

# The harm caused by Jehovah's Witnesses shows charity law reform is urgently needed

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*The Jehovah's Witnesses organisation causes serious abuse and harm, says Lloyd Evans. Its charitable status should be revoked – and society should stop assuming religious organisations only have good intentions.*

Britons, for the most part, are a charitable people. The UK is the fourth largest donor of foreign aid, spending over £13bn annually on improving the circumstances of the downtrodden and impoverished around the globe. This altruism also finds expression domestically, with UK charities receiving £77bn (\$102bn) annually. Clearly, we Brits do not shirk from reaching into our pockets for a worthy cause.

However, as highlighted by the National Secular Society's report, [For the public benefit?](#), it is now apparent that a small but significant percentage of the nearly 170,000 charities are taking advantage of the generosity of the British people, and getting clean away with it.

Over 12,000 religious organisations are registered as charities for the sole reason that they promote religion. Not only do these religious groups espouse teachings that mostly compete with one another, with many promoting the idea that their faith alone offers salvation and all others are unworthy (in other words, they promote themselves), but aligning oneself with a faith does not improve one's wellbeing by default. Indeed, there are charities whose sole purpose is to assist a steady stream of individuals whose brush with religious 'charities' has left their lives in tatters.

EnCourage has the stated aim of offering support to former members of cults, including those who have been "spiritually abused". The Cult Information Centre (CIC) uses donations to raise awareness in this area, including highlighting the "deceptive and manipulative methods" employed by cults to "indoctrinate unsuspecting members of society". And Faith to Faithless, an arm of Humanists UK, supports and advocates for apostates of various faiths, including some who suffer serious psychological trauma and even punishment as a result of abandoning their beliefs. We have a bizarre situation where some 'charities' are so uncharitable to their own members that further charities are needed to undo the damage.

The NSS report does an excellent job of explaining how various groups take advantage of charitable status to further aims that are either not in the public benefit or, in some cases, entirely at odds with it. Rather than rehash some of the examples given, allow me to focus on one 'charity' in particular - an organisation with which I was once affiliated in my years as a believing Jehovah's Witness: the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Britain, otherwise known as registered charity number 1077961.

Watch Tower of Britain oversees the activities of the 139,783 Jehovah's Witnesses in the UK, divided into 1,615 congregations (as of 2018). In the most recent documents submitted to the Charity Commission, it explains that its objectives are "to advance the Christian religion as practised by the body of Christians known as Jehovah's Witnesses".

This goal is achieved, we are told, by "promoting the preaching of the gospel of God's Kingdom

under Jesus Christ in all nations as a witness to the name, word and supremacy of the Almighty God, JEHOVAH"; "producing and distributing Bibles and other religious literature, in any medium, and educating the public in respect thereof"; "promoting religious worship"; "promoting Christian missionary work"; and "advancing religious education".

In short, the work of Watch Tower benefits nobody unless you consider (1) being religious or (2) being a Jehovah's Witness to be advantageous. And that's if we take Watch Tower's disingenuous statement about "promoting religious worship" at face value. Anyone who has spent time as a Witness knows that its preaching work is not about encouraging people to join just *any* religion. The organisation's own literature condemns all other religions as part of "Babylon the Great," the harlot of Revelation whose followers are deserving of destruction in the impending Armageddon unless they can find their way to "the Truth" as taught by "Jehovah's organisation" in the nick of time.

Even being a Jehovah's Witness does not guarantee you a ticket through the supposedly imminent annihilation of 7.5bn non-Witnesses, according to the faith. In a talk given as part of a visit to Trinidad in January 2018, governing body member Anthony Morris coolly told his audience that any who do not sufficiently engage in the preaching work are blood-guilty and hence also awaiting execution. After asking those in attendance to examine their hands, Morris described a scenario where a Witness had not been involved in preaching in "weeks" before saying of such a person: "Well guess what, most likely God's seeing some blood all over your hands. Or they go totally inactive and we appeal to 'em, we try to help, but you cannot water down what God says here. If your hands are not clean because you've been out warning, then they have blood on 'em and you're going to lose your life."

All of this begs the question: Should an organisation whose primary function is to bolster its ranks by recruiting members through coercion and fear-mongering be allowed to call itself a 'charity'?

But its distinctly morbid, doomsday theology is not the only reason why Jehovah's Witnesses, a religion from which I am grateful to have escaped in December 2013 (at considerable personal cost), is deceiving the public in masquerading as a charity.

Since June 2014, Watch Tower of Britain has been the focus of an ongoing statutory inquiry by the Charity Commission for its involvement in what we now know is a global cover-up of child sexual abuse. In Australia, when the recent Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse ordered the local branch office to turn over its records, it discovered that despite meticulously recording 1,006 accused child sex abusers since 1950 not a single one had been reported to the authorities. There is substantial evidence that this is a mere glimpse of a disturbing global concealment of child sexual abuse by the faith.

As recently as September 2018, a jury in Montana fined Jehovah's Witnesses \$35m for the organisation's failure to notify authorities of a known child abuser, which led to the abuse of a second child. This calculated cover-up, signed off by the New York headquarters, was despite local state laws requiring the organisation to report accusations to the authorities. In the Netherlands, Reclaimed Voices - an organisation of former members - has accumulated so many reports of abuse cover-ups (over 300) that the Dutch government has called for an independent investigation into the group, now being carried out by Utrecht University. Moves are also afoot in Belgium to investigate the group.

Here in the UK, the organisation has fought vigorously to keep itself immune from scrutiny, even taking the Charity Commission to court and spending charitable donations on an unsuccessful bid to force it to scrap its inquiry. Despite the Commission prevailing, with the statutory inquiry soon to

enter its sixth year I remain unconvinced that the regulator has the legal muscle to bring my former religion to heel even if it wanted to. This was made plain recently when the organisation printed and circulated material encouraging wives to remain with abusive husbands with no apparent censure of any kind.

"Admittedly, there have been instances where an 'unbelieving husband' seems to prove that he is not 'agreeable to staying with her'," says the December 2018 *Watchtower* magazine article regarding a Jehovah's Witness wife. "He might be extremely physically abusive, even to the point that she feels that her health or life is in danger."

What advice is offered to a woman in this situation? After reminding Witness women that they must remain married to a physically abusive spouse with no grounds for divorce unless there is adultery, the writers remark: "Many loyal Christians have remained with an unbelieving mate under very trying circumstances. They can testify that doing so was worthwhile in a special sense when their mate became a true worshipper." Yes, aiding the 'charity' in recruiting new members is not only a matter of life or death for members in terms of an impending Armageddon. Apparently it should also be the overriding concern for a Witness woman who is married to an abusive potential convert.

You would think that with such stunningly reckless advice, placing women in a life-threatening predicament for the organisation's benefit, the Charity Commission would have strongly condemned the material, which was circulated in the UK using charitable donations. But despite them knowing about it (I personally made sure of that) there was not a whisper of criticism. Neither did the UK's foremost domestic violence charities have anything to say, for reasons best known to them. The incident demonstrated that the Watch Tower of Britain 'charity' has carte blanche to do and say almost anything without so much as a slap on the wrist.

You may feel I've nearly exhausted my list of indictments against this 'charity', but there is much, much more to be said. I could talk about how since leaving the religion my father (a Witness elder) has shunned me, my wife, and my four-year-old daughter (who has never met him) because he is ordered to do so in videos and magazine articles distributed by the 'charity' instructing Witnesses to cease all contact with apostate family members. I could mention that young Witnesses are coerced into spurning college or university education in highly-polished propaganda videos produced by the 'charity'. I could write about how the 'charity' dispatches groups of elders (Hospital Liaison Committees) to the bedsides of stricken Jehovah's Witness hospital patients to remind them, at their most desperate hour, that death is preferable to receiving a blood transfusion.

Suffice to say, the many hundreds of ex-Witness UK citizens who, like me, live daily with the hurt and heartache generated by this group are wounded anew when in horror they behold their tormentors being lauded as 'charitable', allowed by a seemingly indifferent government and its agencies to continue their reign of cruelty with zero censure or resistance. And I am focusing on only one group of religious charities - charity number 1077961 and its hundreds of affiliated charities, including all Jehovah's Witness congregations in England and Wales. I can only imagine the similar atrocities inflicted on members and apostates of other religious groups wrongly claiming charitable status.

Understandably, many will be nervous at the prospect of any form of clampdown on religious groups. Undeniably, many religious charities do considerable good in their communities and must not be forced to suffer due to groups like Jehovah's Witnesses exploiting the system. But the NSS report rightly acknowledges the need for balance in its recommendations. "Removing 'the advancement of religion' from the list of charitable purposes would not prevent religious organisations from enjoying charitable status," it says, "but it would require them to demonstrate a

tangible, secular public benefit under one of the other charitable purpose headings."

In other words, unless religious organisations like Jehovah's Witnesses can demonstrate that what they do is beneficial to the public as a whole, they should not qualify as charities. In the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, not only do they fail to satisfy this modest, reasonable requirement - they are also guilty of abuses against their own members that render any claim to charitable status an insult to their countless victims, to the extent that any good would be entirely outweighed even if the organisation's aims were somehow in line with the needs of the public.

As a nation, it is high time we stop naively giving all religious organisations the benefit of the doubt and assuming they have only good intentions. The laws governing charities are in urgent need of reform, and as one of the many victims of religious abuse in the UK I applaud the National Secular Society for having the tenacity, discernment and common sense to make this clear.

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## Lloyd Evans

Lloyd Evans is the founder of [JWSurvey.org](http://JWSurvey.org). He runs the ['John Cedars' YouTube channel](#) and is the author of two [books](#) on leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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