also a great deal of guidance available on raising children and teenagers. Children are expected to obey their parents but emphasis is placed on discussion, with parents encouraged to explain their values and decision-making. Great emphasis is placed on inculcating the 'right' values in children, and parents should be the primary role models for this. Children should not be overpraised or overprotected and should be encouraged to help with chores around the home. Parents should practice 'loving discipline' which relates to 'instruction, education and correction', not punishment.<sup>6</sup>

Stress is placed on worshipping together as a family with most families spending at least one evening a week together in family worship. Spiritual activities should be placed ahead of entertainment and relaxation activities, according to Witness literature.

The moral education of children thus happens primarily in the family context. As mentioned above, Jehovah's Witnesses do not run organised, segregated children's education services comparable to Sunday school in other denominations, nor do they have their own schools. Instead Jehovah's Witness children normally attend 'mainstream' schools where they participate in most of the curriculum except for assemblies or lessons which incorporate any element of 'collective worship'; RE teaching which resembles interfaith work; any celebrations of religious festivals including 'Christian' festivals such as Easter and Christmas; and some aspects of sex education. During these lessons, Jehovah's Witness children are usually taken out of the class. Also they do not usually take part in extra-curricular activities, both because spiritual activities are prioritised and because competitiveness, such as in the majority of sporting activities, is discouraged. Some families may make a personal decision to home school their children.

Whilst importance is placed on the family unit, there are also married Witnesses who choose not to have children in order to 'give their full attention' to full-time ministry, either as missionaries or working at Bethel. The belief that we are in the 'end times' can add to both a reluctance to bring children into an evil world and a sense of urgency with spreading the Witnesses' message.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/g201311/roles-in-marriage/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/wp20140701/how-to-discipline-your-child/>

Some Witnesses who have decided not to have children, “consider the possibility of bearing children in Jehovah’s righteous new world.”<sup>7</sup>

The majority of Jehovah’s Witnesses do not attend university, but rather take up trades after school or college.

## Diversity

Jehovah’s Witnesses form a relatively cohesive group, with little diversity within the tradition. As stated above, Jehovah’s Witnesses place great emphasis on being a united community through their shared beliefs, with any racial, ethnic or geographical differences eradicated. Neither is there diversity in worship, with all congregations around the world studying the same Bible passages in their midweek and weekend services. All members are expected to attend the annual Memorial, which takes place on the same day and has the same format worldwide. Members who cannot attend are now encouraged to participate via live links. It is worth quoting Chryssides at some length on this:

There is less scope for creativity than one finds in mainstream denominations, where individuals can express their spirituality in writing and in music, and where congregations decide how to organise their worship and how to introduce variations. The Watch Tower Society, by contrast, seeks a high degree of uniformity by ensuring that talks given at Kingdom Hall meetings conform to outlines transmitted by the organisation, and the Kingdom Hall Bible Study meetings elicit answers that demonstrate comprehension of the relevant *Watchtower* article under study, and which reinforces its ideas. There is certainly no scope for presenting alternative views or for questioning or critiquing a Watch Tower publication. (2016: 248).

However, Jehovah’s Witnesses claim to have personal choice around beliefs and practices in line with their own ‘Bible-trained conscience’. Individuals’ views might diverge on more personal matters such as whether children can participate in sports clubs or whether teenagers should attend university.

In terms of relations with other religions, Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that they should have no part in interfaith movements. They claim that they respect people’s right to choose other religions and enjoy debating religious issues with those of other faiths, but have no part in worshipping together with those of other faiths. They claim that both Jesus and the Apostle Paul discouraged interfaith, claiming that it could harm the believer’s faith. Jehovah’s Witnesses, like many other religions, teach that they are the one true Church. However they do not teach that only Jehovah’s Witnesses will enjoy everlasting life on earth. During Judgment Day (a period of 1000 years), God will resurrect both the righteous and the unrighteous – both will have the opportunity to be saved through accepting Jehovah. Nevertheless, Jehovah’s Witnesses consider themselves already “in the truth” (Chryssides 2016: 6) and all other religions, including “nominal Christianity” (the term for all other denominations), are part of “Babylon the Great”. Some Witnesses reject the term ‘religion’ altogether as a way to describe their own faith, reserving the term for other faith groups which are seen as human inventions. Jehovah’s Witnesses hence separate themselves from other religious groups, and from apostates (see Rules and Ethical Guidelines), in order to maintain a sense of religious purity.

## Religious Freedom and Persecution

Since Jehovah’s Witness beliefs require abstention from military duty, patriotic behaviour and blood transfusion, as well as participation in public evangelising, they are often test cases for the extent to which religious freedom will be permitted by a particular government. But, according to Richardson (2015) and Chryssides (2016), they are also one of the most litigious religious groups, bringing at least some of the test cases themselves in a bid to strategically use the legal system to set precedents which might ensure their future benefit. According to Chryssides, Jehovah’s Witnesses, based on the actions of the Apostle Paul who appealed to Caesar when he was on trial, seek “to secure the maximum benefits available under the law” (2016: 123). Pauline Côté and James T. Richardson (2001) have described the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ use of the legal system as a form of “disciplined litigation” in which the Watch Tower Society has produced sophisticated materials to educate members about their legal rights and how to be effective plaintiffs, defendants, and witnesses in legal actions which defend Jehovah’s Witnesses rights. Jehovah’s Witnesses have thus been happy and willing “to bring their challenges to the courts for legal resolution” (Richardson 2015: 301). In later work, Richardson has described the Witnesses as something of a “partner” to the

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/w20000801/Why-Do-They-Have-No-Children/>

European Court of Human Rights, both working to “expand European values over the newer members states” in the Council of Europe (largely former-Soviet dominated nations) (2017: 233).

Since their founding, Jehovah’s Witnesses have been involved in numerous legal cases. They have won over 50 cases before the US Supreme Court in the areas of freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and a right to equal protection under the law (Richardson 2015: 287). Richardson writes that “Jehovah’s Witnesses have filed more religion-related cases than any other religious group before the European Court of Human Rights” (2017: 232). They have filed 256 cases before the Court, as of May 2017, of which they have won 35 cases outright, and have reached “friendly settlement” in another 26 (2017: 234). Richardson states that the majority of these victories have been concerned with conscientious objection but they also involve “issues of registration, taxation, censorship of materials, freedom of expression, child custody, deportation, confidentiality of medical records, neutrality of the State, and meeting disruptions” (Richardson 2015: 299). They have 103 cases pending before the court (again as of May 2017) (Richardson 2017: 234).

Historically Jehovah’s Witnesses have fought cases over their refusal to salute the flag and refusal of military involvement, with success in lands as diverse as the United States, India and the Philippines. In the UK, the ‘Walsh Trial’ of 1953-5 was a test case that the Jehovah’s Witnesses brought to challenge conscription. Douglas Walsh, a Scottish elder, presented the argument that elders and ministerial servants were ministers and as such should be exempt from conscription in line with other religious traditions. The argument was not accepted however with the judge ruling that ministers should have a “distinctively spiritual rather than merely organisational role within the congregation, and must be set apart in some way, with special scholastic attainment” (Chryssides 2016: 121).

Jehovah’s Witnesses still challenge governments world-wide to honour their religious rights/religious freedom, and currently have hundreds of court cases running, ranging from local courts to the European Court of Human Rights, the outcome of which will either broaden or restrict the religious freedom of all citizens of the respective country, not just the religious freedom of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Jehovah’s Witnesses are, in 2018, imprisoned in seven countries worldwide because of their faith: Eritrea; Kazakhstan; Russia; Singapore; South Korea; Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.<sup>8</sup> Recent court cases have been fought in Russia and Kazakhstan. In January 2017 in Kazakhstan, Jehovah’s Witness, Teymur Akhmedov, was arrested for discussing his faith with seven young men who were National Security Committee (KNB) secret police informers posing as students. He was charged with illegal religious activity, convicted in May 2017 and sentenced to five years in prison. An appeal was rejected in December 2017.<sup>9</sup> In April 2017, the Russian Supreme Court ruled that the Jehovah’s Witnesses were an ‘extremist’ religious group, defining this as a group which teaches that its theology is the only way to salvation. The Supreme Court liquidated the Witnesses’ legal entities, banned their activities and confiscated their property.<sup>10</sup> The Jehovah’s Witnesses have reported increasing hostility in Russia, including verbal attacks on school children, physical attacks on adult members, disruption of religious services and arson. An appellate court has upheld a ban of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Bible, the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, in the Russian language as an ‘extremist’ publication and has ruled that the contract on their headquarters near St Petersburg is invalid (the property is owned by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania) and the property can be seized.

## Meaning, Purpose and Truth

### Religious Experience

In general, Jehovah’s Witnesses do not emphasise personal religious experiences but rather focus on the Biblical narratives of those who have had direct revelations of God, including the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets and, later, Jesus and early Church leaders such as the Apostle Paul. This is in line with the emphasis placed on the Bible as the blueprint for living. Charles Taze Russell did not claim a direct personal experience of God or a new Revelation, unlike the founders of some other new religious movements and 19th century sects such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Contrary to some popular belief, Witnesses do not claim new prophetic revelations, but only seek to interpret biblical prophecy.

### Answers to Ultimate Questions

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.jw.org/en/news/legal/by-region/world/jehovahs-witnesses-in-prison-2/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.jw.org/en/news/legal/by-region/kazakhstan/supreme-court-refusal-20171221/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.jw.org/en/news/legal/by-region/russia/court-opens-way-20171211/>

For Jehovah's Witnesses, the Bible has the answer to all spiritual questions and is the source of truth and the blueprint for living. It follows that they, as the correct interpreters of the Bible's messages, have the truth. Whilst they do not consider themselves to be infallible, Jehovah's Witnesses do consider themselves to be 'in the truth' and all other religions, including 'nominal Christianity' (the term for all other denominations), are part of 'Babylon the Great'. Only those who accept Jehovah through belief in the 'ransom sacrifice' of Jesus, and who are repentant and seek to imitate Jesus in their lives, will survive Armageddon.

The Jehovah's Witnesses' answers to ultimate questions are inextricably tied to the key beliefs of the organisation (see Basic Beliefs section above). As mentioned above, they believe that the second coming of Christ and the establishment of his Kingdom on earth is imminent, and that we are currently in the 'last days', with the present political and environmental situation as evidence of this. They seek to reach everyone with this message – 'publishing' or evangelising door-to-door or with literature stands in public places. During Armageddon, the living and dead will be judged by Christ. A 'great crowd' of people from all nations and time periods will survive and will live in Paradise on Earth. A further 144,000 (the 'anointed class') will rule with Christ in Heaven. This theocratic government will rule over Paradise Earth and will replace all current government systems which are believed to be ruled by Satan. Those who are judged adversely will be destroyed.

## Religion and Science

As with all aspects of life, Jehovah's Witnesses believe the Bible has the answers to science and the origins of life. They believe that God created the universe but they reject the label creationist, arguing that some creationists take too literal an interpretation of Biblical accounts of the origins of the universe, for example that it was created in six days of 24 hours each. They argue that a Biblical 'day' can be an unspecified length of time. Hence they reject the 'Young Earth Creationism' associated with the belief that the world was created in six days, and are aligned more to 'Old Earth Creationism' which recognises that the Earth could be billions of years old. Nor do they reject all aspects of 'big bang' theory, rather arguing that there was an intelligent creator behind the big bang.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not accept the theory of evolution. Instead they hold to a theory which has become known as 'Intelligent Design'. They argue that God created all plant and animal life on the planet, including a perfect human couple who, as they were created on a different 'day', have no common ancestry with animals. This belief, they suggest, does not conflict with scientific accounts of variations within species. Scientific observation is valued because through examining his creation, Jehovah's Witnesses' argue, one can view the Creator. Hence they claim they – and the Bible – are not anti-science. They suggest that the Bible contains numerous scientific and medical 'facts' which were 'ahead of their time'.<sup>11</sup> However, they believe that there is a limit to the scientific method and that there are some things, such as the origin of the universe, which cannot be tested scientifically. They suggest that the theory of evolution does not adequately answer the most important questions such as how life began; life is too complex to have started by chance – especially the development of human consciousness and its ability to reason and make moral judgements. Life can only be the result of an intelligent creator. "After decades of research in virtually all branches of science, the fact remains that life comes only from pre-existing life", their website states.<sup>12</sup>

Jehovah's Witnesses websites and publications provide much information on their view of science. An online series called, 'Was it Designed?' (which began in *Awake!* magazine) provides articles arranged by topic from the human body, to land animals, sea animals, birds, insects, plants and more, each focusing on 'evidence' of 'intelligent design'. The materials also include interviews with scientists who are Christian and who reject evolution. These materials are particularly geared towards children and teenagers who will be presented with evolution as 'scientific fact' at school. The materials include counter facts, questions to think about, and answers to common criticisms of those who reject evolution.

Jehovah's Witnesses' belief in intelligent design leads to an adherence to an environmentally responsible lifestyle. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the Earth was created to provide a home to those faithful to Jehovah, and as such they are stewards of the Earth. They have won environmental awards for their relocation projects in both New York, USA and Essex, UK (see also The Environment section below).

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/watchtower-no1-2018-jan-feb/is-the-bible-outdated/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/g201501/how-life-began/>

# Values and Commitments

## Individual and Social Responsibility

Jehovah's Witnesses are a law-abiding community providing the laws of the country do not conflict with their interpretation of Biblical teachings. Jehovah's Witnesses respect the authority of secular governments but their allegiance is with 'God's Kingdom', which is understood as a government in itself and as such takes precedence over all 'earthly' or secular governments. It is for this reason that Jehovah's Witnesses remain politically neutral and do not engage in such activities as saluting a national flag, voting, running for office, joining the armed forces or displaying patriotic symbols, even under threat of death as in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. They claim that such a position of political neutrality was practised by Jesus and the apostles. Neither do they join civic groups such as the Scouts or Guides. This is also why they do not engage in any interfaith work or participation in any other charitable organisations with a religious connection, in the belief that working with other religions jeopardises the purity of the Jehovah's Witness community. Similarly, the Jehovah's Witnesses uphold human rights law where it does not conflict with Biblical interpretations. Despite having few professionals among their number, they have several highly trained expert lawyers who fight their legal battles throughout the world. As noted above, they are also happy to use the legal systems of different countries in order to set legal precedents which might ensure their future benefit in the area of religious freedom.

The Jehovah's Witnesses can be seen as having a great sense of social responsibility to members of their community, over and above to members of the public and to society in general – remembering that all other forms of Christianity are considered 'nominal' and hence as 'Babylon the Great'. All members are active in helping others in their community through such acts as building and maintaining Kingdom Halls; liaising with hospitals on the issue of blood transfusion and/or visiting Witness patients in hospital; and engaging in social programmes such as disaster relief. Thus whilst 'sharing in disaster relief' is considered to be an act of worship, mandatory for members, it is primarily Jehovah's Witness communities who are helped first. Their literature states that during disasters, practical relief and emotional and spiritual support is given to both members and non-members, "but especially toward those related to us in the faith."<sup>13</sup> The literature is critical of major relief organisations for paying their directors large salaries and for failing to ensure that a large enough proportion of the contributions reaches victims.

## Moral Issues

Jehovah's Witnesses place great importance on living a moral life, derived from a close reading of the Bible – 'the Bible's moral code'. They use the concept of 'Bible trained conscience' to refer to ethical decision-making using Biblical principles. They also place great stock in raising their children and teenagers in a moral lifestyle and many of the materials on the Jehovah's Witnesses' websites are geared towards teaching children ethics and morals using stories and characters in the Bible. For Jehovah's Witnesses, a moral lifestyle includes modest dress; moderation in all things related to diet, consumption and finances (for example, alcohol is not forbidden but should not be consumed to excess; the majority of Witnesses have a low to middle income due to their choice of trade-related professions and the accumulation of wealth is not encouraged); and a modest character (competitiveness is not encouraged, nor is seeking praise).

Jehovah's Witnesses tend to have a socially conservative worldview with the patriarchal family held as the ideal. There is not gender equality in the movement but rather a belief in gender complementarity. The husband is the head of the household, the wife submits to him, and the children obey their parents as authoritative figures. Women cannot be elders or ministerial servants within the movement as women are not permitted to teach.

Marriage is considered to be a sacred and permanent bond between one man and one woman for the purpose of procreation. Witnesses oppose both abortion and euthanasia, but the use of contraception is permissible as it is not prohibited in the Bible. Adultery is the only reason for which divorce is permitted within the movement. Those who have divorced because of adultery are permitted to remarry, as are widows. Sexual relations before marriage are forbidden as are all homosexual relations. Jehovah's Witnesses interpret the Bible to say that 'sexual immorality is prohibited', by which they understand all heterosexual sex outside of marriage and all homosexual sex. They recognise that some people are homosexual, and claim to accept them,

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/assist-with-disaster-relief/>

providing they remain celibate. Not only should people not engage in sexual relations outside marriage, but they should avoid any cultural elements (music, films, books etc) that “promotes sexual conduct that offends God.”<sup>14</sup>

Jehovah’s Witnesses consider the physical body as God’s creation and therefore have a responsibility to keep it as fit and healthy as possible. Suffering, illness and disease are believed to be the result of Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden and the subsequent primacy of Satan in the current world. However, Witnesses make recourse to secular, ‘allopathic’ medicine and do not have a healing ministry, believing that the “gifts of the spirit” largely died out with first generation of Apostles (Chryssides 2016: 185). The exception to the use of secular medicine is the issue of blood transfusions, which Witnesses prohibit. Former practices of prohibiting vaccinations and organ transplants have now stopped, as not addressed in the Bible, and Witnesses now can receive both (Chryssides 2016: 188). The use of alternative therapies (complementary and alternative medicine) is a matter of individual choice.

Jehovah’s Witnesses’ opposition to blood transfusions is due to their belief that blood is sacred, as the life force of living things, and its ingestion is prohibited in several Biblical passages (Genesis 9:3-4, Leviticus 17:14 and Acts 15:8-29) (Chryssides 2016: 192). In the Leviticus passage, God warns that anyone eating blood will be ‘cut off’. The Biblical prohibitions have been interpreted as including taking blood into the body intravenously. Jehovah’s Witnesses reject transfusions of whole allogeneic blood (blood from a different individual) and its primary components (red blood cells, white blood cells, platelets and plasma). It is also prohibited to accept one’s own blood donated prior to surgery as blood should not be stored: “He shall even pour out the blood thereof, and cover it with dust.” (Leviticus 17:13). Blood-based medication is also prohibited as is the consumption of blood-based foods such as black pudding.

A Jehovah’s Witness who accepts a blood transfusion may be disfellowshipped (cut off from the community). There are several exceptions where Jehovah’s Witnesses are permitted to accept blood, including dialysis, haemodilution (a technique in which equipment is linked to the patient’s circulatory system), and intra-operative blood salvage.

Witnesses carry a ‘No Blood’ ‘advance decision document’ with them at all times so that in cases of emergency, medical staff will know their position. Witness children carry an ‘identity card’ which has been signed by their parents. However, Witnesses do accept numerous forms of alternative treatment, including the use of non-blood volume expanders. Witnesses have been proactive in advocating these alternative treatments and have established Hospital Information Services responsible for education on and facilitation of bloodless surgery. Designated elders also visit their local hospitals to ensure they have the necessary information, consent forms and professional contacts to ensure bloodless treatments. The Jehovah’s Witness website also has an area for clinicians with numerous downloadable resources, links to peer-reviewed articles and more. Jehovah’s Witnesses claim that bloodless alternatives are safer and more sustainable in the long term.

Needless to say there have been cases where Witnesses have died rather than accept a blood transfusion. Beliefs about blood transfusions are especially problematic in the case of children who find themselves in life-threatening situations or medical emergencies. In Britain and the USA, most medical professionals are willing to explore non-blood options in the treatment of children at the request of their legal guardians. However, some state laws require that doctors administer blood-based treatment to minors if it is their professional opinion that this is necessary to avoid imminent death or severe and permanent damage. In the UK, doctors can have recourse to the High Court to make the child a ward of court.

There is an organisation called the Advocates for Jehovah’s Witness Reform on Blood (AJWRB) which claims that the Jehovah’s Witness position on blood is doctrinally wrong. AJWRB consists of Jehovah’s Witnesses who want to remain members and have completely free choice of medical treatment.

## Rules and Ethical Guidelines

As stated above, Jehovah’s Witnesses follow relatively strict ethical and moral guidelines based on readings of Bible passages which are then explicated through *Watchtower* materials and study guides. As Chryssides has written (2016: 248), there is little room for individual creativity or interpretation – all members are expected to adhere to the interpretations outlined in official literature. Furthermore, members must adhere to certain rules of behaviour and belief set down by the Governing Body. If they do not, they face judicial-like proceedings which could result in disciplinary measures.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/g201309/is-premarital-sex-wrong/>

One of the more well-known, and controversial, disciplinary methods that Jehovah's Witnesses use is the practice of disfellowshipping, that is cutting off or expelling the individual from the community. This does not happen automatically if a member sins – only if she or he is unrepentant of that sin. This is because removing the unrepentant sinner is believed to maintain the purity of the congregation and is commanded in the Bible.

Chryssides outlines the process of disfellowshipping (2016: 139-140). If a Witness sees another Witness engaging in prohibited behaviour, they have an obligation to discuss that behaviour with the errant individual. If their behaviour does not change, the Witness has a further obligation to report the errant individual to the elders. Individual sinners are also encouraged to come forward and admit wrongdoing to the elders. If serious misconduct is suspected, the elders appoint a judicial committee of three elders to investigate the case through interviewing the accused and witnesses. (In accordance with Biblical requirements, there must be at least two witnesses to the offence. This has caused problems with the Jehovah's Witnesses' handling of reported abuse cases – see below for more on this). If the accused shows remorse he will be reprimanded through loss of privileges, which include offering comments at meetings and caring for responsibilities. If he does not, he will be disfellowshipped.

Sins for which a baptised Witness can be disfellowshipped include violence, manslaughter, attempted suicide, child abuse, adultery, viewing abhorrent pornography, seriously immoral speech, tobacco use, misuse of addictive drugs, drunkenness, fraud, slander, extreme physical uncleanness and more. Deliberately persisting in association with disfellowshipped Witnesses is also a sin for which one can be disfellowshipped. When a Witness is disfellowshipped, other members – including friends and (with some exceptions) family – are expected to have no contact with the shunned individual. They are not to have any “spiritual or social fellowship” with the individual, and no communication, not even a greeting (2 John 10, 11).

Disfellowshipping is very difficult for those who have the majority of their friends and relatives within the religion, whose life has been centred within the group, and whose contact with the wider society prior to the issue would have been limited. This practice is one of the most common criticisms that former members and the relatives of members have with regard to the Jehovah's Witnesses. Critics state that the disfellowshipped individual is treated as though they were ‘dead to God’, with no hope for salvation, and is prohibited from attending services.<sup>15</sup> However, the Jehovah's Witness website denies this is the case, saying that disfellowshipped individuals should attend services and seek spiritual counsel from an elder in the hopes that they will repent and return to the faith. In order to return to the faith, the individual must demonstrate ‘true’ repentance and the elders must be satisfied that s/he is suitable penitent. Critical information suggests that around 1% of Jehovah's Witnesses are disfellowshipped every year and that 2 out of 3 of these never return to the movement.<sup>16</sup>

Although the Jehovah's Witnesses have laid out strict guidelines to prevent the occurrence of sexual abuse of children, such abuse has occurred. There has also been controversy concerning the Jehovah's Witnesses handling of reported cases of child and/or sexual abuse within the movement. Whilst victims and their families were not discouraged from reporting abuse to the appropriate secular authorities, elders also conducted a scriptural investigation into the sins of the alleged perpetrator. As noted above, historically a judicial committee of three elders was established to investigate claims of abuse. The committee was meant to interview the accused, the victim(s), and at least two witnesses (called the ‘two-witness rule’ in popular media). Some of the problems with this method include the fact that there are unlikely to be two witnesses to an abuse and that elders are not professionally trained to interview alleged victims. There are now numerous historical reports of young women having to recount their claims of sexual abuse before both the committee of male elders and the accused. For instance, the Jehovah's Witnesses were one case study in the 2015 Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.<sup>17</sup> The Jehovah's Witnesses have not been included in the UK's Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse despite a campaign by critics for their inclusion.<sup>18</sup> In the UK in 2015, a woman won £275,000 in damages from the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society after the High Court in London ruled that they were vicariously liable for the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of deceased ministerial servant, Peter Stewart, in Loughborough in the late 1980s/early 1990s. And in 2014, Mark Sewell, a former elder in Barry, Wales, was imprisoned for 14 years for historical sex offences including the rape of one woman and sexual abuse of minors.

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<sup>15</sup> Recent media articles include <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40704990> and [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rodney-wilson/i-am-now-a-ghost-jehovahs\\_b\\_9764478.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rodney-wilson/i-am-now-a-ghost-jehovahs_b_9764478.html)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.jwfacts.com/watchtower/disfellowship-shunning.php>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-studies/case-study-29-jehovahs-witnesses>

<sup>18</sup> Such as <https://jwvictims.org/2017/08/09/a-posted-plea-to-the-iicsa-for-inclusion-of-jehovahs-witnesses-in-their-upcoming-inquiry/> and <http://jwsurvey.org/child-abuse-2/support-campaign-make-iicsa-investigate-jehovahs-witnesses>



In 2013, Jonathan Rose a former elder in New Moston, Manchester, was imprisoned for nine months for the indecent assault of two minors. This prompted the Charity Commission to open an investigation into both the Manchester New Moston Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, with a focus on their safeguarding policies. The 2017 Charity Commission report into the Manchester congregation found that trustees "did not deal adequately with allegations of child abuse made against one of the trustees in 2012 and 2013. The individual was subsequently convicted of 2 counts of indecent assault." Furthermore, that "the victims of abuse were 'effectively required' to attend a hearing at which they had to repeat their allegations in the presence of the abuser, and the abuser was permitted to question the alleged victims." The report concludes that the congregation's safeguarding policies had improved as a result of the investigation.<sup>19</sup> The new safeguarding policies make clear that the victim and his/her guardians have the 'absolute right' to report an allegation to the authorities and that congregation elders will conduct a 'Scriptural investigation' of every allegation of child sexual abuse. Furthermore, that the victim will not have to make the allegation in the presence of the alleged abuser.

The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Britain sought a judicial review of the Charity Commission decision to investigate, which they lost. The investigation remains ongoing in 2018.

## The Environment

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the Earth was created by Jehovah to provide a home to those faithful to him. As such, they are stewards of the earth and many members try to adhere to an environmentally responsible lifestyle. Jehovah's Witness congregations and projects in different countries have won environmental awards such as a 'Clean Enterprise' certificate for printing facilities in Mexico and 'Green Building Initiative' awards for two buildings in New York. The Jehovah's Witnesses' new UK headquarters being built in Chelmsford, Essex, has been rated 'outstanding', "the highest rating available according to the world's leading sustainability assessment standard, BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method)."<sup>20</sup> Numerous wildlife protection measures have also been put in place in this building project.

Jehovah's Witness literature is keen to point out that Witnesses do not see natural disasters as a form of punishment from God. It rather points to humankind's detrimental actions contributing to climate change as the source of many disasters, in line with current popular and scientific understandings and in contrast to some other faith traditions. Nevertheless, the literature also states that the Bible foretold that humankind would 'ruin the Earth' (Revelation 11:18) and hence current natural disasters are taken as evidence of the imminent end times. But as the Earth was a gift from God, it is reasoned, God will not allow the complete destruction of the planet, and intends men and women to live on the Earth forever. In the end times, God will 'ruin' those 'ruining the Earth' – that is the current government systems, which will be replaced with 'God's Kingdom'. "The righteous will possess the earth, and they will live forever on it" (Psalm 37:29).<sup>21</sup> Despite Jehovah's Witnesses' commitment to environmental responsibility, it is believed that ultimately only God can save the Earth.

## Websites

Jehovah's Witnesses own website - [www.jw.org](http://www.jw.org)

World Religions and Spirituality Project - <https://wrlldrels.org/2016/10/08/jehovahs-witnesses/>

BBC Religion and Ethics - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/witnesses/>

Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance - <http://www.religioustolerance.org/witness.htm>

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/investigation-leads-to-improvements-in-safeguarding-at-jehovahs-witnesses-charity>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.jw.org/en/news/releases/by-region/united-kingdom/branch-office-breem-rating-sustainable-design/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/wp20140901/ruined-earth/>

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