

# Out of the Cocoon



## Are Jehovah's Witnesses a Cult?

By Brenda Lee, counter-cult educator, speaker and author:

“Out of the Cocoon: A Young Woman's Courageous Flight from the Grip of a Religious Cult”

### Out of the Cocoon

Most people would agree that the word “cult” is loaded and controversial. The joke is: A cult is any group that doesn't agree with *my* particular group's views. The reality is no cult member ever believes that they are involved in a cult. That revelation only becomes apparent *after* the member leaves the group and reflects upon his or her experiences with a more balanced 20/20 clarity.

There are also many definitions for the word “cult”; therefore, my opinion of what constitutes a cult is based upon collective definitions provided by cult experts worldwide:

**Cult: Any authoritarian group that uses thought reform, coercive persuasion, deception and fear to manipulate and control its members.**

Today I teach counter-cult education in Denver, Colorado, and I always tell people that it's far more important to recognize the contents of something rather than relying upon a label. You can take a label off a can of beans and slap on a peach label, but you still have beans inside. So, if a person objects to the label “cult” because he/she feels it's derogatory, an objective look at the contents will help the person better understand what they are dealing with. The label “cult” isn't that important. It would be like an abused girlfriend arguing with police after she has been beaten that she objects to the terminology “battered wife.” Semantics.

Now, back to the original question: Are Jehovah's Witnesses a cult? First, I'd like to acknowledge that Jehovah's Witnesses are people with lives and loved ones, just like you and I. *They* are not merely a label. I know; I used to be one, and I resented when someone called me a “Jehova.” Once I left the group and did a lot of research on thought reform and mind control, however, I realized that Jehovah's Witnesses are being psychologically held hostage *within a cult*, a cult created in the late 1800's by a single man, Charles Taze Russell. (Mr. Russell dubbed his followers the International Bible Students, who later became known as Jehovah's Witnesses, currently run by The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society in New York.) The invisible chains that bound me as a former Jehovah's Witness were quite real from the ages of nine until eighteen. I pull no punches in my book, “Out of the Cocoon,” when I describe the abuse I experienced as a result of my family's association with this group. For me and millions of others who have left the organization, living as a Jehovah Witness was a highly toxic existence, one that could have easily ended my life.

What typifies a toxic organization or cult's leadership and structure? A good working understanding has been provided by [cult expert] Dr. Margaret Singer, [Professor at the University of California at Berkeley]: *In most cases, there is one person, typically the founder at the top...decision making centers in him or her.* Illustrating the structure Singer says, *“imagine an inverted T. The leader is alone at the top and the followers are all at the bottom.”* There is little if any accountability and as Singer says, *“the overriding philosophy...is that the ends justify the means, a view that allows [such groups] to establish their own brand of morality, outside normal society bounds.*

# Out of the Cocoon



Jehovah's Witnesses will dismiss Dr. Singer's definition citing that their organization is run by a *group* of men; therefore the dynamic of a single cult leader does not apply to them. But hold on! The Watchtower organization is controlled by "The Governing Body." Note the term "Body" is singular and there is a reason for that. The leadership acts as one voice, directing the lives of millions, just like a single cult leader. There is no accountability (no higher appeal process) and no room for dissention or differing policies within The Governing Body, as Ray Franz, former Governing Body member who wrote "Crisis of Conscience," can attest. Coincidentally, Mr. Franz was excommunicated in 1980, the same month and year that I left the group.

What specifically would define a group as unsafe or toxic? Unsafe/toxic groups or "cults" typically abuse and exploit their members. Their toxicity bubbles up and surfaces as depletion of members' finances, demand for free physical labor, child abuse and neglect, medical neglect, sexual abuse and/or psychological, intellectual (i.e., limited critical thinking skills) and emotional ruin. Cults are a danger to us as a society.

To the average person, the Watchtower organization appears benign, but it uses crippling fear to control its members, operating under authoritarian control, with the threat of excommunication/shunning (Ray Franz and I have been shunned by our families and the Jehovah Witness community for the last 29 years.) In addition, the religious leaders typically have no accredited pastoral or theological schooling and the members are taught that the directions of God are received by a select few in New York and to disagree with them is to challenge God himself. Questioning what is taught, even if it involves the sexual abuse of a child, can be grounds for excommunication and shunning. The Watchtower runs, at a minimum, a multi-million dollar tax-free international corporation utilizing a free sales force and governs nearly every aspect of its 7 million members' lives. The long-reaching impact of association with them is felt not only by those who subscribe to their teachings but *also by extended family members who never attempt to join its ranks*. An example of the latter remains vivid in my mind, even today. I remember when my mother sat me down at age nine and told me I could never speak to our relatives again because "Satan might be using them to keep us from learning The Truth." Our disassociation with them clearly impacted their lives, as well as our own, even though they never became Jehovah's Witnesses.

Here's what some other experts say about Jehovah's Witnesses as a cult:

When Cultists Ask by Norman L. Geisler (Ph.D., Loyola University of Chicago). Dr. Geisler is president of Southern Evangelical Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina. He has published countless articles in academic journals and is the author of more than fifty books. His book includes Jehovah's Witnesses as a cult.

Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements by Dr. Lorne Dawson, Professor of Religious Studies: p. 172: (In referencing the failed 1975 Armageddon prediction by the leadership), Dr. Dawson writes: *The responses of the leadership of the Jehovah's Witnesses to the failure of their 1975 prophecy and the response of the leader of the Ichigen no Miya were similar...By a rather bizarre turn of logic, the leaders in each of these cases chose to place their followers in a kind of 'Catch 22' by blaming them, after the fact, for having brought on the failure of prophecy by having believed it too literally in the first place.*

# Out of the Cocoon



The Kingdom of the Cults by Walter Martin. Chapter 4: Jehovah's Witnesses and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. Walter Martin (deceased) held four earned degrees, having received his doctorate from California Coast University in the field of Comparative Religions. Author of a dozen books, he was nationally known as "The Bible Answer Man," host of a popular syndicated radio call-in program which was heard across the country. He was founder and director of the Christian Research Institute, located in Irvine, CA. On page 11 of his book, Martin quotes Dr. Charles Branden, emeritus professor at Northwestern University: *By the term cult I mean nothing derogatory to any group so classified. A cult, as I define it, is any religious group which differs significantly in some one or more respects as to belief or practice from those religious groups which are regarded as the normative expressions of religion in our total culture...a cult might also be defined as a group of people gathered about a specific person or person's misinterpretation of the Bible. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses are, for the most part, followers of the interpretations of Charles T. Russell and J. F. Rutherford.* After listing other American religions that he considers cults, he comments: *From a theological viewpoint, the cults contain many major deviations from historic Christianity. Yet paradoxically, they continue to insist that they are entitled to be classified as Christians.*

About the time the members adopted their new name, "Jehovah's Witnesses," TIME magazine printed an article called, "[California Cults](#)" dated March 31, 1930, wherein they discuss the Watchtower's then president, "Judge" Joseph Rutherford, and his lavish living arrangements during a time when the rest of the country was experiencing a great depression.

In a cult, it's easy to get in and hard to get out, without feeling the residual effects of a lifetime of damage. Cults, insidious and methodical, seemingly inject a poison into the member that dissolves away the person that friends and family once knew.

Fortunately, it's never too late to leave a toxic organization and get healthy. There are hundreds of recovery websites on the internet for "survivors" of cults. Many of these are listed in the links section of my website, and I personally answer every email I receive to ensure that people receive the help and resources they need. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or need assistance finding your way [Out of the Cocoon](#).