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Jehovah's Witnesses win important case against "El Mundo"

A Spanish court ordered the newspaper to publish the reply of the Jehovah's Witnesses to a defamatory 2022 article. The court found the newspaper has been fed false information by an association of disgruntled former Witnesses and has uncritically published it.

By Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (16.10.2023) - The Spanish Jehovah's Witnesses won an important case against the Spanish newspaper "El Mundo," which on November 21, 2022, published a slanderous article based on information supplied by the anti-cult organization Association of Victims of the Jehovah's Witnesses. On October 2, the Court of First Instance no. 1 of Torrejón de Ardoz dismissed the newspaper argument that responsibility lied only with the Association of Victims of Jehovah's Witnesses. It ordered "El Mundo" to publish the Jehovah's Witnesses' reply and to pay the litigation costs.

In the decision, which is subject to appeal, the court did not limit itself to recognize the right of reply of the Jehovah's Witnesses. It also discussed the merit, finding the allegations of the Association of Victims of Jehovah's Witnesses both likely to cause damage to the religious organization and inaccurate.

The court found it self-evident that the article "generated verifiable damages" to the Jehovah's Witnesses. To start with, "the title of the article itself included the word 'cult' ['secta' in Spanish] that has unquestionable negative connotations with respect to any religion." The stories coming from the Association of Victims of Jehovah's Witnesses are, the judges said, "objectively harmful to the fame and credibility [of the Jehovah's Witnesses organization], such as referring that it is a religious association (which they call a 'cult') with 'cultic' practices, stating that it causes 'social death' to those who leave it, that it 'compels' its members not to report crimes, that it alienates its members, and that it 'encourages physical and moral suicide,'" and so on. Thus, "from any point of view, the article mentions allegations by third parties that cause undeniable damage to the religious association."

Then, the judges examined "whether the allegations in the article are inaccurate," and concluded that most are. The decision noted that "the first thing that is striking is the title of the article itself, where the plaintiff entity is catalogued as a 'cult,' then throughout the extensive text the terms 'cultic practices' are used." According to the decision, "the information in this case is based on a fact that is clearly inaccurate, since the Jehovah's Christian Witnesses are a religious denomination registered in the General Section (Minority Religions), inscription number 000068 of the Register of Religious Entities kept at the Ministry of Justice, so we are dealing with a legitimately recognized denomination in our country like many others. Therefore, to classify the plaintiff entity as

a cult is legally erroneous since, in the context of the analyzed article, it implies attributing to the plaintiff some pernicious or harmful features as opposed to the rest of the religious

Second, the article refers to "testimonies of alleged victims of sexual abuse within the religious denomination ..., alluding to a certain situation in Australia where allegedly 'they hid more than a thousand cases of sexual abuse.'" The article also mentions a "former Jehovah's Witness who reports that he was allegedly abused 'among the Witnesses,' concluding that 'they kill you in life,' and "another former witness who explains the context of some alleged rapes and that 'they constantly threatened him that if he spoke, they would form a judicial committee...'" The court concluded that, when carefully examined, "these facts are not accurate and further affect the public consideration of the plaintiff since, on the one hand, there is no certain record of any conviction of the religious entity as a whole for the aforementioned unspecific cases of sexual abuse in Australia, so it is an inaccurate fact that the alleged events were concealed in that oceanic country. On the other hand, with respect to the specific accounts of alleged sexual abuse, it is not so much that the fact is true or not (in fact, no evidence of any convictions arising from such allegations, if any, has been provided), but that at all times the plural and collective number is used when referring to the alleged sexual abuse, to attribute to the religious denomination as a whole the responsibility for 'sexual abuses perpetrated within the group' rather than to the persons who in each case had caused the alleged abuses or sexual aggressions." Overall, the part of the article concerning sexual abuse should be "classified as inaccurate."

Third, the practice by the Jehovah's Witnesses of the so-called ostracism or shunning, i.e., counseling members not to associate with ex-members who have been disfellowshipped or have publicly left the organization, is qualified in the article as sentencing these former members to "social death" and "a silent hell." The court found the description of the practices by the Association of Victims of Jehovah's Witnesses as based on "facts that are not clearly proved, since it is one thing to assert the right or freedom to choose to relate with a certain person inside or outside a certain religious confession, and another that, as indicated in the article, 'when they are inside the cult they are explicitly or implicitly forced to relate only with other faithful'"—which is "inaccurate."

Worse, the court reports, "the article expressly states that 'there are double standards, because many elders are either adulterers or pedophiles,'" and that the Jehovah's Witnesses "encourage physical and moral suicide." These allegations, the court found, "once again lack a demonstrable objective basis," and are "inaccurate and extremely damaging to the prestige of the plaintiff entity."

In summary, the Association of Victims of Jehovah's Witnesses was caught red-handed spreading false information, and "El Mundo" was caught red-handed uncritically reporting it. "It is not a question here of refuting or censuring opinions—explains the court—, but to legally sanction the erroneous or directly false facts that support such opinions." The court also confirms that a media "is responsible for the content of what is disseminated", including allegations made by third parties. "To admit otherwise— the court argues— would be as much as to legitimize any type of publication based on unquestionably false or untrue facts, just because it is a third party who maintains this erroneous view of the facts."

It is not the first time that media fall into the trap of publishing slander fed to them by anti-cult organizations, "experts" on "cults" (in this case, the "expert" interviewed was

Carlos Bardavío, i.e., the lawyer [representing the Association of Victims of Jehovah's Witnesses](#) in another case), and "apostate" ex-members. It is also not the first time that a media outlet—even one that is a member of [The Trust Project](#)—refuses to publish a religious community's reply to an insulting article. The decision should teach these media a lesson. However, it is unlikely this will happen. Some journalists are like the crow in Aesop's fable, which kept being deceived by the fox and swearing that it had happened for the last time, only to be duped again at the next opportunity.

Spain grants historic tax exemption to Jehovah's Witnesses

HRWF salutes Spain's political will to treat this religious organization and their members in the same way as other faith communities in the realm of taxation

[JW](#) with HRWF (25.05.2023) - The Spanish government approved a significant adjustment to its country's tax law on April 26, 2023. This decision affects Jehovah's Witnesses in Spain in several positive ways.

The government's decision exempts their organization from paying property taxes on theocratic facilities throughout the country. It also allows individuals in Spain who contribute financially to the work of Jehovah's Witnesses to obtain a tax deduction on their contributions.

This adjustment confirms that Spain fully recognizes the status of Jehovah's Witnesses as a religion in line with the numerous decisions of the European Court of Human Rights in the last thirty years.

While Jehovah's Witnesses in Spain were granted legal recognition as a well-established religion in June 2006, they were not given the same tax exemptions as other religions in the country. Jehovah's Witnesses continued filing requests to have these exemptions granted.

Unexpectedly, on April 24, 2023, officials from the Ministry of the Presidency invited representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses in Spain to a meeting. At this meeting, they were informed that the tax law concerning nonprofit organizations would be adjusted, making it applicable to Jehovah's Witnesses. Two days later, on April 26, 2023, the Congress of Deputies approved this adjustment to the law. This change in the law is expected to be officially enacted in June 2023.

Photo: Joan Comas (left), a representative of the branch office of Jehovah's Witnesses in Spain, with Mr. Félix Bolaños (right), from the Ministry of the Presidency

Evangelical church in Spain banned from worship services in its building

CNE (09.01.2023) - <https://bit.ly/3iyb6ie> - An Evangelical congregation in Spain is forbidden to hold worship services in its church building. According to the municipality, the building does not conform to set requirements for places of worship. Now, the congregation has to meet at a different location.

Members of the Evangelical Baptist Church of Faith, Love and Hope in San Sebastián have been meeting in their worship building for six years. Now, the church does not meet the strict requirements of the municipality anymore, [Protestante Digital](#). There is no unified legislation in Spain on rules for church buildings. Therefore, requirements may vary between municipalities. One is stricter than the other.

Cheaper

In San Sebastián, the rules are quite tight. Places of worship have to adhere to the same rules as bars or nightlife venues, [Protestante Digital](#) reports. That means that church buildings must have a soundproof design, for example. These adjustments are often expensive and hard to afford for small Evangelical communities that often look for cheaper premises in cities.

The building where the Baptist Church had been meeting has now been closed for worship services. Javier Fernández, one of the church leaders, says that the members of the congregations had already done many renovations to adapt the former mechanical workshop into a church.

All had been well until the Covid pandemic, [Protestante Digital](#) writes. After four years of meeting, the police came to the building to examine the premise. At that moment, the church was found to comply with the Corona rules, such as keeping enough distance between members and the mask obligation.

However, after that, the City Council wrote that the venue did not meet the municipality's requirements, Fernández tells the newspaper. To make the necessary changes, the congregation would have to spend between 30,000 and 50,000 euros on a new entrance, adjustment of the height of the ceiling and a new ventilation system, among other things.

The three or four dozen attendees can never bring up this money. Pleas to the City Council for an alternative were declined. The requirements and the deadline to adjust to them remained the same.

Burden

In addition, the church had to buy the building because the owner wanted to sell it. As they had no good alternative in the city, the church leadership felt obliged to take it over, even though the financial burden is heavy. Combined with the renovations, the congregation must find 200,000 euros to pay for all the expenses. It launched a fundraiser to do so.

Photo: Congregation in San Sebastián. Photo YouTube, [Protestante Digital](#)