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SPAIN: A hate speech campaign against the Jehovah's Witnesses

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An association calls for a Russian-style ban of the JWs in Spain. The Witnesses have sued for defamation, but the association is supported by most local media.

by Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (10.12.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3U0lG1x> – Let's start with a story. In a democratic country, and one with an

authoritarian past when Jews were persecuted, an association is founded to claim that Jews routinely commit crimes. Some of the members of the association are Jews who have left their religion and turned against it. Others just do not like Jews. Their claims against Jews are both widely disseminated and demonstrably false. They also hail totalitarian regimes that persecute Jews. A Jewish anti-defamation organization sues the anti-Jewish association. Some, however, claim that the latter is the real victim, and that by suing it the Jews just confirmed how evil they are.

This story is hypothetical. However, if you go back one paragraph and systematically change "Jews" into "Jehovah's Witnesses" you have an accurate description of what is happening right now in Spain. There is no doubt that Spain is a democratic country. It has an authoritarian past, when the Jehovah's Witnesses were discriminated and persecuted under the Franco regime, as were most non-Catholic religious minorities. Mindful of this authoritarian past, to its credit Spain now has a liberal enough legislation about minority religions. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, enjoy the highest possible level of administrative recognition there.

However, on May 18, 2019, a Spanish Association of the Victims of the Jehovah's Witnesses (AEVTJ) was founded in Toledo. It was officially registered in the Register of Associations on October 11, 2019.

AEVTJ's by-laws, which read like a polemical pamphlet rather than a legal document, clarify that its aim is to spread "through all possible media" a narrative persuading the Spanish public opinion that the Jehovah's Witnesses violate the Spanish and human rights laws, commit crimes and their "victims" are led to "isolation, depression, and even suicide." Those who escape just with "mental illness" and "fibromyalgia," but at least still alive, may count themselves lucky, the AEVTJ proclaims.

AEVTJ's claims are demonstrably false. Gabriel Pedrero, one of the main AEVTJ activists, launched on change.org a petition to have "the Jehovah's Witnesses declared in Spain an extremist, destructive cult..." (the Spanish word used is "secta" but it should be translated in English as "cult" rather than as "sect"). He wrote there: "Let's sign so that this religious organization may be declared a cult extremist and destructive as it was in Russia," thus endorsing the persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and the Russian unique interpretation of the category of "extremism" to "liquidate" peaceful religious minorities. The Russian crackdown on the Jehovah's Witnesses has been condemned by international organizations, Western governments, and the European Court of Human Rights.

On May 3, 2021, the Jehovah's Witnesses sued AEVTJ for defamation. AEVTJ hired as a lawyer to defend them one Carlos Bardavío, who has been presented to the press as "the most important cult expert in the world." This is in itself remarkable, since I have been described myself in one of the official websites of the American Academy of Religion as "one of the major names in the study of new religions in general," and had never heard of Bardavío before this case. So did a dozen of international colleagues I consulted, all leading international scholars of new religious movements.

From his Facebook page, Bardavío looks like an ambitious young lawyer and professor of law understandably interested in promoting himself. While neither he nor Gabriel Pedrero of AEVTJ qualify as scholars of religion, there is a field where they seem remarkably skilled, Russian-style agitprop and disinformation. Pedrero even let the cat out of the bag when he suggested that Spain should treat the Jehovah's Witnesses just as it does Russia, and adopt the Russian notion of religious extremism.

Bardavío's legal strategy is common enough in cases against religious minorities. He asks "apostate" ex-members to testify

and answer leading questions on whether they felt abused when they were Jehovah's Witnesses and discriminated after they left, and believe the Jehovah's Witnesses are a destructive cult. One may only hope that the court will understand that "apostates," a technical term indicating the minority of ex-members who become militant critics of the religion they have left, are not representative of ex-members in general and are generally not regarded by scholars as the most believable source about the groups they were once part of.

These "apostate" ex-members have clearly been socialized into the anti-cult movement, of which they use the jargon and even repeat common but false claims. One is that the investigation on sexual abuse of minors by an Australian Royal Commission discovered that the Jehovah's Witnesses had shielded from secular justice 1,000 perpetrators of pedophile crimes in that country. This statement is false.

As American scholar Holly Folk demonstrated in *Bitter Winter*, the Royal Commission's figure of 1,006 cases of suspected sexual abuse of minors reflects the sum of all disciplinary reports and referrals, proven and unproven, that had been submitted to the Jehovah's Witness organization in Australia over a 65-year period. These data were supplied to the Royal Commission by the Jehovah's Witnesses themselves. The Jehovah's Witnesses had regarded 383 of the 1,006 allegations as serious enough to be reported to the police, and 161 had resulted in convictions. The Royal Commission's acquisition of all the remaining cases, which were put at the police's disposal, has not resulted in a wave of prosecutions, confirming that the judgement of the Jehovah's Witnesses had been sound enough. The Spanish apostates also omit to mention that, while scholars have criticized the methodology of the Australian investigation, the Jehovah's Witnesses nonetheless fared better in terms of how they protected children than other religious organizations, including the Roman Catholic Church.

Apart from the judges, Bardavío and Pedrero have effectively disseminated their narrative, including the famous but false story of one thousands pedophiles allegedly protected by the organization in Australia, among dozens of Spanish media, most of which have not double-checked what they were told with the Jehovah's Witnesses. Only some of them have published the Jehovah's Witnesses' replies. Most articles only report the opinions of apostates and anti-cultists such as the ex-Catholic priest Luis Santamaría del Río. This is a spectacular example of the media bias against religious organization labeled as "cults."

Accusations against the Jehovah's Witnesses are repeated uncritically, without any awareness that they have been debunked by scholars and repudiated by courts of law. That the Jehovah's Witnesses protect pedophiles has been argued by the Belgian governmental anti-cult mission CIAOSN, which however has been found guilty of spreading fake news and defamation by a Belgian court of law on October 5, 2021.

The Jehovah's Witnesses practice of "shunning" those ex-members who have been disfellowshipped for serious sins or have formally left the organization (as opposed to simply becoming inactive) is described incorrectly in the Spanish case, including by omitting to specify that it is not applied to cohabiting relatives. Also, the Spanish anti-cult activists and media do not mention that the practice has been regarded as a legitimate expression of the Jehovah's Witnesses freedom of religion by courts in several countries, including in Belgium where a court of appeal has overturned a first-degree decision that had declared "shunning" illegal.

The Jehovah's Witnesses practice of refusing blood transfusions for Biblical reasons is described without considering the internationally recognized patients' rights to refuse medical treatments and the great variety of specific cases the specialized literature has examined. Even the dead horse of "brainwashing," a theory regarded as pseudo-

scientific by an overwhelming majority of scholars of new religious movements and by courts of law in the United States and elsewhere, is resurrected. Findings by scholars such as Raffaella Di Marzio that Jehovah's Witnesses appear as psychologically well-adjusted as their fellow citizens who do not belong to their religious organization are also ignored.

The end result, and the one the anti-cultists—who operate according to a well-rehearsed international model—wanted to achieve, is a reversal of truth and reality. The AEVTJ, the defendant of the case and an organization that had spread fake news against the Jehovah's Witnesses, is presented as the victim, a small, brave group resisting a powerful international organization. The Jehovah's Witnesses, the plaintiffs who seek justice against slander and defamation, find themselves put on trial.

Some can object that religious and anti-religious controversies have a century-old tradition, and even exaggerations should be tolerated in the name of freedom of speech. Indeed, there is a subtle line between freedom of speech and slander and defamation. What AEVTJ propagates is, however, "hate speech," something that is not protected by free speech principles. I had hate speech in my portfolio when I served in 2011 at the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) Representative for combating racism, xenophobia, and religious intolerance. I know hate speech is difficult to define, and Spanish criminal law has its own classification for hate speech. But one of the tests to identify hate speech from an international law perspective is that it generates hostility and physical violence. This is precisely what is happening in Spain.

Since the AEVTJ started operating, there have been more documented cases of vandalism against Kingdom Halls (places of worship) of the Jehovah's Witnesses than those anti-cult propaganda had already generated in previous years. The word "secta" ("cult") has been spray-painted on Kingdom Halls, and

sheets of papers have been placed there with accusations of protecting pedophiles (mentioning the usual false Australian statistics) and even of “human sacrifice.”

Hate speech invariably generates hate crimes. Media that irresponsibly repeat and amplify slander without checking it are also not without guilt. What we are witnessing in Spain is a campaign of hate speech. In the interest of religious liberty, human rights, and democracy, it should not be allowed to continue.

Photo: A place of worship (Kingdom Hall) of the Jehovah's Witnesses vandalized on September 11, 2022, in Badalona, Spain.

Massimo Introvigne (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* and of the executive board of University of California Press' *Nova Religio*. From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the “Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions” of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor

problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

Further reading about FORB in Spain on HRWF website

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