

The Banning of Jehovah's Witnesses in Australia in 1941

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Abstract

Jehovah's Witnesses were banned by the Menzies government during the Second World War, in January 1941. They were the only Christian sect to be banned in Australia during the twentieth century. Taken from a history of the banning, which focused on the reasons why the Australian government banned the small sect, this paper sets out a brief history of Jehovah's Witnesses and discusses the particular theology of the Witnesses which contributed to their banning. Generally, scholars agree that Jehovah's Witnesses have been variously complicit in persecution they have received worldwide, and this paper examines specifically the Witnesses' mixture of naivety and arrogance in Australia prior to the Second World War. It then briefly describes the circumstances surrounding the ban and Witness reactions to the ban, including an appeal to the High Court which resulted in the ban being overturned. This paper, which is based on a study of one religion's fight for survival in a western democracy, sheds light on the particular worldview of Jehovah's Witnesses and adds to our knowledge of this small sect, both generally and in a specifically Australian historical context.

The Banning of Jehovah's Witnesses in Australia in 1941

In 1941, during the Second World War, the Menzies Government banned Jehovah's Witnesses, giving them the distinction of being the only Christian sect to be banned in Australia during the twentieth century.

This paper is based on historical research examining the banning (Persian 2005). Relying in parts on secondary literature of an international historical and sociological nature, including the excellent history of Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide by M James Penton (1999), and sociological studies by James Beckford (1975), Ken Jubber (1977) and Ronald Lawson (1995), the research primarily involved archived government files, particularly files from the Attorney-General's Department, and contemporary newspaper reports. This paper sheds light on the particular worldview of Jehovah's Witnesses, both generally and in a specifically Australian historical context. It is of course also relevant to current battles between religions and government.

Jehovah's Witnesses are an evangelistic millenarian sect practicing strict neutrality in government affairs, including political participation and militarism. In wartime, this immediately puts them at odds with governments worldwide. The Australian government's case for the banning in 1941 can be easily summarized. The sect was ostensibly banned because it was involved in radio station broadcasts which were suspected of relaying information to the 'enemy'. They were accused of attempting to destroy national morale and the war effort by refusing to acknowledge King George VI as their King, refusing to fight for their country and, interestingly, for being 'in, but not of, the community' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 18 January 1941). Accusations of being associated with the Communist Party were also bandied about.

At almost the first opportunity during a time of national emergency, then, a generally unpopular religion, Jehovah's Witnesses, was banned, its members were refused permission to meet, and all of its property and material assets were stripped. This ban was illegal, and the subsequent persecution of conscientious objectors among Jehovah's Witnesses was morally reprehensible. An appeal by the Witnesses' to the High Court resulted in the ban being overturned on a technicality.

This paper will describe how Jehovah's Witnesses persisted in provoking the government before their banning, and to the Witnesses' reactions to the ban. It seems that their outspoken lack of patriotism and their virulent anti-Catholicism contributed to their banning, and the Witnesses' contradictory, naïve and perhaps arrogant words and actions while under ban are an interesting study of socio-religious behaviour.

Who are Jehovah's Witnesses? They are a Christian sect that originated in the United States during the 1870s and was brought to Australia in the early years of the twentieth century. Jehovah's Witnesses have been described as an 'established sect,' with 'sect' defined by J Milton Yinger as 'a religious group that rejects the social environment in which it exists' (J Milton Yinger, in Lawson 1995: 352).

The Witnesses grew out of an American Protestant Bible study group established by Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916) in the early 1870s. Russell's journal, *Zion's Watch Tower*, espoused his interpretation of Bible doctrine and prophecy and was the main

focus of the growing group who would become known by the names 'Russell's Millennial Dawnists', 'Bible Students', and eventually, in 1931, 'Jehovah's Witnesses'.

Russell was strongly influenced by millennial movements in the nineteenth century such as the Second Adventists and the Millerites, who had foretold the Second Coming of Christ in 1844. These movements themselves drew on a long tradition within Christianity of millennial belief, particularly amongst early Christians and those of the Middle Ages. Russell never doubted that the Second Coming would occur in time.

Russell's particular millenarian eschatology was based on a belief that the end of the world was near, and that Christ would destroy all worldly kingdoms and replace them with a paradise earth populated by Witnesses. Russell also believed that this paradise was open to all who would accept the message. The sect therefore had a moral and spiritual obligation to spread the word and the message was to be spread through all means possible: meetings, print, door to door preaching and, during the twentieth century, the use of modern technology – films, radio, phonograph records and motor vehicles fitted with loudspeakers. Because the end of the present system was coming, Russell advised Witnesses not to vote, hold public office or serve in the military. However, he felt that if governments made voting or military service compulsory, then Witnesses must comply with Romans 13.1:

Let every soul be in subjection to the superior authorities, for there is no authority except by God; the existing authorities stand placed in their relative positions by God.

Russell had predicted that 1914 would mark the Second Coming of Christ and, when the First World War broke out, took that as a sign that Jesus had indeed returned, *invisibly*. Jehovah's Witnesses were now members of God's Kingdom waiting in a state of grace for secular nations, other religions and anyone not a Witness to be destroyed at Armageddon. As subjects of an invisible heavenly kingdom, the Witnesses' attitudes towards governmental authorities hardened. From 1914, Russell strongly supported conscientious objection and noncombatant military service, and

began criticizing church leaders for supporting the First World War (Penton 1979: 61).

After Russell's death in 1916, the presidency of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, the legal entity of the Bible Students, was taken over by Judge Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1869-1942), a man who has been described as "aggressive, abrasive, [and] arrogant" (Strawhan 1984: 8). Rutherford immediately published *The Finished Mystery*, a work which railed against the First World War, the clergy and secular nations, and which the United States government, among others, regarded as seditious. Although the Society compromised with government wishes by removing some of the offending passages (Penton 1979: 62), Rutherford and seven other directors of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society were arrested, charged with conspiracy under the *Espionage Act*, and sentenced to between two and ten years in jail. These Witness officials were bailed in 1919 and a year later the charges were dropped.

After the war, Rutherford wasted no time in attacking secular authorities, and in 1929 the Society changed its interpretation of Romans 13.1, saying that this scripture's injunction to obedience applied to authorities within the church and not to worldly governments. Witnesses were now required only to obey laws which were not in conflict with their interpretation of God's laws. This meant that notions such as nationalism and military service were over-ridden by a higher law.

Although Rutherford had actually tried his hardest to escape jail, he introduced into Witness discourse one of the more powerful symbols associated with religion – martyrdom. The Witnesses began to expect persecution as a sign that they were God's people living in the time of the end, but in the meantime, they were prepared to make use of defense mechanisms against persecution such as petitions and law courts. Ironically, a world which the Witnesses supposed was under Satan's rule was exhorted to protect the religious freedom of the Witnesses (Jubber 1977: 122).

Rutherford eventually turned the sect into a totalitarian 'theocracy' in which the Society based in New York was viewed as Jehovah God's mouthpiece on earth.

Jehovah's Witnesses were God's people waiting for Armageddon and a paradise earth in which they would live in peace. This meant that racial, national and socio-economic barriers should be discarded, and the Witnesses began to view the theocracy as a 'nation without a country' (Kaplan 1991: 6), and that as individuals they were living in an 'internal foreign country' (Viktor Bondarenko, in WTBT 2001). This theocratic nation was ruled by Rutherford and the Society, who dictatorially wielded power over congregations of Witnesses across the world. When the Society decided that it should object to saluting the American flag in 1935, Witnesses worldwide were told to refuse to salute flags or stand for national anthems. The consequences in Germany were horrendous, as Witnesses were thrown into the first concentration camps for refusing to 'Heil Hitler' (Penton 1979: 65).

Rutherford's leadership also led to aggressive preaching tactics, and increasingly virulent attacks on big business, politics and religion, particularly the Catholic Church. However, the growing persecution that such changes brought were seen by Rutherford as proof of God's backing (Beckford 1975: 38).

Commentators have come to view this period as one of self-inflicted persecution. As Barbara Grizzuti Harrison has argued:

There is reason to believe that they were complicit in their own victimization – manipulating national fears, milking national traumas to invite opposition, in order to enhance their self esteem. In their persecution, they found a kind of peace. (1980: 120-121)

This rejection and vilification of secular society to feed a self-fulfilling martyr-complex certainly led to persecution during the 1930s and 1940s. The Witnesses' rejection of established Christianity, the zealous preaching of millennial eschatology, political neutrality and vocal opposition to military service led to their banning, imprisonment and/or death during the Second World War in both Axis countries and western democracies. The Witnesses were also subject to mob violence in some countries, their literature was banned in many countries, and individual Witnesses were persecuted, imprisoned and/or executed as conscientious objectors.

In western democracies including Australia, Witnesses were disliked for their ‘deliberately intemperate, offensive, and hostile’ anti-religious rhetoric (Regehr 1991), which included the slogan ‘Religion is a snare and a racket’; for their refusal to support national war efforts; and for their general air of spiritual superiority.

After war was declared, national security became a major issue for the Australian government. Jehovah’s Witnesses, already disliked for their vocal antipathy towards other religions and the notion of the nation state, became a focal point of criticism for newspapers, religious leaders and members of the public because of their neutrality and objection to military service. In 1940, they became the object of surveillance by the Army, the Navy, Military Intelligence, the police and the Commonwealth Investigation Branch.

During this time, Jehovah’s Witnesses kept publishing ‘disloyal’ statements such as: The False Prophet is the combined world powers of Britain and America – these beastly governments on Earth which are Satan’s organization [and] ... the great Whore is the so-called Christian religion. (NAA, Series A467/1, CS SF 43/1)

In July 1940 2,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses attempted to march in the middle of Sydney in July 1940 and 67 Witnesses were arrested and charged with carrying placards as advertisements, and offensive behaviour

Jehovah’s Witnesses were also arrested for using loudspeakers on cars and some local councils, bowing to public pressure, made it increasingly difficult for Jehovah’s Witnesses to rent public halls for their assemblies. This did not stop the Witnesses, and in October 1940 a meeting of Jehovah’s Witnesses was deliberately held outside the private home of Attorney-General ‘Billy’ Hughes.

Thus, instead of quietening down during the war to escape unwanted attention as an unpopular and unpatriotic minority, the Witnesses remained vocal proponents of their world view.

During this time, the Witnesses wrote to the Attorney-General and Prime Minister, defending their faith and criticizing others, and there is a playful element in the letters between Attorney-General Hughes and the Witnesses, almost as if the Witnesses were continually trying to push their luck, through arrogance or naivety. Individual Witnesses wrote to Hughes, exhorting him to 'Be British' and saying that 'Jehovah's Witnesses are true Britishers' (NAA, Series A472, CS W1125 Part 1). The Witnesses appear confused regarding their attitudes to the British Empire, and this is one more example of the Witnesses officially disavowing the state, while using state structures for their own purposes.

When Jehovah's Witnesses were banned on 16 January 1941, they were given a full eighteen hours' notice in which to prepare for an 'incredibly bungled' government takeover (*Sydney Morning Herald* 18 January 1941). They viewed this warning as 'evidence of angelic direction and guidance', and were observed by members of the media to be burning some material and moving out 'truckload after truckload' of other material to unknown destinations (WTBTS 1983: 75).

The Witnesses immediately initiated legal action to appeal against the ban and, as well as writing to government officials and harnessing international support, the Witnesses irritated the government by refusing to concede defeat. Although Commonwealth Peace Officers, armed with automatic pistols and batons, were moved into Witness headquarters in Strathfield to prevent the removal of property, some members of the sect remained in residence and they continued to test the limits.

In May 1942 the Army requisitioned the Witnesses' headquarters in Strathfield. This provoked a 'militant aggressive attitude' amongst the Witnesses still residing at Bethel. They refused to allow the Commonwealth Peace Officers to search their bags, and several minor occurrences, including assaults, were reported. A serious incident occurred when the head of the sect in Australia, Alexander MacGillivray, was shot in the shoulder by a Peace Officer, and he and Rees were charged with assault. Of course, the Witnesses described this incident as an 'attempted assassination', a further attempt by the Australian government to silence the sect (WTBTS 1942: 136-137).

Although banned as an organization, Jehovah's Witnesses continued their activities almost without interruption. They could not meet publicly on a regular basis but met instead in private homes. The Witnesses even managed to hold a large assembly on land they owned at Hargrave Park, Sydney, in December 1941 and claimed that this assembly attracted a crowd of 6,000 people from all over Australia. Some Witnesses from Western Australia traveled to this assembly on a 'cross-country trek' which lasted fourteen days (WTBTS 1993: 457), including a week over the Nullabor Plain. Another series of smaller meetings was held in 1942, with speakers traveling to 150 groups in seven major cities Australia-wide.

Witness accounts of the time during the ban argue that the ban had little impact on their activities. The Witnesses claimed that at the 1941 assembly they distributed 20,000 hard-bound books which had been printed and bound in Australia while the sect had been under ban. They also continued to print their magazines, and later boasted that not a single issue of the *Watchtower* was missed, publications continued to pour from Witness presses, and a complete Year Book summarizing the sect's activities were produced each year.

The ban also failed to stop proselytizing, a fundamental part of the Witnesses' faith. They continued to preach door to door, setting out individually rather than in the more traditional pairs, and using just the Bible. A security report dated December 1942 noted that the Witnesses were still going from house to house saying that they were 'God's chosen people', that those who did not join the sect were damned, that 'Armageddon is fast approaching' and that after that event, the Witnesses would be the 'rulers of the new world' (NAA, Series A8911 (A8911/1) 144 Part 1).

Witness leaders then decided to contribute £10,000 to war bonds from money accumulated during the ban, an action that directly contradicted the Witnesses' official position of neutrality. The fact that Rees thought he had 'seen to it' that organizations as diverse as Security and Manpower knew of the donation reflects, at best, a naïve view of how the Australian government worked in wartime (Strawhan 1984: 82).

When the High Court overturned the ban in 1943, the Witnesses' property was returned, and damages were paid. The sect's history of the matter paraphrased Queensland's Chief Justice who blamed a 'state of hysteria' at the outbreak of war as leading to the ban but when matters had 'somewhat cooled down', the High Court 'in its traditional British calmness, gave judgment against the banning of the organization and restored the Jehovah's Witnesses its constitutional rights' (WTBTS 1983: 89-90).

In conclusion, it was Jehovah's Witnesses outspoken lack of patriotism and anti-Catholicism that contributed to their banning by the Australian government during the early part of the Second World War. They were banned but ironically the ban, which lasted for over two years, did not accomplish much at all, as the Witnesses seemed to 'thrive on trouble' (Kaplan 1991: 10). They continued meeting, preaching and publishing throughout the ban, and later claimed that numbers of active Witnesses had almost doubled during these years. However, their contradictory, naïve and arrogant behaviour is an interesting indictment of a sect that believes it is God's organization but which is prepared to make use of defence mechanisms against persecution such as the High Court of Australia, in a bid to maintain legality in the 'time of the end'.

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