

Ep 48: Challenging the Jehovah's Witnesses

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[Lloyd Evans] I think that there is sort of climate of deference to religion in many areas of society.

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[Emma Park] You're listening to episode 48 of the National Secular Society podcast produced by Emma Park.

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The Jehovah's Witnesses are an organization of evangelical fundamentalists. They are notorious

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for their secrecy, exclusivity, and refusal of blood transfusions in life-threatening operations.

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The latter has led to a number of court cases, especially where young people, who are still

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legal minors, are concerned. These cases inspired Ian McEwan's novel *The Children Act*, in which a

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high court judge has to decide whether to order a hospital to give a teenage boy a

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transfusion against his wishes. One thing McEwan

did not consider, however, is the role played in

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these situations by so-called 'Hospital Liaison Committees'. These groups of Jehovah's Witness

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elders are allowed access to a patient in need of a transfusion, and will put pressure on them

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to refuse it. As reported by the NSS last year, the Jehovah's Witnesses have also done their best to

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obstruct investigation into allegations of child abuse within their organization.

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In 2014 Mark Sewell, an elder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, was sentenced to 14 years imprisonment

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for raping a woman, known as Mrs B, in his house, and indecently assaulting a girl under 14.

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Mrs B then sued the Barry congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, into which she had

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been baptised when she met Mark Sewell. The Court of Appeal has just upheld the

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judgment of the High Court, that the
Jehovah's
Witnesses were vicariously liable for the
rape.

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It has awarded Mrs B damages for the
psychiatric injuries that the rape caused her.

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One of the most chilling features of this
case was the fact that, as the court found,

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the teachings of the JWs gave elders
considerable
power and authority over others, who were
enjoined

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to be obedient and submissive to them. The
culture
of the Jehovah's Witnesses, said the Court,
imbued

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leaders with power and authority even
outside
the confines of their religious activities.

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I'm joined today by Lloyd Evans. Lloyd is a
former
elder, who left the Jehovah's Witnesses in
2013.

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Since then he has devoted himself
to exposing its inner workings.

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Lloyd will be talking to me about the harms
caused
by the Jehovah's Witnesses, the challenges
of

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resisting them, and why it is wholly
inappropriate
for their organizations to have charitable
status.

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Lloyd Evans, welcome to the podcast.
[Lloyd Evans] Thank you so much for having
me it's a pleasure to be here.

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[EP] First of all, what do the JW's actually
believe?
[LE] Well, Jehovah's Witnesses are, you could
say, a bible

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literalist, fundamentalist, Christian
denomination,
who believe that the world is ending very
soon.

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Their roots go back to Charles Taze Russell
and the Bible Student movement

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in the late 19th century, which was very
much
inspired by adventism, which obviously
focuses

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on the second coming of Christ. The
movement
morphed during the 20th century into what

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is known today as the Jehovah's Witnesses.
The organization kind of ballooned in the,

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I would say, 40s 50s and 60s, due to an astute
appointment of Nathan Knorr to the
presidency.

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He was very much about growing the movement and expanding internationally. So today the

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organization has moved away from the presidential model of leadership, and is now run by a governing

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body that basically appoints its own members. That's been the case since the 1970s. So now

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8.5 million Jehovah's Witnesses have their lives very much micromanaged by

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currently eight members of the governing body in New York. [EP] So they're in New York, they're in America,

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they're in the UK, where else are they mainly based? [LE] They like to say that they're global.

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It's not quite as simple as that though because there are large parts of the world where it's

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almost impossible to find Jehovah's Witnesses, including parts of North Africa, the

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Middle East. They're basically banned in large parts of the world, including China.

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But the parts where they're not banned, you

will usually find Jehovah's Witnesses in some form,

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although there are higher concentrations in North and South America, Europe, parts

0:04:40.800,0:04:47.760
of Africa, and Australia. [EP] Let's talk about the doctrine for which they're particularly

0:04:47.760,0:04:54.000
notorious, that of refusing blood transfusions. When did this become a tenet of the

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Jehovah's Witnesses? [LE] This was introduced in 1945, or at least that's when we first

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find this idea expressed in the publications, that it would be wrong or something that

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would displease God if one were to receive blood medically. Interestingly, just a few years before,

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they had just kind of mentioned this story in passing, of a woman receiving a blood transfusion

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and no big deal was made of it. We don't really know why the decision was made, or how it was made,

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or who it was made by. It seems to me as though the leadership at that time were very interested in

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finding ways to be different, finding ways to
single themselves out from mainstream

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Christianity. They came up with this idea
that blood transfusions were an aberration,

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because the bible condemns eating blood,
and
therefore if the bible condemns eating blood,
of

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course, why would one have it transfused
into one's body, even if it were to save one's
life?

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So it kind of started in 1945. By the 1960s it
had become a disfellowshipping defence.
There was

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a slight change in 2000, where they said
whole blood transfusions are still forbidden,

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and you can't have any of the main
components,
namely red blood cells, white blood cells,
plasma, or

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platelets, but you can have derivatives from
those
main components. So if, for example, there
were a

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way of getting the haemoglobin out of a blood
cell
you could have the haemoglobin. Of course
red blood

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cells are pretty much only haemoglobin in a
wrapper,
but that's the level to which they

0:06:45.360,0:06:51.920
cherry pick and go into minute detail
into what God would or wouldn't be

0:06:52.960,0:07:01.280
in approval of. Currently Jehovah's Witnesses
are still prohibited from receiving blood,
although

0:07:01.280,0:07:06.640
there is leeway when it comes to some of the
smaller derivatives, and although it's not

0:07:06.640,0:07:15.200
a disfellowshipping offence, you can still be
disassociated, which means basically the same
thing,

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if you willfully and unrepentantly receive
a blood transfusion as a Jehovah's Witness.

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[EP] That seems like a rather arbitrary
doctrine to to put so much weight on.

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[LE] Yes, indeed. It doesn't really
make any sense. It's one of those things
where,

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perhaps in hindsight, the organization might
have chosen not to go down this route, given

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how many Jehovah's Witnesses it's killing.
But it's one of those things, unfortunately,
where

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once the blood starts to be spilled,
you're kind of committed. It's the sunk cost

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fallacy, isn't it? When people start dying, you can't really do a U-turn even if you wanted to,

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because then you would have to account for all the people who died when you were telling people

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that this was what God wanted. So, it seems to me fairly obvious that, even if Jehovah's Witnesses

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or the Jehovah's Witness leadership wanted to do an about face on this, they actually couldn't,

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because they would be then held accountable, quite rightly so, for all of those

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who were martyred by following this decree. [1EP] That seems very telling in terms of

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of their mentality, that once they're committed, they have to

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go down a route, even if it turns out to be illogical or even inhumane.

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How would you characterize the mentality of the JW's as an organization?

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[LR] It's important to stress that, on an individual basis, Jehovah's Witnesses are some of the nicest,

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sweetest, kindest people that you're likely to meet.

I mean i, I was one, I spent lots of time with them.

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Many of my family growing up were and continue to be Jehovah's Witnesses. But like most

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high control movements, it's not necessarily a problem with the members or the followers,

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it's a problem with the leadership. What the leadership have done is they've created

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this incredibly insular movement where everything on the outside is to be distrusted, there can't be

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any form of criticism, or consulting of anything that might criticize the organization.

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The only information that's to be trusted is information from the leaders. It's all

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very Orwellian. Obviously this cultivates a culture where there is immense distrust of the

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authorities, you can understand why that would be a problem for things like child sexual abuse,

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and where members are terrified

of examining any objective

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reasons for criticizing the organization. So the point where you feel as though, when you go on

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a website that's critical of the organization, you feel as though a fireball might come down

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at any moment and obliterate you. But I don't think I'm exaggerating to say that that's kind of

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the existence of a Jehovah's Witness. It's like an alternate reality almost.

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[EP] How did the community of Jehovah's Witnesses react to your leaving?

[LE] Not very well, because to this day

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I'm obviously shunned by them and by my father, who's an elder. My father doesn't

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just refuse to speak to me, but also hasn't met his two grandchildren, my two daughters,

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one's two and one's nearly seven. So, in a way, I feel the punishment from my decision to leave on

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a daily basis because my life is different than it would be if

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there weren't such harsh penalties imposed on people who start thinking for themselves, and

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have a change of heart about the religion. So that's, I suppose, the main thing. But certainly,

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in the immediate aftermath of the decision to leave there was an awful lot of family tension,

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and lots of very difficult conversations. It was a very, very stressful period,

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compounded by the fact that, of course, because your indoctrination is so strong, you're going

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through an existential crisis, and doubting yourself at every turn, thinking am I making a huge

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mistake? How could it be that my entire perception of the world and its future

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is actually accurate and everyone else is wrong?

It's a very, very unpleasant thing to

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go through that process, and that's why my book is called The Reluctant Apostate. I'm

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obviously not reluctant now, I'm quite glad I'm an apostate, but at the time

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you have lots of trepidation when it comes to questioning your beliefs.

[EP] You've talked about

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shunning, disfellowshipping, disassociating, is this always a part of the Jehovah's Witness

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culture for anyone who wants to leave the organization, and how does it work?

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[LE] There's a spectrum when it comes to shunning, I've mentioned before 'bad

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association', they use the verse in the bible 'bad association spoil useful habits', and they

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use that to dissuade people from higher education.

but you can be "bad association" even

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as a Jehovah's Witness, and you will experience a degree of shunning, regardless of whether you've

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actually done anything wrong. So let's say, for example, you have your hair

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done a certain way, or you wear a sort of outfit

this is deemed worldly, or it becomes

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public knowledge that you're watching films that the organization doesn't approve of,

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the grapevine will swing into action, and in hushed tones it

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will be made clear that you're bad association and

not someone to be socialized with. So even though,

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when you go to the Kingdom Hall people will still be speaking to you, you're still

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going to see an impact. and you're going to see a degree of ostracism,

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and there's also such thing as "marking", whereby if you're doing something that isn't

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specifically prohibited but it's still going against the advice of the elders, a

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talk will be given, where your name isn't mentioned, but what you're doing is spelled out very clearly,

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so that people know who it is that's being spoken about. The idea is that they're not allowed to

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socialize with you anymore, but they can still talk

to you at the meetings or doing the preaching work.

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So that's another level of ostracism, but the ultimate level of ostracism, of course, is if you

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either leave through disassociating, which is

what I did, or if you are ejected due to having

0:14:11.840,0:14:19.360

done something wrong, which is
disfellowshipping.

[EP] Let's talk about blood transfusions and

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the refusal of them, and the way that
works. You've been involved in work

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opposing Hospital Liaison Committees. What
are these Hospital Liaison Committees of the

0:14:30.880,0:14:35.760

Jehovah's Witnesses and how are they
involved when
patients are in a life-threatening situation
and

0:14:35.760,0:14:42.900

might need a blood transfusion?

[LE] Hospital Liaison Committees are elite
groups of elders.

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Each congregation has its own body of elders,
but let's
say, in a circuit of congregations, there will
be

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a Hospital Liaison Committee, that's kind of
comprised of the cream of the crop of elders

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from that circuit. These elders are tasked
with ingratiating themselves with local
hospitals

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and making sure that if a Jehovah's Witness is
admitted to hospital and there's a likelihood
of a

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blood transfusion, the hospital or the doctors

or the nurses are on board and basically
willing

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to make sure that the patient doesn't receive
blood. That's basically their modus operandi.

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Of course, when you throw into the mix, and the
reason why I've been so vocal and written a
blog

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article for the National Secular Society,
when you throw into the mix the fact that

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a Jehovah's Witness can be penalized if
they receive a blood transfusion

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"willingly and unrepentantly" you can
see why it's deeply, deeply inappropriate

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for hospitals to be essentially holding the
door open for these groups of elders.

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[EP] Why do you think hospitals are so willing
to do that?

[LE] I think that there is a climate of

0:16:05.760,0:16:13.840

deference to religion in many areas of
society .

I can imagine if I were on the

0:16:13.840,0:16:18.240

Board of Trustees at a hospital,
I would be thinking: well

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this is just the same as a
Catholic priest perhaps coming to the
bedside

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and administering the last rights, or giving
pastoral care to a patient.

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How is this any different? Well, it's
completely
different, because in almost any other case,
when

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a minister of religion, a rabbi or
whatever, attends a hospital bed, there isn't
really

0:16:46.640,0:16:51.840
the likelihood of them penalizing the patient
depending on what medical decision they
make.

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But in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses that
is absolutely something that could happen,
and

0:16:57.360,0:17:03.520
will happen, if the wrong decision is made
and, of
course, because they're at the bedside they
have

0:17:03.520,0:17:09.680
a grandstand view, and can reach conclusions
as
to whether blood was received willingly and
done

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repentantly or not. It's worth
noting Jehovah's Witnesses, of course, will
say

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well there's never going to be a situation
arise
where a Jehovah's Witness will accept blood,

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we don't accept that could even be a
thing, but I've encountered anecdotes

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where people in that situation have relented.
You just never know, no matter how

0:17:38.560,0:17:46.000
much you believe, that having a blood
transfusion is akin to fornication and

0:17:46.000,0:17:51.120
a violation of your body, and that's
what I believed as a Jehovah's Witness.

0:17:51.120,0:17:59.920
You just never know how you might feel when
death
is imminent and you know that you're going
to die

0:17:59.920,0:18:04.800
unless you receive a blood transfusion. One
thing that we found with the National

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Secular Society, when we looked into this is,
that
there are indeed studies that have been

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done that have shown in a given hospital
how many Jehovah's Witnesses

0:18:16.240,0:18:23.360
were treated, and, oh look, a small
percentage did in
the end agree to receiving at least one of the

0:18:23.360,0:18:29.200
main components of blood. So there's always
this
likelihood that a Jehovah's Witness might
want to

0:18:29.200,0:18:35.200
save their lives and receive blood. And then
you

have these men in suits at their bedside who

0:18:35.200,0:18:41.520

are literally tasked with making sure that they don't receive blood. You can understand why it's

0:18:41.520,0:18:48.316

inappropriate for hospitals to be allowing that influence at the patient's bedside.

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[EP] You've been a core participant in an inquiry into the Jehovah's Witnesses attempts to cover up inquiries into

0:18:54.320,0:18:58.242

child abuse in their organization. Could you tell us a bit more about that?

0:18:58.242,0:19:06.080

[LE] Yeah. I was very glad to be involved with the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse for England and Wales as a

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core participant. Incidentally, for the record, Jehovah's Witnesses tried to get me thrown off

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the inquiry. They actually sent a letter and a nine-page dossier to the inquiry

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accusing me of hate speech, inciting examples from my youtube channel of where I've supposedly

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been hateful towards Jehovah's Witnesses.

So they weren't happy about me using my knowledge

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in that way. But, yes, it is unfortunately true, that Jehovah's Witnesses have policies in place

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that facilitate the abuse of children, and actively conceal criminals from law enforcement. So we have

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a situation where there's documented evidence in the organization's own 'Eyes Only'

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confidential documents, that demonstrate that Jehovah's Witnesses have a policy of maintaining

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a database of accused paedophiles, and these records aren't automatically passed on to the police.

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You have this situation where the police is kept out of the loop entirely, enabling individuals

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accused of child abuse to just continue to operate and potentially accumulate more victims.

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[EP] In a similar case, the Court of Appeal has just handed down judgment in Barry congregation of

0:20:34.720,0:20:40.160

Jehovah's Witnesses v BXB. It has upheld the

finding of the judge at the first instance that

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the Jehovah's Witnesses were vicariously liable for the rape of a woman member by an elder, Mark

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Sewell, back in 1990. The court spoke of the power and authority which elders have over their

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congregation and the obedience and submissiveness that are expected towards them. You've spoken about

0:20:56.720,0:21:03.920

the docility of members of the Jehovah's Witnesses congregation. Have you seen in other respects,

0:21:03.920,0:21:10.723

I mean your own experience, this cult of obedience leading to harm and to abuse of people within the organization?

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[LE] Well, I've been an elder, albeit for 12 months, and I've seen the esteem with which elders

0:21:18.720,0:21:26.240

are held by members of the congregation, and I can fully understand why, when an elder

0:21:26.240,0:21:32.160

is an abuser, and there's nothing saying that an elder can't be an abuser,

0:21:32.160,0:21:39.440

I can fully imagine how such an elder could be automatically believed by his colleagues

0:21:39.440,0:21:46.400

and use his power and influence to act abusively towards members of the congregation. And again,

0:21:47.360,0:21:55.760

the policies in the organization make it easy for this to happen, and certainly easy

0:21:55.760,0:22:02.240

for any abuse to stay off the radar of the police, because they view any sort of

0:22:02.240,0:22:08.480

impropriety going on in the congregation as first and foremost their jurisdiction

0:22:08.480,0:22:15.760

to investigate. So they won't automatically hand over the matter to the authorities and say

0:22:15.760,0:22:21.440

we have a situation here, we need a police officer to come and and have a word.

0:22:21.440,0:22:26.400

They will view it as their remit, so that even when we come to child sexual abuse

0:22:26.400,0:22:32.640

and the way that's handled, they have literal direction in their Elders Only manuals called

0:22:32.640,0:22:38.720

The Shepherd the Flock of God book, that says if you hear of an accusation of child sexual abuse

0:22:38.720,0:22:44.320

you need to report it straight to the branch, and the branch will advise you on what happens next.

0:22:44.320,0:22:51.422

[EP] So do the Jehovah's Witnesses policies effectively treat them as not bound by the laws of England and Wales?

0:22:51.422,0:22:55.360

[LE] Well, they wouldn't say that obviously. They would they would say that they do

0:22:55.360,0:23:03.040

recognize the proper legal authorities, and they submit to, they call it Caesar's Law.

0:23:03.040,0:23:08.960

But the reality of it is that they put their own organization and its interests

0:23:08.960,0:23:14.720

ahead of the needs of victims. If they were to be fully compliant with societal norms, when

0:23:14.720,0:23:21.760

it comes to child safeguarding and other matters related to sexual predators, they wouldn't

0:23:21.760,0:23:27.440

be saying 'Only involve the branch, only speak to the branch, we'll deal with it, we'll

0:23:27.440,0:23:33.680

give you advice'. They would be telling bodies of elders 'If this happens go straight to the police'.

0:23:34.320,0:23:41.600

But that sort of advice for elders is conspicuous by its absence.

[EP] In 2019 you wrote a blog post for

0:23:41.600,0:23:46.800

the NSS in which you argued that the Jehovah's Witnesses should not have charitable status,

0:23:46.800,0:23:52.400

which the organization currently does, as a result of the fact that under English law the advancement

0:23:52.400,0:23:59.200

of religion is, in itself, a charitable aim. Presumably you do think that the

0:23:59.200,0:24:06.880

Jehovah's Witnesses have abused their status as a charity.

[LE] Well, yeah. I obviously think that because

0:24:06.880,0:24:13.440

in a way I'm on the receiving end of this abuse, as I mentioned, on a daily basis through

0:24:14.080,0:24:21.120

the shunning policy. And you have to understand, certainly from the perspective of child abuse

0:24:21.120,0:24:29.120

survivors, when they are seeing so obviously what the problems are, and they're

0:24:29.120,0:24:36.080

even seeing material in the publications and in the videos doubling down on these policies.

0:24:36.080,0:24:40.560

It's not just about child sexual abuse. I'll give you another example

0:24:40.560,0:24:47.840

in the area of domestic violence. They've literally published magazine articles

0:24:47.840,0:24:55.040

for distribution in the United Kingdom, I might add, saying that if you are an abused spouse

0:24:55.040,0:25:01.840
you need to stay in your marriage because being abused isn't grounds for a divorce.

0:25:01.840,0:25:09.520
So it's better off to stay in an abusive relationship and try working on it.

0:25:09.520,0:25:15.280
They published this, it was in black and white, it was in, I think, 2019.

0:25:15.280,0:25:21.280
I was jumping up and down at the time on Twitter saying how on earth, in the 21st

0:25:21.280,0:25:28.960
century, can an organization get away with such appalling advice, printing it and publishing it?

0:25:28.960,0:25:34.880
This is before we even think about the database that I've just divulged, and the

0:25:34.880,0:25:41.040
blood transfusion issues, and the shunning issues.
How can an organization publish such appalling

0:25:41.040,0:25:49.280
material and still call itself a charity?
Obviously the way it works in England and Wales

0:25:49.280,0:25:56.800
is that if you are just advancing religion, that alone is grounds for calling yourself a charity.

0:25:56.800,0:26:04.000
So in my blog article for the NSS, I argued otherwise. I said "no", that there needs to be

0:26:04.000,0:26:10.880
"public benefits" It can't just

simply be a religious organization

0:26:10.880,0:26:18.143
promoting itself and and calling itself a charity on those grounds,
which is the case for Jehovah's Witnesses.

0:26:18.143,0:26:22.720
[EP] Perhaps this goes back to the point you made earlier, about deference to religion

0:26:22.720,0:26:28.400
within public institutions in the UK, the idea that just religion is seen as a good in itself,

0:26:28.400,0:26:36.640
whatever that religion holds.
[LE] Oh, absolutely. I might say that this is one of the

0:26:36.640,0:26:45.520
problems I've had with the Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. Richard Scorer, who

0:26:45.520,0:26:50.640
is obviously well known to the NSS, he happens to be my legal representation there - full disclosure.

0:26:51.280,0:26:56.240
One of the problems we've had with that inquiry is that we said very early on

0:26:56.240,0:27:01.040
there needs to be full disclosure of the records. Jehovah's Witnesses are keeping

0:27:01.040,0:27:07.680
these meticulous records about accusations of abuse. When the same investigation happened in

0:27:07.680,0:27:12.960
Australia for the Australian Royal Commission,

the Australian government seized the records

0:27:13.840,0:27:21.360
and discovered that, out of 1006 cases of abuse stretching back to 1950, not a single one had

0:27:21.360,0:27:28.160
been reported to the authorities. Now IICSA, the Independent Inquiry into Child

0:27:28.160,0:27:36.080
Sexual Abuse, has the powers to do the same thing, and say 'we demand these records and we want

0:27:36.080,0:27:42.960
to see for ourselves what percentage are being reported to the authorities', and for some reason

0:27:42.960,0:27:49.360
that we've never really received anything remotely approaching a satisfactory

0:27:49.360,0:27:53.760
explanation, for some reason IICSA has just said we don't need that information,

0:27:53.760,0:27:59.920
we're going to make our findings without that information. For me, that, as well, speaks to

0:27:59.920,0:28:07.840
this enormous deference to religion. I like to think that in almost any other context,

0:28:07.840,0:28:15.120
an organization concealing criminals from the law would be front page news. If, for example,

0:28:15.120,0:28:21.680

it was a football club, or if it was a school, or a high street chain,

0:28:22.240,0:28:28.560
or a gym franchise, you'd like to think that if they had

0:28:28.560,0:28:33.520
written policies saying we're going to keep these individuals secret from from the police, it would

0:28:33.520,0:28:39.680
be splashed all over the front page. But for some reason when it's a religion, society just says 'agh

0:28:39.680,0:28:45.120
well, what can we do?' They get to decide for themselves how they manage these things.

0:28:45.120,0:28:49.440
Frankly I just think we're living at the wrong point in history and that's why I think the

0:28:49.440,0:28:55.353
work of the NSS is so important in highlighting these enormous injustices.

0:28:55.353,0:29:00.000
[EP] Britain just doesn't seem to have got into the 21st century as far as religion is concerned.

0:29:00.000,0:29:10.960
[LE] Oh absolutely not. I might say that it's very re-traumatizing, as a former cult member, as sort of a cult refugee.

0:29:10.960,0:29:18.320
Because when you do make it out, when you escape that abusive, exploitative

0:29:18.320,0:29:25.040

situation, you like to think that you'll be greeted on the other side by a society that's horrified

0:29:25.040,0:29:30.240
that you've been through that experience, and will work its very hardest to make sure that it isn't

0:29:30.240,0:29:36.480
repeated. But the truth of the matter is that, again, we're living at the wrong point in history.

0:29:36.480,0:29:42.720
When you do make it out of a cult - I unashamedly apply that word to Jehovah's Witnesses -

0:29:42.720,0:29:48.880
because of the deference to religion, society just shrugs its shoulders and seems completely

0:29:48.880,0:29:58.320
indifferent to the whole experience, and again just applies spadefuls of tolerance to these

0:29:58.320,0:30:05.920
policies and practices that are hurting people and ruining lives.
[EP] Tolerance in all the wrong places.

0:30:05.920,0:30:09.612
[LE] Absolutely
[EP] Finally, what is the best way of tackling

0:30:09.612,0:30:16.700
the Jehovah's Witnesses in the long term and preventing them from causing further harm to more people?

0:30:17.200,0:30:24.480
[LE] That's a difficult question, and probably more

educated people than me will have ideas.

0:30:24.480,0:30:30.960
i do know what I don't like to see, which is the outright banning of Jehovah's Witnesses. That's

0:30:30.960,0:30:34.240
unfortunately been the case in many countries around the world.

0:30:34.240,0:30:40.800
I think when you do that, when you apply that sort of heavy-handedness to

0:30:40.800,0:30:48.560
a cult, what you do is you just drive the abuse underground. It still stays there,

0:30:48.560,0:30:55.360
and, in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, you also furnish a persecution complex narrative, that

0:30:55.360,0:31:03.360
can actually boost the propaganda that the leaders put out. So I'm very much against banning

0:31:03.360,0:31:10.240
cults and abusive religious movements, but I do think that legislation needs to be

0:31:10.240,0:31:18.320
brought in that identifies these areas of abuse, and holds the leaders accountable. What's

0:31:18.320,0:31:26.240
very interesting is last month, in Belgium, there was a criminal case in which Jehovah's Witnesses

0:31:26.240,0:31:33.680
in that country were fined €96 000 for violating the human rights of a number of

0:31:33.680,0:31:40.480
former witnesses through their shunning practice.
Because everyone has the human right of

0:31:40.480,0:31:48.080
freedom of worship, but that human right includes
freedom to leave one's religion if one wishes.

0:31:48.080,0:31:54.000
So if you have an organization that is exporting punishment on people who do leave,

0:31:54.000,0:31:58.720
there's a violation there of human rights, especially if you're

0:31:58.720,0:32:04.880
using all sorts of hateful rhetoric to stigmatize and demonize these individuals.

0:32:04.880,0:32:13.072
Well this is discrimination, and it's hate speech. And in Belgium, at least,

0:32:13.280,0:32:18.240
they have they have acted accordingly. And it's very encouraging to see

0:32:18.240,0:32:26.080
that governments are slowly, painfully slowly arguably, starting to apply this sort of

0:32:26.080,0:32:31.680
pressure. I can only hope that, even if it's not in my generation, that we see these

0:32:31.680,0:32:36.240
issues taken seriously, I can only hope that in future generations

0:32:36.240,0:32:44.477
organizations that do abuse people and make

people miserable, will be held accountable by law.

0:32:44.477,0:32:49.760
[EP] So the rigorous and consistent application of human rights law may be one way

0:32:49.760,0:32:54.748
of starting that process.
[LE] Yes. It's just a principle at the moment.

0:32:54.748,0:33:03.280
It means virtually nothing to the thousands of people each year who are either ejected from Jehovah's witnesses or

0:33:03.280,0:33:09.280
leave as a matter of conscience. They find out 'oh actually this is a violation of your human

0:33:09.280,0:33:15.200
rights', but it actually means nothing in practice, because those human rights aren't enforced.

0:33:15.200,0:33:23.840
[EP] Lloyd Evans, thank you very much.
[LE] It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you for having me.

0:33:28.080,0:33:34.459
[EP] I'm joined now by Megan Manson, Head of Policy and Research at the NSS, to give the NSS's comment

0:33:34.459,0:33:39.440
on the Jehovah's Witnesses. Megan, welcome to the podcast.
[Megan Manson] Hi, Emma.

0:33:39.440,0:33:44.400
[EP] So first of all, I think one point that Lloyd made, that I found very interesting, was this

0:33:44.400,0:33:50.240

idea of deference to religion, both that there's this sort of culture of deference to religion

0:33:50.240,0:33:56.240
within the NHS, within the health service, and also perhaps within public institutions in the

0:33:56.240,0:34:02.240
UK in general. Is that something which accords with your own experience and the experience of the NSS?

0:34:02.240,0:34:09.120
[MM] Absolutely. 100%. The NSS's strapline is 'challenging religious privilege'

0:34:09.120,0:34:13.920
and when we talk about religious privilege, what we're really talking about is

0:34:13.920,0:34:19.920
this deference to religion, the idea that somehow religion is special and should have exceptions

0:34:19.920,0:34:26.320
when it comes to the general laws and principles that apply to everyone. So, yes, we see that in

0:34:26.320,0:34:30.640
all facets of society and pretty much everything we campaign on is about this deference to

0:34:30.640,0:34:36.720
religion. So whether it be education and the high level of control that religious groups have in

0:34:36.720,0:34:43.600
education, or in our own Parliament where you have 26 bishops in the House of Lords,

0:34:43.600,0:34:51.440

and, as we've heard from Lloyd, in healthcare as well.

[EP] And the strange thing seems to be that

0:34:51.440,0:34:58.080
it doesn't matter what the religion is, what the belief is, if it's labeled as "a religious belief",

0:34:58.080,0:35:03.760
then it seems to be above scrutiny. Talking of strange religious beliefs, I mean this idea of

0:35:03.760,0:35:10.480
refusing blood transfusions, which, as we have seen, Lloyd said was introduced by the Jehovah's

0:35:10.480,0:35:16.240
Witnesses in the 1940s, and has sort of been adopted just to make them different from other

0:35:16.240,0:35:23.360
religions, so a totally arbitrary belief, and we have this strange idea now that the Jehovah's

0:35:23.360,0:35:29.840
Witnesses have Hospital Liaison Committees which sort of almost coerce Jehovah's Witnesses who

0:35:29.840,0:35:34.560
are in need of a transfusion not to have one. Megan, what's been the NSS's involvement with

0:35:34.560,0:35:40.720
these Hospital Liaison Committees?
[MM] This is something that we worked with Lloyd on. It was

0:35:40.720,0:35:47.760
Lloyd who basically raised this issue of Hospital

Liaison Committees and precisely what they do in

0:35:47.760,0:35:54.240

hospitals, the fact that they discourage Jehovah's Witnesses from receiving blood.

0:35:54.240,0:36:00.560

When we found out about this we decided to write a letter to the Department of Health,

0:36:00.560,0:36:08.160

and Lloyd helped us in writing that letter, to raise these concerns, because, honestly, I think

0:36:08.160,0:36:14.320

that the NHS really does bend over backwards to make sure that all patients, regardless of their

0:36:14.320,0:36:20.560

religion or belief, feel welcome, feel supported, to basically provide a sort of personalized service

0:36:20.560,0:36:26.560

to them. And I think that's commendable. However this issue of the Hospital Liaison Committees

0:36:26.560,0:36:32.800

has shown that there can be some problems with this approach, and the approach of of chaplaincy

0:36:32.800,0:36:38.720

in general, a multi-faith chaplaincy. So whilst it's wonderful that the NHS wants to

0:36:38.720,0:36:44.640

try and provide this spiritual support to people, regardless of religion or belief, it can, as

0:36:44.640,0:36:50.400

we can see in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, lead to people coming into hospitals

0:36:50.400,0:36:55.200

who might have other agendas. In the case of Jehovah's Witnesses Hospital Liaison Committees,

0:36:55.200,0:37:00.614

that agenda is in direct conflict with the health and welfare of the patient.

0:37:00.614,0:37:08.240

[EP] How far do Hospital Liaison Committees have influence on particular NHS hospitals and organizations?

0:37:08.240,0:37:15.760

[MM] Well, when I looked into this I was really quite shocked. I looked at the policies

0:37:15.760,0:37:20.720

regarding blood transfusions and regarding interface with religious organizations of a number

0:37:20.720,0:37:26.080

of trusts, and I was really surprised to see that the Hospital Liaison Committees have been sort

0:37:26.080,0:37:33.040

of providing training in hospitals to sort of talk about Jehovah's Witnesses, and, I suspect, to make

0:37:33.040,0:37:41.680

the case for why they refuse blood. And they also have been writing, or helping to write,

0:37:41.680,0:37:47.580
hospital policies regarding blood transfusions,
which I think is really quite worrying,

0:37:47.580,0:37:54.640
if the NHS is allowing religious groups to sort
of
co-write their policies about patient health
care.

0:37:54.640,0:38:01.675
[EP] So they're sort of predisposing hospital
staff to assume that
everyone who's a Jehovah's Witness is going
to refuse blood.

0:38:01.675,0:38:05.360
[MM] Yes, that's right. I did see
wording that did seem to say that. It sort

0:38:05.360,0:38:10.960
of said Jehovah's Witness patients refuse
blood.
Now I think that is a dangerous assumption to
make.

0:38:10.960,0:38:15.120
I'm sure that there are checks and
balances, and any Jehovah's Witness who
comes in

0:38:15.120,0:38:20.640
is asked 'do you want to receive blood or
not?'
However, if the assumption is already there
that

0:38:20.640,0:38:25.600
they almost certainly will or they definitely
will,
then I think that puts pressure on the patient.
If

0:38:25.600,0:38:30.800
they're on the fence and thinking 'well
actually,
now it's come down to crunch time, I think i

0:38:30.800,0:38:36.160
would rather receive blood and I'd rather
stay alive and look after my children, for
example.

0:38:36.160,0:38:40.480
But if there's that pressure there, not only
from
the Hospital Liaison Committees but also

0:38:40.480,0:38:45.920
from staff, just tacitly, by assuming that
they're
going to be refusing blood, then, yeah I think

0:38:45.920,0:38:50.080
that could possibly make the difference in
their
decision, and that in turn can make the
difference

0:38:50.080,0:38:55.810
between life and death.
[EP] Lloyd also raised the point that Jehovah's
Witnesses

0:38:55.810,0:39:01.360
are a charity, but there seem to be good
reasons for thinking
they shouldn't be one. Currently they're a
charity

0:39:01.360,0:39:08.000
because the advancement of religion is, in
itself,
deemed a qualification for charitable status.

0:39:08.000,0:39:11.520
Megan, this is something which the NSS has
long
been campaigning on that the advancement
of

0:39:11.520,0:39:16.160
religion should not in itself be a qualification
for charitable status. Do you think that the

0:39:16.160,0:39:21.520

Jehovah's Witnesses are a good illustration of the problems of having this qualification?

0:39:21.520,0:39:27.040

[MM] Definitely. I think they are a very good example of why the advancement of religion should

0:39:27.040,0:39:34.160

not qualify you as a charity. Just to explain a little bit more, there are a number

0:39:34.160,0:39:40.640

of charitable purposes set out in law, many of which are there for historical reasons,

0:39:40.640,0:39:44.720

and many of which are absolutely fine, and many people still agree are beneficial to

0:39:44.720,0:39:50.800

society. I think the advancement of religion is a particularly old one. It used to be

0:39:50.800,0:39:56.508

the advancement of the Church of England, and that's evolved over time as

0:39:56.720,0:40:02.240

different religions became more influential in society. There was an assumption that

0:40:02.240,0:40:07.920

advancing the cause of the Church was, in itself, beneficial for society.

0:40:07.920,0:40:15.120

That presumption, advancing religion, is somehow beneficial is still there, even though we are

0:40:15.120,0:40:20.800

now less religious than we ever have been. The surveys consistently show that over 50% of the

0:40:20.800,0:40:28.640

population say they have no religion, and there's now more awareness that many religious practices

0:40:28.640,0:40:36.320

are harmful, and the Jehovah's Witnesses are a good example of this. We heard from Lloyd about the

0:40:36.320,0:40:42.480

the shunning, which is frankly cruel, to tell people you can't leave this

0:40:42.480,0:40:48.560

religion. If you do, then you're expected to cease contact with your friends and family.

0:40:48.560,0:40:53.360

There's the examples of their appalling record on child abuse and safeguarding,

0:40:53.360,0:40:58.720

and they're discouraging of social cohesion as well, basically telling witnesses that you

0:40:58.720,0:41:04.640

shouldn't really make friends with non-witnesses. So we're just seeing

0:41:04.640,0:41:12.160

a catalogue of harms caused by this organization, and I completely agree with Lloyd that the

0:41:12.160,0:41:15.760

banning them is certainly not the way to go. That would be completely contrary to

0:41:15.760,0:41:21.200

secularist principles, and yes, I also agree with him that it would sort

0:41:21.200,0:41:26.800

of feed into the persecution complex that and
Jehovah's Witnesses may already have. So
yes a ban is

0:41:26.800,0:41:31.280
certainly not the way to go. However
questioning
and challenging their charitable status on the

0:41:31.280,0:41:40.560
basis that they are clearly in some ways
harming
society and their own members, whilst the
benefits

0:41:40.560,0:41:46.320
of this religion are quite hard for
most people to see. I imagine that many
people

0:41:46.320,0:41:51.040
in the organization, they might well
enjoy the social aspect of it, but is

0:41:51.040,0:41:58.426
that enough to be a registered charity? I
don't think it is.
[EP] Megan Manson, thank you very much.

0:41:58.426,0:42:06.831
[MM] Thank you.
[EP] This episode was produced by
the National Secular Society.

0:42:06.831,0:42:12.880
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0:42:12.880,0:42:21.422
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