

## **Expert Opinion**

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1. We have been requested by the law firm of Mr. Shane Brady, representing the “Christian Congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Netherlands”, to examine the report “Sexual Abuse and Willingness to Report Within the Community of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” authored by Kees van den Bos, Marie-Jeanne Schiffelers, Michèle Bal, Hilke Grootelaar, Isa Bertram and Amarins Jansma, with the cooperation of Stans de Haas, and commissioned by the Research and Documentation Centre of the Ministry of Justice and Safety (Utrecht, December 2019: hereinafter “the Report”), and to comment on it based on our experience of several decades in the study of minority religions and the Jehovah’s Witnesses. None of us reads Dutch, and we have worked on an English translation supplied by the law firm of Mr. Brady. We cannot, of course, verify the quality of the translation, although we did double-check the tables and figures in the original Dutch version we also received.
2. We are scholars of religion specialized in the study of new religious movements and minority religions, and members of the group “New Religious Movements” of the American Academy of Religion. We have observed the Jehovah’s Witnesses internationally for several decades.
3. J. Gordon Melton is the Distinguished Professor of American Religious History at Baylor University, Waco, Texas. He is the author of numerous books on new religions, in many of which he has discussed the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which he has monitored for more than 50 years. As a former

president of the Communal Studies Association, he is also familiar with “closed” and other religious communities, both those who live a geographically isolated existence and those who try to create strong social boundaries with the world of non-members.

4. Holly Folk is an associate professor at the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington. She is familiar with “closed religious communities,” having served on the board of the Communal Studies Association since 2010, and has studied the theology and practices of Jehovah’s Witnesses within the framework of a comparative study of “new Christianities.”
5. Massimo Introvigne has been until 2016 a professor of Sociology of Religions at Pontifical Salesian University, Torino, Italy. He is the author of some seventy volumes on minority religions and sociology of religions, three of them devoted to the Jehovah’s Witnesses (Introvigne 1990, 2002, 2015). He has also studied sexual abuse within religious communities, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, authoring two books on the subject (Introvigne 2010, 2011). In 2010, he was among the panelists at the hearings on “Child abuse in institutions: ensuring full protection of the victims,” organized in Strasbourg by the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly’s (PACE) Committee on Social Affairs. In 2011, he has served as the Representative for combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), of which The Netherlands is also a participating state.

### **The Report: Methodological Issues**

6. We have read the Report with great interest. We do understand that our colleagues confronted a delicate field, where research is by definition difficult.

We applaud their intellectual honesty in acknowledging repeatedly that nothing in the Report is aimed at “establishing the truth” (see e.g. 13) about the self-reported stories of sexual abuse they encountered. “The process of establishing the truth, they stated, is not a goal of this research” (7). Although we may have liked to see this point underlined with more emphasis, we appreciate the cautionary note that the terms “perpetrators and victims” and “abuse” in the Report in fact mean “alleged perpetrators and alleged victims ... [and] alleged abuse. This is because we could not verify if the abuse really took place or not” (29).

7. The final conclusions that, “it is difficult to present our findings with a precise representativeness for the Jehovah’s Witnesses community” and that “we cannot give a precise estimate of the prevalence of sexual abuse about Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Netherlands” (122) also attest to the professional integrity of the authors.
8. The sources of the report include three investigations in Australia, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, some scholarly studies on Jehovah’s Witnesses, interviews with six current members and four former members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses “who were directly or indirectly involved in cases of sexual abuse” (26), and interaction with both the board of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Netherlands and the Reclaimed Voices Foundation, an advocacy group that “works for the interests of the victims of sexual abuse among Jehovah’s Witnesses” (26). It is, however, not unfair to the authors of the report to state that the key element on which their conclusions were based is a survey carried out by establishing an electronic contact point and encouraging current and former Jehovah’s Witnesses with direct or indirect experience of sexual abuse to compile a questionnaire. The existence of the contact point was advertised through several Dutch media, and both the board

of the Jehovah's Witnesses in The Netherlands and the Reclaimed Voice Foundation. It was possible, but not mandatory, to include personal data for further contact, thus making the questionnaire no longer anonymous. Understandably, only a few respondents included these data. 751 questionnaires were received, some of them incomplete, but "all the data compiled were used, including information from questionnaires that were not completed" (33). We note that decade-old cases were included, as well as cases where the alleged perpetrators were not Jehovah's Witnesses.

9. We agree with the researchers on two main points: first, self-selected samples such as this one do not allow for any conclusion about the truth, or otherwise, of the allegations made; second, notwithstanding all their problems, self-selected samples are sometimes used in social science research for lack of alternatives, and their use is not regarded as generally inappropriate. However, in this specific case, we are somewhat surprised that the Report does not discuss the possible manipulation of electronic research. Both sexual abuse and the situation of religious communities accused by some of being "cults" or "sects" are very controversial issues. Well-organized advocacy groups exist in the field, and even some governments have their own agendas. One of the authors is Italian and notes that one of the most vitriolic anti-Jehovah's-Witnesses Web sites in Italy did publicize the survey as "a bomb" about to explode in The Netherlands, and the possibility of participating (see <http://testimonidigeovaconsapevoli.blogspot.com/2019/04/bomba-in-olanda.html>). Of course, if we assume we were dealing with skilled organizations, the Dutch language would not have been a serious obstacle. One of the authors has discussed elsewhere how both the Chinese and the Russian government have been suspected (including by U.S. governmental authorities) of creating false accounts on social networks to disseminate

negative information about groups they are actively repressing as “cults,” mentioning as an example the suspicious proliferation of accounts applauding the Russian decision and accusing the Jehovah’s Witnesses of all sort of (mostly sexual) wrongdoings after Russia banned the Witnesses in July 2017 (Introvigne 2020, 81). These are by no means mere conspiracy theories, and the practice of creating fake accounts on the social media to influence the public opinion, or electoral processes, by both public and private agents is described in a large and fast-growing literature. We are not told in the Report whether measures have been taken to prevent multiple questionnaires to be submitted from the same IP address, or questionnaires to be submitted by using VPN masking the real IP address of the respondent. Even if these measures (that we know were adopted in other surveys in the delicate field of new religious movements) were used, through appropriate software it is possible for experienced organizations to bypass them. Absent any further information, we should conclude that:

- (a) it would have been comparatively easy for organized opponents of the Jehovah’s Witnesses to submit multiple questionnaires trying to depict the Witnesses in the worst possible light (of course, theoretically it would also have been possible for the Witnesses to submit multiple questionnaires praising their organization – but the results of the survey rule out this as unlikely);
- (b) within the framework of the controversies about “cults” and “sects,” it has already occurred that private organizations and state agents have been strongly suspected of creating fake electronic identities of “victims” of the “cults”;
- (c) there is no evidence that the respondents, or the majority of them, (i) were really current or former Jehovah’s Witnesses (in fact, the report itself

mentions that the majority of the respondents were not currently Jehovah's Witnesses [34] and it is not clear whether all the non-members who submitted answers claimed to be ex-members); (ii) were Dutch; and (iii) were real individual respondents rather than what in the literature about electronic disinformation are commonly described as "trolls";

(d) normally, where there is substantive reason to consider some responses flawed, they are set aside as "unusable." In this survey, it seems that all responses were used, which increases the possibility that responses sent by "trolls" were also considered.

10. These objections of course do not apply to the personal interviews with six members and four former members of the Jehovah's Witnesses. This was also not a casual sample, as the ten interviewees were selected among those who contacted in different ways the authors. We have no reason to doubt that their perception of their experiences was genuine, although we also note that the interviews lasted only one hour each and were not recorded (researchers relied on their notes: 26, 60). On the other hand, ten interviews, although relevant for a qualitative study, are a small sample statistically, and to come to some quantitative conclusions the Report relies mostly on the electronic survey.
11. We find no trace in the Report of the large sociological literature discussing the frequent bias of ex-members who have left a religious group and criticize it, called by some sociologists "apostates" (a technical term not implying any value judgement), and frequently compared to ex-spouses reporting on their marriage after a bitter divorce. We do not believe that all ex-members have agendas, nor that their recollections should be automatically dismissed. In fact, they can offer useful information about the groups they have left. On the other hand, we may have expected in the Report an awareness of the decade-long discussion among scholars of religion on how to interpret and read the

narratives of ex-members, without dismissing them but also without always taking them at face value, and a mention in the bibliography of classic works on the “apostates” such as the collective volume edited by David Bromley in 1998 (Bromley 1998).

12. Apart from a recent book by the Reclaimed Voices Foundation, focusing on sexual abuse, we notice that only two scholarly books on the Jehovah’s Witnesses are mentioned, dated 1997 and 2002, i.e. published respectively twenty-three and eighteen years ago. In recent years, there has been a flourishing of academic studies on the Jehovah’s Witnesses. British scholar George Chryssides has published several seminal studies, impossible to ignore (including Chryssides 2008, 2016). In 2018, Professor Zoe Knox has published an important work about evolution and change among the Jehovah’s Witnesses (Knox 2018). Had the authors of the report consulted these works, they may have come to a more diachronic assessment of the Jehovah’s Witnesses (see below), assessing the importance of recent changes.

### **The Findings: (A) A Uniquely “Closed Community”?**

13. One key conclusion of the Report is that Jehovah’s Witnesses are a “closed community,” defined as “a group of people with equal identities that are extremely protected from the public, e.g. from ideas and individuals from outside the group,” where members follow “their own logic” (19). We find this application of this definition of “closed community” to the Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Report as highly problematic. In general, it is not necessary to adopt an extreme post-modernist deconstructionism to observe that all communities have “their own logic.” In the U.S., Democrats do not share or even understand the logic of the Republican Party, particularly in the current Trump era. A non-Marxist would not understand the logic of a hard-core

Marxist. A believer would not understand the logic of an atheist. And so on. It is also interesting that the Report offers the Roman Catholic Church as another example of a “closed community.” We know that in some historical period and countries Catholics have perceived themselves as threatened by hostile forces and may have adopted a more defensive attitude. However, few scholars of religion would deny that today a large majority of “active” Catholics visit a church for Mass two or three times every month, contribute some money, but otherwise have very limited or no contacts with the Catholic Church, particularly in Western Europe (see e.g. Davie 2002). The Catholic community is not “closed,” in the sense that the majority of its practicing members are exposed to ideas and lifestyles very different from those the Catholic hierarchy advocates for most of their time, and in most cases agree with them and disagree with the Church’s teachings, as also evidenced by sociological literature and surveys (see e.g. Berzano 2019). If the Roman Catholic Church is a “closed community,” almost all religions are “closed communities” (certainly, Islam and Orthodox Judaism), with the exception of some ultra-liberal Protestant groups or low-intensity New Age and other communities, which certainly do not represent the majority within the international religious scene.

14. It seems that the fact that the Jehovah’s Witnesses are a “closed community,” in the negative sense of the term, was assumed at the very beginning of the research, rather than demonstrated at the end. The authors claim that this is a unanimous conclusion in the existing literature about the Witnesses, which is indeed not true. The conclusion seems to be based on the fact that the scholarly literature consulted is both limited and old (see above). We are not told what experience the authors had of interacting with real-life Jehovah’s Witnesses prior to their research for the Report. We do, and we interacted with Jehovah’s



Witnesses in several countries, not only our own. They may be classified as “strong believers” in their religion, but the vast majority of them have a job outside of the congregation and regularly interact with non-members. Jehovah’s Witnesses are conservative believers who live quietly (and yes, do not celebrate birthdays or Christmas, and do not vote) but are very much part of the “real world,” unlike the real, typical “closed” religious communities who live communally in isolated farms.

15. Coming to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, there are several indicators in the Report that, authors tell us, should confirm that they are a peculiar, radical type of “closed community.” They include:

(a) “Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that they have the true religion” (20);

(b) dissenting members are disfellowshipped and shunned by current members (22);

(c) they have “a strong hierarchy” (73);

(d) they have a “strong sexual moral” (74);

(e) “there are no women” in the highest echelons of their hierarchy (100) and “the interpretation of the Bible is in the hands of a male hierarch organization” (108).

16. All these five statements are, when correctly understood, true. However, they are far from being unique to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and are indeed common to most of world religions. Statement (a), that “Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that they have the true religion,” has been used in Russia to prove that the Witnesses are “extremist.” However, most religions proclaim that they offer the only path to salvation. This is obvious for Islam, but was reiterated by Catholicism in the Vatican declaration *Dominus Iesus* of 2000, although it is perhaps less emphasized by the present Pope (but *Dominus Iesus* has never been eliminated from the list of official Vatican documents: Congregation for

the Doctrine of Faith 2000). In fact, except few ultra-liberal communities, it would be difficult to find a religion approaching potential converts with sentences such as “May I introduce to you my religion, which may or may not be the true religion?” All missionary religions are exclusivist, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses are certainly not the only missionary religion.

17. The argument that excommunication (disfellowshipping, in Jehovah’s Witnesses language), and subsequent difficult or limited communications between excommunicated and actual members, is unique to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, or to “cults,” is false. Both excommunication and measures against “apostates” exist in most traditional religions. *Deuteronomy* 13:6–16 allowed Jews to kill apostates excluded from the community for heresy, idolatry, or immorality. Happily, in later Jewish practice the execution of the apostates was replaced by rituals and practices enacting their symbolic “death.” The person expelled by the community was subjected to a symbolic funeral and mentioned by using the language usually reserved for the deceased persons (Cohn 1996, 351). Traces of this practice survive to this very day in some ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities (Cohn 1965, 365). There is a large literature about apostasy in Islam. Although the relevant texts of the *Quran* may be subject to different interpretation, and today there are liberals insisting that execution is not mandatory (Saeed and Saeed 2017), the opinion that apostates from Islam should be killed is still widespread among different Islamic legal schools. Several Islamic states maintain laws considering apostasy from Islam a crime to be punished by the death penalty. Authoritative theologians consider killing an apostate relative a virtuous deed, and some scholars report that “even when modern Arab or Muslim states abolish the death penalty for apostasy, it is usually enforced by the enraged populace” (Cook 2006, 276–77). When Christianity went from persecuted minority to

state religion, it quickly obtained from the Roman Emperors laws mandating the execution of those Christians expelled for apostasy or heresy (*Codex Justinianus* I,11:1 and 7). The same *Codex Justinianus* (I,7:3) also ordered that these excommunicated Christians “shall be separated from association with all other persons.” In more recent centuries, those excommunicated from Christianity managed to escape execution, but still they were harassed in several different ways. In Italy, the Catholic Church insisted until at least the Second Vatican Council that the State should impose legal limitations on those the Church had excommunicated (Dalla Torre 2014).

18. A very important point, and one not mentioned in the Report, is that, as explicitly stated in official documents by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, nobody should be disfellowshipped for reporting a case of abuse to the secular authorities. The current edition of the official handbook for congregation elders, “*Shepherd the Flock of God*”—1 Peter 5:2, confirms that a person who reports an allegation of abuse (or any other crime) to the secular authorities will not be disfellowshipped or in any other way sanctioned by the Jehovah’s Witnesses: “One who reports an accusation to the police, the court, the elders, or others who have authority to look into matters and render a judgment would not be viewed by the congregation as guilty of committing slander... This is true even if the accusation is not proved” (Christian Congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses 2019, 12:28). This is not a novel provision in the 2019 handbook. The 2010 edition had a parallel provision: “It is not considered slander to make an accusation to the police, the court, ... or others who have authority to look into matters and render a judgment... This is true even if the accusation is not proved” (Christian Congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses 2010, 5:27). The Handbook adds that, “Jehovah’s Witnesses abhor child sexual abuse (Rom. 12:9). Thus, the congregation will

not shield any perpetrator of such repugnant acts from the consequences of his [sic] sin. The congregation's handling of an accusation of child sexual abuse is not intended to replace the secular authority's handling of the matter (Rom. 13:1–4). Therefore, the victim, her parents, or anyone else who reports such an allegation to the elders should be clearly informed that they have the right to report the matter to the secular authorities. Elders do not criticize anyone who chooses to make such a report" (Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses 2019, 14:4). The official child safeguarding policy of Jehovah's Witnesses, published in dozens of languages (including Dutch) on their official website, states at paragraph 4, "In all cases, victims and their parents have the right to report an accusation of child abuse to the authorities. Therefore, victims, their parents, or anyone else who reports such an accusation to the elders are clearly informed by the elders that they have the right to report the matter to the authorities. Elders do not criticize anyone who chooses to make such a report—Galatians 6:5" (Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses 2018, no. 4). In the May 2019 issue of *The Watchtower*, we read that, "Elders assure victims and their parents and others with knowledge of the matter that they are free to report an allegation of abuse to the secular authorities. But what if the report is about someone who is a part of the congregation and the matter then becomes known in the community? Should the Christian who reported it feel that he has brought reproach on God's name? No. The abuser is the one who brings reproach on God's name." ("Love and Justice in the Face of Wickedness" 2019, 10–11).

19. Obviously, the Jehovah's Witnesses are not unique in having "a strong hierarchy" and a "strong sexual moral." In the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope maintains the role of ultimate arbiter of doctrine and morals. Mainline Islam, Orthodox Judaism, and many forms of conservative Protestantism have

the same positions as the Jehovah's Witnesses on pre- and extra-marital sex, adultery, and homosexual relations. Although some statements by the present Pope Francis have indicated more charitable openings, masturbation, homosexual relations, pre- and extra-marital sex, and adultery are still listed as mortal sins by the normative *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1992, #2352 [masturbation], 2353 [pre- and extra-marital sex and adultery], 2357 [homosexual relations]).

20. We personally sympathize with those who would like to see women play a larger role in religious hierarchies. It is, however, even unnecessary to remind that in the Roman Catholic Church there are no women serving as cardinals, bishops, or priests, as there are no female imams guiding mosques nor female rabbis in Orthodox Judaism (as opposed to other forms of Judaism, which however represent a minority within international Judaism). In 1984 the Southern Baptists, the second largest religious denomination in the United States, passed a resolution, which still stands, stating that, “we not decide concerns of Christians doctrine and practice by modern cultural, sociological, and ecclesiastical trends or by emotional factors,” and , “The Scriptures teach that women are not in public worship to assume a role of authority over men lest confusion reign in the local church” (Southern Baptist Convention 1984).
21. In short, the features that should allegedly prove that the Jehovah's Witnesses are a peculiar or unique form of religion, perhaps a dangerous “cult” or “sect,” are not unique or peculiar to the Witnesses and in fact are found in most religions. Concerning the Jehovah's Witnesses, the fact that the most recent scholarly literature has been ignored also led to some misunderstandings. Although the emic self-perception of the Jehovah's Witnesses may differ from the etic perception of the outside scholars, most academic studies underline the importance of the 1995 official statement by the Witnesses that it is

inappropriate to calculate precise dates for the end of this world. This statement is seen by scholars within the context of a real, if slow and partial, mainstreaming of the Jehovah's Witnesses, with more frequent interactions with society at large at all levels (Chryssides 2016; Knox 2018). The image of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the report is sometimes at risk to be purely synchronic, ignoring that religious movements evolve and change in history and can only be studied diachronically.

22. Sometimes, it seems that the Report adopts a circular reasoning, a common fallacy. We know that some communities are “closed communities” because sexual abuses go unreported there – and we explain why sexual abuses go unreported with the fact that these are “closed communities.”

### **The Findings (B): Sexual Abuse Among Jehovah's Witnesses**

23. We have no doubt that serious cases of sexual abuse have occurred among Jehovah's Witnesses, and that some have not been properly reported to the civil authorities. Given the size of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the contrary would be surprising. The report does not quote the classical works of our late colleague Anson D. Shupe (1948–2015), with whom we had the opportunity to work on this issue, on sexual and other abuse by clergy and other religious figures (Shupe 1995, 1998, 2000, 2007). Shupe elaborated a general theory of “clergy malfeasance” positing that religious organizations where ministers and elders interact with minors may exhibit a comparatively high rate of sexual abuse, and that they are more protective of their image than eager to see the perpetrators punished by the state justice. Shupe shortly mentioned the Jehovah's Witnesses, but his theory predicted that religions that, unlike the Witnesses, have a large professional clergy, which depends on the organization for its economic survival, would be more protective of the

perpetrators (Shupe 1995). Indeed, according to the Report itself (with all the methodological limits mentioned before), 30% of the Dutch Jehovah's Witnesses who knew of a sexual abuse incident notified the police and 27% filed a formal police report. These percentages, as the Report notes, are higher, not lower, than those of the general Dutch population, where 9% of those who know of a sexual abuse notify the police and 3% file a formal report (35–39). And, confirming Shupe's theory, the percentages are also higher than those in the American Catholic community according to the well-known reports by the City University of New York's John Jay College, which in turn noted that the percentage of reports in Catholic communities is not lower than in American society in general (John Jay College Research Team 2004, 2011).

24. It is also worth noting that the Jehovah's Witnesses do not sponsor or provide any activities that separate children from their parents or otherwise take custody of children. The Witnesses do not sponsor or organize Sunday Schools, catechism education, kindergartens, or other activities where children are separated from their parents. According to Shupe (1995) – and to common sense – religious communities that do not organize activities where children are separated from their parents have a lower incidence of abuse, which is confirmed by the data of the Report itself discussed above. Abuse can of course occur at home, and several cases mentioned in the Report are in fact of incest, rather than of abuse in an institutional setting. However, there is no evidence in the Report that incest is more prevalent among Jehovah's Witnesses than in Dutch society at large.

25. In the last decades, most large religious communities understood that sexual abuse was a serious problem within their fold, as it is within society in general. They adopted various measures, hoping that they would improve the situation. As, again, the John Jay reports noted, improvements are only possible in the

long run. The issue of sexual abuse is candidly discussed in the Jehovah's Witnesses literature. We are personally aware of more than 20 articles published in recent years in Jehovah's Witnesses publications discussing sexual abuse and offering common sense guidance and suggestions. The Report itself notes that the Jehovah's Witness, like the Catholics and others, did take action. "There have been relatively few reports on more recent cases," the Report states (40). There are, according to the Report, two alternative explanations for this. One is that "over the last decade there has been a better response to reports of abuse within the community of Jehovah's Witnesses." Another is that recent abuse has not yet been reported, perhaps because the victims did not find "the courage to report abuse" (40). While the second explanation may be true for individual cases, certainly in the last years the social climate has been more, not less, favorable to victims of sexual abuse, as evidenced by the success of the "Me Too" movement, so that the first explanation appears more likely. It seems unfair to dismiss respondents who reported that "Things have changed... They no longer discourage reporting to the police" (75), "a lot has been done in way of prevention... As far as prevention goes, I think we're doing well" (676 and similar, as unreliable, or to hastily conclude that the new policies are ineffective. As mentioned earlier, a serious study of the new policies would only be possible after several years of implementation.

26. The Report mentions dissatisfaction with how the Jehovah's Witnesses handled the abuse cases. Those of us who have studied sexual abuse know that "dissatisfaction with handling" is widespread, and also applies to how cases are handled by the police and secular courts. Sexual abuse is such a horribly traumatic experience that no "handling" is perceived by the victims as totally adequate. It is, again, unfair to single out Jehovah's Witnesses as if



the “dissatisfaction with handling” would concern only them, while it is a common phenomenon in cases of sexual abuse in general.

### **The Report: Recommendations**

27. We do not condone or under-evaluate in any way the horrible plague of sexual abuse, and we are aware it is a dramatic problem in religious communities as it is in society as large. We personally agree with the Report’s recommendation that The Netherlands introduce an “obligation to report” to civil authorities serious elements indicating that a sexual abuse may have occurred (as opposite to mere rumors), through a law “formulated meticulously, taking into account the important right of freedom of religion.” Those asked to report should accept to err on the side of caution, and acknowledge that the police and secular courts may be better equipped to investigate in depth abuse claims that religious and other communities are.
28. What we find problematic in the recommendations, on the other hand, is singling out the Jehovah’s Witnesses, on the basis of the uncertain results of a survey and of the faulty idea that they are more “at risk” than other groups or the society in general. As we mentioned earlier, the Report’s own figures lead to a different conclusion. For instance, we find it unfair that Jehovah’s Witnesses should “submit a yearly report” on how they deal with sexual abuse through an internal desk, while a similar obligation is not imposed on other communities. We find it also unfair that school inspectors should watch children of Jehovah’s Witnesses for possible low school performances “perhaps to enable the child to be more active in the religious community,” while no such surveillance is recommended for children raised in other religions, and no evidence is offered that children of Jehovah’s Witnesses have on average poorest performances than other children in Dutch schools.

This would be surprising, based on our own experience of better-than-average primary and junior high school results of children of Jehovah's Witnesses in other countries, and the insistence of Jehovah's Witnesses literature on parents watching that children scrupulously fulfill their school obligations.

29. We also have problems with the recommendation that Jehovah's Witnesses should allow women to "have decisive roles" in the hierarchy of their community at all levels, and that, "this is the only way that the interests of women can be addressed" (120). Scholars may legitimately discuss whether having supreme hierarchies including both men and women may be beneficial to religious communities, and we may agree with this idea in general. However, one should distinguish opinions by scholars or theologians from recommendations carrying the authority of a state. In the latter case, we would be confronted both with a breach of the principle of separation of state and religion and of the right of religious communities to decide of their own organization, and with a discriminatory treatment of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Presumably, the Dutch government would not recommend to the Muslim community to have female imams, or to the Catholic Church to have female bishops, admonishing them that otherwise Dutch authorities would be led to believe that "the interests of women" are not protected in their communities.
30. Because of their minority status and peculiar lifestyle, Jehovah's Witnesses are a fragile community, more exposed than others to slander and stereotyping (as illustrated by Knox 2018). Indeed, since the end of World War II, they have been the group most targeted by anti-cult literature and propaganda in Europe. We are very concerned that the publication of the report may lead to more stereotyping and discrimination. Few in the general public will read the whole report. Many if not most will only read titles in the media, and will be easily persuaded that the Jehovah's Witnesses are "bad" citizens, more prone

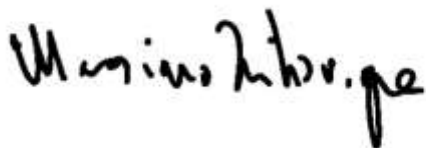
than other Dutch to sexual abuse and the protection of the abusers, while in fact even the figures of the Report suggest that the opposite is the case. We also live in a context where the general public is very much concerned (and rightly so) about sexual abuse, and may tend to believe all media reports, whether they concern proved facts or mere hypotheses and rumors. Public opinion is also unfavorably predisposed against groups the media, or vocal organized opponents, label as “cults,” and may easily believe allegations of sexual abuse against them, regardless of the weight of the accusation. We strongly recommend that any publicity given to the report will insist on the fact that sexual abuse is not more prevalent among the Jehovah’s Witnesses than in other religious communities or other segments of Dutch society, and will mention the co-operative attitude of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the fact that serious measures to address the problems have been adopted by them, with some positive results, while it is too early to evaluate their long-term effects at this stage.

January 7, 2020

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