



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT

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Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia)

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16 April 2024

Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT
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By email: LCommitteeECI@parliament.act.gov.au

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the *Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT*. We make this submission in response to Submission 6 by Lara Kaput, authorised for publication 27 February 2024.

From the outset, we wish to state that Submission 6 contains many blatantly false and defamatory allegations about the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. The overall claim that "being a current or former Jehovah's Witness is a driver of loneliness and isolation in Australia" is entirely unfounded. On the contrary, Doctor Raffaella Di Marzio, an Italian psychologist and scholar of religious sciences stated, "Jehovah's Witnesses form a religion well-rooted in the social fabric."¹ The religion of Jehovah's Witnesses has published much material to help individuals of all ages develop healthy relationships.²

In this submission, Ms. Kaput references 12 other submissions she has tendered to different government inquiries, including appearances at committee hearings, that contain the same slanderous allegations about the religion of Jehovah's Witness as her submission to your Inquiry. In our opinion, the multiplicity of submissions is evidence that Ms. Kaput is abusing the various committee submission platforms to advance her own aims, namely, the dissemination of false information about, and advocating against, the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Rather than address each and every falsehood line by line, we have provided a summary of the relevant religious beliefs and practices and addressed the core themes raised in Submission 6.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Australia and the ACT

Jehovah's Witnesses are an internationally known Christian religion. There are 8.8 million Jehovah's Witnesses in 239 lands, with more than 20 million persons attending their religious services. In Australia, there are more than 70,000 Jehovah's Witnesses forming over 700 congregations with more than 114,000 attending their religious services. In the ACT, there are approximately 670 Jehovah's Witnesses forming six congregations. Congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses generally comprise individual congregants living in a particular neighbourhood or area.

Officials around the world have recognised the benefits of the volunteer and educational work of Jehovah's Witnesses.³ For example, Jehovah's Witnesses' literacy programs have taught hundreds

¹ Being Jehovah's Witnesses: Living in the World Without Being Part of It," The Journal of CESNUR, v. 4, no. 6, 2020
<https://cesnur.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/tjoc_4_6_6_dimarzio.pdf>

² See for example: Working Through Loneliness <<https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/teenagers/worksheets/working-through-loneliness/>>; How to Deal With Loneliness <<https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/g201504/deal-with-loneliness/>>; The Loneliness Epidemic—How Can You Cope? <<https://www.jw.org/en/library/series/more-topics/loneliness-epidemic-how-you-can-cope/>>

³ See for example: Jehovah's Witnesses Receive Recognition for Bible Education Work With Prisoners in Colombia <<https://www.jw.org/en/news/region/colombia/Jehovahs-Witnesses-Receive-Recognition-for-Bible-Education-Work-With-Prisoners-in-Colombia/>>; Helping the Deaf in the Emerald of the Equator <<https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/activities/help-community/deaf-people-emerald-of-the-equator-indonesia/>>; A Successful Campaign in Lapland <<https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs->

of thousands to read and write around the world.^{4,5} Witnesses conduct prison ministries to help rehabilitate inmates.^{6,7} When disasters strike, Witnesses are prepared to take immediate action to provide practical assistance and unpaid volunteers provide basic necessities, medical supplies, and temporary or permanent housing.⁸ In many countries, including Australia, Jehovah's Witnesses are helping an increasing number of immigrants and refugees to adjust to a new environment, a new language, and a new culture.⁹ They offer Bible-based comfort to those who suffer tragedy or loss.¹⁰

Jehovah's Witnesses' activity is primarily financed by voluntary donations from individuals who are Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses are not expected to tithe or to donate any specific amount or percentage of their income (2 Corinthians 9:7). We never take collections or charge admission at our meetings, nor do our ministers charge fees for baptisms, funerals, weddings, or other religious services. We do not raise money through bake sales, bazaars, bingo games, carnivals, dinners, raffles, or similar events, nor do we solicit donations. Donors' information is never shared or made available to the public (Matthew 6:2-4). Our websites and publications do not contain revenue-generating advertisements.¹¹

Jehovah's Witnesses and Social Life

Jehovah's Witnesses come from all cultures, ethnicities and walks of life and strive to adhere to the form of Christianity that Jesus taught. Most were not raised as Jehovah's Witnesses but have become such as adults, deciding to do so based on their own inquiry into the faith. One independent survey of 1,422 Jehovah's Witnesses found the vast majority (80.7%) did not come into contact with Jehovah's Witnesses through family ties.¹² The authors concluded that "these figures show that Jehovah's Witnesses are not isolated."¹²

While Jehovah's Witnesses take their religion seriously, they enjoy entirely normal lives. The vast majority work full time in secular employment, own or rent their own homes, and enjoy recreation and spending time with their friends and family. Their children attend schools in the community at large, go shopping, watch television and movies, use the internet, enjoy sports, and spend time with their peers.

A SOFRES survey (conducted by the independent pool survey firm TNS Sofres of Paris, France, October 1998; results based on a random sample of 1,025 Jehovah's Witnesses and associates) showed that in France:¹³

- 85% of families with children from ages 2 to 5 send them to nursery schools or child care centers.

[witnesses/activities/ministry/successful-campaign-lapland-saami/](https://www.jw.org/en/gov-resources/global-information-brochures/brochure-jehovahs-witnesses-in-the-community/). Jehovah's Witnesses in the Community < <https://www.jw.org/en/gov-resources/global-information-brochures/brochure-jehovahs-witnesses-in-the-community/>>

⁴ Jehovah's Witnesses contribute to literacy <<https://www.herald.co.zw/jehovahs-witnesses-contribution-to-literacy/>>

⁵ Bible Education Promotes Literacy <<https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/g201508/bible-education-promotes-literacy/>>

⁶ Utah Jehovah's Witnesses take the Bible to the 'largest gated community' prison <<https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2023/06/30/utah-jehovahs-witnesses-take-bible/>>

⁷ 10 years of community work at Yongah Hill <<https://www.flipsnack.com/ncci160/the-northam-advertiser-dec22jan23/full-view.html?p=16>>

⁸ Do Jehovah's Witnesses Assist With Disaster Relief? <<https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/assist-with-disaster-relief/>>; Disaster Relief in 2022—Brotherly Love in Action <<https://www.jw.org/en/library/series/how-your-donations-are-used/Disaster-Relief-in-2022-Brotherly-Love-in-Action/>>; Disaster Relief in 2021—Not Abandoning Our Brothers and Sisters <<https://www.jw.org/en/library/series/how-your-donations-are-used/Disaster-Relief-in-2021-Not-Abandoning-Our-Brothers-and-Sisters/>>; Jehovah's Witnesses and Disaster Relief <<https://www.jw.org/en/gov-resources/global-information-brochures/brochure-jehovahs-witnesses-and-disaster-relief/>>

⁹ Helping Refugees in Central Europe <<https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/activities/help-community/helping-refugees-central-europe/>>

¹⁰ Jehovah's Witnesses in Australia Honored for Helping Detainees <<https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/activities/help-community/jehovahs-witnesses-australia-help-detainees/>>; Bringing Hope and Comfort to the Elderly <<https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/activities/help-community/hope-comfort-elderly-portland-victoria-australia/>>; A Campaign that Saved Lives <<https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/activities/help-community/campaign-saved-lives-tabasco-mexico/>>

¹¹ How Is the Work of Jehovah's Witnesses Financed? <<https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/donations-worldwide-work-finances-money/>>; How Do Jehovah's Witnesses Use Donations? <<https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/how-do-jw-use-donations/>>; They Ask for Work but Not for Pay <<https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/activities/construction/jehovahs-witnesses-construction-work-volunteers/>>

¹² [Values and Beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan](#)

¹³ SOFRES, Sociological study on Jehovah's Witnesses in France, October 1998, Ref : MHI-MVN 98-204. Random sample of 1,025 Jehovah's Witnesses and sympathizers.

- Three families out of four have their children sharing in cultural and sporting activities at school, and two thirds in social activities, skiing and country school, etc.
- During holidays, the majority of their children go out with friends, read, and watch TV.
- 51% of Jehovah's Witnesses interviewed have a share in charity works and 40% share in neighbourhood and/or cultural activities. Cultural activities include the following:
 - reading of books, more than two-thirds of those interviewed state that they often read books;
 - reading magazines (57%);
 - reading newspapers (40%);
 - going to movies (27%); and
 - visiting museums and exhibitions (14%).

Researchers have found that those who become a Jehovah's Witness subjectively report positive changes in their overall well-being and in their relationships with others. A 2022 sociological report from central Asia found the following:¹²

- Positive changes in well-being after baptism as a Jehovah's Witness (73% to 86%). Aspects of well-being include:
 - hope for the future;
 - life in general;
 - quality of leisure; and
 - emotional and mental health.
- Improved relationship with family members (73%). "This indicator demonstrates the importance of the family and the positive changes that their teachings can bring to the family life of Witnesses."

Jehovah's Witnesses View of Education and Employment

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that education is vital in helping individuals fulfil their sacred obligation to support their family.¹⁴ For this reason, children and young people are urged to take the greatest possible advantage of the education offered by their school, while parents are encouraged to show great interest in their children's schooling and to cooperate with their teachers. Witness parents encourage their children to apply themselves at school and to do their best, not being satisfied to do the bare minimum. We discourage 'dropping out' of school as those who finish school are often better prepared for the responsibilities of adulthood.¹⁵

Enrolling in a postsecondary education course or university education is a personal decision. Many have obtained university qualifications. Before deciding, Jehovah's Witnesses are encouraged to carefully examine the range of options available and the cost and value of each.

It is a core tenet of the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses that individuals work hard to support themselves and their families to the best of their ability. The Bible encourages doing "hard work, doing good work," that "there is benefit in every kind of hard work," and that a person should "find enjoyment for all his hard work." (Ephesians 4:28; Proverbs 14:23; Ecclesiastes 3:13) Further, the Bible describes one who fails to provide for his family's material needs if they are in a position to do so as "worse than a person without faith." (1 Timothy 5:8) They also follow the Scriptural admonition to pay taxes, support their local community and respect governmental authorities.—Romans 13:7.

The religion of Jehovah's Witnesses does not dictate what type of employment a person should pursue. Adherents to the Jehovah's Witnesses faith can be found in almost all professions.¹⁶ The religion encourages individuals to improve employment prospects by developing skills and aptitudes that are desirable to employers,¹⁷ accepting what some might term 'menial employment' rather than

¹⁴ How Do Jehovah's Witnesses View Education? <<https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/jw-education-school/>>

¹⁵ Should I Drop Out of School? <<https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/teenagers/ask/dropping-out-of-school/>>

¹⁶ See for example life stories of Jehovah's Witnesses at: <https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/science/origin-of-life-viewpoints/>; <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/101987083#h=1:0-44:41>; and <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/102000287#h=1:0-73:48>

¹⁷ A world in Turmoil – Protect Your Livelihood <<https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/awake-no1-2022/world-turmoil-protect-livelihood/>>

relying on welfare support,¹⁸ and carefully weighing up the long-term impact their personal decisions might have on employment prospects.¹⁹ Additionally, Jehovah's Witnesses maintain an online, publicly available reference library that explains how the personal application of Scriptural principles can help a person find and maintain employment, manage finances, and enhance economic security.²⁰

Researchers have found that rates of unemployment amongst Jehovah's Witnesses are the same or lower than the general population. The 2022 sociological report referenced earlier found the following:¹²

- the general employment structure of adherents to the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses has no significant differences from the employment structure of the general population;
- the share of the unemployed population is similar to the general structure of the labour market for 2022;
- within the structure of the employed population, among Jehovah's Witnesses, twice as many Jehovah's Witnesses are self-employed than the general population (including "self-employed" and "business owners");
- this gap in types of employment cannot be related to the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses, which do not contain restrictions on work that could be a barrier to seeking hired employment; and
- the alleged reason may be hidden in the bias of employers towards Jehovah's Witnesses.

A SOFRES survey referenced earlier showed that in France:¹³

- the level of activity among Jehovah's Witnesses was noticeably higher than the one of the French people: 63% to 53% on the average;
- this difference appeared again as far as the structure of the jobs was concerned: 44% of Jehovah's Witnesses were salaried to 34% nation-wide; and
- the rate of state employees (13%) was identical to the French average, the same was true of artisanal, commercial and liberal professions.

False Claims of Loneliness and Isolation

The author of Submission 6 falsely claims that the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses causes loneliness and isolation in current and former adherents as a result of 1) the Scriptural teaching to be "no part of the world" (John 17:16); and 2) treatment of those who leave the faith.

1. The imputation that the Scriptural teaching to be "no part of the world" means that Christians must isolate themselves from society, leaving a person lonely and vulnerable, is entirely false. Jehovah's Witnesses do not practice or consent to wrong practices that are prevalent in society today, such as crime, cruelty, oppression, and dishonesty.²¹ In that sense, they are "no part of the world." Rather than isolating a person, Jehovah's Witnesses believe that avoiding such behaviours and attitudes fosters healthy and productive relationships with others and makes them valued members of the communities in which they live.

Additionally, Jehovah's Witnesses are "no part of the world" in that they chose to remain politically neutral. They do not lobby, vote for political parties or candidates, run for government office, or participate in any action to change governments.²² Although not voting in elections, Jehovah's Witnesses are by no means naive as to political matters in the country in which they live and abroad. Jehovah's Witnesses view it as a Scriptural obligation to

¹⁸ The Uses and Abuses of Welfare <<https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/1983242#h=21>>

¹⁹ See for example paragraph 5 of the article, [What Does the Bible Say About Tattoos? | Bible Questions \(jw.org\)](https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/peace-happiness/employment-money/)

²⁰ Employment and Money <<https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/peace-happiness/employment-money/>>

²¹ Christian Neutrals in the Last Days <<https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/2002804>>

²² Why Do Jehovah's Witnesses Maintain Political Neutrality? <<https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/political-neutrality/>>

respect the authority of the government under which they live. Jehovah's Witnesses are internationally known for obeying the law, paying taxes, and cooperating with efforts of the government to provide for the welfare of its citizens, all of which requires some level of factual knowledge and political awareness.²³

2. Jehovah's Witnesses adhere to the Bible's high moral standards and try to avoid practices that displease God. All Jehovah's Witnesses agree to live by those standards when they make a personal and voluntary decision to get baptised. Jehovah's Witnesses do not automatically disfellowship someone who breaks the Bible's moral standards. Neither do they disfellowship someone who decides that they no longer wish to practice the faith. If, however, a baptised Witness makes a practice of not adhering to the Bible's moral standards and is unwilling to change, he or she will be disfellowshipped – a practice that is based solely on Bible principles (1 Corinthians 5:13). Since the individual is not living by the tenets of the religion they can no longer be called one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Individual congregants may then exercise their personal religious conscience and apply the Bible's admonition to limit or cease their association.²⁴

When a spouse or parent is disfellowshipped, the religious ties he had with his family change, but blood ties remain. The marriage relationship and normal family affections and dealings continue.

Although no longer one of Jehovah's Witnesses, disfellowshipped individuals are free to attend our religious services. The individual's relatives or close friends may even personally invite them to attend a religious service. If they chose to attend, they may be appropriately welcomed by those that know them and sit with whomever they chose. They may request spiritual assistance from congregation elders at any time. Additionally, the elders will periodically reach out to the individual to offer such assistance.

Professor Paulo Pinto de Albuquerque, former judge of the European Court of Human Rights, described Jehovah's Witnesses' religious practice of disfellowshipping as follows:

“[D]isfellowshipping, as well as disassociation, are protective measures of the faith community to avoid that other Christians may feel inclined to follow immoral customs and thus be encouraged to have a lax attitude toward biblical standards, and most importantly, they are rehabilitation-oriented, pedagogical measures to get hardened sinners to repent, come back to doctrine-conform religious practice and return to the faith community, which can be, depending on the wrongdoer's openness, accompanied and mitigated by the constant moral availability of the Elders to provide him or her advice and consolation. In criminal law jargon, disfellowshipping and disassociation are not a purely retributive and incapacitating punishment for expiation of moral guilt, but instead they pursue both special preventive (personal rehabilitation) and general preventive (collective deterrence) purposes. . . .”²⁵

On 7 June 2022, the Ghent Court of Appeal (Belgium) concluded, when upholding the legality of Jehovah's Witnesses' religious practice of disfellowshipping:

“2.9.3 It is clearly not disputed that the shunning policy does not entail members of Jehovah's Witnesses who have dissociated themselves or been excluded being actively approached, hassled, bullied, threatened or harassed by persons who are still members ... What is essentially being denounced ... is passive social rejection by members of Jehovah's Witnesses, which is referred to by the Anglo-Saxon term

²³ See Jehovah's Witnesses and Political Neutrality <<https://www.jw.org/en/gov-resources/global-information-brochures/brochure-jehovahs-witnesses-and-political-neutrality/>>

²⁴ Do Jehovah's Witnesses Shun Those Who Used to Belong to Their Religion? <<https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/fag/shunning/>>

²⁵ Disfellowshipping and Discrimination of Religious Minority – Expert Opinion on Articles 9, 11 and 14 of the ECHR, 28 June 2023, paragraph 377.

“shunning”, vis-a-vis members of Jehovah’s Witnesses who have been excluded or who have voluntarily dissociated themselves.

“2.12.3 As regards the practical implementation of the shunning policy which, according to the civil parties, leads to “complete isolation” or “total social isolation”, the court notes first and foremost that, according to the statements of the civil parties and of the registered injured parties in the criminal evidence, the shunning policy leads at most to social isolation from other members of the community of Jehovah’s Witnesses and not to generalised social isolation.

“There is no indication from the criminal evidence that Jehovah’s Witnesses intervene in any way with regard to non-believers or those of other faiths when a member who has dissociated himself or been excluded develops social contacts outside the religious community, joins certain associations or converts to another faith. ...

“Nor can it be argued that the exclusion policy referred to leads de facto to generalised social isolation. According to the documents submitted by the accused ... Jehovah’s Witnesses constitute a (very) small religious community of approximately twenty-six thousand members in the whole of Belgium, so that an encounter with a member of Jehovah’s Witnesses through general social interaction will be the exception rather than the rule.”

The religion of Jehovah’s Witnesses does not publish statistics on the numbers who are disfellowshipped, those who formally resign from the faith, or the numbers who are reinstated. As such, the figures quoted in Submission 6 are pure conjecture. For example, Ms. Kaput’s estimate of the number of Jehovah’s Witnesses in the ACT is twice the actual number. Her so-called statistics cannot be considered a creditable or reliable source of evidence.

The author of Submission 6 attempts to mischaracterise the religion of Jehovah’s Witnesses as a “high control” religion or “cult.” Such mischaracterisations are entirely unfounded and highly offensive. Jehovah’s Witnesses respect each individual’s right to make decisions of their own. In all areas of life, each congregant is encouraged to train their “perceptive powers” to discern right and wrong (Hebrews 5:14). Each individual believer has the free will to make their own personal decisions and will bear the responsibility for the outcome.²⁶

The European Court of Human Rights recognised this in the case of *Jehovah’s Witnesses of Moscow and Others v. Russia*²⁷ (no. 302/02, 10 June 2010) in which the Court:

- dismissed as completely unfounded the accusation that Jehovah’s Witnesses infringe congregants’ right to respect of their private life (§§ 116-121);
- found that there was no evidence to support the allegation “that the rights of Jehovah’s Witness children had been violated on the ground that Biblical texts restrained their independent thinking, hindered the development of patriotic feelings and made them social outcasts” (§§ 123-127);
- found that there was no evidence that congregants were subjected “to psychological pressure, ‘mind control’ techniques and totalitarian discipline” (§§ 110 and 128-130); and
- found “nothing to suggest that any form of improper pressure or undue influence was applied” (§§ 131-146).

One sociological report found that of the 1,422 individuals surveyed:¹²

“More than 90% note that they had a choice and freedom to ask questions during the [Bible] study period. They did not face pressure or attempts to control their religious decision, nor

²⁶ How to Make Good Decisions <https://www.jw.org/en/library/books/enjoy-life-forever/section-3/lesson-35/>

²⁷ ECHR, *Jehovah’s Witnesses of Moscow and Others v. Russia*, no. 302/02, 10 June 2010: [Jehovah’s Witnesses of Moscow and Others v. Russia \(coe.int\)](https://www.echr.coe.int/t/EN/Case_Library/Case_Library/Jehovahs_Witnesses_of_Moscow_and_Others_v._Russia_(coe.int).aspx); See also *Taganrog LRO and Others v. Russia*, nos. 32401/10 and 19 others, §§ 157, 161-183, 7 June 2022: [Taganrog LRO and Others v. Russia \(coe.int\)](https://www.echr.coe.int/t/EN/Case_Library/Case_Library/Taganrog_LRO_and_Others_v._Russia_(coe.int).aspx)

did they need to abandon their family to become Jehovah's Witnesses. As a result, the survey findings refute the criticism of aggressive promotion and imposition of religion."

Dr. Massimo Introvigne has researched this matter and stated the following on the Bitter Winter website:²⁸

"As one of the leading academic scholars of the Jehovah's Witnesses, George Chryssides, has observed, sometimes apostate ex-members and self-appointed "experts on cults" who rely on their accounts tell stories that range from the 'unlikely' to the 'absurd.'

What happens, in reality? In the case of former Jehovah's Witnesses who have been disfellowshipped or have disassociated themselves—I clarified what this means in the previous article of this series—, a sober announcement is made in the midweek meeting of their congregation that "X is no longer one of Jehovah's Witnesses."

Some of the apostate 'atrocities' mentioned by Chryssides pretend that in this case the disfellowshipped ex-member is 'ordered out of the family home with only a few belongings such as an old van and no money for petrol, and [has] to sleep under a bridge as a consequence.' This would perhaps make for a dramatic script for a movie, but is not true.

As Chryssides commented, "disfellowshipping is not meant to foster callousness." He cites an example from The Watchtower of a disfellowshipped woman whose car had a flat tire. In this case, congregation members were counseled to help her, and told that refusing to assist her 'would be needlessly unkind and inhumane,' and would show 'a lack of balance' in understanding the principle of shunning. This is even more true in the case of seriously sick or ageing disfellowshipped relatives in need of assistance. The Jehovah's Witnesses teach that shunning does not eliminate their relatives' duty to assist them."

Conclusion

We trust this response clarifies the allegations raised by Submission 6 against the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. If you have additional questions regarding the beliefs, practices, and activities of Jehovah's Witnesses, or require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours faithfully,

*Christian Congregation of
Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia)*

²⁸ Jehovah's Witnesses and Shunning. 3. Shunning in Theory and Practice <<https://bitterwinter.org/jehovahs-witnesses-and-shunning-3/>>