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Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care and Jehovah's Witnesses: a faulty report

A biased and unscientific methodology, a selective use of sources, and religious prejudices led to unreliable conclusions.

by Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (06.08.2024) - The recently released report by the New Zealand [Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care](#) generated considerable international emotion. Its conclusion that some 200,000 children in the country were abused when in care of state or faith-based institutions between 1950 and 1999 [is indeed disturbing](#). Less understandable is the disproportionate attention in media accounts about the section of the report [on the Jehovah's Witnesses](#), considering that out of the 200,000 cases only one concerns that religious organization, and that it is really a case of "abuse in care" is disputed.

The "case study" of the Jehovah's Witnesses is methodologically faulty and religiously biased, which makes its conclusions unreliable. Although current members of the Jehovah's Witnesses were also heard, and the organization submitted comments, the conclusions of the report appear to be based on three main sources. First, the testimonies of a small number of "apostate" ex-members are discussed. "Apostate" is not an insult: it is the [technical term](#) sociologists use to designate the minority of ex-members who turn into militant opponents of the group they have left. Most ex-members are not "apostates."

The second source consists of articles by anti-cult critics of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Some of them are part of an organization calling for the legal repression of the Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups and were active participants [in a recent international anti-cult gathering](#). The New Zealand report repeatedly references an article by two British psychologists, Windy A. Grendele and Savin Bapir-Tardy, and one criminologist, Maya Flax (p. 12 and p. 36) and another by an American hospital research assistant and tutor called Rosie Luther (p. 12, three references). I am the co-author with Professor James T. Richardson, a leading international authority on the relationship between religion and the law, of [a criticism of the article by Grendele, Bapir-Tardy, and Flax](#), and have also [negatively reviewed](#) Luther's text. One may agree or disagree with our criticism, but what is beyond dispute is that these are militant statements promoting the state repression of the Jehovah's Witnesses rather than neutral scholarly articles. The latter do exist, but the large scholarly literature about the Jehovah's Witnesses is totally ignored by the New Zealand report.

The third source consists of the previous reports by the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) and the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse for England and Wales (2021). [Criticism by scholars](#) of the Australian

report is ignored, and its conclusions are summarized in a simplistic way, dangerously close to the statements that led [Belgian](#) and [French](#) government bodies to be found guilty of incorrectly representing the issue of child sexual abuse among the Jehovah's Witnesses by courts of law in their respective countries. For example, the New Zealand report claims that "The Inquiry has not seen any evidence of the Jehovah's Witnesses referring sexual abuse allegations to police during the Inquiry period in Aotearoa New Zealand. This is consistent with Inquiry findings in Australia..." (p. 47). However, in the Australian case, of the 1,006 case files that the Jehovah's Witnesses provided to the Royal Commission, 383 had been reported to the police at the time they had happened, and 161 had resulted in convictions.

The New Zealand Commission was also aware (as it referenced it in two footnotes at p. 11) of the expert opinion dated February 2021 written after the Australian Royal Commission report by Professor Patrick Parkinson, an authority on child sexual abuse, who concluded that the measures protecting children adopted in 2017 (but with significant earlier precedents) by the Jehovah's Witnesses are adequate and compare favorably with other religions. However, it mentioned the Parkinson opinion only with reference to disfellowshipping procedures, ignoring the scholar's substantial comments on child protection policies, a matter for which it preferred to rely on anti-cult sources.

As for the report about England and Wales, while the New Zealand text emphasizes its parts critical of the Jehovah's Witnesses, it ignores its statement that, while problematic in the past as it happened for most other religions, the policies adopted by the Jehovah's Witnesses for handling cases of child abuse [have now been improved](#).

What the New Zealand report mostly derives from its English-Welsh counterpart is the latter's [criticism of the "two witness rule,"](#) which requires two witnesses to testify against an accused wrongdoer in proceedings before an ecclesiastical judicial committee. The New Zealand document thus perpetuates the confusion between the internal procedure of the Jehovah's Witness to remove those who are responsible of serious sins and are unrepentant and the different issue of reporting sexual abusers to secular authorities. How the Jehovah's Witnesses, or any other religion, handle their ecclesiastical matters within the congregation should not be of any concern to a secular investigation. Freedom of religion and freedom of association allow them to discipline, or not discipline, their members in the way they deem fit. Since it is acknowledged that their current directives ask members to comply with laws or regulations about reporting co-religionists suspected of being guilty of sexual abuse to the police, whether they keep them in the fold, expel them, or otherwise discipline them, and to do this require one, two, or a hundred witnesses, is an ecclesiastical matter that secular institutions have no business in regulating.

The New Zealand report exhibits a clear antipathy against the Jehovah's Witnesses and conservative religion in general. It repeats several times that their practices are inspired by the "2000 year old" (p. 46, 61) texts of the New Testament and "primarily based on passages from the Bible" (p. 6), as if this was something strange or sinister for a religious organization. The report also blames the Jehovah's Witnesses for having male Elders and members of the Governing Body only, and repeatedly calls their organization "patriarchal" (p. 10, 11, 29) not a complimentary term in the context of the document. Obviously, several mainline religious organizations (including the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox Judaism, Islam) also have male leaders only. The report gives weight to the

testimony of one ex-member that Jehovah's Witnesses children "could not participate in Christmas, birthdays, and other holidays" (p. 25). Perhaps no testimony was needed, as this is a well-known doctrine of the Jehovah's Witnesses, who regard these celebrations as inherently non-Christian. It is also part of their freedom of religion to interpret the Bible in this respect as they deem appropriate.

It is also reported that "The Jehovah's Witness faith is not merely an association based on friendship, common interests, work or a home. Being part of the faith is considered a pathway to salvation" (p. 11). Having studied religions for several decades, I should confess I never came across one that presented itself as a mere circle of friends and did not claim to offer "a pathway to salvation," although "salvation" in different religious contexts may have different names.

The mandate of the New Zealand Commission referred to "abuse in care." Repeating [a mistake by the Australian Royal Commission](#), and by amending its definition of "care" after its work had started, the New Zealand Commission expanded the notion of "care" referred to religious organizations beyond any logical meaning of the word.

It is acknowledged that "Unlike most other faith-based organisations the Inquiry investigated, the Jehovah's Witnesses did not provide faith-based schools, children's homes, or foster care services during the Inquiry period" (p. 14). However, it is alleged that the fact that minors accompanied adult Jehovah's Witnessing during missionary activities, participated in Bible studies conducted by Elders in their homes, or helped adults in cleaning Kingdom Halls and other service activities placed them in a situation of "care." The authors of the report are aware that Jehovah's Witnesses clearly prescribe that during these activities minors should not be alone with Elders or other adults and should be under the supervision of their parents yet report testimonies by apostate ex-members claiming that in what were admittedly isolated incidents this did not happen. More generally, and absurdly, the report claims that since Elders are figures of authority every time minors are with an Elder, even in a non-institutional and private context, they are in "care" of the religious organization.

This is the case of the lonely instance of child sexual abuse concerning the Jehovah's Witnesses the New Zealand Commission obtained evidence of. It concerns an Elder who under the pretext of accompanying S.C., a minor friend of his family, home with his car took her repeatedly to an area where "there were no homes" and sexually assaulted her (p. 39). The report differentiates this case from four that the Jehovah's Witnesses themselves reported to the Commission, where Elders were disciplined for their inappropriate or abusive behavior with minors, and a couple where ex-members testified that they were abused as children in their homes by family members or friends. While in these cases the Commission claims it could not reach the conclusion that the minors were "in care of the faith," in the case of S.C. it believes the situation was one of "care" because "the faith conferred power and authority on the Elder," and the girl trusted him because he was an Elder (p. 39).

Coincidentally, while the New Zealand Commission released its report, the Ontario Supreme Court in the case "Gutierrez v. The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Canada" (2024 ONSC 3837) on July 4, 2024, refused to certify a class action against the Jehovah's Witnesses by noting that "It is not reasonably foreseeable that a religious institution that does not assume any care giving responsibility for children should be liable for failing to safeguard Jehovah's Witnesses children from sexual assaults

perpetrated outside of Kingdom Halls by minor and adult Jehovah’s Witnesses in private residences, camp grounds, and automobiles” (par. 128 of the Ontario decision). If we would follow the twisted logic of the New Zealand Commission, there would be no need to distinguish between institutional or “in care” abuse and abuses in private settings, including in automobiles. By definition, any abuse by a person with a position of authority in a religious organization would be regarded as institutional.

It remains that a Commission that reported it had found 200,000 cases of “abuse in care” in the period it studied in New Zealand in state- and religion-sponsored institutions, found only “one allegation of sexual abuse against a child in the care of the Jehovah’s Witnesses during the Inquiry period” (p. 38) and it found it by stretching the meaning of “care” beyond any reasonable limit. The Commission justified the “relatively low level of alleged abuse” with “the barriers to disclosure” allegedly existing among the Jehovah’s Witnesses (p. 38). But this argument unfairly places the Jehovah’s Witnesses in an impossible position. If ex-members report they were abused, this proves the organization has a systemic problem of abuse. If they don’t, it proves that they have created barriers preventing members (and seemingly hostile ex-members too) from reporting abuse. To increase the figures, the report mentions allegations of “psychological and emotional abuse” (p. 40) by apostate ex-members, which are fairly typical of anti-cult accounts but clearly have nothing to do with child sexual abuse.

Based on a faulty methodology, relying mostly on biased sources, and being clearly tainted by religious prejudice, the New Zealand report cannot be considered a reliable scientific study. It asks the Jehovah’s Witnesses to apologize. While perpetrators of individual, non-institutional, and non-in-care abuse should certainly be prosecuted by courts, I do not find in the report anything the Jehovah’s Witnesses were guilty of in New Zealand as an organization—and much the authors of the report should offer an apology for, as willingly or unwillingly they contributed to discrimination and slander against a minority religion.