



ARE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES JUST GETTING A BAD RAP?

A College Student Interviews
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First of all, why do people join a group like the Watchtower/Jehovah's Witnesses? People join any group—dangerous or not—because they are looking for something that is missing in their lives. Cults offer a sense of community, purpose or mission and hope in a world that sometimes seems quite bleak. Cultists are usually intelligent, idealistic people who are emotionally vulnerable at the time a cult comes recruiting; e.g., they are going through a divorce or death in the family, they are feeling isolated or lonely, and/or are disillusioned with their own social circle and feel they need a change or purpose in their lives.

Do you think that the media has any influence over the way Jehovah's Witnesses are perceived? For instance, television shows sometimes poke fun at them. Do you believe that people don't take Jehovah's Witnesses as seriously as they should?

The truth is, people will ultimately form their own perceptions no matter what is said about a group or how they are portrayed. In my opinion, the media poke fun at Jehovah's Witnesses and don't take them seriously enough. The general population needs to be warned that this group isn't just annoying when they ring your doorbell and drag you out of bed to peddle their beliefs; they are also very dangerous.

Conversely, some counter-cult educators, like me, aren't afraid of the public's perception and will call a spade a spade (see www.outofthecocoon.net, www.freeminds.org, www.dannyhaszard.com and www.silentlambs.org), exposing the dark secrets of the group. Then there are those who are afraid to broach the level of toxicity in this cult, referring to it as a "sect" or "alternative religion" instead because they don't want to offend anyone.

I remember when my book *Out of the Cocoon: A Young Woman's Courageous Flight from the Grip of a Religious Cult* was published in 2006, I received quite a few emails chastising me for suggesting the Watchtower is a cult, saying it would be offensive to Jehovah's Witnesses. Well, the word "pedophile" is an offensive word too, but you still need to recognize it for what it is so that you can deal with it appropriately. Don't sugar coat the term "pedophile" by calling the abuser a "lover of children" instead. Don't sugar coat a "cult" by calling it an "alternative religion."

I often hear in the defense of cults, "Live and let live" or "It's their right to choose their religion." Unfortunately, lots of spiritually abusive "religions" hide under the freedom-of-religion umbrella. Ironically, cults feel entitled to religious tolerance from others while simultaneously denying it to others. The Watchtower's shunning edict is an example of this.

What's interesting is they will openly deceive the general public by appearing to align with viewpoints considered more mainstream, even though they know their statements are at best half-truths. Case in point is the Watchtower's July 2009 "Awake!" magazine, p. 29, in which they write:

"No one should be forced to worship in a way that he finds unacceptable or be made to choose between his beliefs and his family."

For myself and the *millions* of ex-members who are being shunned by other Jehovah's Witnesses, I can assure you that we find this statement not only hypocritical but appalling. What the Watchtower leadership really means, based on their actions, is, "It's acceptable for you to become one of us and forsake your current religion (i.e., leave Catholicism to become a Jehovah's Witnesses or leave your Jewish roots to become a Jehovah's Witness), but don't dare think for a minute that it's OK to leave us



without retribution!” As an active Jehovah Witness elder wrote to me: “...if I were to leave it would impact greatly on my relationship with my wife and many friends – walking away isn’t always as trouble-free as it sounds.”

I left the group as a teenager because I didn’t want to “**be forced to worship in a way that (I found) unacceptable**” and yet I lost my mother, brother, sister, four nephews and niece as a result. Contrary to what the July 2009 “Awake!” magazine says, I was forced by Jehovah’s Witnesses “**to choose between (my) beliefs and family**” at the age of 18. As a result, my family has been forbidden to speak to me all this time—since 1981.

Now, consider this: In light of the fact that the shunning expectation has been in place for literally decades, does the aforementioned quote suggest premeditated deception or unanimous ignorance on the part of Watchtower leaders? I believe they know exactly what they are doing and are a highly deceptive group. Deception is the hallmark of a cult.

The Governing Body (i.e., leadership) of the Watchtower also requires that hundreds, if not thousands, of people die every year refusing blood transfusions. That’s Jonestown revisited every single year in the Watchtower. If you are not familiar with Jonestown, over 900 People’s Temple members committed suicide by drinking poison or were murdered in 1978 in Jonestown when they refused to drink the poison ladled out by their leader, Jim Jones. Those who resisted were shot, had their throats slit or were held down and injected with poison. However, because Jehovah’s Witnesses aren’t dying in a mass murder, in one single event, the media barely takes notice of their martyrdom.

Do you have any advice you would pass on to people who are involved with the Jehovah’s Witness group?

Although I get to speak to Jehovah’s Witnesses on occasion and have helped many find the courage to face the truth about their religion and leave, Jehovah’s Witnesses in general are forbidden to talk to anyone like me or read anything critical of their group. That’s actually the first sign of cult involvement. It’s called “Milieu Control” or control of your environment. The cult dictates the information you receive both externally (from those outside the group) and internally (how you speak to yourself and what you believe). You are taught not to even listen to anyone outside the group because Satan is speaking through them. You are taught that if any doubt enters your mind, again, it is Satan speaking.

I wish I could speak to the 7 million Jehovah’s Witnesses worldwide and advise them that when *anyone* tells you that *they* need to become your SOLE source of “spiritual” information, something is terribly wrong. Putting all of your eggs into one basket is a terrible risk, as the people in Jonestown discovered.

What if they are lying to you? How will you ever learn if you have “the truth” if you close your mind, readily believing that you already have it? If you purchased a car, who would you be more likely to believe the high-pressure car salesman who is only interested in closing the deal (i.e., Jehovah’s Witnesses) or the car’s former owner who has spent years with that car?

Jehovah’s Witnesses have a lot they could learn from ex-members, if they would only be courageous enough to challenge their leadership’s stranglehold. Of course, to do so would mean that they would be excommunicated and shunned by everyone in the group, including their own family. This is known as “coercive persuasion” (i.e., you do something you would not necessarily do before you joined the group but feel coerced to do so through fear of reprisal). This is also “spiritual abuse.”



Many scholars believe that even the way that society has so passionately reacted to the Stephanie Meyer's book *Twilight* and its film adaption could be considered, by definition, nothing less than a cult. What is your response to these allegations?

Although I've never read the book or watched the movie (I have seen previews), what you are describing is more of a **cult phenomenon**. When most experts use the word "cult" they are referring to *a destructive group led by an authoritarian leader(s) who uses deception and coercive persuasion*.

People can become passionate about many different causes and beliefs, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they are involved in something destructive. You can join a yoga class for exercise, but throw in a cult leader who insists that you give him or her most of your money and/or time, someone who allows or promotes sexual abuse of children, tells you that you can no longer speak to your mother who is a nonbeliever, insists that you cannot dress a certain way, tells you that you cannot read anything outside the group or attend any other yoga class (thereby exploiting you on many levels), then that yoga class has just turned into a destructive cult.

Some people think that cults can be either dangerous (i.e., Johnstown) or benign (Twilight craze). Do you also have this opinion? Or do you believe that cults are dangerous and unnecessary in the 21st century society?

I think most people would agree that *all* cults that cause emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual, financial and/or intellectual ruin are dangerous. In a cult, it's easy to get in and hard to get out without feeling the residual effects of a lifetime of damage.

If you are referring to "cult phenomenon," then this simply classifies a group of people who enjoy a similar passion without allowing it to become all-encompassing in their lives. *A cult phenomenon* may or may not be a bad thing, depending upon the group's actions. For instance, if people following the success of the book Twilight all decided to kill or injure other people because they feel the need to appease some Vampire god, leader or political cause, then yes, that group would be a dangerous thing. However, reading a book and meeting with others who enjoy it, while *not* being under the control of a leader or group of leaders acting as a single entity (such as the Governing Body in the Watchtower organization), is not necessarily a bad thing.

Remember, it's not *the beliefs* of a group that make it dangerous. It's *the actions* the group takes to enforce their beliefs, which in turn injures others, that makes it so toxic.

A good test is to ask: Does the group I am interested in have thousands (or millions) of dissidents vocalizing that they are in some type of recovery process? If so, then buyer beware.